

ה'תשס"ח

תורת

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Notes and Novellae on Pirkei Avos
Based on the Lev Avos, the Biur HaGra, the Rambam, and other sources.

פרק א'
Chapter One

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I

מֹשֶׁה קָבַל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי, וּמִסָּרָה לְיֵהוֹשֻׁעַ,
וְיֵהוֹשֻׁעַ לְזִקְנִים, וְזִקְנִים לְנָבִיאִים, וְנָבִיאִים
מִסָּרוּהָ לְאַנְשֵׁי כְנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הֵם אָמְרוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה
דְּבָרִים, הָיוּ מְתוּנִים בְּדִין, וְהֶעֱמִידוּ תַלְמִידִים
הַרְבֵּה, וַעֲשׂוּ סָיֵג לַתּוֹרָה:

Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua; Yeoshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah.

Moshe received the Torah from Hashem, but the Mishna tells us that he received it from Sinai. We know that Har Sinai was chosen for the giving of the Torah because of her humility. The Mishna is teaching us that Moshe was the best person to receive the Torah because he was so humble. Reb Chaim Volozhin points out that a cup with thinner walls is able to hold more water. In the same way, a person who is not so ‘full of himself’ is able to hold more Torah.

Yehoshua was able to receive the Torah from Moshe because he was humble as well. Yehoshua would stay behind after class and arrange the chairs of the Beis Hamedrash. The Gemara tells us that Yehoshua was a moon compared to Moshe’s sun. Yehoshua was able to accurately receive and reflect Moshe’s teachings.

The Zekeinim referred to are Eldad and Meidad. Each of the twelve Shevatim submitted six names for the Sanhedrin. Only seventy were chosen and Eldad and Meidad waited until many, many years later before ruling for a total of two years (Vilna Gaon).

The Anshei Knesses Hagedola were a group founded by Ezra which spanned a long period of time. Historically, the main task of the Anshei Knesses Hagedola was to teach the Jewish people how to continue and organize as a nation after the return from the Babylonian exile (following the Purim story).

The Anshei Knesses Hagedola deliberately taught the lessons and strategies that would ensure the future of the Jewish people. There were some generations in which the leaders were very

selective in their students and in the people they associated with. The Anshei Knesses Hagedola taught their generation to be patient in judgement and not to turn anyone away abruptly. A judge should never assume that two cases are identical; he should examine each individual case with care. The Anshei Knesses Hagedola also taught that a person should take many students, and that we should Make a fence around the Torah. This way we can ensure that the ways of the Torah are be preserved and we have a 'Safer Torah'.

II

שְׁמַעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק הָיָה מְשִׁירֵי כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הוּא
הָיָה אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל
הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוּדָה וְעַל גְּמִילוּת חַסְדִּים:

Shimon the Righteous was one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly. He used to say: On three things the world is sustained: on the Torah, on the (Temple) service, and on deeds of loving kindness.

Shimon Hatzadik was the last of the Anshei Knesses Hagedola. He taught that although every person is intrinsically important, our actions are important too. The world stands on our acts of kindness, our Torah, and our Tefillos. If we don't act properly, the world will not function properly either.

The word 'Samech' means support and it is an acronym for the three pillars which support the world: Sanhedrin, Melech (King), and Kohein (Vilna Gaon).

The Vilna Gaon writes that the best way to perform kindness is to show respect for our friends.

III

אֲנִי מִיָּגוּם אִישׁ סוֹכּוֹ קִבֵּל מִשְׁמַעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק. הוּא
הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אֵל תִּהְיוּ כְּעַבְדִּים הַמְּשִׁמְשִׁין אֶת
הָרֶב עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל פָּרֶס, אֲלֵא הָיוּ כְּעַבְדִּים

הַמְשַׁמְשִׁין אֶת הָרַב שְׂלֵא עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל פְּרָם,
וַיְהִי מוֹרָא שָׁמַיִם עֲלֵיכֶם:

Antigonus of Socho received the Torah from Shimon the Righteous. He used to say: Be not like servants who minister unto their master for the sake of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve their master not upon the condition of receiving a reward; and let the fear of Heaven be upon you.

The Rambam writes that two of Shimon Hatzadik's students, Tzadok and Baisos, did not want to listen to the rabbis (the 'perushim') at all. They invented an entire philosophy to support their position. Tzadok and Baisos pointed to the famous words of Shimon Hatzadik in the previous Mishna and asked how it was that people did Mitzvos and did not get rewarded. Don't our actions influence the world around us?

In our Mishna, Antigonus clarified that we do influence the world, but it is very unhealthy and unwise to expect to see the results. Rather, we should serve Hashem out of love. We can be confident that our actions will have a positive effect on the world and on our lives.

The concept of 'Morah Shomayim' is the awareness that everything in this world is happening according to Hashem's will.

IV

יוֹסֵי בֶן יוֹעֶזֶר אִישׁ צְרֵדָה וַיֹּסִי בֶן יוֹחָנָן אִישׁ
יְרוּשָׁלַיִם קִבְּלוּ מֵהֶם. יוֹסֵי בֶן יוֹעֶזֶר אִישׁ צְרֵדָה
אוֹמֵר, יְהִי בֵיתְךָ בֵּית וְעַד לַחֲכָמִים, וַהֲוִי
מִתְאַבֵּק בְּעַפְרֵ רַגְלֵיהֶם, וַהֲוִי שׁוֹתֵה בְצִמָּא אֶת
דְּבָרֵיהֶם:

Yosi ben Yoezer of Tzeredah and Yosi ben Yochanan of Jerusalem received the Torah from them. Yosi ben Yoezer of Tzeredah said: Let your house be a meetinghouse for the sages and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst.

In the centuries after the Torah was given, there were no arguments at all about Halacha. Everybody knew what Moshe Rabbeinu had heard from Hashem and acted accordingly. In the generation following Antigonus the very first argument came up. The Torah tells us that before an animal is brought as a Korban the Kohein and/or the owner should push down firmly on it's head. This is called Semicha and it is not done on shabbos because of the prohibition of Muktzeh. The question arose regarding Semicha on Yom Tov. Somehow, the law had been forgotten and the people could not agree on one opinion. This was the only halachic argument amongst the Jews. Later, In the days of Hillel and Shammai there were three more arguments and in the days of their students the disputes became to many to count.

Imagine living in the generation of the first argument. Today we take for granted that there will be several opinions on every Halacha, but the people who witnessed the first argument were frightened. The leadership of the nation was split between a Nasi and an Av Beis Din. One advocated Semicha on Yom Tov and one was against it. These Leading Pairs were called the Zugos.

Technically, this was not the first time that the Jewish people were led by a pair of leaders. Moshe and Aharon took us out of Mitzrayim, Shoftim worked together with the Kohanim Gedolim, and the Kings ruled opposite the Neviim. When Moshiach comes we will be led out of Galus by Moshiach ben Yosef and Moshiach ben Dovid. Even so, the rise of two leaders is significant because they often have very different ways of leading and different points to emphasize.

...יְהִי בֵּיתְךָ בַּיּוֹם וְעַד לְחַכְמֵי...
...Let your house be a meetinghouse for the sages...

...Let your house be a meetinghouse for the sages...

In the first generation of Zugos, leaders argued about the best way to stop the Torah from being forgotten any more. Reb Yosi ben Yozer said that we need to spend more time with wise people. We cannot afford to waste time with ignorant people when the Torah is in danger of being forgotten.

One aspect of having Torah scholars in our home is to ensure that our homes are places where Torah scholars can feel comfortable.

Rav Mordechai Gifter began his career as a Rabbi in Waterbury, CT. He was out of town, separated from the great scholars of Lithuania he had loved. He was isolated from his friends with whom he studied and grown. He was surrounded with people that never saw the world that

he related to and didn't understand it. There was no one around to discuss a Tosfos or difficult Ketzos. Whenever a meshulach, a shochet or a visiting Rabbi would pass through his town, Rav Gifter would grab him and talk with him through the night. Rav Gifter had an interesting practice. He would ask his guests to look around his house. He would ask them to walk through the living areas, the bedrooms, and look through the kitchen cupboards to check for nuances of change. Rav Gifter realized that he wasn't in Telz, he wasn't even on the East Side of New York, he was in Waterbury. He was afraid that without even realizing it he might be declining spiritually. He knew that he was too close to the situation to realize it. He gave his guests the job of inspecting his life. He was guarding his most sacred possession - his Yiddishkeit. (Heard at Rav Gifter's funeral, recorded by R' Y. Haber)

...וְהָיוּ מִתְאַבְּקִים בְּעֶפְרָר רַגְלֵיהֶם, וְהָיוּ שׂוֹתֵהּ

בְּצִמָּא אֶת דְּבָרֵיהֶם:

*...and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words
with thirst.*

Historically, the teachers would sit on chairs as their students sat around them on the dusty earth. The word 'Avak' is also used to describe the (figurative) dust that is kicked up in an argument about Torah. We should consider it a privilege to drink the words of our sages, even if we need to sacrifice a little bit of our dignity.

Rav Shalom Schwadron once walked into Yeshiva and began rolling in the dust on the floor. He wanted to fulfill, very literally, the idea of becoming dusty from the dust of the feet of the sages.

V

יוֹסִי בֶן יוֹחָנָן אִישׁ יְרוּשָׁלַיִם אָמַר, יְהִי בֵיתְךָ
פְּתוּחַ לְרוֹחָהּ, וְיִהְיוּ עֲנִיִים בְּנֵי בֵיתְךָ, וְאַל
תִּרְבֶּה שִׁיחָה עִם הָאִשָּׁה. בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ אָמְרוּ, קַל
וְחֹמֶר בְּאִשְׁתֵּי חֲבֵרוֹ. מִכַּאֲן אָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים, כָּל
זְמַן שֶׁאָדָם מְרַבֵּה שִׁיחָה עִם הָאִשָּׁה, גּוֹרֵם רָעָה
לְעִצְמוֹ, וּבּוֹטֵל מִדְּבָרֵי תוֹרָה, וְסוֹפּוֹ יוֹרֵשׁ גִּיהֵנוֹם:

*Yosi ben Yochanan of Jerusalem said: Let your house be wide
open and let the poor be members of thy household; and do
not talk much with women. This was said about one's own*

*wife; how much more so about the wife of one's neighbor.
Therefore the sages have said: He who talks too much with
women brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the
Torah and will in the end inherit Gehenna.*

Yosi ben Yochanan was also concerned about the future of the Jewish people. Unlike his contemporary, Yosi ben Yoezer, he felt that we could no longer afford to focus solely on the scholars. Everyone needed to be exposed to Torah and scholarship. Yosi ben Yochanan taught his students to open the doors to their homes wide and invite everyone in. The poor should be actual members of their households. They should have their own rooms and their own phone lines. They should get mail delivered to their homes. Their homes should be known as homes where everybody is welcome. In this way, the Torah would be spread out amongst the masses. The Gemara teaches: “be careful with the sons of the poor - because they are the future of the Torah”.

...וְאַל תִּרְבֶּה שִׁיחָה עִם הָאִשָּׁה....

...and do not talk much with women...

We know that women have a deeper sense of understanding than men. Why shouldn't men speak with them? Irving Bunim points out that the word Sichah refers to idle, pointless chatter. Women are capable of much deeper, more meaningful conversations and we need to take advantage of that. On the flip-side, women often desire to have conversations between themselves. It is inappropriate (and unwelcome) for a man to join such a conversation.

The Avos Derabbi Nosson takes a different approach: If a man is insulted by his friend he will likely forget about it the next day. If he tells his wife about it, she will become upset on his behalf. She will make him more upset and she may speak to the other man or his wife. The entire conversation would be blown out of proportion.

VI

יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן פְּרַחְיָה וְנִיטַי הָאַרְבֵּלִי קִבְּלוּ מֵהֶם.
יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן פְּרַחְיָה אָמַר, עֲשֵׂה לְךָ רַב, וְקִנְיָה לְךָ
חֵבֶר, וְהָיוּ דָן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת:

Yehoshua ben Perachyah and Nittai the Arbely received the

Torah from them. Yehoshua ben Perachyah said: Provide for yourself a teacher and get yourself a friend; and judge every man towards merit.

The idea of ‘making for yourself a teacher’ is central to Judaism. Nobody can be completely objective when making decisions. Every person needs to have somebody who understands both them and the Torah very well. Even Moshe and Aharon learned from each other before teaching the Torah to the Jewish people (Gra, based on Mechilta Bo 3). If a person is confident in his or her Rav, he or she can make a decision to listen to their Rav regardless of personal opinion.

Today great Rabbonim are often known as ‘Gedolim’. The word Gadol has ancient roots: When Avraham celebrated Yitzchak’s third birthday, we are taught that the Gedolim of the generation were in attendance. An elderly Jew in Jerusalem once explained to me that an Adam Gadol (a big person) is like a Yeshiva Gedola (a big yeshiva). A big Yeshiva is able to accept all sorts of boys because they are populous enough to absorb even the weaker and less committed among us. A Gadol is, likewise, able to accept all sorts of ideas and values because they are absorbed into his all-encompassing Torah-based weltanschauung.

In our praiseworthy rush to emulate Gedolim, we tend to look at only one or two facets of their behavior. We sometimes fail to recognize the Derech Eretz which is the Sine qua non of all Torah learning and of all great people.

Gedolim are not obsessed with appearances; they also tuck in their shirts and turn down their brims. Gedolim don’t waste time or money; they also don’t get speeding tickets or steal. Gedolim are able to guide people wisely, yet they rarely boss people around. Gedolim are deserving of great honor, yet they rarely request it.

If we are to learn from and emulate Gedolim, we need to remember that it takes many pieces to form a Gadol. If we ignore half of the pieces, our picture will be incomplete.

One of the fondest weeks of my life was the one in which Rav Chaim Pinchas Sheinberg Shlita came to Australia. I was fourteen at the time and was given the task of assisting Rabbi Sheinberg and making sure that all of his needs were met. At first, Rav Sheinberg was very upset to see me at his side and playing hookey from school. He grudgingly relented to my presence when my Chavrusa joined me in the dining room as he saw people in an office upstairs.

The highlight of my week came in the form of a glass of fresh mousse with a cherry on top. At

the request of the woman of the house, I took leave of my Chavrusa and brought the delectable dessert upstairs to the Rosh Yeshiva. The Rosh Yeshiva thanked me politely and, for the first time all week, asked if I would do him a favor. Of course I said yes. My excitement turned to wonder as he handed me his spoon and asked me to stay for a few minutes and eat the Mousse. It was delicious and I told him so. He thanked me again and I took leave, taking care to return the empty glass to the kitchen.

I returned to my chavrusa but it wasn't long before the woman of the house, noting the uncharacteristic speed with which "Rav Sheinberg" had devoured the mousse, asked me to bring up another glass which she had painstakingly prepared.

She confided in me, saying, "I finally found something he likes". I just licked my lips and smiled.

The rest of the week was as sweet as it was instructive. My role as Rav Sheinberg's assistant was to arrange his appointments, answer the door, and eat his mousse. My chavrusa was a little jealous when he found out, but I had no intention of sharing my responsibilities.

The word Gadol means big and a Gadol must be big enough to consider everything. Rav Sheinberg wasn't content to greet visitors all day and let people guess how many Tzitzis he wears - that's what Jelly bean contests are for. He busied himself considering my learning, his learning, his diet, and the feelings of his hostess. A Gadol spends his time perfecting every aspect of every moment in his day.

... עֲשֵׂה לְךָ רֵב...

...Provide for yourself a teacher...

Sometimes it is simply not possible to emulate the acts of a Gadol. His actions may be inappropriate for our personalities or our times. Rather than imitate Gedolim we need to learn from the underlying motivation drive that spurred them to act.

One of the striking aspects of All for the Boss - the biography of R' Yaacov Yosef Herman - is that he is unemulatable. His actions worked for his time, but anybody who tries to copy him is crazy. We cannot go down to Coney Island with Sandwich boards, ship thirteen-year-old child to New Haven without parental consent or barge into the mayor's office (as he did).

The secret of R' Yaacov Yosef's piety and success as it could be applied to our generation is Limud Torah.

Rabbi Herman gave seven or eight Torah classes a day. He never stopped learning, even as he maintained a business and opened his home to the masses. His Torah learning was the invisible tool that made him popular with everyone from the greatest of the European sages to most coarse and unholy people in New York. When Rabbi Herman moved to Yerushalayim he was immediately accepted as a popular lecturer for the erudite community there.

More importantly, Rabbi Herman's Torah kept him grounded. His decisions were Torah decisions, his battles were battles for Torah, and his words of rebuke were sincere. There was no fluff or self-interest in the Herman household.

When we see Torah leaders, they are often busy and important people with lines of people waiting to see them. Nobody is born that way. We need to see great people against the backdrop of the Torah they have learned.

Another great insight in All for the Boss is that it is a frank biography of a leader. Many of the stories about Cod Liver Oil and Podlikes are silly, but they give us a taste of the Way it Was. We can understand Torah leaders better if we have an idea of what they have experienced and accomplished in their lives.

I always tell my students that our goal is not to see one of thirty-six hidden tzadikim, but to be one of the thirty-six hidden tzadikim. We are the product of the Torah that we have learned and the experiences that Hashem sends our way. By listening and growing, we can become shining lights in a dark and confusing world.

...וּקְנֵה לְךָ חֵבֵר...

...and get yourself a friend...

'Buying a friend' is usually looked down upon. Reb Yehoshua be Perachia points out that, while our families might love us unconditionally, friends need to be 'bought'. We can afford to have fights with our siblings because we know that they will not stop loving us. The same is not true of friends. We need to be willing to make sacrifices and put effort into our friendships.

What is a friend? King Shlomo teaches us in Koheles (4:8-9) that two are better than one because

if one falls, his friend will be able to lift him up. Friends are great for companionship and conversation, but a real friend is someone who will lift you up when you are down.

The Medrash tell the story of a father who asked his son how many friends he had. The son replied, “I have fifty friends, how many do you have?” to which the father said: I have on y one half of friend. the father then instructed his son to but a bloody sheep into a sack and approach each of his friends and ask them to hide the sack. All of them refused. The father went to his one half friend who immediately agreed to hide the ‘body’.

In Hebrew, the word for group is Chabura. It comes from the word Chaver, which means friend, and Chibur, which means connection. A Chabura is a beautiful thing.

There is also a sinister meaning to the word Chabura. The Torah describes a wound or a bruise as a Chabura. The linguists explain that this is because the blood gathers together below the skin in response to an injury. On some level, this too is a beautiful concept, but in the final analysis it remains a Chaburah – a wound.

I heard from Rabbi Michel Twersky that when we form alliances and unions with each other we are forming a chabura. If the entire purpose of that Chabura is as a reaction to an outside force, then that unity is tainted. The unity is not the result of an intrinsic spiritual or emotional connection; it is the result of an outside force. It is a wound.

When the Jewish people gathered together at the Yam Suf, it was not as a response to the Egyptian enemy – they weren’t sure he was an enemy. It was not even with a goal of reaching the land of Israel – they weren’t ready for that. It was just simply gathering together as “one nation under G-d” aiming to grow and become greater. The Egyptians were also unified as they chased the Jews, but Rashi describes it “With one heart and as one man” – they were of one heart and therefore they were like one Man. They joined together to take revenge. The Jewish people were the opposite: “As one man and with one heart” – we began with no cause but unity and the desire to grow. Later we became united as one heart, and only then did we receive the Torah.

Unity doesn’t begin with a Cause. Unity begins with Unity.

...וְקַנְיָה לְךָ חֵבֵר...
...and get yourself a friend...

...and get yourself a friend...

In Parshas Vayechi, Yaakov lay on his deathbed. He summoned each one of his children and blessed them individually. Only Shimon and Levi were called in as a pair. “Shimon and Levi are brothers”, Yaacov told them. “You have the power to unite with each other and cause major events to happen. You acted together to sell Yosef, and he was sold. You acted together to attack the residents of Shechem, and you were successful”. Yaacov hinted that in the future the children of Shimon would stage a demonstration against Moshe in the episode of Zimri and Kosbi and the children of Levi would also gather together against Moshe in the rebellion of Korach. Yaacov was very straightforward in his criticism. He cursed their anger and declared that he would have no part in those actions. He even prayed that the protagonists would not be identified as his grandchildren. He also prayed that the children of Shimon and Levi not be allowed to unite. He prayed that they be scattered and dispersed throughout the Jewish kingdom.

Despite the implications of Yaacov’s dying words, the tribes of Shimon and Levi were not evil. Levi was chosen from all of the tribes to represent us in the Beis Hamikdosh. We are commanded to this day to give special honor to Kohanim and Leviim. The tribe of Shimon made up the teaching corp of the Jewish people. The scholars and educators of all of the tribes came primarily from Shimon.

The Kli Yakar writes that the ability of Shimon and Levi to represent and educate the Jewish people was a result of their ability to connect with people. Yaacov saw that when Shimon and Levi connected to each other the results were not good, so he prayed that they separate from each other and use their abilities to form powerful connections with the entire Jewish nation. They were chosen to spread out, to teach and to inspire because of their ability to connect, not in spite of it.

When I was in yeshiva, one of my Chavrusas (study partners) was also my best friend. We didn’t learn much because there was so much to talk about. We could shmooze for hours and fall drastically behind in our learning. In an act of self-righteousness, we asked our rebbe to split us up and assign us new Chavrusos. The Rebbe would not cooperate. “if you shmooze well together”, he said, you can, learn well together too”.

Yaacov looked at the powerful abilities of Shimon and Levi and saw enormous potential. He chastised them for their anger but not for their unity. He told them to channel their energy to benefit all of Klal Yisrael. In their particular case it was not advantageous to direct their

connectivity toward each other. Instead, he insisted that they scatter throughout the land of Israel and connect to every single Jew. He made them our representatives in the Beis Hamikdash and the teachers in our Yeshivos. He unleashed their power in a constructive way and gave them, perhaps, the best blessing of all.

We have a power to connect with people in a way that is too valuable to ignore. Like Shimon and Levi, we need to spread the love and recognize that we can change lives every time we smile, every time we make a phone call, and every time we say ‘good shabbos’.

We may be tempted to restrict our unity to those around us, but we need to follow the lead of Yaacov, Shimon , and Levi to touch and acknowledge every single person in our lives.

...וְהוּי דִן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת:

...and judge every man towards merit.

Yehoshua ben Perachia had a student named Yeshu. One day, while they were traveling, Yeshu made an inappropriate comment. Yehoshua ben Perachia refused to speak with him for thirty days. On the thirtieth day, Yehoshua ben Perachia was going to accept his student with open arms but was in the middle of Shema when he entered. Seeing Reb Yehoshua cover his eyes, the student thought that he would never be forgiven. He left to begin his own religion.

The Gemara teaches that Yehoshua ben Peracha was too strict with his student. He should have emphasized his redeeming factors and brought him close with his stronger hand, even as he was pushing him away with his weaker hand.

Reb Yehoshua ben Perachia was very aware of the importance of judging every person in a favorable way or more accurately, judging ‘the entire person’ favorably. When we look at a persons total experience we are more equipped to think kindly of them. If we know that a person has a difficult situation at home, we will be more tolerant of their crankiness when they are dealing with us.

The Rambam, commenting on this Mishna writes that the obligation to judge favorably does not extend to a wicked person who almost certainly is guilty. Elsewhere, the Rambam writes that it is proper to judge every person favorably without exception. Perhaps this can be resolved by differentiating between actual judges, who are the focus of the commandment to judge favorably, and regular people whose obligation is extrapolated from that of the judges. It would make sense

to say that a judge should not and may not defy logic to judge a man favorably. If he is a wicked man he is probably guilty. It is only in our private lives that we have the ability and the right to engage in mental acrobatics to judge others favorably.

...וְהָיָה דֵּן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת:

...and judge every man towards merit.

In Parshas Ki Seitzei the Torah tells us the difficult story of the ‘Ben Sorer Umoreh’, the wayward son. This rare boy misbehaved to the point that we have given up hope on him. We assume that he will grow up to be a bandit and a murderer. The Torah tells us to put him to death. He should die as an innocent soul and not as a guilty criminal.

Death seems to be a harsh punishment for this young man. In fact R’ Shimon (in Maseches Sanhedrin) opines that it is inconceivable that the Beis Din would actually stone somebody who has not yet committed a crime. We cannot kill him for stealing wine and meat from his parents. R’ Shimon insists that the case of the Ben Sorer Umoreh never actually took place. The Torah wrote it so that we could receive reward for Torah study by learning it.

Reb Yonasan argues and asserts that the case of Ben Sorer Umoreh did take place. “I saw him”, he says, “and sat on his grave”.

The Talmud has a similar discussion about the Ir Hanidachas - the city that becomes completely idolatrous. The Torah commands us to destroy this city. This time R’ Eliezer insists that the Torah records this law only for the sake of Torah study. It never actually happened. Reb Yonasan argues once again: I saw it and sat on its ruins.

Reb Yonasan’s position is intriguing. Not only does he insist that these cases took place, he seems to have gone out of his way to visit the gravesites of these people. Reb Akiva Eiger understands the statement “I sat on his grave” literally. Reb Yonasan literally sat on the graves of these people. Why would Reb Yonasan visit their graves and then (seemingly) disgrace them?

Reb Yonasan’s position brings to mind a different statement of Reb Yonasan in Masechtas Brachos (18a): The Gemara tells of the time that Rav Chiya and Rav Yonasan were walking together in a graveyard. Rav Yonasan’s Tzitzis were dragging on the ground. Our minhag is to hide our tzitzis when entering a graveyard so as not to mock the deceased who can no longer do mitzvos. Reb Chiya said to Reb Yonasan “lift your tzitzis. You do not want those who have

passed away to have complaints against you.” Rav Yonasan disagreed, “Since when are the deceased so aware of their surroundings?” He quoted a verse in Koheles “The dead do not know anything”. Reb Chiya argued sharply with Reb Yonasan but Reb Yonasan seems to be consistent with his propensity to sit on tombs.

Reb Yonasan’s appears to have been in the habit of deliberately demonstrating that the deceased cannot be offended.

In order to understand Reb Yonasan’ viewpoint we need to understand how the Ben Sorer Umoreh got to where he was in the first place. The Ben Sorer Umoreh is the only case in the Torah of someone who is punished based on his future actions. Even Yishmael, the father of the Arabic nations, had his life saved. Though his children would include many enemies of the Jewish people and he himself was not always a friend of the Jewish people, he was judged a`yx de` ym - as he was at that point in time.

Yishmael was given a chance to change but the Ben Sorer Umoreh was not. I once heard from Reb Yitzchak Ezrachi that there was a very important distinction between Yishmael and the Ben Sorer Umoreh. Yishmael had a chance to change and eventually he did do Teshuva. He had the opportunity to listen to and learn from Avraham and Hagar and those around him about the right way to live his life. His name was Yishamael, the one who hears Hashem.

Not so the Ben Sorer Umoreh. The Torah stresses that he refused to listen to those around him. He had no ears. The Gemara (according to Reb Schwab) explains that we are talking about someone who had the best of parents and the best of opportunities available to him, but he had no ears. He refused to listen. A person who is so wrapped up in himself that he refuses to listen to those around him is hopeless. He has no vehicle for change.

Reb Yonasan recognized that it was possible for a Ben Sorer Umoreh to exist. It could happen. But he also recognized something else: There was no hope for this rare child, but he was not completely bad either.

Reb Yonasan quotes Shlomo Hamelech who writes in Koheles that when a person passes away all of his lusts and obsessions pass away with him. If he was obsessed with himself when he was alive, he will cease to do so after he has passed. The Ben Sorer Umoreh is a person who is really good at heart but who is stifled by handicaps that are beyond his control. He cannot change because he cannot listen. Reb Yonasan reminds us that however great his faults, there is a good person hidden inside. His urges are not him, his lusts are not him and his problems are not him.

I once visited the home of “Gravedigger”, the famous off road driving champion. He drives a Monster Truck but he is not a Monster. He has all of his trucks on display along with a free petting zoo, picnic tables and open space for travelers to relax. He may earn his living by jumping over school buses and pushing the competition off of cliffs, but he is really a nice guy who enjoys hanging around his farm and giving rides to kids for \$5.

We tend to judge ourselves by what we drive and what we wear. There is some truth to this, but in the final analysis what we wear is not us. Our clothing may tell people about us and they may affect who we are, but they are not us. The same is true of our bad habits. The way we act and the way we speak may dictate how we are perceived, but our actions are not us; they are things that we do.

Even the Ben Sorer Umoreh is not all bad. After he passes away he is no longer haughty, he no longer seeks glory and he no longer lusts. Reb Yonasan said “I saw him, he can exist; but he was just handicapped by forces beyond his control”. Now that he is no longer part of the physical world, his good points can shine. Where he is now he can listen and he does hear. He is no longer the person he was before. Reb Yonasan would go out of his way to demonstrate that the deceased were no longer tied up in their egos. He would sit on their graves.

Rav Yonasan later changed his mind about the feelings of people who are no longer with us. We know that when Moshe Rabeinu passed away Hashem told him to bring a message to Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov. Moshe was to tell them that Hashem had fulfilled his promised and that the Jews were entering Eretz Yisroel. They needed to hear about this and they needed to hear about it from Moshe. Our forefathers will never stop thinking about us and we will continue to yearn for mitzvos after we pass away.

We do not sit on graves and we subscribe to the majority view that the Ben Sorer Umoreh will never be born. Nonetheless, Reb Yonasan’s message remains true: we can be separated from our bad habits. Our bad habits are not us.

VII

נְתַאֵי הָאֲרֵבֵלִי אֹמֵר, הִרְחַק מִשְׁבֵּן רָע, וְאַל
תִּתְחַבֵּר לְרָשָׁע, וְאַל תִּתְיַאֵשׁ מִן הַפְּרָעָנוּת:

Nittai the Arbelite said: Keep far from an evil neighbor and do not associate with the wicked; and do not abandon belief in retribution.

Nitai Ha'arbeli led his generation together with Yehoshua ben Perachia. They agreed in concept and disagreed in approach. Yehoshua ben Perachia said: Make yourself a teacher and acquire a friend. Nitai Ha'arbeli said: Stay away from bad people and don't associate with evil. Yehoshua ben Perachia said: Judge everyone favorably; Nitai Ha'arbeli said: Evil people will eventually be punished.

Who were the evil people that Nitai Ha'arbeli sought to avoid? A peek into Avos D'rebi Nosson gives us an insight into Nitai Ha'arbeli's inspiration. He tells the story of a man who found Tzaraas (leprosy) on the walls of his home. The metzora gets his wall knocked down, presumably because he has sinned. The neighbor who shares a wall loses his wall as well - because he has a neighbor who has sinned.

Nitai Ha'arbeli understood that to live next to a metzora is to share his guilt.

What kind of people become 'Metzoras'?

There were ten possible causes, but the top three are Lashon Hora (Evil Speech), Haughtiness, and Stinginess. Basically, Nitai Ha'arbeli moved to get away from bigmouths, show-offs and cheapskates.

I once brought my daughter to a doctor in a very frum neighborhood. There was a Mezuzah on the door, a Shema in the waiting room, A Tefillah on the wall and a nurse who could not stop saying Baruch Hashem. At the pharmacy, we found the Pesach Guide attached to the counter. It felt like a game of Mitzvah Monopoly.

I was jealous for a few minutes, perhaps rightfully so, but I stopped myself from jumping to conclusions. Was my judgement based on the Mishna in Avos or on my own comfort level?

Life at 613 Torah Avenue is very cool and very nice, but (possibly) not an end in itself. When Nitai Ha'arbeli told us to have good neighbors, he wasn't talking about living on the street with the biggest Lag B'omer bonfire or on the route of The Man with the Truck. Nitai Ha'arbeli was telling us to find neighbors who are loving, humble, and generous. That is what the Metzora did

when he made contact with the Cohein and that is what both Nitai Ha'arbeili and Reb Yehoshua ben Prachia agreed was the key to our survival.

One more thought: Maybe the problem isn't the people, but the walls. The Talmud tells us that when the Metzora demolished the wall separating him from his neighbor he would find an ancient treasure.

If the walls between us crumbled, what would we find? (Kli Yakar)

Spiritual Congestion

Traffic in Boro Park is one of the hardest things to explain. How can anybody rest on Shabbos, speak with Hashem three times a day, give tzedaka and double park?

I was asking myself that question just before I ducked into Munkacz on Sixteenth Avenue last Wednesday. I had just spent twenty minutes attempting to single park a twelve seater van that wasn't mine. I was very frustrated with Boro Park and very anxious to respond to the call of nature.

I was surprised to find that there was traffic inside Munkacz too. A bottleneck had formed at the stairwell and movement had come to a standstill. Unlike the traffic outside, I noticed that nobody was yelling, pushing, or even talking loudly on their cell phones. At the front of the line was a distraught man pouring out his heart to the Munkaczer Rebbe. The Rebbe was standing riveted to his spot and completely oblivious to

the long and patient line of people waiting to go downstairs. This was a type of Boro Park traffic that I could appreciate.

Later on, I took my students to see the famous Shomer Shabbos shul. One minyan subtly pushed the other out as thousands of people rushed in to daven and get back to work. This happens for twenty-two hours a day. Even the carefully choreographed tzedaka collectors don't miss a beat. More Boro Park traffic.

We visited Hatzala where our gracious guide screeched into the tightest parking spot imaginable. His deluxe station wagon was decked out with a cherry light, a siren, and four car seats.

We spent some time at Hatzala, trying out expensive equipment, asking questions, and hearing about September 11th. We met veteran Hatzala members and even joined the

Vizhnitzer Cheder in the dispatch room for a bilingual demonstration. The kids loved every minute, but my favorite part was the way the volunteers described themselves:

“We may be machers, yentas, kuchleffels, busybodies and nudnicks – but we do save 10,000 lives a year”.

Out-of-towners love to express disbelief that Boro Park continues to exist. We claim that they are losing their youth, lost their integrity, and won't show up when Moshiach comes. The Leshem writes that we need to look at the world as Hashem does: with confidence in everyone and an appreciation of the special qualities that distinguish every person and every community.

...ואל תתיאש מן הפרענות:

...and do not abandon belief in retribution.

At the end of Benching we quote the verse “I was young and also old and I have not seen an abandoned Tzadik”. At times, we do see a Tzadik who appears to be abandoned. If we wait patiently and observe carefully for our entire lives, we will witness that no Tzadik is truly abandoned by Hashem.

VIII

יהודה בן טבאי ושמעון בן שטח קבלו מהם.
יהודה בן טבאי אומר, אל תעש עצמך כעורכי
הדין. וכשיהיו בעלי דין עומדים לפניך, יהיו
בעיניך ברשעים. וכשנפטרם מלפניך, יהיו
בעיניך בזכאין, כשקבלו עליהם את הדין:

Yehudah ben Tabbai and Shimon ben Shetach received the Torah from them. Yehudah ben Tabbai said: Do not make yourself like those that present before judges. When parties to a Torah suit are standing before you they should be in your eyes as wicked men, but when they have departed from they should be in your eyes as innocent, if they have accepted the verdict.

A naive person often assumes that his adversary is not capable of doing evil things that he himself would not do. As we learned in the previous Mishna, it is praiseworthy to judge others favorably. This approach does not work for judges. A judge needs to assume that the people standing before him are capable of the worst possible crimes. He needs to see both litigants as wicked and devious people. Later, when they have accepted his verdict, he will have a chance to look at each one as a Tzadik and admire the guilty party for accepting the ruling against him.

Yehudah ben Tabai himself was once fooled by a witness who deliberately gave disqualified testimony (Makos).

IX

שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן שֵׁטַח אוֹמֵר, הָיִי מְרַבֵּה לְהַקְדוֹר אֶת
הָעֵדִים, וְהָיִי זֹהִיר בְּדַבָּרֶיךָ, שֶׁמָּא מִתּוֹכָם יִלְמְדוּ
לְשָׁקֵר:

Shimon ben Shetach said: Examine the witnesses diligently and be cautious in your words lest through them they learn to falsify.

The Vilna Gaon writes that, aside from the warped judgement, a judge does not want to have a hand in bringing lies and falsehood into the world. Shimon ben Shetach once bought a donkey and found a jewel in the saddle. He insisted on returning the jewel saying, “I bought a donkey; I did not buy a jewel”.

X

שְׁמַעְיָה וְאַבְטַלְיוֹן קִבְּלוּ מֵהֶם. שְׁמַעְיָה אוֹמֵר,
אֲהוּב אֶת הַמְּלָאכָה, וְשִׂנְאָה אֶת הָרִבְּנוֹת, וְאַל
תִּתְּוֹדַע לְרִשׁוֹת:

Shemayah and Avtalion received the Torah from them. Shemayah said: Love work; hate domination; and seek not undue intimacy with the government.

Rav Kook explains in Ein Ayah that a person should love work because it teaches us that we are responsible for our actions and that we need to work to get results. A person who has a good work ethic will also serve Hashem conscientiously.

There used to be a man in the Saranac shul in Buffalo, NY named Mr. Fixler. He had survived the holocaust as an adult without missing even one day of Tefillin. He came to the United States and remained both a religious man and the backbone of the shul until the day he passed away. He wrote his own epitaph for the plot which he bought on Har Hazeisim. It says: “Here lies a descendant of the Taz who benefited from the fruits of his own labor all the days of his life”. Indeed, the Gemara in Berachos tells us that “a person who benefits from his own labor is greater than a person who fears G-d”. Some people fear G-d in theory; he is able to fear G-d in practice.

...וּשְׂנֵא אֶת הָרִבּוֹנוֹת...
...hate domination...

...hate domination...

Shemayah tells us to “hate positions of authority”, yet we find that many great people did take positions of authority. Moshe tried to shy away from leadership and the Torah tells us that Hashem became angry with him. Rav Chaim Pinchas Sheinberg, shlita, explains that a person needs to understand that leadership is not about fun and games. Leadership is an enormous responsibility. If somebody hates positions of authority, he is probably the right person to be in a position of authority. It is the people who love to boss others around that should not be leaders.

When Rabban Gamliel appointed two of his students as leaders he told them ‘I am not appointing you as exalted leaders, but as public servants’ (Horiyos 10a)

XI

אֲבַטְלִיּוֹן אוֹמֵר, חֲכָמִים, הִזְהָרוּ בְּדַבְרֵיכֶם,
שָׂמָא תְּחֻבּוֹ חֻבַּת נְלוֹת וְתַנְלוֹ לְמָקוֹם מַיִם
הָרְעִים, וַיִּשְׁתּוּ הַתַּלְמִידִים הַבָּאִים אַחֲרֵיכֶם
וַיְמוֹתוּ, וְנִמְצָא שֵׁם שָׂמָא מִתְחַלְלֵל:

Avtalion said: Sages, be careful with your words lest you incur the penalty of exile and are called to a place where the waters of learning are impure and the disciples that come

after you drink of them and die; and the Heavenly Name is consequently profaned.

Another man in our shul in Buffalo was Mr. Safrin. He used to say “whether you meant to insult him or you didn’t mean to insult him - he is insulted.” When Mr. Safrin found himself speaking inappropriately he would immediately stuff his mouth with a napkin to muffle his words. It was a little bit odd, but it left a lasting impression.

Avtalyon is warning us that our statements can be damaging regardless of how we meant them. In the age of Social Media a statement can be taken out of context and disseminated within minutes. It becomes the responsibility of the wise man to realize that his words are being heard. He needs to be sure not to make statements that can be misconstrued.

Our Google Image At Risk

One year, the yeshiva cholent pot was a little bit too full. The oil boiled over and dripped into the flame, causing an explosion on Friday night. The fire marshals came and didn’t like what they saw. They closed down the Yeshiva for a few months and closed down the kitchen for even longer. The Yeshiva was going to close it’s doors.

There was one man, let’s call him Chaim, who stepped up to the plate and took over the running of the yeshiva. The elderly Roshei Yeshiva were great with learning, but not as involved in keeping the kitchen up to code. Chaim was already working for yeshiva in some capacity, but now he took full charge of the office, the kitchen and the entire building. He managed the meager finances of the Yeshiva and worked with donors to rehabilitate the building and

make it legally habitable for Yeshiva Bochurim. Before we knew it , the building was safe once again, the kitchen was updated and the cholent was back on the flame. The yeshiva lived to learn another day.

Maybe I was naive, or maybe I was just out of the loop, but I just found out (years later) that Chaim was never paid. He had other jobs, and he was supporting his family responsibly, but my yeshiva had not paid him. If they had money they would have hired an administrator and the cholent might not have blown up to begin with.

The tragedy of this story is that a Google search on my Yeshiva will tell you about the condemned building, the oblivious Roshei Yeshiva, and the boys who were forced to go home. No search engine

will tell you the story of Chaim, the altruistic hero who saved the Yeshiva.

More tragically, no Google search will tell you what Chaim saw in the yeshiva that made him work pro bono to rehabilitate it. You won't find anything about the depth and diligence of the learning, the dedication and devotion of the teachers, or the decent businessmen and dayanim that the yeshiva produced.

Chaim is a real Chareidi, the type that exist off line and in real life: a regular guy, smiling, shmoozy, making a living and learning every day. Nobody asks him Halachic questions or stands up when he walks into the room. He helped the yeshiva because he loves Torah and he saw Torah suffering.

Today, every individual and group has a digital persona. Our snapshot for the

world is the information that appears on the first page of a Google search. Some people manipulate their digital persona to misrepresent themselves; others are well represented online. Some innocent people let their digital persona take on a nasty life of it's own while they don't get within four amos of a computer screen.

Search engines can't access a Rosh yeshiva's Shiur Klali or his weekly Mussar Shmooze. They can't be at a Rosh Yeshiva's Shabbos Table or experience his Ne'ilah. They form an inaccurate digital perception of a Rosh Yeshiva based on a couple of second-hand statements quoted in the New York Times and on random weblogs.

We need to be very careful with our words to be sure that our quotations are not disseminated out of their context for the world to see.

XII

הִלֵּל וְשַׁמַּי קִבְּלוּ מֵהֵם. הִלֵּל אָמַר, הַיְיָ
מִתְּלָמִידָיו שֶׁל אַהֲרֹן, אוֹהֵב שְׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם,
אוֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת וּמְקַרְבֵּן לַתּוֹרָה:

*Hillel and Shammai received the Torah from them. Hillel said:
Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace,
loving your fellow creatures and bringing them close to the
Torah.*

Many people make the mistake of taking Hillel's side. When we consider the story of the convert who wished to learn the entire Torah while standing on one foot, we should find ourselves siding with Shammai. How could Hillel accept a convert who didn't even have the decency or resolve to spend more than a few minutes learning? How could Hillel *not* turn this man away?

Hillel and Shammai had very different approaches. Neither was right or wrong but the popular vote supported Hillel and we rule in accordance with him. Sometimes, we need to show patience even at the possible expense of not standing up for the glory of the Torah.

Breaking G-d's Rules

I spent the last few hours of one year at the Enterprise car rental agency. You need a credit card to rent a car, and I had the good fortune to get in line behind an angry marine who was trying to rent a car without a credit card. (Most marines are nice guys, but this one was clearly frustrated). The Marine tried cash, debit cards, and ID tags, but the clerk just kept repeating the rule: You Need a Credit Card to Rent a Car.

As I stood and watched this exchange, the marine finally lost his patience. He took his entire wallet, closed it and threw it at the clerk.

"Take whatever you need", he said, "Just give me a car"

Everyone in the store was aghast at the man's behavior and the clerk refused to serve him.

A supervisor came out a few minutes later and calmed him down. She said

that she could get him a car. She would need to check his credit record, his driving record, and his personal history. She began drilling the Marine: Who is your employer? (U.S Marine Corp) How many years have you been with the Corp? (Twenty five years) What is your rank? (Sergeant) Who can we call for a recommendation? Do you have any outstanding debts and to which banks? Do you have a criminal record?

The tough marine was embarrassed and humiliated. Only after a full interrogation and extra paperwork was he allowed to take a car.

At first I looked condescendingly at this antithesis of the Wisdom of Ben Zoma: "Who is Strong? He who conquers his emotions." Apparently, a man can rappel from helicopters into enemy fire and still be a wimp when it comes to conquering his own anger.

A few minutes later, it occurred to me

that I might not be much better than this Marine. What is the difference between his behavior at Enterprise and our own behavior on Rosh Hashana? Don't we ask Hashem to ignore the rules and make an exception for us? Don't we just 'throw everything we have' at Hashem and demand that He make it right? Are we really looking to interrogated and judged like the Marine was judged? Why would Hashem bypass the rules that He Himself set up? How do we have the Chutzpa to ask?

Many great thinkers have asked this question and they all seem to agree on one basic answer: Mercy is not a way to bypass judgment; it is a form of judgment.

Hashem judges us as we judge others. If we are unwilling to bend our will and our desire for others, Hashem will (chas veshalom) act in kind and not veer at all from the rules that he has set forth.

On the other hand, if we are merciful when considering the actions of others, Hashem will be merciful when

considering our actions as well.

Enterprise rent-a-car isn't sophisticated enough to change their policies on a case by case basis. Hashem, in His infinite wisdom, is able to base His Judgment on each person's individual approach to justice.

The last line of Avinu Malkeinu was composed by Rabi Akiva. The Jewish people were desperate for rain and Rabi Akiva asked Hashem to have mercy upon us. He was answered immediately with torrents of rain. The students wondered why Rabi Akiva had been answered so quickly while Rabi Eliezer's many Tefillos had gone unanswered. A heavenly voice explained that Rabi Eliezer was a student of Shammai. He was always strict and unforgiving on the Torah's behalf. Rabi Akiva was a student of Hillel and he was being judged in the way that he judged others.

If we are merciful in judging others; Hashem will be merciful when He judges us.

...הוּי מִתְלַמְּדֵי־וְשֵׁל אַהֲרֹן, אוֹהֵב שְׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף

שְׁלוֹם, אוֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת וּמְקַרְבֵּן לַתּוֹרָה:

... Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow creatures and bringing them close to the Torah.

Aharon used to befriend people whom he knew to be wicked. He would treat them, as his equals and, out of shame, they would begin to live up to his expectations. He truly loved and respected people and it 'showed through' and brought them closer to Torah.

... וְרוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם ...

...and pursuing peace...

Aharon would also find two people arguing and speak with them separately. After clarifying that each individual party was willing to stop arguing, he would bring the two of them together.

In Halacha the status of Rodef - pursuer - is very serious. For example, if somebody is pursuing his friend with a knife, we are obligated to kill him. We are that sure that he would have followed through on his intentions. In the same way, Hillel teaches that we should be Rodef Shalom. We need to pursue peace with no intention of letting go or giving up.

The Talmud (Pesachim 86b) as well as the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law, OC 170:5) gives us a strange piece of counter-intuitive advice:

"Obey any words that the host does say - unless he tells you to go away"

My wise friend, Dr. Behrooz Dayanim explained to me that if your friend is telling you to leave, something is clearly wrong. Our sages are telling us that rather than just leave we should endeavor to stick around and find a solution to our host's problem.

Dr. Dayanim's father was the Dayan in Shiraz, Iran. He was responsible for all of the divorces in Shiraz and her neighboring towns. Over his fifty year career many couples came to him - but not one couple actually divorced. Mola Meir Moshe Dayanim would help them work through their issues and send them away in peace.

In contrast, I once had a friend who disappeared. I tried to stay in touch by calling his cellphone every Friday to say good shabbos. One week he actually picked up the phone. He told me that he had left town because he had some personal issues in his life. He didn't feel right living in our community any more because none of the frum people seemed to have any issues at all. (It's true: Frum people do have more fun!) I assured him that we have our issues as well - including the very issue that he was dealing with. Sadly, we never spoke again and his cell phone number was eventually disconnected.

My friend assumed that his problems were an invitation to leave the community. Our sages tell us that there is no such thing. We need to find solutions, or in this particular case - find problems. If he had taken the time to realize that he was not as unique as he thought he was, he could have avoided disappearing and actually found some help.

This applies when we deal with ourselves as well:

Rabbi Alexander Moshe Lapidos writes in his Divrei Emes that the host referred to in the Talmud is G-d. We need to listen to G-d, but if we hear G-d telling us to give up and leave we can be assured that we heard Him wrong. Like Mario, we need to live with the knowledge that if we come up to a brick wall we have to either break through the wall or go back and try again. The game is never over.

Finally, when we leave the house we take something with us that cannot be replaced. Yaacov had to go to Charan, but Be'er Sheva suffered. Many years later his great-great-grandson Nochum Ish Gamzu kept his shaky house standing just by being inside ("As long as I am in the house - the house will not fall" - Taanis 21a).

Don't leave the building; you might bring down the house.

XIII

הוא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, נִגְדַּר שְׁמָא, אֶבֶד שְׁמָהּ. וְדָלָא
מוֹסִיף, יוֹסִיף. וְדָלָא יְלִיף, קְטָלָא חִיב.
וְדֵאִשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ בְּתַנָּא, חֲלָף:

Hillel used to say: He who aggrandizes his name, loses his name. He who does not increase his knowledge, decreases it.

*He who learns not, forfeits his life. He who makes unworthy
use of the crown (of the Torah) shall pass away.*

Hashem checks his headlines every morning, but his headlines are not the same as the ones here on earth. Very often we are discouraged when we do not get the credit that we deserve. We need to remember that we are on the front page of G-d's newspaper. When people receive undeserved attention in this world, we can keep in mind that they haven't even made it into the headlines that really count.

The Pasuk in Mishlei (27:14) tells us that one who praises his friend loudly at night will cause him to be cursed in the morning. Attention is not always a good thing.

...וְדָלָא מוֹסִיף, יִסָּיֵף...

...He who does not increase, decreases....

It is said that when Rabbi Avraham Kalmanowitz visited the United States in the thirties he was greeted at the port by a Jewish man. The man welcomed the Rosh Yeshiva and told him proudly, "I have been living in the United States for Twenty years. I keep Kosher, I pray daily , and I've never worked on Shabbos".

Rav Kalmonowitz turned to his students and quoted an obscure medrash: "Woe is to the person who comes to heaven and is able to enumerate his good deeds".

The ability to recall all of our good deeds is not a good thing.

On the other hand, we read on Shabbos Shuva that we are to "bring stuff (devarim) with us when we return to Hashem".

We need to approach Hashem and present our actions as both infinite and finite, We say that we tried to fix the world and to become truly righteous. We also say that there is an extra man in shul because of our role modeling or that a student got his first one hundred on a test because of our encouragement.

Unfortunately, we get so bogged down by the 'concrete stuff' that we lose site of the less trackable small stuff. We feel so good about our Major Accomplishments that we let everything else fall to the wayside. Everyone wants to save the world; nobody wants to help with the dishes.

I had a friend who made up his mind to wake up early and daven vasikin at the Kosel for forty consecutive days. He woke up at 4:00 am, walked to the Old City and davened. He came home a few hours later, had a quick bite to eat and cleared the rest of his schedule for a nap ... until the next morning at 4:00 am. He was impervious to criticism. He had prayed at sunrise at the Kosel and was therefore holier than most of the people rebuking him.

The fifteen minutes of fame come and go. Greatness is about quietly and consistently amping up our integrity, our Tefilla, and our Torah learning.

Rav Avigdor Miller used to encourage people to do one act a day that only G-d knows about. When we study we need to do it for our own personal growth and not to impress others. Even after we have achieved impressive levels of scholarship, we need to continue studying, if only for our own Neshamos.

...וְדָלָא יִלְיָהּ, קִטְלָא חַיִּיב...
... He who learns not, forfeits his life...

... He who learns not, forfeits his life...

Zombie Tag

Nothing is more popular right now than zombies. The living dead are here to stay. — Katy Hershberger (2009)

One recent Friday night, my neighborhood hosted a game of Zombie tag. Katy Hershberger used her iPhone and Facebook to get almost 20,000 people to sign up for a game of Zombie tag. The police closed the streets, PETA and the reporters set up shop, and the walk home from Kabolos Shabbos got really interesting.

At exactly Shkia, fifteen professional zombies raced through the streets and tagged civilian players. Anybody who was tagged became a Zombie, and

before long the streets were crawling with over 1,000 zombies. The zombies dressed in black and spent four hours darting from hiding place to hiding place tagging people and (I suppose) feeding off their flesh. They couldn't die because they were already dead.

I figured someone out there would want to hear Kiddush, so I went down to where the action was and mingled with the crowd. My first reaction was fright. People in Norfolk have been trained by the Navy to look tough and camouflage

well. Muscular black clad men emerging from the darkness are always a little chilling, and even more so when they come in swarms of ten or more.

I quickly got over the initial fear when I realized that these were all just regular people. Most of them thought that I was part of the event (I do dress in black).

I went home for the Shabbos Seudah but learned an important lesson: Normal people are attracted to zombie events. Something about us enjoys dressing up like the living dead and forming lines around the block for a chance to be attacked by a flesh-eater.

I am fascinated by this trend and have spent the past week trying to understand it.

Back in the Harry Potter days, I remember being shocked by a world that was fascinated with the metaphysical but totally uninterested in the soul. As the trend moves beyond sorcerers and hobbits to include vampires and zombies, the soul is still not emerging as an important player..

A former boss of mine used to enjoy asking college kids to describe a "Soulmate". There were always loud and lively answers, until he led into the next question:

"What is a soul?"

It seems like people don't think about souls often enough.

The Medrash tells us about the Zombie that Rabi Akiva met. The unfortunate man's soul was not allowed entry to the world-to-come until his son began to learn Torah. Of course, Rabi Akiva taught the son to say Kaddish and liberated the zombie from his misery.

We (as a people) love to say Kaddish. Kaddish is the #1 mitzva for most Jews, and yet we seem to belong to a society that is fixated on the body after death and all but unaware of the soul.

I once read a little known story about the Chofetz Chaim:

In 1917, as a teenager, a relative of the Chofetz Chaim was dealing with many internal struggles and doubts. She decided to confront the great Tzadik, the Chofetz Chayim, directly. The Chofetz Chayim was, of course, one of the greatest leaders and gedolim alive. She asked the Chofetz Chayim "How can you sit here in this little town of Radin "doing nothing" while in the world around you technology and industry are developing at an unprecedented rate?"

The Chofetz Chayim did not take offense or criticize the girl. He explained

gently and presciently: “You see airplanes flying and you are very impressed, but one day they will invent an airplane that can fly to the moon. You hear about bombs blowing up buildings and you are awed, but soon they will invent a bomb that can destroy an entire city.

“The world around us is impressive and awesome. Amazing advances are being made daily - but they are not my primary concern.

“I am not in the business of making better bombs or better airplanes. My job is to make people better. The Torah makes people better and my job is to become a mench. My job is to become a human being who is closer to Hashem. That is what I am doing here in Radin.”
The Chofetz Chaim understood that, more than anything else, we need to develop our neshamos. We are fascinated with the tangible and captivated by our physicality. Our Yetzer

Hora wants us to focus on walking corpses, but our true focus should be on our better half: the holy Neshama that has the potential to elevate us, satisfy us and nurture us to 120 and beyond.

I walked out of my house before midnight last Friday just as a tired zombie emerged from the shadows. Feeling impulsive and reckless, I yelled out “I’m winning!”. He prepared to tag me and turn me into a zombie. When I told him that I wasn’t playing, he looked a little bit puzzled and continued down the street. As he disappeared around the corner he turned around to face me again.

“You are winning...”, he shouted, “...at life”.

He may have been a zombie and he might have been drunk, but I’d like to think that he was right.

XIV

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וּבְשָׂאֲנִי
לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי. וְאִם לֹא עַבְשִׁיו, אֵימָתִי:

*Hillel used to say: If I am not for myself who will be for me?
Yet, if I am for myself only, what am I? And if not now, when?*

Every person has their own unique purpose and contribution; every moment has it’s own unique

potential. Hillel is warning us not to ignore our obligation and not to discount the contributions of those who are different than us.

The Pasuk in Tehillim (49:8) tells us that a person cannot redeem himself or pay someone else to fulfill his purpose in life. Every life is a unique opportunity which cannot be duplicated or replaced.

When Different Isn't Done

During one summer in Norfolk, I met a frum pirate.

He has never boarded a ship with intent to plunder, but he will be following a full size pirate ship from port to port for the next few months. He gives tours, exhibits cutlasses and (maybe) gets to put on a pirate costume every now and then.

When I first saw the yarmulke on his head, I assumed something was wrong with him. Guys with black velvet yarmulkes don't sign up with Long John Silver. They certainly don't keep parrots. They don't dress up. It just isn't done.

There are other things that aren't done.

When I was learning in Mir there was a guy called The Tie. Other people also wore ties, but they were all old (above 35) or on staff. The Tie was one of us, but none of us showed up daily with a clean shave, an attache case, and a Tie. It just wasn't done.

One day, The Tie tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to learn with him. He was one of the best Chavrusos I ever had. People would identify me in the hallways as the guy who learned with The Tie. I remember visiting The Tie at home, fully expecting to meet a Mrs. Tie and a bunch of Lil' Ties running around in diapers (they weren't).

One day a random guy walked over to our seat and popped The Question:

"Why do you wear a Tie?"

It may have been my imagination, but I think I heard 5,000 people hold their collective breath and move forward in their seats. Why Did he wear a tie?

"Well", The Tie said simply, "If I worked in a bank I'd wear a tie. Learning Torah is more important than learning a bank".

Oh.

I've often thought about The Tie. He went on to bigger and better things, but

he taught me an important lesson: Don't be a wimp. If it isn't done - do it anyway.

A special man that I knew turned around his entire life to become frum. Holy things were dear to him and he filled his life with holy things. He built a Holy household, cultivated a holy image of a beard and peyos, and sent his children to holy yeshivos. He even moved to the Holy city of Yerushalayim.

Fifteen years later, his Yerushalmi son came home from his holy Yeshiva.

"Dad", he said, "I want to cut my Peyos off. The good guys in the Lithuanian yeshivos don't have long peyos. It just isn't done."

Dad's answer should be in the textbook of every father:

"You can do what you want", he said, "but I want you to know that those peyos inspired me to turn my life around. I gave up my lifestyle for those peyos. Those peyos inspired me to raise you to be the frum Jew and Torah scholar that you are. That isn't done where I come from - but I did it anyway.

That son kept his peyos, but so many of us aren't unique and special because "It just isn't done".

When I was a youngster in Buffalo, I

was one of a handful of boys who wouldn't walk four steps without a yarmulke. My classmates would take advantage of my limitations and grab my yarmulke for a game of Kipah-way while I stood helpless in the sidelines.

One day I went home and cried. My father shared with me that in his day he was the Only boy (his age) in Buffalo with a yarmulke. Even his teachers would politely "remind" him to remove his Kipah. Keeping that Kipah on was tough, but it made him strong. That Kipah would never come off.

My father also gave me some father-to-son strategy. The next day in school I didn't just stand there with my hand on my head. I reached nonchalantly into my right pocket and took out a backup yarmulke. I walked away smugly while my oblivious friends played on.

I had a third yarmulka in my left pocket, but I never needed it. I don't know if my friends felt like losers or began to respect my conviction but they never played Kipah-way again. When Rosh Hashana came they asked for forgiveness and we all ended up a little bit smarter.

If you have convictions, stick to them. If someone knocks you down because you are a little bit different, just ignore them.

Put on another Kipah, wear a nicer Tie,
grow your peyos longer, be a pirate.

It's done. And it's the only way to get
anything done.

...וְכִשְׂאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי...

...If I am for myself only, what am I?...

Jews are stiff-necked and stubborn people. We lasted this long because we are sure of the truth and willing to stand up for it. When someone else has a different take on that Truth we do not give in quickly. In many cases we never give in. We protest in many ways and it is often the askanim who suffer.

At one point the Mir Yeshiva in Yerushalayim was led by Reb Beinush Finkel, Reb Chaim Shmuelevitz and Reb Nachum Percovitz. Reb Nachum gave one of the most popular shiurim in Eretz Yisroel, attracted students to Mir and generally influenced the learning Style in the Yeshiva. Reb Beinush ran the Yeshiva and worked hard to keep the lights on. He was a true Tazaddik Nistar. The biggest secret was that Reb Beinush was absolutely opposed to Reb Nachum's style of learning and the way that he trained the Bochorim to learn. When Reb Chaim Shmuelevitz was no longer alive and Reb Nachum was no longer able to say a shiur it was suggested that Reb Nachum's son-in-law (Reb Asher) take over his shiur. Reb Beinush was emphatic "I have had enough of these people!".

Think about that: For most of his career Reb Beinush Finkel took responsibility for the yeshiva while disagreeing vehemently with it's methods. Reb Beinush thought the others were dead wrong - but he supported them anyway.

We can be stubborn, but we need to remember that other people have the right to be stubborn too.

It is hard to be an Askan because people don't recognize an askan's right to disagree. Barring heresy, we need to respect the reality of others having opinions.

Be right and Be stubborn - but be realistic too. There are other people out there who have the ability to be just as Right and just as Stubborn. You will not always get your way (so don't ruin it for everyone else).

...וְכִשְׂאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי...

...If I am for myself only, what am I?...

The Torah instructs the Metzora to end his or her period of isolation and repentance by bringing an offering that includes (among other things) a branch of a cedar tree and two birds.

How is it that the Metzora, who is afflicted with a form of leprosy because of his habits of haughtiness and chatter, would bring an atonement sacrifice that includes Cedar and Fowl? Don't the tall cedar tree and the chirping birds recall the very traits of haughtiness and chatter that got him or her into trouble to begin with?

I once served as a jurist for the Norfolk circuit court.

The defendant was a young man who was accused of kicking a policeman while intoxicated. My fellow jurors and I listened closely to the testimony and unanimously voted to declare the defendant Guilty. The young man was sentenced to between one and five years in prison - at our discretion.

As an American Citizen I was proud that I would serve on this man's jury and, along with my fellow citizens, ensure that the Kicker received no more and no less than the consequence that he rightly deserved.

As we entered the Jury Chamber, one woman set the tone for the discussion:

"I don't know about y 'all", she said. "but I don't want to be meeting this man in the K-mart Parking Lot. I vote to put him behind bars for as long as possible". As I watched with shock and disappointment, each one of the jurors around the table slowly nodded in confirmation. They were voting to keep a man who had done very little wrong behind bars for as long as possible, just so that they would not have to deal with him.

I was the proverbial Twelfth Juror and, sitting as I was between the jurists and the door to the courtroom, the defendant's fate was in my hands. I made an impassioned plea for sanity and, after much argument, managed to exact a compromise of three years.

We handed our decision to the judge, and the verdict was handed down.

As we watched the poor young man leave the courtroom in chains, I couldn't help but wonder

what the world would lose by putting this man behind bars for three years. I was shocked by the insensitivity of a group of people who could say, “we don’t need him, he’s not important, just put him somewhere where we can’t see him.”

The phrase “I don’t need him” articulates precisely the haughtiness and talk that gets the Metzarah into trouble. Haughtiness can be the most destructive element in even an exemplary and fair society like the one that we live in.

Yet, we don’t ask the Metzarah to give up his haughtiness. We allow him to keep it and even celebrate it by marking the end of his purification process with a piece of Cedar. This is because haughtiness is not really bad. Cedar is used to describe wise people and the Torah teaches us that a person who is haughty in the ways of Hashem will go further than any other.

Good haughtiness causes a person to realize that with the help of others they can become great. Good haughtiness causes a person to say: “I need him”, “he is important”, and “I have great goals that can’t be accomplished without him”.

...אם אין אני לי, מי לי. ובשאיני לעצמי, מה אני...

...If I am not for myself who will be for me? Yet, if I am for myself only, what am I?

The Torah records that in the Jewish year of 1787 (1787 BCE) large populations migrated from the East and settled in Babylon, which is present day Iraq, probably around Baghdad. At this time all the people were of One Language, one language and one manner of speaking.

Nimrod, who was their leader, declared a war on G-d and had everyone build a tower. He was intent on rebelling against G-d.

The Jerusalem Talmud records an unusual argument between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yochanan, one said that they actually spoke seventy languages, while the other understood that they spoke only one language, that of G-d (Hebrew).

In linguistics there are two schools of thought, one believes that all men are created equal and it is only the culture and nuances of society that cause us to be different than each other. The other, more realistic view is that we were all created different and it for that reason that many different languages and slang has evolved. Even if theoretically we could all speak one language and thus all think in the same way, there would be peace on earth but it last for only a short time because

ultimately the uniqueness within us would awaken and new languages would emerge.

The Pasuk (Ester) refers to “every nation and their language”, in describing diverse cultures. Roget in his introduction to the thesaurus states that his main intention is not to make writing more colorful but rather to provide a vehicle in which thinking itself could be more creative. Rabbi Tzadok Hacohen (Kometz Mincha 20) writes that the tongue or the language is the quill of the heart. Just as the Quill is able to take thoughts and transcribe them onto paper, there is a step before this where the emotions of the heart are transcribed into words, thus language is to the heart what a pen is to the mind. The Chovos Halevavos (Bechina 5) enjoins man to meditate on all the good that G-d has given him. He writes, “Now think about the good which has been given to man through the power of speech and articulation. For with them he can present that which is in his soul and inner recesses, and with them he can understand the feelings of others. The tongue is the quill of the heart and the agent of his hidden thoughts. If man would not be capable of speech, we would be entirely unintelligent and animalistic. Speech is what separates Man from all other species; with it we make pacts among ourselves and with G-d, with speech we beg forgiveness, which is the highest indicator of our intelligence.”

Both Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yochanan had difficulties with the idea of everyone speaking the same language. One resolved it by saying that perhaps they spoke the same language, but only as a “Safah” from the lips outwards. Inside, they all had completely different emotions which just hadn’t yet been articulated in to individual languages. Rabbi Eliezer preferred to take the verse at face value; at one point everyone was truly unified, it was only after this unity was used for the wrong purpose that we were split. Either way the pieces of the puzzle can be put back together.

Nimrod brought about and took advantage of unity in the wrong way by uniting everyone to rebel against G-d. Avraham was able to welcome and respect everyone without losing sight of the reason for all our differences. he was able to bring people together to praise G-d.

My father compares this to a bicycle wheel, composed of a hub, spokes and a rim. On its own the hub is quite useless, it can only be strengthened by a large number of spokes jutting from it each in a little bit of a different direction and finally being encircled by the rim. If any of the spokes disconnects itself from the hub the wheel will not be strong. At the same time if we are not all headed toward the praising of G-d the rim will be equally weak. Nimrod dealt with the spokes using his own personal hub and rim. This did not work. Abraham, his contemporary, allowed everything to work within G-d’s original design.

...וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁיו, אֵימָתַי:

...And if not now, when?

The Mysterious Mr. Malik

Good salesman don't have business cards. A good deal is now or never; either you make the sale or you don't. Business cards are an excuse to stall, to procrastinate and to forget.

I received this lesson from Louis the Encyclopedia Salesman as he Lassoed me with a bagel at the Fedex store last week.

I was making copies and generally minding my own business when Louis yelled, "Hey, Are you a Rabbi?!". I politely complimented him on being an Observant Jew and replied that actually I was an Assistant Rabbi. "Well", he countered, "I don't go to shul, and if I did it definitely wouldn't be yours because you daven in Hebrew". He went on to explain that he learned Hebrew as a child and didn't understand why anyone used it but it didn't really matter because he didn't go to shul anyway. He claimed that he was mostly Jewish to annoy his mother-in-law who wasn't. We spent about twenty minutes discussing everything from Mumbai and Manishevitz to Mitzvos, Marketing and Mr.Malik.

As the copier spit my pages into a mess

on the floor, I shocked Louis with the news that I was not acquainted with Mr. Malik. Louis patiently explained to me that Mr. Malik was the holiest and most learned Jew in Norfolk. He wore a Yarmulke and even davened every day - in Hebrew.

I walked away from the conversation intrigued by this lost Jew and very curious about the Mysterious Mr. Malik. I racked my brains and asked around trying to find a clue to the identity of this righteous Man named Malik.

I didn't have long to wait. Just two days later I sat down at a very well attended Bas Mitzvah and - in case I did not yet believe in G-d - there was Mr. Malik staring at me from across the table. I almost hugged him.

Once we got past the fact that Mr. Malik could not hear or see we actually had quite a nice conversation. He didn't remember Louis the Encyclopedia Salesman but he was learned and he did daven - in Hebrew - every single day. "It's a Mitzvah", he explained, "and Mitzvas are good".

My experience taught me a lesson about

encounters. Mr. Malik doesn't remember Louis, but Louis remembers and reveres Mr. Malik. Mr. Malik is arguably Louis' strongest connection to Hashem.

Louis taught me never to miss an opportunity to inspire someone. I have tens of business cards of people I intended to get back to and get to know.

It seldom happens.

Like the Frisco Kid approaching the Quackers, the person who approaches you in Kinko's or Kmart is thirsty for a Jewish Moment. You probably won't see him or her again. Teach them some Torah, recommend a book, make their neshama smile. It is now or never.

XV

שְׁמַאי אוֹמֵר, עֲשֵׂה תוֹרָתְךָ קְבֵעַ. אֲמֹר מְעַט
וְעֲשֵׂה הַרְבֵּה, וְהוּי מְקַבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּסִפּוּר
פְּנִים יְפוֹת:

*Shammai said: Make your study of the Torah a fixed habit.
Say little and do much, and receive all men with a cheerful
face.*

The Lithuanian Roshei Yeshivos used to say that a truly diligent student “sleeps on time, eats on time, and learns on time”. The true secret to greatness is to have a good schedule and keep it.

We recite the words of Atah Kadosh - “You are Holy, and Your name is Holy, and Holy ones will praise you daily” - as part of the Shemona Esrei three times each day.

The strange thing is that we only mention the idea of “praising G-d Daily” when it comes to holiness. We don't praise G-d for daily wisdom, daily health, or daily forgiveness. What is the connection between Holiness and the fact that Holy beings offer their praise daily?

It seems to me that Holiness is intrinsically connected to consistency. Only by doing something regularly can we be considered holy.

Consistently is not the same as Constantly. Rashi writes clearly that the word Tamid (usually translated as always) means regular. The Menorah was not always lit, but it was lit every day. The sacrifices were not constantly being brought, but the Korban Tamid was brought every day.

The component that separates the Men from the Boys, the Women from the Girls, and the Holy from the Unholy, is consistency. It is easy to quit smoking twelve times. Truly holy people are able (if they so desire) to quit smoking once and stick to it.

I once asked Reb Nota Greenblatt why he didn't ask potential converts if they would be willing to sacrifice their lives for Judaism. After all, we are supposed to examine converts on the easiest and the hardest Mitzvos. Kiddush Hashem, it would seem, is the most difficult of Mitzvos. Rabbi Greenblatt explained to me that dying for G-d is an easy mitzvah. It is living in a G-dly way that is a challenge. He preferred to verify that potential Jews would live as Jews and was willing to assume that, given their sincerity, they would be willing to die as Jews as well.

I once shared this thought on Kedusha with Rabbi Mordechai Dolinsky of Jerusalem. He agreed with me wholeheartedly and pulled a Mesillas Yesharim out of his briefcase. He turned to the chapter on holiness and showed me that he had underlined each of the many times that the Ramchal mentions Consistency and regularity in conjunction with Holiness.

Inspired people do something once; Holy people do it again and again and again.

I recently received a phone call from a relative of someone who had passed away here in Virginia. "I've been davening for that man", the relative said, "for forty-two years". I hope that one day I can say that I have done something consistently for forty-two years.

...עֲשֵׂה תּוֹרַתְךָ קִבְעָה...

...Make your study of the Torah a fixed habit...

Unfortunately, many people forget where they came from and why they started out. The Torah tells that every king had an obligation to write two Torah scrolls. He would keep one Torah with him at all times and read from it when he judged, when he rested and while he ate. The other Torah would remain in the Bais Hamikdosh. As he carried the smaller Torah around with him there was a danger that the Torah would lose some of its original message. Words could fade, letter could crack and portions could become damaged. Once a year the king would personally go to the Bais Hamikdosh and consult with his backup Torah Scroll. He would fix the cracked letter and rewrite the faded words, he would renew his personal Torah and make sure that it was consistent with the Torah he had begun with.

Symbolically, this is a way for the king and for every person to make sure that they remain on

task and that they don't forget their original goals and how they started out.

When a young person begins their life, he or she has a good idea of what she wants to look like in coming years. Many people are privileged to have parents, grandparents and other role models who can help them write their own personal mission based on thousands of years of knowledge and experience.

What separates the men from the boys, and the girls from the women, is the ability to look back at that message, that goal, and that determination and purity one year, five years and even twenty years later. Every person needs to be able to regularly pull out their original goals and compare them with their life today. They need to take the time to fill in the blanks, rewrite the faded letters and fix the cracks. Life takes many twists and turns and those who successful are those who able to adapt but not lose sight of their basic goals. It is easy to get caught up in day-to-day living and go years and years and years without looking back at that original set of goals and aspirations.

Yogi Berra said that if you don't know where you are going – you are sure to get nowhere quickly. We are fortunate to know where we are coming from and where we are going. If we can stick to our ambitions and never lose sight of our goals, we will go even further and make the world a better place.

We begin the year saying that this will be THE year. All too often, twelve months later we find that it has been 'just another year'. True greatness for ourselves and for the Jewish people comes when the end of year and who we have become matches the beginning of the year and what we aimed for.

Lakewood's Ark

Shalom Mordechai is a close friend of mine and was my Chavrusa in Lakewood. We learned together right in front of the Aron Kodesh in the main Beis Medrash. When I left Lakewood for Norfolk, Shalom worried that my learning might be affected. He undertook to check on me every month.

Shalom was relentless, he called me every Rosh Chodesh for an update on my progress. He wouldn't accept vague answers and he challenged every decision that I made. He made sure that I stayed in touch with my inner Yeshiva Bochur and made me answerable for my learning schedules and priorities.

I love talking to Shalom but it wasn't a walk in the park. Shalom is hard to impress. He is a man on a mission. When I made a siyum he asked me what else I was learning, When I began giving a class early in the morning, he asked if I learned at night. When the President of Hebrew Union College and the Mayor of Virginia Beach spoke at my Siyum on Krisos, Shalom didn't care. He wanted to know if I had learned every Tosfos.

As I took on various rabbinic responsibilities and teaching positions in the community, Shalom wasn't impressed. He was no less demanding. When I joined the Harley Davidson Club and enrolled in Norfolk State University, Shalom didn't blink. Shalom just wanted to be sure that I was learning.

What right did Shalom have to be so demanding? Who appointed him as my personal Mashgiach and Drill Sergeant? I often wondered but never complained.

Last year, my wife and I took advantage of some time in Lakewood to return to our kollel days. The plan was for me to spend a week learning in BMG. This was not a social visit and nobody in Yeshiva was expecting me. I strode into the Beis Medrash bright and early, took a seat twenty rows back from the Aron Kodesh and opened my Bava Basra. I

saw Shalom in our old seat with his new chavrusa learning Bava Kama. He never saw me.

I learned in Lakewood for a week and Shalom never took his head out of his gemara. He came earlier me, left later than me, and never stopped learning.

Shalom truly does live the Lakewood life. His entire life is about Torah and he will never look out of his Gemara. He doesn't care about mayors, presidents, prestige, or motorcycles.

Torah is his life. Torah is our life. Shalom refused to let me forget that.

Would I have continued to learn even without Shalom's monthly phone calls? I like to think so. Did Shalom have the license to call and remind me that learning is important? Absolutely.

Watching Shalom Mordechai learn convinced me of this more than a thousand phone calls. Shalom passed the test of time and withstood the pressures of 'the little world out there'. Shalom is what Lakewood and all Bnei Torah should represent. They are our reminder that everything is in the Torah and that we are nothing without it. They affirm that Torah has the depth to captivate us for a lifetime.

...עֲשֵׂה תוֹרַתְךָ קִבְעָה...

...*Make your study of the Torah a fixed habit...*

The Defining Moment

In 1920 (or thereabouts) a car made its way down Rechov Yaffo. It was not the first car to arrive in Jerusalem or even the first car to drive down Rechov Yaffo, but it was unusual. All of the students, teachers and staff poured out of the Eitz Chaim Yeshiva to have a look at this great new invention. When they returned to their studies, they were impressed (and maybe a little ashamed) to find that the only one who had remained in Yeshiva and not allowed the passing car to interrupt his studies was a young boy named Shlomo Zalman Orbach.

Reb Shlomo Zalman went on to become one of the leading Torah authorities of his generation, but he did not remain in the Bais Medrash. As he grew older he spent many hours looking at elevators, cars and other modern machinery. He researched and wrote groundbreaking

books on electricity, medicine and mechanics. Somebody asked the Rav: “What could you possibly have gained by learning for those ten minutes instead of stepping outside with all of your teachers and friends?”

“Those ten minutes didn’t make me more knowledgeable than my friends”, Reb Shlomo Zalman acknowledged, “and learning about cars is certainly not a waste of time. What I gained in those moments was my bond with the Torah. In those ten minutes of learning I developed an intimate relationship with the Torah that lasted me for a lifetime. I knew what I desired and I knew where I belonged. Nothing can tear me from my Torah.”

We all need moments that define us.

...וְהוּי מְקַבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּסִכּוֹר פְּנִים יְפוֹת:

... *and receive all men with a cheerful face.*

It is important to point out that, despite the perception of most people, Shammai was the one who told us to greet every person with a smile. Our faces are public property and a sour face is like the Torah’s example of a pit dug in a public thoroughfare: if it causes damage we are completely responsible.

XVI

רָבֵן גַּמְלִיאֵל הָיָה אוֹמֵר, עֲשֵׂה לְךָ רַב, וְהִסְתַּלֵּק
מִן הַסֵּפֶק, וְאַל תִּרְבֶּה לְעֵשֶׂר אֲמֻדוֹת:

*Rabban Gamaliel said: Provide yourself with a teacher and
remove yourself from doubt, and do not accustom yourself to
give tithes by estimation.*

Confidence can not be overrated. The Ramban writes in his letter to his son that we should never close a book without articulating the new lessons that we have learned. We cannot cheat ourselves of the satisfaction of getting something done and doing it properly.

XVII

שָׁמְעוֹן בְּנוֹ אוֹמֵר, כָּל יְמֵי גִדְלָתִי בֵּין הַחֲכָמִים,
וְלֹא מְצֵאתִי לְגוֹף טוֹב אֶלָּא שְׁתִּיקָה. וְלֹא
הַמְדַרְשׁ הוּא הָעֵקֶר, אֶלָּא הַמַּעֲשֵׂה. וְכָל הַמְרַבֵּה
דְּבָרִים, מְבִיא חַטָּא:

*Shimon his son said: All my days have I grown up among the
wise and I have not found anything better for a man than
silence. Studying Torah is not the most important thing rather
fulfilling it. Whoever multiplies words causes sin.*

People love to say: “I saw Rabbi ... and I told him...”. We would be far better off if we concentrated on what great people tell us rather than on what we told them. We spend most of our time listening with half an ear and planning our next contribution to the conversation. It is a lose-lose situation. Nobody is listening to us and we aren’t learning anything new.

I once asked Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel a question. He listened carefully, thought for a few minutes, and recommended two approaches for me to research. I spent many hours following up on his recommendations and writing pages and pages of notes. I was gratified to find that at his next Shiur Klali Rav Nosson Tzvi asked my question and discussed the two approaches that we had come up with together. It was only much later that I learned that Reb Nosson Tzvi had written on the topic many years before. As a teacher and a Talmid Chochom, Reb Nosson Tzvi did not

tell me that he had already researched and written on the sugya. He chose to listen to my question as if it were a new one and to allow me to come up with the answers on my own.

XVIII

רָבֵן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים
הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַדִּין וְעַל הָאֱמֶת וְעַל הַשְּׁלוֹם,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (זְכַרְיָה ח) אֱמֶת וּמִשְׁפָּט שְׁלוֹם שִׁפְטוּ
בְּשַׁעְרֵיכֶם:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel said: On three things the world is sustained: on truth, on judgment, and on peace, as it is it says (Zechariah 8:16): "Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace."

The Mishna in Kesuvos uses the term “we do not live from her mouth” to describe a woman who is lying. The Shitah Mekubetzes quotes this Mishna explaining that a person who is truthful keeps the world turning. A person who is untruthful has the ignominy of not contributing to the upkeep of this world.

תושלב"ע