

Teach Them To Believe

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

This week's *parsha* of *Emor* contains the various *Yomim Tovim* that we celebrate, as well as the obligation to count the days between when the *korban ha'omer* is brought on *Pesach* and the day which commemorates *Kabbolas HaTorah*. We refer to the obligation as *Sefiras Ha'omer* and the seven weeks when the count is conducted as the *Yemei Sefirah*, the period in which we currently find ourselves.

It was during the first half of this period until *Lag Ba'omer* that the 24,000 students of Rabi Akiva contracted illness and died. *Chazal* teach that they were punished because they did not treat each other with proper respect. And ever since then, people have been discussing why they deserved to die because they didn't display proper respect for their colleagues.

Perhaps we can understand that by failing to treat their fellows with respect, they hampered their ability to grow and be as productive as they could have been. They robbed them of the self-respect and self-dignity every person needs in order to excel. And robbing a person of their pride and confidence is akin to killing him, for you have ruined their ability to do what they were brought to this world for.

Someone who publicly embarrasses another is referred to by *Chazal* as a *rosha* who does not merit a portion in the World to Come. The rabbis teach that it is preferable for a person to throw himself into a burning flame rather than cause another person embarrassment. This is because shaming a person is akin to murder.

It would seem that dealing with people in a less than respectful manner on a regular basis is more hurtful, and therefore the 24,000 *talmidim* of the great Rabi Akiva were punished so severely. These were the people who were to be charged with the responsibility of transferring the Torah to the future generations, but they impeded their fellows' ability to reach their potential and to grow into the Torah giants they were meant to be in order to fulfill their specific missions. [See also *Rashi Gemara Taanis 23a D"H oh chavrusah oh misusah*.]

The *Chazon Ish* would say that every *yeshiva bochur* requires a spoonful of *kavod* every day in order for him to be able to grow in his Torah and *avodah* and not become disenchanted with himself. In order for *bochurim* to grow, they need to hear words of encouragement and kind comments about themselves. If they are treated that way, he said, they will be inspired to grow and excel. And while he made the statement about *yeshiva bochurim*, it refers to everybody.

Students of the Alter of Slabodka would repeat that he taught that if we would remove from a person all aspects of respect, he would either die or lose his mind and go insane. Without any feelings of respect, a person simply loses it.

Everyone needs to feel good about themselves in order to be happy, satisfied and productive. Especially in this time of *Sefirah*, we must all do what we can to help ourselves and others feel good about themselves and their abilities so that they will be motivated to be energetic and productive.

Sefirah is divided into two “halves.” There are thirty-two days and then there is the *Lag Ba’omer* break, followed by seventeen days. The thirty-two days leading up to *Lag Ba’omer* correspond to the word “*kavod*,” respect, whose numerical value is 32. It was during those days that the *talmidei* Rabi Akiva perished for not displaying proper respect, and correspondingly, it is a time when we should work on rectifying their sin by ensuring that we treat everyone with respect. Following *Lag Ba’omer*, there are seventeen days, corresponding to “*tov*.” Hopefully, by then, the sin has been rectified, as we continue to prepare ourselves for *Kabbolas HaTorah*.

Too often, we encounter people who lack motivation and drive. They have given up on themselves. They view themselves as failures because nobody respected them. They were labeled as dummies and slow learners when they were young and were never able to climb out from under that label.

I met a teenage boy over *Yom Tov* who wasn’t fitting in. He dressed differently than his peers, was making a big commotion, was using inappropriate words quite loudly, and was making a general nuisance of himself. I went over to him quietly and tried making conversation with him to calm him down and to see what his issue was. Perhaps I could help him. After some chit chat, he looked up at me and said, “Anyway, what do you want from me? I’m just a loser.” Feeling so bad for him, I said, “You’re just starting out. It’s way too early to be a loser. You have a long way to go.”

I hope he took my words to heart, but I doubt that he did. It's been beaten into him ever since he was a young boy. Maybe he failed a test or two. Maybe he wasn't able to read and was ashamed to ask for help. From there, it snowballed. It could have been anything, but by now, he has given up on himself, and it will take a lot of hard work to get him back to where he has some self-esteem and enough belief in himself to give himself another chance at climbing back up.

The great *posek*, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, served as *rosh yeshiva* of the famed Yeshiva Kol Torah in Yerushalayim. There was a boy who wasn't doing well, and the *hanhallah* decided that he had to be sent away. Though he was quite intelligent, he was very lazy. Despite all their best efforts, they were not able to convince him to take his studies seriously. Finally, after exhausting all their attempts to get him to shape up and improve, they decided that it was not beneficial for him to remain in Kol Torah and it was detrimental to the others for him to stay there.

The *hanhallah* convened a meeting to discuss the weighty issue, and it was agreed that he would be asked to leave. All present voted for his immediate expulsion – all except Rav Shlomo Zalman. He also agreed that the boy must go, but he asked for a two-week delay in carrying it out. The others agreed, though they didn't anticipate any change. After all, they had tried everything, to no avail.

That evening, Rav Shlomo Zalman approached an older boy with a proposal. He said to him, "I want to hire you to teach this boy a certain *Tosafos*. I will pay you well, and I want you to teach him the *Tosafos* and the surrounding *sugya*. I want him to know this *Tosafos* inside and out, backwards and forwards. For two weeks, I want you to also teach him the commentators who discuss this *Tosafos*. I want him to know it all.

"It's not going to be easy, and every day you will have to come up with different ways of getting his interest and holding it, but I have faith that you will be able to carry out this job for me."

This older *talmid* got to work. First, he asked the boy for his help in studying the *Tosafos* with him, using the ingenuity his *rebbe* told him he would need to hold the younger boy's interest and encourage his involvement. Each following day, he found a way to keep the conversation going, adding to the boy's understanding of the entire topic and the words of *Tosafos*. By the time the two weeks ended, the boy who was struggling was energized. He was involved in the *Tosafos* and an expert in it.

Once a month, Rav Shlomo Zalman would go into each *shiur* room and give *farhers*, testing the *talmidim*'s knowledge and comprehension of what they were studying. He would ask them questions on the *Gemara, Rashi, Tosafos, Rosh, Maharsha*, and other commentaries connected to the *sugya*. On the last day of the two weeks, Rav Shlomo Zalman entered the *shiur* room that the boy who was to leave that day was in.

Everyone sat in their seats, tense for the moment the *rosh yeshiva* would call upon them. Everyone except that boy. It was his last day. He was leaving regardless, he was a loser anyway, and he had nothing more to lose. Besides, what were the chances that Rav Shlomo Zalman would call upon him? He leaned back in his seat, with his legs folded, waiting for the whole thing to end.

How surprised he was when, of all people, the world famous *rosh yeshiva* looked in his direction and called upon him. "Chaim Goldstein, let me ask you a question." It was about that *Tosafos* that he had been studying the past two weeks. He sat straight in his seat, snapped out of his apathetic daydreaming, and proceeded to answer.

A broad smile spread across the beautiful angelic face of Rav Shlomo Zalman recognizable to so many. He shot back what's known in *yeshivish* as "a bomb *kasha*" on the *p'shat* the boy said in *Tosafos*. "How can you say such a *p'shat*?!"

The boy was now almost standing on his feet with excitement. "*Rebbi*, the *Rashba* asks that question, but the *Maharsha* answers it, so I stand behind my *p'shat*."

"Not so fast. Perhaps you are correct. Tell me please, what does the *Maharsha* say?"

And so it went back and forth for a while. The rest of the *shiur* sat in amazement at the boy's brilliance. Rav Shlomo Zalman was overjoyed. He could barely contain his pride as the boy showed what he was capable of.

Finally, the boy finished his journey through the *sugya*. Rav Shlomo sat there transfixed. He looked at the boy with warm, holy, *Yerushalmi* eyes and said with all the kindness of his soul, "I see in front of me a gifted boy, an exemplar of this *yeshiva*. You are brilliant and able to learn so well. Why are you leaving the *yeshiva*? What a shame."

The boy wanted to jump up and say that he wasn't leaving by his own volition; he was shown the door. But before he could say anything, the angel in front of the class continued: "I understand that you are going to study in a *yeshiva* that is closer to the home of your widowed mother."

Copious tears were flowing down the boy's cheeks, and even if he wanted to say something, he couldn't. There was a large lump in his throat. He began thinking to himself, "If only the *rosh yeshiva* knew the real reason I'm leaving..." but he didn't have much time to think, because Rav Shlomo Zalman continued speaking to him. "It is amazing that a *baal kishron* like you is leaving the *yeshiva* just so that you can be close to your mother. What astounding *mesirus nefesh*! What *kibbud eim*! Amazing. You made the right decision."

He went over to the boy and shook his hand, while blessing him that he should see much success in the *yeshiva* he was going to so that he could be close to his mother, the *almanah*, and help her with her needs, bringing her comfort and *nachas*.

That evening, when he packed his bags to leave, he did so with his head held high, with much pride and self-esteem. He wasn't a loser who had to sneak out of the *yeshiva*, hoping nobody would see him, fading into the darkness of returning home with no *yeshiva* to go to.

He was the guy Rav Shlomo Zalman praised for his *mesirus nefesh*. He was a *baal kishron*, who excelled in learning and had a bright future ahead of him.

Years went by, he got married, and he had a few children. One day, he went to a *bris* and the great *rosh yeshiva* and *posek*, Rav Shlomo Zalman, was the *sandek*. After the *bris*, everyone passed by Rav Shlomo Zalman to shake his hand and receive a *brocha*. Our friend was among the people on line, though he doubted Rav Shlomo Zalman would remember him.

When it was his turn, he stuck out his hand. The elderly *rosh yeshiva* shook it warmly and asked him his name. "My name is Chaim Goldstein," he said.

Rav Shlomo Zalman's eyes lit up. "Of course I remember you! You are the tremendous *baal kishron* who, with *mesirus nefesh*, gave up learning in Kol Torah to be near your mother,

the *almanah*. Of course, I remember you. How could I forget someone who gave up so much for his mother?"

What an amazing story about an amazing person.

There is so much pain in our world, so many struggling kids and adults, so many people who had their innocence robbed from them, so many who everyone has given up on, including themselves. So much sadness, so much grief, so much difficulty coping with what life brings.

We can help them. Each one of us can. We don't have to be as great as Rav Shlomo Zalman. All we have to do is care. Care enough about other people to show them respect. Show them that their life is worth living. That they have a future. That despite everything, they are not losers. Allow them to believe in themselves. It doesn't cost anything to smile at someone. It's not the end of the world to make up a little story that allows someone to believe in themselves and get their life back on track.

It's not that hard to treat other people the way you want to be treated. It will make a world of difference if you do. And it will prepare the world for the coming of *Moshiach* any day now.