



GROWTH

At The

YOM TOV TABLE

SHAVUOT

Special Holiday
Double-Sided Edition!

Close the Yeshiva for WHAT?

It was Yom Kippur. The synagogue was packed. It was the high point of the year - excitement permeated the air. As Kol Nidrei was to commence, the rabbi of the shul walked over to the bimah next to the chazan. Overcome by emotion, the rabbi fell down on his hands and knees and cried out emphatically: "Hashem!!! Before You, I am nothing!" The chazan, inspired by the rabbi's declaration of humility, got down on his knees and screamed: "HaKadosh Baruch Hu!!! In front of You, I am also nothing!" One of the congregants in the front row, doubly inspired at that point, fell to his knees and yelled: "G-d, in front of You, I, too, am nothing!!!" Seeing this, the chazan turned to the rabbi and remarked incredulously, "Who does this guy think he is, that he thinks he's nothing?!"

In describing the journeys of the Jewish nation, the Torah recounts that they went from the desert to a place called 'Matana' (ומדבר מתנה). Understanding this phrase on a deeper layer, the Gemara (*Eruvin* 54a) expounds 'Matana' (lit. "gift") as a reference to the Torah, and derives: אם משימ - אדם עצמו כמדבר זה שהכל דשין בו תלמודו מתקיים בידו - if a person makes himself like a "mini-desert" in that he allows others to walk all over him, then the Torah is able to stay within him.

This raises a substantial question. What exactly does this mean? Does the Torah really want a person to let everyone take advantage of him? Are we to be weak, distant people?

Furthermore, we beseech G-d in our prayers every day: ונפשי - כעפר לכל תהיה - "let my soul be like dirt for everyone." Again, what is the idea here? Are we communicating that a person needs to always be in the back and never putting oneself forward, achieving, taking risks, or believing in oneself?

The answer is profound. Similar to how a couple of people would interlace their fingers and lift someone up to retrieve a basketball that got wedged in between the rim and the backboard, Chazal are communicating the hallmark of a reliable person who allows others to lean on him, or 'step' on him, to elevate themselves. The message here is not to be a "shmatta" or a doormat, but to embody a deep level of humility by being a "steppable" person. Some people are never dependable and hardly make themselves available for

others. הכל דשין בו means that he allows and is happy for people to utilize him, his gifts, and his assets.

This is the meaning of the phrase "let my soul be like earth for everyone." Earth is used to grow and develop things. In essence, we are asking Hashem: "Please, let people use me! Allow others to utilize the knowledge, resources, connections, expertise, and talents that You blessed me with!" When a person is truly humble enough to be "steppable" in such a manner, our Sages teach, that is when Torah can rest in him.

Without refining our character traits and developing good *middot*, what worth does our Torah learning really have? Our *chachamim* tell us that if a person has good *middot*, the Torah is an elixir of life for him, whereas for an individual with negative characteristics, the Torah that he has becomes like a toxic poison. The Torah, being compared to water, makes things grow - but are we watering flowers or thorns? The fire of Torah used the right way is a source of light and warmth, but some may unfortunately use it to burn and destroy others. In a corrupt individual, whatever Torah he has amassed can become dark and twisted, and something as beautiful as religion can become used as a weapon against others.

The Vilna Gaon comments: עיקר חיות האדם להתחזק תמיד בשבירת המידות - *the main reason why a person is alive in this world is to constantly strengthen oneself in breaking negative character traits*. And he adds: ואם לא למה לו חיים - *if one is not involved in this, of what purpose is his life?* Of course, life is very busy. There are tons of *mitzvot* to do and plenty of things to take care of, but the ultimate purpose of all those things is - with enough time, patience, and effort - to develop and refine one's character.

The Rambam writes something remarkable. If someone has \$10 to give to charity and he has the option of either giving the entire sum to one poor individual or dividing it into \$1 each to donate to ten different people, which is preferable? It's the ultimate question of quantity vs. quality. He answers that giving \$1 to ten people is a higher form of *tzedaka* - despite the fact that each one is receiving a smaller sum - because through the repetition of

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reaching into one's pocket again and again, the donor will have developed *midat hanetina* - the attribute of giving. Even though each dollar in *tzedaka* ended up accomplishing less, the individual will have developed spiritual muscle memory in teaching his heart to be generous. Ultimately, G-d provides for and takes care of every individual. The poor man's fate is in Hashem's Hands anyway. The real goal in giving is to break one's natural sense of stinginess and selfishness and become a giver.

One night, in the original Mir Yeshiva in Europe, a group of boys was on their way back to the yeshiva. Suddenly, they saw people screaming and yelling at them, ordering them to freeze. Being that the anti-Semitism of that period was much more violent, the boys nervously began to run. As they were scampering in the dark of night, they couldn't see who was shouting and chasing them. They finally got back to their dormitory, running inside and locking the door.

There was a loud banging on the door - again and again - sharp, forceful knocks that echoed through the building. "Open up!" a voice shouted in the local language. "It's the police!" Only then did the boys realize who had been trying to get their attention the whole time. (Unfortunately, in those countries, the police were often just as dangerous and corrupt as the criminals themselves.) Still, they had no choice. They opened the door. Immediately, the officers began shouting, "What are you doing? Why were you running? Are you spies? Criminals? What are you hiding?" The boys tried to explain. "No, we're yeshiva students," one of them said. "We didn't know who it was. We couldn't see - it was pitch-black outside." One of the officers barked, "License and registration!" One by one, the boys hurried back to their dorm rooms to retrieve their passports and documentation. They brought them back and handed them over. The officers inspected each one carefully. "Okay," one finally said. "You're free to go. You - free to go. You too. Free to go." There was only one last student left, R' Shlomo Shimshon Karelitz, who didn't live in that dormitory. "I'm really sorry, but I don't have my papers," he explained. "I was just with the boys, and we ran together. My papers are in my dormitory room a few blocks away." The police threatened that there would be big trouble if his story wasn't true, and they followed him to his dormitory. Thankfully, he was able to show them his papers, and the crisis was averted.

The next morning, the mashgiach of the Mir Yeshiva, R' Yerucham Levovitz, walked into the yeshiva and announced, "I just want everyone to know that because of what happened yesterday, we were seriously contemplating closing our doors and never opening again." The crowd was in shock. Sure, it was scary, but to shut down the yeshiva for good?? Was that really called for?

"I went to speak to all the other rabbis," R' Yerucham explained with his fiery spirit, "trying to decide if it was even worth keeping the yeshiva open after what happened yesterday. A bunch of boys were terrified, running for their lives, thinking some frightening person was coming to attack them. It turns out it was the police. Each boy gave their documentation and was good to go. There was one boy who didn't live there, and when the police told him that they needed to see his documents, he was allowed to go by himself with the police to his dormitory room???"

"How do you know he's safe? How did you know he would be okay? And even if you thought he was safe and you believed that as police they weren't trying to harm anyone, you know how scared you were one minute ago! How could it be that we have a yeshiva where the boys studying Torah here could see their friend put in a predicament and terrified, and not stand with him or walk him back? What are we even doing here? Maybe this whole yeshiva is a failed experiment."

As we celebrate Shavuot and mark the anniversary of having received such a beautiful gift from our Creator, let us each work on analyzing ourselves and bringing our middot to the next level. Do I get angry too quickly? Do I stay angry for too long? How patient am I with people? How accepting and loving am I? How critical am I when I look at everything? Am I always negative and cynical? Am I a person that gives generously of their time and resources? Am I approachable? Let us find an area for growth and figure out how to become a better version of that. Let us remember that it's okay if someone steps on us to get a leg up. It's okay for us to help, give, and develop somebody else. In fact, that may be why Hashem put us here to begin with.

(Based on a d'var Torah shared by R' Shlomo Farhi)

You Never Know

A really good and close friend of mine recently shared with me an amazing post. Its powerful truth shook me to my core. It read: "You never really know the true impact you have on those around you. You never know how much someone needed that smile you gave them. You never know how much your kindness turned someone's entire life around. You never know how much someone needed that long hug or deep talk. So don't wait to be kind. Don't wait for someone else to be kind first. Don't wait for better circumstances or for someone to change. Just be kind, because you never know how much someone needs it."