



Parashat Vayechi



English version

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## THE ART OF AVOIDING STICKY SITUATIONS

A fight avoided, is a fight won. If you see trouble coming, cross the street.

Some people learn krav maga, and rely on their self-defense skills. Yet, even the best self-defense can't help you if the other person has a gun.

Imagine this: A friend tries on a questionable outfit and asks, "Do I look good?" Honesty is important, but tact is priceless. Be tactful: "You always look great, but maybe the other outfit suits the occasion more." This avoids hurting their feelings while gently steering them in the right direction.

Let's take a lesson from the jungle: One day, the lion, the king of the jungle, asks the donkey: **Lion:** "How is my breath?" **Donkey:** "Honestly, your breath is horrible!" Angered by the insult, the lion eats the donkey on the spot. Later, the lion asks the wolf, who witnessed the poor donkey's fate, the same question. **Lion:** "How is my breath?" **Wolf:** "Your breath is wonderful, Your Majesty!" The lion growls, "You're lying!" and eats the wolf too. Finally, the lion asks the clever fox: **Lion:** "How is my breath?" **Fox:** "Your Majesty, I have Covid, I can't smell a thing."

The smartest move in a minefield is knowing where *not* to step.

Here are four real life scenarios. 1. You're in the office, and a coworker starts venting about another colleague. They look to you for validation. Stay neutral, and redirect. "Oh, I haven't noticed that. Anyway, what's the update on the project?" 2. A family member/relative tries to drag you into a

longstanding feud, asking, "Don't you agree that they were wrong?" Acknowledge their feelings without taking sides. "I can see why you're upset; it's a tough situation." You validate emotions without escalating the conflict or taking a side. 3. Someone drags you into a heated debate online, asking for your opinion. Politely, get out of it. "I think this is a topic best discussed in person—this Whatsapp chat, isn't the best place for delicate topics." 4. A friend asks to borrow money, but you know lending him will strain your relationship, as you are not sure he will pay back. Decline with empathy. "I'm not in a position to lend right now, but I can help you brainstorm other options." Avoid resentment while offering support in a non-financial way.

The sages implemented laws to avoid situations of Yichud between men and women. The intent is to prevent anything inappropriate, or appearance of something inappropriate. Yosef exemplified this when he fled Potiphar's wife. Despite the incriminating evidence—his coat in her hands—Yosef knew better than to reenter the room to retrieve it. Sticky situations are never worth the risk, even for a moment.

In **Parashat Vayechi**, we learn one of the most profound self-help lessons: the art of avoiding sticky situations. When Yaakov fell ill, they came and informed Yosef, saying: "**Behold, your father is ill**" (Genesis 48:1). This is perplexing. How could Yosef not have known about his father's illness? Surely Yosef, being a devoted son, would



have visited his father frequently to honor and care for him.

The Midrash explains: **"This informs us of Yosef's righteousness, as he did not wish to be alone with his father."** For the 17 years that Yosef lived with his father in Egypt, Yosef never allowed himself to be alone with him. **Why?** The Midrash continues: **"So that Yaakov would not ask him, 'What did your brothers do to you?' and end up cursing them."** Yosef reasoned: **"I know the righteousness of my father—every word he speaks becomes a decree. Didn't he tell Lavan, 'With whomever you find your gods, they shall not live,' and my mother died as a result? Shall I now risk him cursing my brothers? If he curses them, he may destroy the entire world, for the world was created for the sake of the 12 Tribes of Israel!"** (Pesikta Rabbati Chapter 3)

Therefore, Yosef avoided being alone with his father at all costs. He kept busy, avoiding any situation where his father would be able to ask him *What happened? Who did this to you?* As a result, **Yaakov never learned about the sale of Yosef by his brothers—not even in his final days.**

For 17 years, Yosef refrained from being alone with his father. What an extraordinary act of self-restraint by Yosef!!! After being separated from his father, Yaakov, for **22 long years**, Yosef is finally reunited with him. Their love was an indescribable bond between father and son. Yet, Yosef made a remarkable decision. For **17 years**, he **never once allowed himself to be alone with him.** Why? To avoid the burning question *"What happened to you? How did you end up in Egypt?"* 17 years of self-restraint to avoid any sticky situations!

Once you open up the Pandora box, you have no idea what is going to come out. Be careful with your words. Once they are said, they can only be forgiven, not forgotten. As Mark Twain said, *Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.*

When someone asks you, "How old do you think I am?", make sure you know how to answer that. To flatter, here are two answers. 1. Whatever age you are, subtract 10 for how you look. 2. I don't know, but I'm definitely older than you. 3. You look like you've mastered the perfect age!

Sometimes laughter is the best self defense. 1. Don't worry, you're younger than you'll be tomorrow. 2. Whatever your age is, it's the perfect time for a midlife crisis. 3. I feel like you were at the signing of the Declaration of Independence. 4. You're from the future, aren't you?

When your neighbor proudly shows you their newborn and asks, "Isn't she adorable?", you have to know what to say. When your kid loudly points at someone in public and says, "Why is that man so fat?" You have to know what to say. (Maybe whisper back, "He's actually storing up for the winter... like a bear.")

When Moshe was tasked by G-d to take the Jews out of Egypt, he hesitated because his brother Aharon was already their leader. Moshe avoided a sticky situation that might make Aharon uncomfortable. Similarly, Aharon delayed the creation of the Golden Calf, avoiding direct confrontation until Moshe returned.

The best way to climb out of a hole is to never fall in. Peace isn't found in fixing the chaos; it's in not inviting it in the first place.

## THE ART OF WAITING AND TRUSTING

Before he died, Yaakov told his sons the secret of bringing the Mashiach: וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל-בָּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הַיְמִינִים הַאֲחֵסְפִי וְאֶנְיֹדָה לָכֶם אֶת אֲשֶׁר-יִקְרָא אֶתְכֶם בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים הַאֲחֵסְפִי. If you stay separated, Mashiach won't come.

You need to see the good in each other, accept each other and help each other, to merit the End of Days. The Midrash tells us that the Jewish Nation coming together is a sign of the upcoming Final Redemption. (B Rabba 98)



When Moshe witnessed how Datan and Aviram were fighting, and how they were speaking Lashon Hara, he said, אָכְנוּ נִדְעֵה הַדָּבָר. The reason why they can't be freed from Egyptian slavery is because they can't get along. (Shemot Rabba 1; 30)

In the days of Shmuel and Shaul, kids had a tremendous amount of Torah knowledge even before their Bar Mitzvah, and the warriors of Shaul would still fall in war. But in the days of King Ahab, they were all idol worshippers, but no one fell in war! Why was that so? Because in the days of Shmuel and Shaul, people would speak Lashon Hara. But in the days of Ahab, they would guard their tongue! Lashon Hara causes G-d to remove Himself from His people! (Midrash Tehillim 7)

It is so interesting. The Egyptian Jews were idol worshippers, and still, Moshe did not understand why they were in a most bitter exile of slavery. Only after Moshe saw that they spoke slanderously of one another and they were not united, only then Moshe could justify G-d's not redeeming them and allowing His Nation to suffer! How does that make sense?

Serving idols is very bad; but G-d chooses the children of Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov to be His Nation, despite their religious level, or belief, or behavior. But once they start speaking slander among themselves, once we can't get along, G-d doesn't want us, because we are not a nation, but a fragmented people! G-d allows the nations of the world to remind us that we are one! That no matter what type of Yarmulke you wear, no matter if you *don't* wear a Yarmulke, the gentiles will remind you that you are all part of the same Jewish Nation!

The Sifte Hachamim asks, on Rashi, why Moshe was wondering why the Jews were in Exile? Even if they were not speaking Lashon Hara, they needed to go through the 400 years that Avraham Avinu's descendants were decreed to suffer!!! So why was Moshe not understanding the reason for the exile, and the delay of the redemption?

The Siftei Hachamim answers that although Avraham's questioning G-d's promise of the Holy Land to his descendants caused him to have his

descendants suffer for 400 years, the descendants, themselves, did not do anything to deserve such a punishment! The rule of the Torah is לֹא יוּמָתוּ אָבוֹת : על-בְּנֵיהֶם וּבְנֵיהֶם לֹא יוּמָתוּ עַל-אָבוֹת : that children don't die because of their parents' sins; so, if the Jews in Egypt did not do anything that was in line with Avraham's sin, they could not be deserving of his punishment! Only now that they are speaking Lashon Hara, do they deserve the punishment coming to his descendants!

A person can be punished for something his ancestors did, only if he if he sinned in a way similar to his ancestors. (Berachot 7a; Sanhedrin 27b) We all die because of the sin of Adam, who ate from the forbidden fruit, the one tree from which G-d told him not to eat. Although none of us ate from the forbidden fruit, we still die because we have all done something similar to Adam. G-d gives us so much, but there is just one thing here and there that G-d tells us is *not* good for you. You can't have that. And we all want what G-d told us we can't have! And we try taking what G-d tells us that we can't have! The Vilna Gaon says that the whole Torah is summed up into the Ten Commandments, and the whole Ten Commandments is summed up in the last of the ten: Do not covet! Do not want what is not given to you!

Why is speaking Lashon Hara similar to Avraham Avinu asking how he could be sure, that his descendants would inherit the Land?

All Lashon Hara is a lack of patience and faith. If you would have a little more patience, if you would believe in the other person even when it makes no sense to believe in him, you would be able to hold your tongue. We tend to think people are worse than they are. So often, people we give up hope on prove that we underestimated how good they could really be, how connected to G-d they can really be.

When Yaakov wanted to tell his children when the End of Days would come and how it would be, G-d stopped him. (Tanhuma 8) Yaakov wanted it to be easier for his children to serve G-d in the Galut, in the exile, if things would make sense to them, if



they would know how it would all turn out in the end. From his own life, Yaakov knew how hard it is to have patience and wait to see how after all the hardships in life, G-d will show you how much he loved you, all along, in the end. It would have been so much easier for Yaakov to serve G-d all along, if only he had known why G-d caused him so much suffering, and that it was all for the good!

G-d wants us to serve Him *without knowing* how it all makes sense!!! Only in the merit of waiting, endlessly, believing when it seems that there is nothing left to believe in - only in that merit will G-d redeem us from this long Exile! G-d wants us to serve Him with Emunah, with patience!

If the brothers would have had patience with Yosef, if they would have believed that he had only

the best intentions, they would never have devised a plan to get rid of him! When G-d sent Moshe to tell the Jews that He was redeeming them, G-d told Moshe, tell them that My Name אהיה is sending you to redeem them from the Galut. The Name of G-d יהוה has the numerical value of 26. The Jews thought that they needed to be in Exile for what they did to Yosef for 260 years, 26 times the ten brothers who sold him. But G-d said, No! My Name through which I will save you is אהיה I will be, with the numerical value of 21, and when it is multiplied by 10, it is 210 years! We are at 210 years, and you can be redeemed!

The name of G-d אהיה, that G-d **will be**, means trust in G-d! He knows the future, and you don't! Trust the process!

### MY PERSONAL HANNUKA MIRACLE

A little personal story that just happened to me. I prayed at the Kotel Sunday, Rosh Hodesh, the 7th day of Hannukah, at Sunrise Minyan. The Kotel is full on Hanukah, and fuller on Rosh Hodesh. After Amidah of Shaharit, I needed the restroom badly, so I quickly took off my tefillin, and without wrapping them, just placed them in their bag, amongst the many Tefillin bags that were on the mini Bimah/stand. When I came back, the Tefillin were not in the bag, but outside the bag. Strange. I figured that they must have fallen, as there were a lot of tefillin on that stand, and maybe someone pushed them and they must have moved.

Being that it was next to the Tefillin station of Chabad at the Kotel, for those who don't have with them Tefillin, and the tefillin station was not yet open so early in the morning, someone comes over and asked me, if they can use my Tefillin. For sure! Especially because I wanted to put on my second pair, my pair of Rabbenu Tam.

Wearing my Rabbenu Tam Tefillin, I finish up Hallel and Torah reading, and I then came back to take off and wrap up my second pair of Tefillin. By that time, the person who used my Tefillin, wrapped up my first pair and put them on my bag. I

wrapped up my second pair, and put my two pairs and my Tallit in my bag, and continued on my way.

The next day, on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Hannuka, by Sunrise Minyan by the Kotel, it was pouring rain. Everyone who could, packed inside the tunnel, by the Kotel. I finished praying, and after all the moving around, I noticed as I wrapped my first pair of Tefillin, that the Tefillin straps of the Tefillin shel Rosh, looked strange! **My** straps are black on both sides, and this one's tefillin were black only on one side, but white on the other! It must be that someone switched my Tefillin shel Rosh, of my first pair!

But it can't be! I did a mitzvah, letting someone wear my Tefillin, and now, ... this is what happens? Whose Tefillin is this anyway? Did I even get the Mitzvah wearing this other person's tefillin? What Kashrut standards on his Tefillin does he have, anyway?

His Tefillin looked old. They looked worn out. But before going to my Soffer to check them out and tell me what I should do, I went immediately to the lost and found of the police of the Kotel to report



the story. I went to the lost and found of the Moreshet HaKotel to report the story and left my phone number. I went to all the leaders of the Sunrise Minyanim in that area of the Kotel to take down my number if anyone contacts them, noticing that their straps are not identical. It was raining really hard, and I was soaked and cold!

My Sofer said, not to worry. The Tefillin Shel Rosh, that I see here are old, but they are an even higher-level standard of Kashrut than yours! From the way the Shin is, the person's Tefillin are Ashkenaz, and yours are Sefardi. From the look of the straps, the Tefillin are of an elderly man. But you don't have to wear another pair, for today. Wait a couple of days, don't buy a new pair for 4500 shekel just yet, because I guarantee you, that person is going to be hunting after his Tefillin once he recognizes the straps, that they are not the same! He invested so much in his Tefillin, he will be looking for them, more than you are looking for yours! Unless, one thing. Because this person is an older man, he may not notice that the straps are not the same!

I was broken. These are my Tefillin from my Bar Mitzvah, and the Tefillin cases were new, and were from the highest levels of Hidur! My Tefillin's standard is one of the things I am proud about, and now, I don't have my Tefillin Shel Rosh, of my Rashi Tefillin! Because of doing a mitzvah!?!

I called my Rabbi, and he said, that in the meantime, it was okay to wear that person's tefillin every day, as he is probably wearing mine, and is forgiving me to use his, just like I am forgiving him to use mine.

Every day that I could, for the week, I came back to the Kotel for Sunrise. I would call out, in the area of the switch, if anyone heard someone coming to that spot, looking for the person who switched his Tefillin. No one knew. I would look at people praying in the area, seeing if the straps of their Tefillin of the head and the ones of the hand, were not the same. People got annoyed at me for staring at them and their Tefillin, asking what I want from them. I was looking foolish. And I was

frustrated. People took down my phone number, and told me they would call me, if someone does come by looking for his. I kept checking my phone every day, but no phone calls.

I turned to Hashem at the Kotel, knowing that he never leaves that place, saying, I know that You know what happened here, as it happened right under "Your Nose". I know that you saw me do that mitzvah of letting that boy wear my Tefillin. And I know that everything that happens is for the best. I did all that I could to get back my Tefillin. And I feel bad for that person, who I have his. Please Hashem, give him back his Tefillin, and give me back mine!

And then I remembered how, when someone loses something, G-d has something that the person gains more than he lost! The first day when I came to Israel as a Yeshiva student, I lost my watch in the Minyan Factory in Bayit Vegan, Jerusalem, next door to the Yeshiva I attended. I must have left it on the Bimah, and did not put it on after putting my Tefillin in their bag. I came back and noticed then, 20 years ago, a sign on the wall, that read "We found your watch! Come and claim it with Simanim! If you know the signs, that will show that it is your watch, we will return it to you!"

I came over to that family, and gave them the signs, and they gave me my watch. Over the next year and a half, they invited me for Shabbat meals often, and before I returned to America for Pesach a year and a half later, they asked me if I would date anyone, when back home for Pesach break. When I told them that if something came up I would consider it, they offered my Dolly, my wife, from Bayit Vegan. I dated her, and two weeks later, we were engaged.

I pretty much was ready to give up on my Tefillin, after a week of waiting. And then, Sunday morning, I got a phone call. "Is this Farhi? Did you pray on Sunday morning by the Kotel, by sunrise? Are your Tefillin Shel Rosh switched?... I am the relative of the person who switched Tefillin last week with you, accidentally at the Kotel. My



relative lives in Monsey. He was here in Israel, for his father's yahrzeit, but he had to run back. He noticed when he got back to Monsey, that the straps were not the same. We called the lost and found of the Kotel, and they did not remember anyone saying that they had their Tefillin shel Rosh switched. Sorry!... But before they hung up, they said, "Wait a second! You said Sunday, on Hannuka? Yes! There was someone Farhi... here is his number!"

I got in touch with this person in Monsey, and we exchanged pictures of the Tefillin to make sure, that we switched with each other, and not with a third person. This man had mine, and I had his. He said to me, "Know, that the Tefillin, are not mine. They were my father's, who was a great man. He moved to Bnei Brak many years ago, and was from the closest people with R' Chaim Kanievsky. He is buried right next to R' Chaim, as he was very close to him. He bought the grave when R' Chaim bought his. I am wearing my father's Tefillin, as I know that his Tefillin were very important to him, and that my father had the highest level of Hiddur on his Tefillin. I was broken to find, that the day of

my father's yahrzeit, I lost his tefillin! It was almost as if, his tefillin were taken away from me, on his Yahrzeit! And I could not understand it! Being that I was standing next to the Chabad Tefillin stand, someone at the kotel asked me if they could use my Tefillin, and I let them use it, knowing that that was what my father would want me to do with his Tefillin... And now, after doing the mitzvah, my Tefillin were lost! But know this... you have been wearing Tefillin of my father, who was a great man!

I told my Rebbi the story, and who the man was who I was wearing his Tefillin, and my Rabbi said, "Sure! I know who he was! He was first close to R' Chaim's father, the Steipler, and when he asked the Steipler where to give his Tzeddaka money, the Steipler said, that he should support his son, R' Chaim, which he did the whole life of R' Chaim!"

I had just two more days, to wear that man's Tefillin. I kissed those Tefillin, and thanked G-d for giving me the merit! Within 48 hours, I had a knock on my door! The man from Monsey already had my Tefillin sent back, and I gave him back his Tefillin to the messenger!

## THE ART OF CHANGING THE WORLD

There were people who changed the world forever, who saved, and keep saving, millions of lives, even after they are gone. The inventors of the three-point seat belt, vaccines, penicillin, the British mathematician who decoded the German military enigma code in WW2, the Russian submarine officer who did not press the nuclear button in the Cuban war, the inventor of GMO wheat to win the war against starvation, were from the greatest people of all times, saving more lives than anyone else.

In spirituality, though, it is not about how many people one affects that makes people legends. Judaism is a religion that values quality over quantity. It is not how many actions you do, but it is the actions you do with your whole heart that make a difference. What makes someone a spiritual

legend, can simply be a one-time act, done with the right intention, bringing G-dliness into the world, even the world of just one person.

Yosef merited to be king, he merited greatness, because of just one act. He stood tall to block Esav's view of his mother Rachel, so he merited greatness. (See Rashi בנות צעדה עלי שור) Shem merited tzitzit for his descendants, the Jewish people, for the one act of covering his father, Noach. Avraham merited tefillin and techelet, from the way he once spoke to the King of Sedom, מְחוֹטָּ וְאֶנְכִי עֹפֵר וְאֶפֶר וְעַד שְׂרוּדֵי-נֶעַל. And for saying וְאֶפֶר וְאֶפֶר, Avraham merited "the dirt" used to prove innocence of the Sotah, and the ashes of the Red Heifer. Aharon merited Priesthood for all his descendants, for being truly happy for his younger brother Moshe's new post. וְרָאָה וְשָׂמַח בְּלִבּוֹ



All of the great women in the Eishet Chayil hall of fame entered either through just one act, or by empowering just one man to be the greatest he could be. *Sarah, for making her husband rich from Pharaoh. Rivka, for helping Yitzchak overcome the loss of his mother. Leah, for greeting Yaacov with a cheerful face when he returned from the field, when she purchased that night from Rachel for some mandrakes. Rachel, for going through embarrassment of having no children, every day. Bitya, daughter of Pharaoh, who converted and dealt with Moshe. Yochebed, for being the mother of Moshe. Miriam, for prophesying that her mother would have the child that would save the Jewish People. For getting slapped on her head over her prophecy by Amram, when the slavery got worse instead of the redemption arriving, and when Little Moshe was thrown into the Nile, she stayed strong to her prophecy, by waiting on the side of Nile to see what would happen to her brother. Chana, for praying for a son, and in the merit of that prayer, to be the mother of Shmuel, who was equal to both Moshe and Aharon, together. Yael, for not killing Sisra with a sword, but instead, killing him with a tent peg, so as not to wear a masculine item. The widowed woman who gave bread and water to Eliyahu the prophet. Rachav, the harlot, who was willing to help the Jewish Spies when the Jews came to destroy Yericho. Bat Sheva, for being the mother of King Shlomo. Michal, for saving King David's life from the hands of her father, King Shaul. Shimshon's mother. Elisheva bat Aminadav, the wife of Aharon, and the mother of all Kohanim. Serah Bat Asher, who saved a whole city of Jews, with her sound advice. The wife of Ovadiah the prophet, who prevented her sons from falling into King Achav's persuasion to worship idols. Shunamit, for feeding the prophet Elisha. Ruth, for converting and embracing the religion in such a way that she merited to be King David's grandmother.* (See Midrash Mishlei 31;11-49)

According to Judaism, the one-on-one tutor is not less praiseworthy than the Rosh Yeshiva. You change one person's life, and you have changed the world. Cheering up just one person, just one time, can begin a ripple effect: the newly happy person will cheer up others and make the world a better place. This is what motivated me to go into the

self-help space to begin with. It was because, when I was a teenager, one of my friends was suffering from horrible facial acne attacks. He looked down, and I asked him what's up. He said, "You know... My face!" I told him that people don't look at the external as much as they look at the internal. Be positive, be the best guy you can be, and you will see that people will see your inner beauty, when you let it shine." I did not think much of it, until one day, years later, this person said that back then I had saved him from suicide. Ever since, this person is making people happy, every day of his life.

One book, one pen, one child and one teacher can change the world, forever. It has been said, education is the most powerful tool to change the world. Change a classroom, and you change a community. When you change enough communities, you can change the world. And our education systems are built, not for the masses, but for those few who end up making a difference in the world. *אֶחָד מֵאֶלֶף מְלִמְדֵי תּוֹרָה יִצְאֵהוּ* (Koheleth 7 28) Rashi explains that out of a thousand students who enter our religious education systems, only one comes out of the system who is able to answer a Halachic question. It is for that one person who makes the difference, and who changes the world, that we build our education systems.

When Yaakov blessed the tribes, he blessed them over a singular descendant of that tribe, and ignored the other thousands. He blessed Yehuda, focusing on David Hamelech and his royal family. He blessed Dan, with just Shimshon in mind. He blessed Gad, with just Yiftach in mind. He blessed Binyamin, with just King Shaul, Mordechai and Esther in mind. He blessed Ephraim, the younger brother, with his right hand, instead of Menashe, just because of one of Ephraim's descendants, Yehoshua Ben Nun. What about the rest of the descendants?!? Why are they not referred to in the blessings? What are they? Chopped liver?

The answer is that in Judaism, it is not about quantity, it is about quality. G-d has patience to wait ten generations for a Noach, and another ten generations for an Avraham Avinu, and sustains all the sinners till then, for the sake of these great men, to bring G-dliness into the world. So why does G-d

make so many people, if they are, anyway, just background scenery? This question is asked by the Rambam, in his introduction to Mishnayot Seder Zeraim. He writes the ways of G-d. "G-d made a person rich, with servants, and a mansion, so that just one time, the poor Tzaddik, can sit and rest in the shade of his mansion, when he is tired and hot." According to Judaism, all of the world, is to serve, indirectly, the Tzaddik. (Intro Messilat Yescharim) As Zecharia prophesied, there will come a day when the biggest stadiums of Esav will serve as places where Torah will be taught in public. (Zecharia 9;11 Rashi) MetLife stadium, and the biggest stadiums, were built for the sake of promoting Torah, for the Siyum Hashas. The

biggest railroad in the world, the Trans- Siberian, 6,150 miles long that takes seven days on a single train, was created to save the Mirrer Yeshiva. (Just to give you a concept: The whole USA is only 2,800 miles wide) As King Solomon taught, אִי־אֶלֶּם עוֹלָם? The purpose of the whole world, is, somehow, to serve the Tzaddik. (See Berachot 58a, Yoma 38b)

According to Judaism, each person can be that Tzaddik, and should strive to be that person. That is why G-d created Adam, one man alone. So that each person should say, the world was created for me, to make it a better place than it is. And to teach, that if I change the life of just one person, I have changed the world. (Sanhedrin 37a)

Selfie steps to change the world:

1. People who change the world have a certain mindset. "I am only one, but still, I am one. I cannot do everything, but still, I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." (E.O. Grover)

2. Don't try to change the world. Find a problem that exists that you have a solution for, something you deeply care about. Find like-minded people, who recognize this problem, and care enough to not only advise, but to give time, money and effort, for this cause. Every change that ever happened in the world, began with one caring person, who put together a group of a few caring people.

4. The first step of changing the world is to make your bed. Clean up the messes you make, fix yourself, and the world will follow.

5. Have patience. You can't change the world overnight.

## Question of the week

Q: Hi Rabbi! I love your articles, but I miss the Q A on Effective Learning Tools. You have any tips on focusing?

Dan D.

A: Dan, thanks for the comment, it keeps me going! Focusing is the most important thing we have to focus on in life. In your "hour of power", the time that you function best, focus on focusing on your most important tasks, for as long as you can. Success in any area in life, is dependent on how long you can focus with no interruptions, on accomplishing your most important tasks. Not on making your to do lists, and not on filling your calendar. But on how long you can focus on your most important tasks, getting them done.

There are two ways to focus. Micro and Macro. Micro refers to small, and Macro refers to big. In the yeshiva system, Iyun is Micro, עוקר הרים and Macro is Bekiyut, bigger picture, סיני. This is represented in the measurements of the Aron Hakodesh, which is symbolic to Torah Learning, and it is measured by width and length, and depth.



The art of focusing, is made up of three main ingredients. LCQ2: Listening, Curiosity, and Questions. And then, LCQ again on the answer. You need to first listen, to have what to focus on, then, then choose what you are curious about in what was just said, and then, ask questions. Any of the six questions will do. Who What When Where Why and How. (See Yachin Boaz intro to Kodshim)

When listening to people, trying to focus on what they say, you need to be focused on both: on what the general message is, and on the details of what they are actually saying. This way, people will feel that you are present with them when they talk to you. The art of listening is very valuable, and it shows ultimate respect. Just recently, a girl broke an engagement, telling me that what bothered her most, was that she felt that the boy was not present with her in their conversations. A client asked me recently, how to be present in a conversation. The answer is, you need to listen with every bone in your body. And to be focused, on every, single, word. At the outset of my work as a life coach, I actually had a hard time doing this, as my mind would begin to wonder, even a drop. This is not good, because the most important tools of the coach is his ability to listen with every bone in his body. Baruch Hashem, I learnt how to speed type, blind type, so I was able to start writing down everything they were saying and I was able to reflect and ask questions, that would challenge them to think and perform their best. Writing, taking notes, is a great tool, for getting hyper focused.

I call this hyper focusing, the Fresh Fish method. There was this guy who opened a fish store next to a yeshiva. One guy passed by and read the sign. It said, Fresh Fish Sold Here. He entered and asked the fish guy, the fishmonger, a question. “You wrote on the sign, Fresh Fish Sold Here. Why do you have to mention, that it is sold here? Where else would you sell the fish of your store? In the pizza shop?” The fish guy, said, he was right. He got up on the ladder, and crossed out the word Here.

The next day, the same guy came in and said, “Now the sign says, Fresh Fish Sold.” Of course, you are selling fish! Did you think someone would think that you are giving out fresh fish for free?! So the fish guy, erased the word “Sold”. The next day, the same guy says to him. “Fresh Fish? Of course, you are selling fresh fish!? What else would you be selling? Spoiled fish?! So he erased the word fresh. Now, all it says on the sign is, “Fish”.

The next day, the same guy comes in and says, “I was looking at your Fish sign, and I have one last question. Why do you write Fish? Everyone knows you are selling fish! You can smell the fish store from down the block!” So the fish guy took down the sign, and nobody ever came to buy fish. The only person who came into the store, was this guy, who came each day to say, how much he loves the empty sign on the store front.

In micro, this guy was right. But in the macro, he was very wrong. However, the Micro is important for being a good listener, ready to question, every, single, word. But then, we need to step back, and look at the whole picture. And sometimes, when you focus on the whole picture of what the person is saying, you get a whole new dimension to focus on.

This is true, for all focusing. When you are learning Torah, G-d is talking to you, so you need to apply LCQ2, you need to Micro, and Macro, using the Fresh Fish method, but also, stepping back and seeing the whole picture. Hopefully, we will focus on focusing in the next articles, as well. And thank you, Dan, for getting me back into the QA!!

## THE ART OF FOCUSING (2020)



As we see the light in the end of the Covidland tunnel, looking back at the dark parts of 2020, people lost a lot. Loved ones, income, clients, career, motivation, spirituality of loved ones... an endless list. Entering 2021, we have a choice. We can focus on the pain of the losses of 2020, or we can focus on the lessons learned. How you focus will determine your performance in the year ahead, as people are controlled by three decisions. What am I going to focus on? What does it mean? What am I going to do about it?

Whatever we focus on in life expands. Do we focus on problems, pain, hopelessness, helplessness, impure thoughts, how much we are missing, and how much we can take in life? Or do we try to concentrate on creative ideas, solutions, options, the soul, Torah concepts, how much we *do* have, and how much we can give in life. The choice is yours. I will never forget when, over 10 years ago, my father, Rabbi Isaac Farhi, was invited to one of the biggest activists in the Syrian community, which I grew up in, to discuss an urgent matter. He brought me along. The opening question was, "Rabbi, what do you think is the biggest religious problem presently facing the community?" My father answered, "I don't know. I don't usually focus on what's wrong. I focus on the good, on what's right, and I try to make that better."

Ever wonder why Tefillin is called Tefillin? The Torah refers to Tefillin only as *Ot*, or *Totafot*, but never as Tefillin. The root of the word Tefillin, coined by our Rabbis, is found in our Parasha. Yaakov told Yosef, רָאָה פְּנֵיךָ לֹא פָלַלְתִּי I never **thought** I would see your face again. Tefillin is a focusing machine, and it is the secret spiritual weapon of the Jew. First thing, each morning, we direct all the focus of the four senses of the head: sight, smell, sound, taste (hence four parchments on head), and the sense of touch in our hands (hence one parchment on arm) on what G-d wants us to focus on. If you do not think with a Tefillin mindset of what is written in the Tefillin *Parashiot* - that you are a Jew who G-d redeemed from Egypt, and that everything you are and have belongs to G-d, etc., - you have not fulfilled the

Mitzvah. Without focusing correctly, the act of putting on Tefillin is no more than the act of a monkey. (Aruch Hashulchan 25;8) This is also why your thoughts, while wearing Tefillin, are so important. In Olam Haba, a person who has not worn Tefillin is classified as an entirely different type of person: *a skull that did not wear Tefillin* קרקפתא דלא מנה תפילין Because what a person focuses on *defines* the person. (R. H. 17a) There is no other case in which the lack of performing a mitzvah leads to classifying the person, as one type or another. Because what you focus on determines who you are.

In relationships, what we focus on in other people expands. Focus on the good of your loved ones, and watch them exceed your expectations. Focus on their weaknesses, and watch them crumble. Here is my favorite one-minute video clip. "One day, as a small child, Thomas Edison came home from school and gave a paper to his mother. He said to her. "Mom, my teacher gave this paper to me and told me that only you are to read it. Mom, what does it say?" Her eyes welled with tears as she read the letter out loud to her child... "Your son is a genius. This school is too small for him and doesn't have good enough teachers to train him. Please teach him yourself." Many years after Edison's mother had died, he became one of the greatest inventors of the century. One day, Edison was going through a closet, and he found the letter that his old teacher had written his mother that day. He opened it... The message written on the letter was, "Your son is mentally deficient. We won't let him come to school anymore." Edison wrote in his diary: "Thomas A. Edison was a mentally deficient child whose mother turned him into the genius of the century."

Was the teacher wrong? No. Thomas, at an early age, developed hearing problems, which made it hard for him to listen in class, which made him bored in class. So, the teacher labeled him a misfit, as he was a misfit to *her* teaching style of explaining, repeating, and asking students to repeat after her. Edison's learning strength was in reading, being imaginative, and asking questions, but not in



listening... an obvious misfit to the classical classroom setting.

Was his mother wrong? No. Little Thomas Alva Edison *was* a genius. Thomas just needed someone to focus on a solution, not on the problem, and make him the greatest problem solver of the century, with a record number of 1,093 patents and inventions that impacted our world: Durable lightbulbs, improved telegraphs, carbon microphone which made telephones practical, first commercial x-ray machine, motion picture, phonograph-sound recorders and players, rechargeable batteries, efficient electricity and electric systems, improved cement to build stadiums (i.e., Yankee Stadium), electric trains, brakes, rubber wheels, fruit preservers that suck the oxygen out of jars making them vacuum sealed, etc., etc., etc. All because his mother did not focus on what Thomas' teacher focused on.

Even our fears and anxieties are the result of what we focus on. One of the most powerful parts of the drama between Yosef and his brothers happens after Yaakov's death. On their way back to Egypt, returning from Yaakov's funeral, they passed the pit that Yosef's brother threw him into. The tribes observed Yosef staring into the pit, murmuring something. They assumed that now that Yaakov was gone, Yosef was considering how to take revenge. But in reality, Yosef was just blessing G-d for the miracle that He had performed for him there, ברוך שעשה לי נס במקום הזה. When they arrived in Egypt, Yosef stopped inviting his brothers to eat with him. While their father was alive, Yaakov would sit Yosef at the head of the table, despite the fact that royalty was given to Yehuda, and Reuven was firstborn. Now that Yaakov died, Yosef avoided this politically sticky situation.

The brothers were petrified of revenge, לוי ישׁטגנו, יוֹסֵף, *What if Yosef hates us, and he will pay us back for the evil we did to him?* For the sake of peace, and out of fear of their lives, the brothers approached Yosef and lied to him. *Your father commanded us, before his death, to relay to you: please forgive the sin of your brothers, for they have done you evil, etc.* Yosef cried when they spoke with him, and he responded in the most unusual way.

אל-תייראו... וְאַתֶּם הַשְׁבַּתֶּם עָלַי רָעָה אֲלֵקִים הַשָּׂבָה לְטֹבָה *Don't fear... although you intended to do me harm, Elokim intended it for the good.* Why was that a reason not to fear? If Yosef remembered that they had intended to harm him, and only because G-d intervened, he was saved, that was all the more reason for the brothers to fear his revenge! The Alter from Novardok answers something amazing. Yosef was telling them, I never had anything against you. Even when you came down to Egypt the first time for food, I did not remember what you did to me, I only remembered my dreams. (see 42:9) The reason why you are afraid of me is because of your interpretation of my actions. The reason why, since day one, you interpreted my actions with agendas against you, is because, אַתֶּם הַשְׁבַּתֶּם עָלַי רָעָה. You saw me as a bad guy. Everything I ever did, you interpreted as a threat. I can't help you to stop being afraid of me, unless you begin to see me, my essence, as a loving brother. No matter what you did to me, regardless of how you perceived me, G-d turned it into good. I never had, and I still don't have, anything against you. But I can't help you to stop being afraid of me. Only you can help yourselves.

Selfie steps to improve your decisions of what to focus on:

1. Ask yourself, consistently, the *right* questions, at the beginning of the day. What are my priorities, what is most important? What is expected of me? What do I wish to achieve? What are my options?



2. Create a notebook, a file, or post-it, to be your “side-tracking-thought parking lot.” A place where you can “park” the thoughts that don’t serve you best, so that they don’t disturb the rest of your focusing, which should be on what *is* effective, relevant, and important. You can always come back to them, when they have a purpose.
3. (Sponsored ad by author ☺) Book daily, weekly, or monthly sessions with your favorite coach, Yosef Farhi, to focus on and create everlasting change. You need an accountability partner to prioritize goals, chart progress, and celebrate success.
4. Focusing is like a muscle. The more you focus on focusing, the stronger your focusing gets.

## HOW TO SOLVE EVERYONE'S PROBLEMS

Unfortunately, we can't solve most of the problems of most of the people in our lives. Unfortunately, there is only a certain amount of charity we can give, only a certain amount of extra time and energy we have. Unfortunately, there is only a certain amount of care and heart that we can slice into so many small pieces.

Rav Yohanan taught us something that can change that. *It is greater to give someone a bright white smile; more than giving him a cup of milk.* The source for this is from the words in the *passuk* in this week's *parasha*. וּלְבֹן - שְׂגִימִים מִחֶלֶב (Bereshit 49). Rav Yohanan teaches not to take these words only literally, but to learn the following lesson: אל תקרי "ולבן שנים אלא וליבון שנייים" (Ketubot 111b) *Read in this passuk, that "whitening teeth," smiling, is greater than giving a cup of milk.*

Three questions. Why is greeting someone with a smile greater than giving specifically a cup of milk? Why did Rav Yohanan use milk to express his point, why not chocolate chip cookies? Why specifically milk?

Another question. Imagine two people standing at Metliffe stadium at the outset of Siyum Hashas. They are competing who could be a bigger *Baal Chessed*, who can be more altruistic. One pays money to hand out cups of warm, *Cholov Yisrael* milk to 97,000 people. And the other stands at the entrance, smiling and greeting 97,000 people. Who did more *Chessed*? Rav Yohanan says it's not the one who gave the milk. It's the one who smiled! How does that make sense?

We know that the Torah compares a human being to a tree. כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׁדָה What is the meaning of this comparison? In what way is a human similar to a tree?

A tree will die without sunshine, without warmth. Love, care, and warmth are human emotional needs; they are oxygen to the ego. If you smile to your children, students, spouse, in-laws, employers, employees, neighbors, siblings, to the people you meet each day, you are giving them their emotional oxygen.

In ancient medicine, when someone got sick, it was usually because the person was worried, angry, or stressed. These negative emotions cause the person to become heated up, and heating the system makes it sick. The way to cool down the system was to drink milk. Rav Yohanan is teaching us that a better way to help someone who is angry, stressed or worried - is by smiling to him with a broad, genuine smile. By being as optimistic as you can be with them, this can cure them more than the best medicine. This is greater than solving their problems for them. Because lack of emotional oxygen is the root of so many issues. Rav Yohanan chose specifically milk to teach us that a smile can cure what medicine can't. (Ein Yitzhak)

A smile tells its receiver – "I respect you. I accept you. You are important." Milk does not do that. Milk, even if it had a physical cure to it, it was only a physical cure. A smile is an emotional cure. According to a study done at Uppsala University in Sweden in 2014, it is tough for one to remain angry

and worried, even with a worried or angry face, while looking at a happy person who is smiling a genuine smile.

Everyone knows that the best Abbas and Imas, are the smiley Abbas and Imas. The best Rebbeim, teachers, and tutors are the smiley ones. The best employers, best employees, are the smiley ones. I made a big mistake a few years back on Erev Rosh Hashana. I wanted to take on myself something small that would have an overall impact on my whole performance as a Jew. I decided to take upon myself to smile to everyone I meet and to become an overall more smiley person. Unfortunately, it did not work. New Year's resolutions need to be simple. Changing a *middah*, is not simple. It is easier to finish Shas, not that finishing Shas is easy!

What is the secret of those who are able to smile to everyone? Are they mentally strong, or are they emotionally tough? People who can smile "whatever the weather" have a particular formula. They schedule time to worry, label their emotions, accept what they can't change, and they take on the problems they can. They know how to cheer themselves up when the going gets rough.

These last two weeks, I did not write. I had a hard time smiling. I have a bill of 7000 shekel from the printer for printing *parashah* sheets, and I can't continue without more financial aid. But then I realized I couldn't afford to stop writing. Writing my ideas and helping people with my self-reflectiveness, cheers me up more than anything else.

Here are the Selfie Steps to access the emotional energy you need to smile a genuine smile to as many people as you can.

1. Slow down and enjoy the moment. Take a deep breath. Inhale and exhale, slowly, focusing on enjoying the moment that G-d has given you. Just for a moment, try and let go of the past and future and things that you have no control over.
2. Practice smiling first thing in the morning. Make it a conscious decision first thing in the morning that you will smile to as many people as you could. This is the best and only thing you can probably do to help them.
3. Smile, not because other people expect you to, (which can have a negative effect) but because you have so much to smile about. G-d has blessed you with so much good!!! Smile inwards, towards yourself, as you deserve a boost in positivity, and you will smile outwardly. And then, watch how your smile spreads positivity like magic!
4. Stop trying to solve everyone else's problems.
5. Think happy thoughts, happy memories. Meditating on gratitude is a sure smiley solution.
6. Know what cheers you up, and what calms you down. Torah. Music. Good food. Nature. Gym. Volunteer work. Take a break from digital devices and spend more time with those you love.
7. Believe that G-d is with you, that G-d loves you, that G-d believes in you, that G-d is Infinite, and He has infinite solutions.

### THE ETERNAL INTERNAL CONFLICT

When you think of all your inner conflicts and put them out there on paper, you will notice how many there are. *Should I stay later at the party, or should I get up early to pray like a mentsch? Should I*

*protect my best friend, or should I be honest when asked information regarding a shidduch? Should I work harder or be calmer? Am I who I was, or am I who I want to be?*



So, a Jew has ups and downs. A Jew has emotions. A Jew has tests in life. And no matter what test you are going through, G-d prefers you more than anything else in His Universe. קִיִּינְעֵקֶב בְּתֵר לִו יְהָ. אִישׁרְאֵל לְסִגְלָתוֹ: For G-d has chosen Yaakov for Himself (Tehillim 135; see Malbim) You are G-d's favorite, even when you can't stand yourself.

It is impossible to eradicate emotion; it is only possible to ignore it, or to question its truth. Emotions come and emotions go, but the values you respect define who you really are. The person you are is the person you fight to stand up to become. You are the person you pray to G-d that He let you be. Yaakov reached the point of deserving seven crowns for having met seven major challenges in his life and "getting up" after each one. This ability to get up again is the glorious Yisrael, even if he is on his way down to exile.

This problem of not tapping into the Yisrael we are inside is the reason why we don't have the Beit Hamikdash today. As the Messilat Yesharim writes in chapter 19, "And if a person says, who am I?

*And what have I, hidden inside me, that I can pray for the end of the exile, for Jerusalem, etc... Can my prayers gather in the exiles? And sprout a redemption? The answer is like we learned (Sanhedrin 38): For this, a person is created alone, in order that each person can say, "For me, the world was created", and this brings G-d pleasure, that his sons pray for the Beit Hamikdash. And even if his prayers are not answered immediately, for the time has not yet come, or for some other reason, still, he has done his part, and G-d is happy with this..."* The reason why the Temple is not rebuilt, the reason why Mashiaich is not here, is because we do not believe in ourselves; we do not recognize that our prayers can make a difference. We do not realize that the world that each and every one of us finds himself in, is the world that was created for that person. This is the belief of the Yisrael. Only by realizing that even when we are in the Yaakov mode G-d loves us more than anything, will the Yisrael in each one of us shine.

## SOMETHING FOR THE KIDS

Someone asked me a few days after Hanukah how my vacation was. I answered that I am still בהפּשׁ. (I am still on vacation.) He asked me why I am still on vacation a week after Hanukah. I told him בהפּשׁ is also the acronym for the four things we all have to deal with in life. All of life's problems usually fall under one of four categories: בריאות – health, הִינוּךְ - parenting, פרנסה - livelihood, שלום בית, peace with your spouse, or the people in your life.

Our job in life is to juggle those four. Rabbi Geizler taught us, as coaches, that if the difficult problems in life are hard to solve, the reason is usually because the problems are a solution for some other problem. A parenting problem can be solved with time, thought, money, or patience, but the reason why a parent may lack these resources is because these resources are already invested to a great extent in his livelihood. I can't get to the gym and care for my health, because I don't have the

time to make time for it, because my time is invested in one of the other three. Etc., etc.

Lately, I invented an awareness game that I play with my kids. It's called "the ingredients game". I take something out of the refrigerator, something that everyone eats, and I ask the kids what the main ingredient is. What is the second most important ingredient. What is the third. Most of the time, we do not pay any attention to the ingredients of the things we eat. And most of the time, we do not realize what percentage of our time, money and effort is invested in any one of the four abovementioned factors. Usually, not even 20 percent of our resources are spent on הִינוּךְ, on parenting. Despite the fact that our children are 100 percent of our future. This is something we all know. But something we all forget (or choose to forget) too often.



Probably the person who changed the world the most over the last years was Steve Jobs. What was his motivation? What kept Steve going? “Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything – all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure – these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.” “Being the richest man in the cemetery doesn’t matter to me. Going to bed at night saying, ‘we’ve done something wonderful’, that’s what matters to me.”

Eliyahu Hanavi asked G-d, “Master of the World! With what will a poor man’s name be remembered before You? A rich man is remembered because of his money, his silver and gold, for his precious stones and diamonds and all types of fancy utensils he acquired. But the poor man, how will he be remembered?” In other words, a rich man has the ability to put his name on a Yeshiva Building, on an Aron Kodesh, he can donate a Shul... and these will bear his name. But the poor man has nothing with his name on it, to keep the memory of his name before G-d!?

G-d answered Eliyahu, “The poor man will be remembered through his children. The son reads the Torah in shul , and people ask, ‘Who’s that man’s father?’ The son asks a good question in the study hall, and people ask, ‘Who is the one who asked that question? Who is his father?’ And people will bless G-d’s Name, because of the poor man’s son.” The rich man is remembered because of the buildings he donated to the Yeshiva. And the poor man is remembered because his son is the one who is teaching Torah in that Yeshiva. (TDE 18)

When Yaakov blessed Menashe and Efraim, he blessed them with the eternal blessing: המלאך הגאל אותי מכל רע יברך את הנערים ויקרא בהם שמי May the One who redeemed me from all hard times bless the lads, *and call in them My Name*. What does that mean, that Yaakov’s name be “called in them”? The Shevet Meyehuda answers that Yaakov was asking that his name live on through these children.

Not by having his name on buildings. But by the actions of his offspring.

When Yaakov blessed Yosef, (ויברך את יוסף) he blessed him by blessing his children. (המלאך הגאל אותי מכל רע יברך את הנערים) Because the greatest blessing you can give a person is to bless his children. Because your sons are you after you are gone.

Did you ever stop to ask yourself what is the greatest thing you can give your children? I thought about this for a while. The secret to having a tranquil home, to having Shalom Bayit and to effective, successful parenting is Triple A. Your wife and kids need Attention, Affection, and Appreciation *from you*. But most husbands and fathers confuse the Triple A with another Triple A. They think that what their family needs most from them is Affordability, Availability and Advice. And that is why most husbands and fathers feel that to be a good father or husband is an impossible task. But the second Triple A is asked for only when there is a lack in the first Triple A. The first Triple A is all your family really need from you.

What did Yaakov leave for his children? He gave them the greatest thing a father can give. He blessed each one and let each one know his strength and weakness. He let them know that he knows each one has a unique Neshama, and he believes that each one will go on to become the greatest that he can be. ויברך אותם איש אשר כברכתו ויברך אותם *And he blessed them, each one with the befitting blessing, did he bless them.* The Or Hachaim explains this to mean that each one of the children had his unique strengths, and Yaakov made sure that each one knew who he could be, and that Yaakov believed in him. Probably the greatest thing I can give my children is the knowledge and certainty that I believe in them, to let them know how great they are, and how great G-d made them.

Unfortunately, the way the world we live in conducts itself is a far cry from these ideas. The problem with the education system we have in our society is that the school system is outdated. The





style of education and parenting kids as “factory made, one size fits all” is outdated. The old system builds factory workers and employees. Today’s world and market is looking for more creativity and less workers. People need to feel today, more than ever before, that they have a unique identity.

For example, one of my children happens to be an amazing storyteller. Unfortunately, the school system does not give a child an opportunity to develop such a skill. Quite the contrary. The child gets punished for telling stories in class, and draws attention. It turns out that one of the greatest skills one can have in life is storytelling. For marketing, bringing your brand to life, for teaching, for parenting, and for holding people’s attention. It is

the seemingly small traits that our children are blessed with that they need us to glorify and strengthen.

If we bring those unique blessing that G-d gives us to light, we can do tremendous things in the world. Believe it or not, Steve Jobs’ greatest life passion and skill was calligraphy. He knew more about design than he did about technology. And he used that passion to build the iPhone in such a way that, “We made the buttons on the screen look so good you’ll want to lick them.”

It is up to us to notice the gifts G-d gives our children and to let our kids know how great they can be. To believe in them. Because they are only future we have.

## ILLEGAL, IMMORAL AND FATTENING

Life really stinks. There are so many things in life we can’t have. Luxury is out of our budget. As one gentile put it, all the good stuff in life is illegal, immoral or fattening. Life is so complicated and frustrating , full of expectations that we have that aren’t met. Life is what happens, while we are busy making plans. Man plans, and G-d laughs. How depressing. Life is somewhat pointless.

Or, life is really awesome. It is one incredibly amazing adventure, the most captivating fairy tale. It is an ongoing challenge of faith, self-improvement and self-actualization. Expectations and assumptions are the parents of frustration, disappointment and misery. G-d and His World owe you nothing. He was here before you, and He will manage fine after you are gone. He does not need you, but He loves you like crazy, and He gave you this 120-year opportunity to live an amazing life. Life is so beautiful, for no matter how many times we mess up, G-d is waiting for our return. G-d is awesome, and life is an opportunity to express this message to the world. Life is full of meaning, to serve G-d and to develop a relationship with Him. Life is an opportunity to be G-d-like and to sanctify G-d’s Name. Life is an opportunity to use

everything G-d gives us to serve Him. How enlightening.

So, who’s right about life? The pitiful or the positive? They are both right. Because life is like a mirror; it reflects how you look at it. If you love life, life will love you back. Life is not as much what happens to you, as much as it is how you respond to it, how you interpret it, and what you make of it.

There was a Chassidic Rebbe, who took his Chassidim to a simple, 105-year-old man, to get a blessing. If he reached such an age, he must have had some merit for his longevity. Wrinkle-free Mr. Old Man lived at the edge of a farm. After getting the blessings they wanted, they asked him for his secret. What is the secret of your longevity, Mr. Old Man? “I never asked questions; I do not need to know why things happened. G-d does not explain Himself in this world; He waits till you get upstairs to let you understand. If you ask too many questions, G-d, in His kindness, brings you Upstairs early, to let you know the answers, so that you do not have to think too hard trying to figure out your life by yourself.”



In Parashat Vayechi, we see how Yaakov was given his greatest punishment for something he said to Pharaoh in last week's *parasha*. The Hebrew word ייחיי is the numerical value of the good years that Yaakov had in his life. 34. 17 years from Yosef's birth until Yosef was taken away from him, and 17 years from his reunion with Yosef, until his death. Yaakov lived 33 years less than his father, Yitzhak. 33 beautiful years, golden years, were taken from him! Why? Because when Pharaoh asked him how old he was, his answer was "The years of my life were small in number, and bad. I did not live as many years as my ancestors." Yaakov lost a year of life for each of the 33 words that were spoken between the two. Hashem said to Yaakov, "What is all this complaining? I gave you back Yosef, I saved you from the hands of Esav, and you came out on top with Lavan; so, why are you complaining?"

Now, of course, Yaakov had what to complain about. You could look at the beginning of each story and cry, or you could look at the end of each story and laugh. All the turbulence of Yaakov's life had reason, and in the long run, Yaakov benefitted from every single difficulty that he went through. Because he ran from Esav, he learned 14 years and built a family. When he was with Lavan, he built himself a livelihood. When he finally rejoined Yosef, Yosef was able to support Yaakov's entire family in the time of famine. All's well that ends well. Even Dinah's defilement, had a good ending to the story. Her daughter from Shechem, Osnat, was sent down to Egypt, and, oddly enough, ended up being the girl that Yosef married! Osnat was the mother of Menashe and Efraim! We know that in Yaakov's conversation with Esav, Yaakov looked

at the good in life. So why, now, was Yaakov focusing on the negative aspect of his life? Yaakov, one of the greatest men ever, could have complained many times in his life, but he did not. Why was now any different?

The answer is that he was talking to Pharaoh, a materialistic gentile. Go explain to Pharaoh the pleasure of having 12 children that are the 12 Tribes, of having a Shabbat table, of learning 14 uninterrupted years in Yeshiva with a connection to G-d, without sleep, of getting a blessing from your father that cost you having your bed at home. For a gentile like Pharaoh, fun means immoral, illegal and fattening. Good life means, to the materialistic, having what most people want, but cannot have. But Yaakov, on his level, was punished, for that is not the way to talk about life, the life of a Jew. Even if you are talking to a materialistic gentile, or someone who does not understand the inner beauty of Jewish life.

I just recently spoke to a friend who left Kollel and went into Kiruv. He relayed to me that he never realized how lucky we are, those who are in the Ultra Orthodox, Chareidi system and part of the religious community. We have life with structure; we have a normal life, even if our lives have trials and tribulations. The things we want are legal, moral and nutritious, and more important: the things we want are spiritual. When I asked my Rebbi what to look for when I am looking to buy an apartment in Israel, he answered, "Three things. A place for a Sukkah. A good spot for your Menorah, and a location that is right next to your favorite Beit Midrash." Our life has so much good to be thankful for! If only we could see it and stop asking why things aren't better.

## ART OF APOLOGY

Erev Yom Kippur, I witnessed something very sad. The Jewish Law is that Yom Kippur cleanses only sins between Man and G-d. But if you sinned against a fellow Jew, after Yom Kippur you will still have that sin on your records – unless you ask for forgiveness. You

need to apologize. Now, we all make mistakes, and we all need to ask forgiveness, some time or another in life. Many wait for Yom Kippur eve, and "by the way" ask people for forgiveness. "Are you *mochel* me?" "Do you forgive me?" Some people do not even ask



forgiveness on Yom Kippur eve. They feel embarrassed, do not know how to do it, do not believe that forgiveness is attainable, or all of the above. What I witnessed Yom Kippur eve was sad. One sibling waited a couple of years to muster up the courage to ask another sibling on Yom Kippur eve to forgive and leave things behind them. But, the other sibling just turned around and walked away. A few more attempts, and the sibling who was being approached just said to the one asking forgiveness to “go get a life”. It was too late, too close to Yom Kippur, and the bad feelings and sins between the two of them would linger on for a very long time. Too long. *Unless* they would learn *how* to ask forgiveness. It is sad, because one sibling really wanted to change the relationship for the better. He really wanted to move on. And now, after having been turned away, the animosity just grew.

People rely on the dictum that if you ask for forgiveness three times and are rejected, the sin is no longer yours, but belongs, now, to the person you sinned against. People forget to read the words of our rabbis closely. Our Rabbis tell us that it is not enough to ask “Are you Mochel me?” three times. We need something called **רפיס דברי ריצוי**, and **עד שירצה את הכירו**. What are these things? After learning this article you will know what they are, and you will know *how* to ask forgiveness. It boils down to the old rule of successful communication, it is not *what* you say, but *how* you say it.

On the way back from Yaakov’s funeral, Yosef stopped by the pit that the brothers had thrown him into. As Yosef just stood there, looking over the pit, the brothers observed Yosef mumbling something to himself. They figured that now that his father was no longer living, Yosef was plotting revenge against them. (Yosef was actually blessing G-d at the

pit **ברוך... שעשה לי נס במקום הזה**, for making a miracle for Yosef in that place, the place where he almost died.) Also, after Yaakov’s death, the brothers noticed that Yosef did not invite them to eat with him at his palace anymore. They assumed that that, also, was because he wanted to take revenge. (But Yosef was actually just not sure how to make the seating arrangements in such a way that no one would get insulted. While Yaakov was alive, he, himself, would make the seating arrangements, putting Yosef at the head of the table.) The Torah tells us that the brothers feared Yosef’s revenge, and that is why they asked forgiveness.

Also, the brothers did not apologize themselves; rather, they asked the brothers closest to Yosef, (sons of his mother’s maid, Bilhah, whom he was close to) to ask forgiveness on their behalf. Rabbeinu Bachyeh tells us something very important. Yosef told them they did not need to worry. He never literally told them “I forgive you”. And because he *never explicitly said*, “I forgive you”, the sin was never forgiven. This, despite the fact that Yosef forgave them wholeheartedly, and he even cried when they suspected him of planning to take revenge. Still, Rabbeinu Bachyeh says because there was not an explicit “I forgive you”, the Jewish people needed to suffer the loss of the **עשרה הרוגי מלכות**, the Ten Martyrs many years later. Ten martyrs, for the sin of each one of the ten tribes. *All because the apology was incomplete.*

So, I researched the best way to apologize, to make the apology complete. Step one. Remorse. “I am sorry...” “I apologize...” But do not stop! The problem with just saying these two words alone, is that “Sorry, Excuse me, I apologize, *Slicha*” are used too freely. The remorse needs to sound genuine. If it is not genuine, it can make the original insult



even stronger. Even if it is authentic, but if it *sounds* fake, it has an opposite effect. ***The way to properly express remorse is to fill up the sentence, explaining specifically what you are sorry about.*** This does not mean bringing up the sin, but **דברי ריצוי**. I apologize for talking in a way that was out of line. Not, I apologize for calling you stupid, which could be another sin in of itself, for repeating the insult and bringing him back to the pain. The **דברי ריצוי** is showing that you wish to make amends. ***If there is anything I can do to make things better, let me know. I promise that I will do my best.*** This is from the most powerful parts of the apology .

We see that Yaakov asked forgiveness this way. When Yaakov apologized to Yosef for not burying Rachel in *Maarat Hamachpela* but on the road, Yaakov did not just say he was sorry, “It was out of my hands”. Yaakov explained himself at length, defining exactly what he was sorry about and the circumstances that brought him to act as he did. (See Rashi and Midrashim, four reasons that Yaakov told Yosef why he buried Rachel in Beth Lechem).

Point two. If the person has other reasons why he is apologizing, such as fear, it also makes the apology come across as weak. This is why waiting for Yom Kippur to start the apology process is not advisable. Erev Yom Kippur is a time to ask for forgiveness, ***after first having made amends a while previously.*** Otherwise, it might look cheap, as if you are not remorseful about the sinful act, but nervous about Yom Kippur. The person feels forced to forgive, but your relationship with him will stay bleak. It is not only for religious reasons that you need to apologize, to cleanse yourself from sin. It is ***to improve your relationships.*** Just hear the thought, “Just because you have Yom Kippur to worry about, that doesn’t mean I should accept your apology.”

Even in accepting apology, it is important ***not to*** keep it short. Yosef answered the apology saying, “*Do not fear... התחת אלקים אני Am I instead of G-d? I can’t harm you, even if I wanted to. Because of you, my brothers, the Egyptians realized that I am not a slave, but that I am part of a prestigious family. If I will harm you, the Egyptians will deduce that you must not be my brothers, “Did you ever see a brother kill his own brother?”* This is strange. The same reason that Yosef told them why he would not kill them, *that same reason was great rebuke to his brothers who did try to kill their own brother.* How could Yosef bring up the argument that a normal man would not kill his brother, something that they actually plotted to do? This was a time that they were expressing remorse! We see from here what Yosef was telling them, and what was in Yosef’s mind. Yosef told them, *When you sold me, when you wanted to kill me, it could not make sense unless G-d had wanted you to think in such a way. For even an Egyptian knows that a brother does not kill a brother. The only reason you thought in such a way must be because G-d had a plan. G-d must have put such thoughts in your minds.* (The Midrashim tell us that immediately after selling Yosef, the brothers did not understand how they could have done such a thing.) ***Yosef was able to forgive them, because he was able to see G-d in the picture.*** Either way, Yosef consoled his brothers at length, telling them two things. They had nothing to worry about (**אל תיראו**), and that ***they were not to blame*** (**התחת אלקים אני**). If a person accepts apology and shows the offender that he understands him and that he is not to blame, the original, good relationship will be immediately restored.

And a few more pointers. **Point 3.** The person who did something wrong should, himself,



come and ask forgiveness. It is part of the expression of sincere remorse. **Point 4.** It is *important not to give excuses* for your behavior, *in a way that sounds as if you are not taking responsibility for what you did.* When you take responsibility and promise that it won't happen again, there is a greater chance that the other person will forgive you. (This does not mean to take too much responsibility). **Point 5.** Never expect forgiveness right away. It takes time for the hurt person to get over his feelings and recover from the painful incident.

### THE G-D GIFTED ME

One never gets burned out from being himself. "Burn-out" happens when a person tries to be someone he is not, and then finds that it is impossible! The Hebrew word for stress is מתח. This word מתח is also used when describing a stretched rope – מתוח. Stress is the outcome of someone stretching himself too much or too far and even then, not reaching his goal.

The best way to dissipate stress is to accept ourselves as we are and stop trying to be people we are not. The world today has become stressful as never before, with more tension than oxygen. So many people have convinced themselves that if they would only be rich, famous, good looking, humorous or like their successful sibling, popular colleague or assistant, then the good times would start. As we will soon see, that just may be when the good times are over.

Using Chanukah as a springboard we might wonder concerning the fate of the Hashmonai family. After their victory, this family of Kohanim ascended the throne, assuming kingship over the Jewish people. For taking the throne, each of the four holy and pious sons of Mattityahu fell in war. The Talmud (B. Batra 3b) tells us how the Hashmonean rule ended,

When you apologize properly, people will forgive. All you have to do is to remember to say SORRY.

Sentence: Short, Sincere, but full sentence. Obligate yourself to make amends. Responsibility for the insult, no excuses. Rest. Let it sink in. Never demand forgiveness, let the other person know that you understand him, if it is hard for him to forgive. Yourself. Apologize in person.

and how the Herodian period begun. The story is of Hordus, slave of the Hashmonai royal family. *One day Hordus laid his eyes on one of the Hashmonai princesses. Soon after, he heard a Heavenly voice call out "Any servant who presently rebels will succeed". Hordus took the opportunity to kill all of the Hashmonai family, leaving behind the princess he wanted to marry. Once the girl realized that the former slave, Hordus, wanted to make her his queen, she climbed to the rooftop and cried out- "Anyone who claims that he belongs to the house of Hashmonai is nothing more than a servant, for all the Hashmonai kohanite family perished". This girl, the last member of the Hashmonai family, then leaped to her death.*

The Ramban in this week's *parasha* (49,10) writes the reason for the punishment of the priestly family. On his death bed, Yaakov blessed Yehuda "the royal staff should not be passed (to another) from Yehuda". The Hashmonaim priests had an obligation to offer sacrifices in the Temple and not to sit on the royal throne. The throne is reserved for Yehuda, alone. Despite the holiness and



piousness of such a family, they were not meant to rule the Jewish people.

R' Chaim Chechik zt"l writes in regard to this Ramban, that every person has a place, mission, and plan custom tailored for him in this world. Once someone tries to be someone else who is seemingly "G-d gifted", then he will not have Heavenly support or assistance in being that "someone else". Although the Torah we have today was preserved in the generation of the Hashmonaim solely in their merit, all four sons of Mattityahu, the Holy Priest, died tragically as a result of being who they were *not* supposed to be.

This mistake can and does happen to many people. A person who is, ostensibly, not trying to be someone else, and who denies wishing that he could have been a successful sibling or student instead of being himself, may blush during his denial. How sad it is that a person considers that there is someone with greater importance than his own. Who will be *me* in my place? There is, after all, only one *me*, and no one else can be the real *me*.

We see this in the Ramban, concerning the explanation of the transgression of *kilayim*, crossbreeding.(Vayikra 19:19) The reason G-d forbade crossbreeding is because He created the species with genetic identity to exist till the End of Time. One who crossbreeds is ruining G-d's Creation ; it is as if he thinks that G-d made (chas veshalom) an

incomplete world. *Each and every blade of grass has a Mazal in the Heavens that taps it and directs it to grow* (Breishit Rabba 10; 6). The Universe is run with the utmost precision and Divine Intervention. By trying to be someone else we are in essence saying – (chas veshalom) *G-d, your world isn't perfect. You made a mistake with me.*

R' Yerucham Levovitz z"l takes this a step further. If someone *does* succeed in being someone else, *he may not survive*. Fish need to reside in water at all times to live. Other animals would die in such conditions. And a fish on land would die if he had too much fresh air. This demonstrates that the source of life is neither air nor water. The true source is a Supernatural G-d. When someone tries to be like someone else, he is leaving his "source of support from Heaven". This is not how G-d made him/her. They may never survive in such conditions. G-d created this feeling of stress for a person to help him discover if he is being himself or someone else.

It is so important to internalize at every spare moment G-d's Divine Intervention and Care. Forgetting this can cause us much psychological damage. The outcome is a feeling of being left out, abandoned or forgotten. In the field of productivity, the results are even more destructive. We may never even notice *in what we actually are* "G-d gifted."

## THE CURSE OF A PATRIARCH

When Yaakov was on his death bed, he blessed his sons. Each blessing was "custom designed" to fit the very essence of each one of the twelve tribes. In the blessing to Shimon and Levi, Yaakov reproved them for their attack on Shechem. *"Their daggers are*

*stolen...Cursed be their anger, for it is brazen, and their fury, for it is harsh..."* (49:5) Rashi comments that Yaakov said to his sons the following: *"This skill of murder* (when they killed the men of Shechem) *is not your essence. The "talent" of murder belongs to*



*Esav. Esav alone was blessed by my father 'And you should live by your sword.' You stole the "dagger" from him."*

This is quite strange. How can it be that Yaakov saw fit to reprove his sons for their having killed the men of Shchem at the time he had chosen to bless them?

R' Yerucham Levovitz, zt"l, writes that this reproof was not for their having killed a whole community alone. It was reproof *that they had stolen a trait that was not theirs*. Murder was a penchant of Esav, not one that belonged to Yaakov's family. Shimon and Levi behaved in a way that was antithetical to their nature. Yaakov cursed this trait of Esav, which was, in actual fact, foreign to his own clan.

We may wonder at times at how *we* behave, feel or think. Is this who we really are? Not necessarily. We are who we *want* to be. If we discover that we have acted in a way that we regard as being below our standards, it could result from the social context in which we find ourselves. We may have "stolen" negative traits from our acquaintances that are not at all the real *me*. Human beings are social creatures, very conscious of what others say and think about us – very anxious to please. This is why it is so important to be sure we are keeping company with people whom we respect. Unsuitable behavior can be the result of trying to please the wrong people. Yaakov was able to curse his sons' hasty act and say *this is not who you really are. This behavior was stolen from Esav*. In essence this was the greatest blessing their father could give them. To dissect their negative actions from the way they identify themselves.

It is so sad when we make the mistake of deciding who we are when we are "down". It might take a life time to figure out who the

real *me* is. If we can only find the deepest will of *me*. The *me* that hides under the Tallit on Yom Kippur and behind the tear-stained machzor. This is probably more the essence of me than the me after sin.

There is a Rambam that can shed light on this concept. In Hilchot Teshuva (7:3) he writes *Do not think that one must repent only from sinful acts, such as forbidden marital relations and thievery. It is equally important to repent from evil characteristics. We must identify, through soul searching, traits of anger, hate, jealousy, competition, immorality, chasing after money, honor and allowing ourselves overindulgence in foods. From all these traits and those similar to them one must repent. It is harder to repent from these sins of character than it is to repent from those that have an action, for if one is enmeshed in these traits, it is hard to free oneself of them ...*

We may ask ourselves: if these traits comprise sins, then why are they not part of the *viduy* (confession)? We bang our hearts and say גזלנו, that we stole, but we do not say that we are *thieves*, nor do we describe ourselves as people who chronically chase after money. We confess about gossip, but not about hating our brethren. We confess only actions, but do not confess to being a bad person. This is rooted in the passuk of Viduy *and they shall confess their sins that they did.* (Bamidbar 5:7) Why do we not confess to being bad people?

One cannot confess being a thief or a murderer, because a big part of Teshuva is saying that the evil of my actions is not my true identity. Although it could be that one acted according to the dictates of a certain trait, this certainly does not define his essence, as long as, deep down in his heart, it is not who he really wants to be. If a person stole and does



not want to be a pick-pocket, then he isn't one, as long as he compensates his victim for the loss and promises not to repeat his wrongdoing... This explains how we can ask to be written in the Book of the Righteous on the High Holidays, although we may not have acted as righteous. One can decide to be a

Tzaddik; the sins that make him appear to be a Rasha do not identify who he is.

We can decide who we are despite our past. We can decide how we want to identify ourselves. After all, a dusty diamond is not valued according to the dust...

## YEHUDA – I WILL NEVER FORGET YOU

Yosef's last wish was to be buried in Eretz Yisrael. He made his brothers swear that when G-d would remember them and take them out of Egypt, they would take his bones along with them, at the Exodus. He told them, "Return me to the place you sold me from."

When Moshe was ready to go, he stood on the Nile and said, Yosef, Yosef, the time of redemption has come. G-d is waiting for you, and the Jews are waiting for you; the Clouds of Glory are waiting for you. If you reveal yourself now, good, etc. There are opinions that Moshe wrote the Name of G-d on a piece of clay and threw it into the Nile. Suddenly, the coffin rose. Etc.

Throughout their travels in the desert, Yosef's Aron (coffin), would travel with Moshe, right alongside the Ark. And the Nations of the world would ask, what is the ark of the Ever-living doing next to the ark of the dead? And the Jews would say, the one who is in this Aron (coffin) kept what is in this Ark. The Ark has in it the Ten Commandments that say, "I am Hashem your G-d", and Yosef said, Am I in the place of G-d? "You should not have other gods", and Yosef said, I am afraid of G-d. etc. etc. "Do not covet" He did not covet the wife of Potiphar. Etc. (Yalkut Shimoni Beshalach 247 225)

There seems to be a lesson here, in the fact that Yosef's coffin was placed next to the Ark. It

seems that it was done to make a statement. What message were the Jews trying to convey by placing the two together?

The answer seems to be, to the Jews and to the world, that the person who lives Torah is not just following a list of rules, guidelines and restrictions. It is not that when one faces tests in life, when one deals with conflict or crisis and stands strong, that he has kept to a manual. Rather, by keeping the Torah, you become the Torah, you become the manual. And that is a huge difference. Allow me to explain.

My wife was taught by Rebbetzin Spetner, that when you see in your child or someone you love something about which you feel that they need to be rebuked, do not say anything yet. Hold your tongue for about 3 weeks. In the meantime, work to improve yourself in that area, and you will see that your child/loved one will improve without your saying a word. This really works. Why?

This is the secret power of coaching and its fundamental belief. That "telling" doesn't work. Advice does not work. Words don't work. "Shoulds" don't work. The person has been "shoulding" himself/herself for so long and is not only not getting anywhere, but becoming more and more frustrated. So why should my "should" be any more powerful than his/her own? But when we focus on living differently, not on just words, the





person changes, and those who are around learn by example. By influence. By osmosis.

Yosef brought the Torah to life, by living it. He became a living Torah. And this is a huge lesson in leadership and effective parenting, which is leadership parenting. All the best leaders lived the life they wanted to preach, so they did not have to preach it. This is the difference between the Jewish leaders who lead by example, and other “leaders”, who can be orators, manipulators, or dictators, but in effect, are not real “leaders”.

The Aron of Yosef is not the coffin of a dead man, but of a living Torah, a real leader, that the gentiles could only wish they had. This is why when Yaakov died, and his coffin was in transit to burial in Maarat Hamachpela, Yosef and all the kings put their crowns on the coffin. Because when a great man dies, he does not die. He is still leading those people who knew him. That is how you know if someone was a leader or a dictator/manipulator. If after he dies, his lessons, lifestyle, virtues and values live on. That is Jewish Leadership. When Yaakov chose Yehuda to be the forefather of the Jewish Kings, it was in the merit of Yehuda’s responsibility to Yosef, to Binyamin, for being honest about his episode with Tamar, and for doing the right thing, without being afraid of what anyone else would say or do. These are all traits of a real leader, the secrets of effective leadership. Of Jewish Leadership.

This last week I could not stop crying. I lost one of my best friends, Yehuda Brenig, zt”l. He did not know he was one of my best friends, but he was. He died in the late 40’s, leaving his wife and ten kids. His life was Torah, and he was one of the nicest people I have ever known. He projected serenity, positivity and calm to the world who knew him; there was not a dry eye at the levaya. He

asked for no eulogies, no announcements, no posters. “What if the Heavenly Courts hear people saying about me that I learned the tractates Berachot, Shabbat, etc., and they test me, and I don’t know them?” As I write this, I have in my pocket a letter he wrote to his family and close friends, telling them what they can do for him. “That each one tries to do G-d’s Will.” Yehuda, I will miss you dearly.

I sat at the Shiva, introducing myself as Yosef Farhi, the one to whom Yehuda would give rides back from the Mir Yeshiva to Bayit Vegan. Whenever he did not have room in his car, he would try to find me some other ride home. I always loved to ask his advice. Not that he would say much, but he would listen and stay positive. And Yehuda projected positivity because that is how he lived. And the last thing he told me, when I asked him about some difficulty I was dealing with, while he was sick and dying and nobody knew that, he looked at me in the eye and said, “Yosef, you could look at this as a slap from G-d, or a pat on the cheek from G-d. It all depends how you look at it. And Yosef, I promise you, it is a pat of love.”

When I told this to the family, Mrs. Brenig, may she live and be well and strong and positive, said to me, He was like that to everyone. All day, people are coming and telling stories like yours. And now, when we need his counsel and encouragement, we need to ask ourselves, what would Yehuda say if he were here?

I cried with Mrs. Brenig and the family, because Yehuda would not say much. He lived his positivity, his serenity and his calm. That is how he projected it so well. He was a living example of Emunah, giving, being in the Now, and he is still a living example to all those who knew him.



## RUNNING LIKE WATER

The other day, I found a book with sayings from the Rebbe of Kotzk at a street book sale. He was known for his quotes, for the way he would make his point sharper than the point of a needle. When the idea sinks in, a person can only say, "Ouch!, I was not aware of that!" So, I flipped through the pages, and looked around for a quote that I could meditate on, one that I could "stick in deep". I do not know why, but I just could not get the following one out of my mind. **אין סכנה כסכנת ההרגל** "There is no danger like the danger of habit". It did not mean that much to me when I first read it, for we find this concept in other places. But still, I could not get the words of the Kotsker out of my head. He said it differently from everyone else, *There is no danger like the danger of habit*. Not Hurricane Sandy. Not a Nazi Germany. But "habit".

What are habits? Habit is a repeated behavior that is more or less automatic, having been programmed through prior experience. Such subconscious action can be most useful in many areas of life, enabling us to do tasks efficiently, as we need not devote contemplation or thinking what we are about to do. So how could the Kotsker say that habit is the greatest danger for humanity?

In this week's parasha, we find how Yaakov "blessed Reuven" **פְּהוּז כַּמִּים אֶל תּוֹתֵר כִּי עָלִיתָ מִשְׁכְּבֵי אָבִיךָ** *Hasty like water, not deserving of reward, for you have gone up onto your father's couch...* Reuven was under rebuke for having been hasty. But why did Yaakov connect haste to water? Water flows; that's it! It is not the "hastiest" thing on earth. As a matter of fact, water does not have any speed on its own. So why use the metaphor of water?

There are basically two human states. The preplanned state. And the planning state. Successful people always plan ahead, for when we are preprogrammed, we work the best. But,

on the other side of the coin, when we forget to plan ahead and we are running on "preprogrammed mode" for too long without being aware of how things are going, we are in great danger. We are unaware of where we are, how we are behaving. We are then just like water that flows through a mold. Water is unique in this sense; it is the only thing in the universe that runs without making a conscious decision to do so. Our actions and decisions are like the water. Our routine is our mold. And the water, our actions and decisions, flows through the mold of our routine, as if we were robotic. People who do things with haste in life are usually running according to a mold they made for themselves. Then, life can flow by without meaning. Just missing the whole point. Accepting things in our mold, because we just got used to it being there. The water just glides through it.

New drivers are those who are developing habits of how to drive. Until then, they are very cautious. Once new drivers get into the stage that coaches call "unconscious competence", they fiddle with the radio and do other things while driving. The problem is when they get so used to such habits, so dependent on them, that they just do not remember that you cannot drive safely while texting or searching someone's number. The result? Car accidents are from the highest causes of death. **אין סכנה כסכנת ההרגל** *There is no greater danger than the danger of habit*. Habit may be the greatest thing for human performance and productivity, but it is the most dangerous as well.

There are so many types of day-in, day-out habits. There are learning habits, thinking habits, eating habits, and religious habits. Coming late to prayers. This is a result of how we habitually go to sleep, without schedule, not turning on the alarm clock the night before.

We then wonder why we have trouble concentrating in our prayers.

Let us zero in on thinking habits. I was coaching a boy who wanted to improve on his Chassidus; he wanted to be able to learn Tanya with clarity. So, for the first time in my life, I studied the works of the founder of Chabbad. We opened the sefer to where he was up to, and I could not believe what I saw on the page. "A human is split in two, Knowledge (חכמה ודעת) and Middot (behavior/ characteristics). The Knowledge is the Mother and the way one behaves is the outcome of the knowledge he has." At the bottom of the page, there is the following explanation: If we want to fear G-d, to love G-d, the Rambam tells us that we have to look at the Creation and "think"—ויתבונן. When we realize how amazing the Creation is, when we are in constant awareness of its grandeur, we remain awestruck. We are in an ongoing state of love.

The way to change the way we feel, the way to change the way we act is to change the way we

think. The thought is the Mother, and our perspective, feelings and behavior are the outcome. We have thinking habits; they will determine the way we feel. Let us take the example of depressed people. Depressed people are those who have habits of depressed thinking. Depressed people generally have a habit of looking at the world as being "all or nothing". *If I do not have a lot of friends- I have no friends. If I do not have the greatest job I know – it is better to be unemployed. If I am not going to be the best guy in the beit midrash- better that I not come at all.* All the thoughts of this person flow like water through the all or nothing "mold". ***The thoughts go so fast, he doesn't even notice that he has thoughts that are self-destructive.*** He doesn't know why he is feeling unhappy and defeated. This is habit of thought. And *there is no greater danger than the danger of habit.*

May Hashem help us be aware of what we are doing. How we behave. And who we are.

## THE JEWISH GHETTOS

It takes 10 hours by plane to get to Eretz Yisrael from America. But once you are here in Eretz Yisrael, it takes 10 years to get America out of you. To get into the zone of "spirituality over luxury". Yehudah took Yosef out of the pit and sold him into bondage, Egypt bound. Yehuda was punished for this action by losing his first two boys. But why? Wasn't it much better for Yosef to go to Egypt and work his way up from slavery than to be stuck in some pit? The answer is, no. It is better to be in a pit with snakes and scorpions in Eretz Yisrael than it is to live the life of a king in a foreign land. Allow me to explain.

Life is full of decisions. One of the places where people make your decisions for you is in the supermarket. The supermarkets are full of strategy, all based on studies of human behavior. The bread, milk and eggs, the staples, are at the end aisles, which forces you to see all the items you want (but don't need) on the way there. The shopping carts are X-large, not 'only' for your convenience, but to make sure that your full cart is the fullest a cart can be. (Try this. Eat your whole next Shabbat meal on a small salad plate, and I guarantee you will eat much less. We fill up our plates to the full. And we fill up our shopping carts to the full. It's human nature.) There is music in



the background (to make you forget your worries and your bank account), there are no clocks on the wall (to make you oblivious to time, strolling down the aisles in a trance, looking for what you “might” need), and freshly baked breads, (some supermarkets bake bread in the supermarket to make you *feel like you are hungry*. The smell of baking bread stimulates hunger. Hungry people buy more food than those who are full.) The “bulk sales” make you buy more than you need or use, just so that you do not “lose out” on the savings.

As you walk out of the supermarket, you feel great that you’ve saved so much money (on things you never thought you needed). The sneaky supermarket strategies play with your emotions, and your intellect is left in your car in the parking lot. While you are at payout, if you are asked, “Do you really want this? Is this an intelligent purchase? Are you sure that your hard earned money is being spent wisely?” The answer is “yes, yes, yes”. You are repeatedly oblivious to how many decisions are made for you by the seller, behind your back, before you walk down the aisles.

There were objective studies done on these lures. People eat more food when they have bigger plates. People pop down more popcorn when they have bigger popcorn buckets. People consume more Coke when the glass is a bigger glass. Most importantly, the study shows that *they deny putting more into their bodies due to the larger container*. They claim that they would have eaten the same amounts, regardless. *The emotional mind and circumstances control the intellect*.

This is the Jew in Exile. Decisions made by the gentiles, behind the back of the Jew. What type of phone do you need? What type of internet? What is a marriage supposed to look like?

What is “success” in life? What is the purpose of a car, a vehicle or an identity? What is music supposed to sound like? What state of mind are the words supposed to get you into? How are we supposed to dress? What type of names should we use; how are we supposed to talk? Is fitness about watching over a present G-d gave us for a hundred and twenty years, or about having a ‘perfect body’? Is money a goal in and of itself, or a means to live a life with purpose? What is the purpose in going on vacation; what type of vacation to go on, and how much money to spend? What is the point in going to a restaurant? Is texting a friend while talking to somebody proper, or not? Are liberty and freedom an ultimate goal, or a means to an end ?

Even the gentiles know it. Jim Rohn, “America’s Foremost Personal Achievement Philosopher”, said it. “The two things that will decide what and who you will be in five years from now are the books you read and the friends you have.” Society decides my decisions, behind my back. Like it or not. You can argue with me intellectually, you can argue with them intellectually, but your intellect is not as strong as your emotions. And your emotions, your subconscious decisions, are those of the “herd” that you belong to. Period. And thus, the biggest decisions of our lives are, many times, made for us, by our surroundings.

Last week, I took a Kolliel guy from my shul for a lift. We talked about his rabbi. He told me his rabbi visits him twice a year. Knowing that his rabbi is extremely busy, I asked him why his rabbi comes to his house twice a year. “He comes each time I make a siyum.” I asked him what he makes a siyum on – “I finish Shas twice a year. I sleep 4 hours at night, and an hour in the afternoon, and I don’t learn Shas during first, second, or third Seder.” Oh. I did



not know. I did not know that a 35 year old can do that. (And he takes his kids to school every morning, does the shopping, etc.) I did not know that a 35 year old, or anyone else, for that matter, can sleep 4 hours a night and learn like that. Just to have people like that in my life, living in the same neighborhood, can give me proper perspectives. Ever since, each time my mind starts with thoughts of jealousy, anger, temptations, I think of that guy, and how far one can get when he uses his time wisely. Then, I do not have time for those thoughts of jealousy, temptation, or anger.

What was the first thing Yosef did when the Jews came to Egypt? He told his brothers to tell the Egyptians that the family business was shepherding, an abomination for Egyptians. This would make certain that the Jews would not associate with the Egyptians. They would stay in Goshen, the first Jewish Ghetto. Looking at intermarriage in American Jewry, one will not be shocked if studies show less than 50 percent identity survival outside the ghetto. (Today's ghetto may be the Jewish community, which decides for each member what is considered "normal".)

In this week's Parasha, Yaakov proposed that Menashe and Efraim, Yosef's sons, become Tribes. All together, 13, Yosef having a double portion. This is hard to understand. Hadn't Yaakov learned not to favor Yosef? Twenty-two years, Yaakov suffered from this mistake of favoring Yosef and causing strife among the Tribes. Hadn't he had enough?

Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky answers. Menashe and Efraim were in great danger, for the

Egyptian surroundings they were raised in, might have a negative effect on them. By considering them as his own children, Yaakov hoped to instill within them a feeling of identity and belonging to Yaakov's home. Efraim had even been given an Egyptian name (Egyptian names commonly had in them the letters פ , נ and מ . i.e., Pharaoh, Potifar, Tzafnat Paaneach, Efraim, Shifrah, Puah, etc.) For this reason , Yaakov placed Efraim before Menashe, when he blessed them, for Efraim needed extra protection.

Shifrah and Puah, a.k.a. Yocheved and Miriam, were greatly rewarded for not killing the Jewish babies, despite Pharaoh's command. Our Rabbi's teach that for this great act, they merited having great descendents, High Priests and Kings. Why was it such a great test for a Jewish mother not to kill Jewish babies? The Halacha is that one must give up his life in order not to kill another Jew!?

The answer is that the difficulty of the test lay in Yocheved and Miriam overcoming their Egyptian Names. Pharaoh knew that the only way to get them to do such an act was by changing their names, giving them a gentile identity. For standing strong against this identity crisis, they were greatly rewarded.

The name you use, the clothes you wear, the way you speak – all may be the most momentous decisions you ever make. Our Rabbis teach that the Jews were redeemed from Egypt for keeping these three identity factors. Because even if a person stoops low, his identity, community, and friends can be his saving grace in the darkest moments.



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