



GROWTH

At The SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT
NITZAVIM / VAYELECH

The Unscripted Speech

R' Gavriel Shimonov related the following, powerful story.

A secular Israeli girl had just graduated college and, like many others, was inclined to take a trip to the Far East for some soul-searching. She told her parents, who gladly paid for her ticket to India for a "well-deserved vacation." She arrived in India, and it wasn't too long before she met a Hindu Guru who would change her life forever. Having grown up bereft of meaning or purpose in life, she found depth in the "wisdom" of the Guru, and before she knew it, she was in a complete haze. She found herself becoming very passionate about the way of life in India, and fell in love with the Hindu Guru. She sent a message back to her house that she found her new life in India, and that she didn't plan on returning home. "I've found everything that I've ever wanted," she sent them. "In fact, I'm going to marry the Guru."

Her parents were beyond shocked; they were devastated. They tried calling her back through her phone, but to no avail. She changed her number, her name, and her lifestyle. For months, her parents cried their eyes out for their daughter, who disappeared completely. Her brother, who was zocheh to be a ba'al teshuvah and had recently married, couldn't bear to watch his parents endure such pain, and told them: "I'm going to go to India and do everything in my power to track her down." Promising to knock some sense into his sister, he booked the first available flight to India, and, after much investigating, was finally able to obtain her location and find her. "How could you do this?" he asked her. "Our parents bought you the ticket, and you just completely abandon them without even saying thank you or anything?" She explained, "You don't understand. I finally found what I was looking for. Leave me alone; I'm getting married here."

"Listen," her brother pleaded. "The least you can do is just say 'thank you' to your parents, who raised you and spent so much money on you. At least come back just for that..." After much cajoling, he was finally able to convince her to return to Israel on a short trip just to bid her parents farewell, and he bought her a flight ticket. He brought her back to their parents' home, and while she was inside talking to them, the brother devised a plan. He knew that a certain rabbi, with whom he was well-connected, was a prolific speaker, and would give a short d'var Torah right after Mincha every day. He figured that if he could arrange for his sister to be in the audience for a special pre-planned speech, perhaps that could inspire her to avoid going down this treacherous path. And so, her brother acted fast. He called the rabbi, informing him that he planned to bring someone who was on the verge of leaving the faith completely, and they set up that come Wednesday after Mincha, the rabbi was to deliver targeted words of inspiration.

Wednesday arrived, and the brother inconspicuously told his sister that she couldn't just leave without shutting down her bank accounts and taking care of other technicalities and paperwork. He convinced her to accompany him to the city as they go together to the bank, timing it out that they should be in the café close to the synagogue for lunch before mincha. 15 minutes prior to mincha, he apologized for suddenly remembering that he had to pray mincha, and asked her if she would be kind enough to escort him to the shul and wait for him before they return to wrap up business. She acquiesced, and when they arrived at the shul, the brother was shocked to find out that the rabbi wasn't there for mincha. He couldn't believe it. All the effort and planning to

orchestrate everything at this crucial moment was all gone. Any hope that he had in mind for his sister was lost.

After mincha, the gabbai got up and explained that in their shul, they always had a speech at this time, and although the rabbi was absent, they would still carry on as per usual. He pulled out a Halacha sefer and started monotonously reading the chapter pertaining to Hashavat Aveda (returning lost objects), dry to the bone. There was really nothing interesting coming out of him as he dully recited assorted halachot relevant to this complex area of Jewish law, but the sister listened, as she was there, waiting, anyway. At the end, the gabbai parenthetically remarked: "By the way, sometimes a person loses an item in order to provide a zechut for the one who finds it and helps return it to the rightful owner. There's a reason for that, too..." The sister didn't even know what she missed out on; all she heard were some details about Hashavat Aveda that seemed totally irrelevant. As she walked with her brother out of the shul, she said goodbye forever and told him to leave her alone, still dead-set on continuing her life in India with the Guru.

Two days before the date of the wedding, the parents received an incoming call from their daughter. "I'm coming home," she told them, emotionally. "I'll tell you everything when I get back. I'm done with this place." She booked the soonest flight, expecting her family to reject her for abandoning them, but was astonished when she instead received a welcoming committee rejoicing upon her return. After sharing some emotional moments, she finally revealed what had transpired. "This Guru... he's a billionaire. People pay him a fortune to hear him talk and teach his idolatrous practices. He puts on a show where he showcases his supposed wisdom, but he's full of nonsense." This came through as ironic, given that she was singing a whole different tune not too long before, but she explained. "A few days before we were going to get married, I was walking with him down the street when he noticed a wallet on the floor, dropped by a poor American tourist in the middle of India. It had his passport, license, IDs, and a few hundred dollars. The Guru was very happy, expressing how 'lucky' we were and all the 'signs' that pointed to this fortunate outcome, while he just put the wallet in his own pocket. 'What about all the things you were teaching us...?' I asked him. After all, he had been relentlessly preaching all this time about ethics and moral conduct. He scoffed at me, and remarked, 'First lesson: care about yourself.' I was stunned; I couldn't believe it. At that moment, I had a flashback. I suddenly remembered what the gabbai had said in that synagogue, that there must have been a reason someone lost that wallet – so that whoever finds it can accrue merit by returning it. I suggested to the Guru that he practice what he had been preaching, but he responded that he didn't care. Everything was centered around him... that's when I realized that this selfish, greedy man was full of nonsense, and there was nothing there for me."

A few verses in Parshat Nitzavim discuss the tremendous significance of the Torah and following Hashem's ways. Although the Torah "is not in the heavens," its impact is out of this world. Just look at the far-reaching effects of a small, accidental, "boring" speech about Hashavat Aveda by the gabbai, and how, truly, nothing is beyond Hashem's capability...

"Teshuvah is knowing that even if you could return to the past, you wouldn't belong there anymore."