

## פ' בהעלותך תשפ"ג

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### RAV STERNBUCH ON RAV GERSHON EDELSTEIN ZT"l

Yesterday Rav Sternbuch spoke about Rav Gershon ז"ל at the beginning of a shiur delivered at his Yeshiva in Ramat Beit Shemesh.

The *poskim* discuss whether it is permitted to learn Torah in *botei medrash* during the time of *aveilus* for a *godol beYisroel*. The *gemoro* says in *Moed Koton* that in the time of *Chazal* the learning in *botei medrash* would stop when the *nossi* passed away. *Chazal* recognized that the death of a *godol* has an impact on the entire generation, and therefore during the period of mourning for him refrained from the joy of Torah learning so that they would feel the great void for the entire generation upon the passing of a great person.

Rav Sternbuch knew Rav Gershon when they were neighbors in Bnei Brak, and he recalls how Rav Gershon would learn and teach Torah non-stop. He had the merit of disseminating Torah to thousands of students, and students of students.

He was genuinely humble. Not only did he not seek honor, but he felt that he did not deserve honor at all, and this is a very high level of *anovo*. *Anovo* is the key to success in Torah, as we pray, "Let my soul be to all as dust [so that You may] open my heart to Your Torah".

It says, "And now, Yisroel, what does Hashem your G-d require of you but to fear Hashem your G-d", on which the *gemoro* (*Brochos* 33b) asks, "Is fear of heaven a small matter?", and answers, "Yes, with regard to Moshe, fear of Heaven is a small matter". Both the Vilna Gaon and the Baal Shem Tov explain that this does not mean that the *possuk* is only addressing *Moshe Rabbenu*. After all, it says explicitly "And now, Yisroel", but rather that for as long as Moshe was present amongst the people, the entire nation could easily attain fear of Heaven. due to the personal example he set. Similarly, Rav Gershon was a living *musar sefer*, and his influence will be sorely missed.

On the one hand, Rav Gershon was always learning, but, on the other hand, he gave counsel to and comforted the masses knocking on his door. He would advise people on how to immerse themselves in the Torah world.

The *gemoro* (*Kiddushin* 40a) says that a "good righteous person" is someone who is good to Heaven and good to his fellow human beings, and someone who is "good to Heaven but bad to his fellow human beings" is "a righteous person who is not good". The commentators wonder how someone who is bad to his fellow human beings can be termed a righteous person at all, and explain that "a righteous person who is not good" refers to someone who is not concerned about his fellow human beings, and does not make sure that his environment is positively affected by him. Such a person is "bad to his fellow human beings", since he deprives them of his positive influence. Rav Gershon was a "good righteous person". He was good to Heaven and good to his fellow human beings.

Hashem now expects us to build the Torah world. During the Holocaust, the entire European Jewry was destroyed, but eventually many yeshivos and *kolelim* opened in every town both in *Eretz Yisroel* and overseas, and we experienced with our own eyes that "Hashem's hand is not short" (*Bamidbor* 11:23). We should not make any calculations, but simply get on with doing what we are supposed to do, and Hashem will automatically provide us with Divine assistance.

Everybody should realize that they are capable of becoming great in Torah, and not succumb to the evil inclination, which attempts to convince its victim that he is incapable of achieving greatness. This is false "humility". Anyone who undertakes to learn with *hasmodo* will certainly see within a short period of time how he has acquired a desire to learn more and more Torah. However,

one has to be careful not to make exaggerated resolutions in one go, but rather proceed gradually by undertaking small changes, and making steady progress that way.

## DIFFICULTIES

Rav Sternbuch said the following this week at Yeshivas Brisk on the occasion of a *Hachnosas Sefer Torah leiluy nishmas* his late brother-in-law, the Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Meshulam Dovid Soloveitchik *zt"l*.

The reward for the mitzvah of Talmud Torah depends on the extent to which a person has had to overcome difficulties. Someone who dedicates himself completely to this mitzvah receives a great reward. With each word of Torah, a person creates angels with a great capacity to advocate on his behalf. However, the powers of the angel in Heaven depend on the value of the mitzvah on account of which the angel was created, and the extent to which the person has had to apply himself and overcome difficulties in order to learn Torah.

A person's greatness does not depend on his abilities, but rather on his *hasmodo*. Without toiling in Torah, a person's talents will be of no avail to him. The Brisker Rov told Rav Sternbuch that people have a misconception about his father, Rav Chaim, assuming that he became great because of his abilities. In truth, his greatness was actually due to his great *hasmodo* and toil in Torah. Naturally, his talents assisted him, but they were not the cause of his greatness. Dayan Abramasky told Rav Sternbuch that when they were fleeing on a train during World War I, Rav Chaim sat in a corner learning *gemoro*, Rashi and *Tosfos* assiduously, in total oblivion of the noise and tumult around him.

Moreover, the holy Torah cannot be attained through natural means without divine assistance, even by someone who has been blessed with talents and abilities. In order to obtain the Torah from Hashem, one has to pray for success in Torah. One has to pray each word on its own with concentration, and consider himself to be standing before the King when he says, "Blessed are You Hashem etc". Rav Sternbuch recalls that the prayer of the Brisker Rov throughout the year was the same as his prayers on Rosh Hashono and on *Tisha Be'Av*, with "tears in his heart", although he did not display his inner feelings outwardly.

The highest level of prayer is prayer with tears. That way one arouses divine mercy, as it says (*Brochos* 32b, *B. Metzia* 59a) "The gates of tears have not been locked". The Zohar greatly extols the virtue of prayer with tears, which opens the Gates of Heaven. Happy is the lot of the person privileged to pray in this way, especially when he considers how he wastes his time on vanities, and praying quickly without contemplation. Such thoughts in themselves can arouse a person to cry during his prayers.

## SPIRITUAL CRAVINGS

*When you light the lamps* (8:2). Rashi: "Why is the portion dealing with the menorah juxtaposed to the portion dealing with the *nesi'im*? For when Aharon saw the dedication of the *nesi'im*, he felt distressed over not joining them in this dedication - neither he nor his tribe. So Hashem said to him, "By your life, yours is greater than theirs, for you will light and prepare the lamps".

Why was Aharon distressed? Although the *nesi'im* had a special part in the dedication of the *mizbeach*, he received his own special part, the *minchas chavitin*, which are brought every day as well as the *avodas Yom Hakippurim*. He had received his own unique task as *Kohen Godol*, and surely he realized that Hashem allocates each person the tasks that are most appropriate for him.

*Tzaddikim* yearn for any possible spiritual qualities, and therefore when Aharon saw that there was a component of *avodas Hashem* in the task allotted to the *Nesi'im* that he did not merit to have a part in, he became upset, since he craved this quality too.

In the case of physical desires, someone feels a lack and consequently an urge to fill that lack, but in the spiritual realm, the opposite occurs. Someone who has not acquired any level of *avodas Hashem* does not feel any lack or need to acquire such levels, and it is only those who have made spiritual acquisitions in Torah and *yiras Shomayim*, those who have tasted the sweetness of Torah, who are hungry for more areas that can bring them closer to Hashem. Such people do not give up any possibility of acquiring another mitzvah or *dikduk behalocho*.

The Vilna Gaon says that a person should love the Torah dearly, because with every word that he learns he performs a separate mitzvah, and if each word is such a great mitzvah on a par with all other *mitzvos*, how much more so if he learns a chapter of *mishnayos* or a *daf gemoro*. Each time a person does that he performs hundreds of *mitzvos*, each one of which is equivalent on its own to all the others.

The Chofetz Chaim calculated that, on average, a person can speak 200 words a minute. This means that a person can perform 200 *mitzvos* of *Talmud Torah* every minute. Conversely, if he utters forbidden speech, he not only transgresses 200 prohibitions, but also cancels 200 positive commandments of *Talmud Torah*, which he could have performed during that minute.

## **TORAH MEDICINE**

Rabbenu Bachaye writes that the seven lights of the Menorah symbolize the seven branches of general wisdom, because all forms of wisdom are included within the wisdom of the Torah and stem from the Menorah, which symbolizes the Torah.

Eyewitnesses told Rav Sternbuch about a person who needed to be operated in his head. The specialist surgeon Dr Ashkenazy expressed his opinion that the operation could not take place since the patient would remain paralyzed and not get out of bed. The patient came to see the Chazon Ish and told him what the surgeon had said. The Chazon Ish proceeded to produce a sketch of the head and brain on a piece of paper, indicating a way in which the operation could be performed without damaging dangerous areas, and he told the patient to show this drawing to Dr Ashkenazy, telling him that he would already know how to operate based on the drawing. The surgeon was indeed very impressed by the drawing, and performed the operation based on it. The operation was very successful, and the patient recovered.

When other doctors heard about what had happened, they wanted to visit the Chazon Ish so that he could teach them about surgical procedures, but Dr Ashkenazy told them that the Chazon Ish in his great holiness derived his wisdom from delving into the holy Torah, and it would not be possible for a simple person to understand the Chazon Ish's wisdom, which was derived exclusively from the Torah.

Similarly, it is related about the Vilna Gaon that in his youth he made discoveries in the field of medicine derived from the Torah, but his father forbade him from delving into medicine any more, since otherwise he would be obliged to spend a lot of time saving Jewish lives through his wisdom, and he was not obligated to take time away from his Torah studies, and give up all his Torah greatness, in order to save others.

## **UNTIL THE FLAME RISES BY ITSELF**

*When you light the lamps (8:2). Rashi: He is required to kindle the lamp until the flame rises by itself*

The menorah symbolizes the Torah, and therefore the act of lighting the menorah symbolizes the dissemination of Torah. When a person influences others to come closer to the Torah, he should do so with the aim of the flame of Torah rising by itself, i.e. that his protégé

should no longer need external assistance. However, he should not allow his protégé to become independent until he is sure that the flame of Torah is strong and indeed rises by itself.

The *Shulchan Oruch HoRav* writes in *Hilchos Talmud Torah* regarding the mitzvah of teaching his son Torah that the father is obligated to get his son to the stage that he is able to learn the entire Torah. If his son is talented, it is sufficient to provide him with a teacher to teach him how to learn *gemoro* with *poskim*, *rishonim* and *acharonim*. Then, when the son has reached the level of “the flame rising by itself”, when he is able on his own to continue learning in depth up to *halocho lema’ase*, the father has fulfilled his obligation and performed the mitzvah of teaching his son the entire Torah.

If the son is not so talented, and is not able to understand on his own without being taught expressly, the father is obligated to hire a teacher to teach him the entire Torah, both written and oral. He also says that the father is obligated to continue supporting his son even after his marriage so that he can continue fulfilling this obligation.

The *Remo* (*Y.D.* 242:34) says that even though, in general, a person’s rabbi has precedence over his father, since his rabbi brings him to the afterlife, and his father only to this world, if a father supports his son and assists him to the best of his abilities to learn Torah, he takes precedence over his son’s rabbi.

A mother shares in her husband’s reward if she participates in assisting her husband or her son to learn Torah. The reward awaiting Jewish mothers for this endeavor is unfathomable, since they are thereby literally ensuring the continued survival of the nation.

Rav Elya Lopian said that a woman fulfils the commandment of “and you shall delve therein day and night” (*Yehoshua* 1:8) by constantly thinking about how she can best assist her husband and sons in their Torah studies.

## **CHESED PRODUCES TORAH**

“*And Aharon did so*” (8:3). *Rashi*: “*This is to Aharon’s credit, to teach us that he did not change.*”

One interpretation of this *medrash* is that most people have ups and downs in their *avodas Hashem*, but Aharon did not change, and every time he went up to light the candles, it was with the same degree of joy and enthusiasm for performing Hashem’s Will that he had the first time he performed this *mitzvah*.

Alternatively, the change does not refer to his *avoda*, but, on the contrary, to the fact that he did not change his previous conduct to which he had become habituated of making peace between man and his fellow man. This is indeed a novel point, which has to be taught, because we might have thought that now that Aharon had become privileged with the task of lighting the menorah, he would abandon his previous occupation of making peace between man and man and husband and wife, and concentrate exclusively on serving his Creator day and night. Comes along the Torah and tells us that “he did not change”, the greatness which he had now attained did not affect his previous activities in the slightest.

A person cannot absolve himself of the duty to engage in acts of *chesed* because he is busy learning Torah or with other *mitzvos* and good deeds, because he is not on a higher level than Aharon who, notwithstanding all his greatness and holiness, continued searching for ways to benefit his fellow Jews and increase their interpersonal harmony, even after having become busy with the holiest activities.

Similarly, Jewish rabbinic leaders throughout the generations, who attained very high levels of Torah and *avodas Hashem*, did not cut themselves off from public affairs, but rather

constantly sought to benefit the public and engage in acts of kindness with their fellow Jews. In fact, it was specifically because of those acts of *chesed* that Hashem paid them measure for measure, and, in the merit of those acts, they enjoyed special divine assistance and illumination to produce great *chidushei Torah*.

### PERSONAL EXAMPLE

*“Take the Leviyim from among the bnei yisroel and cleanse them”* (8:6)

Now that the *Leviyim* had been chosen to serve Hashem they had to “cleanse themselves” from any sign of sin, because the public would be watching them and learning from their actions. They had to endeavor to be perfect role models.

Rav Schneider would say that the reason *shevet levi* were not provided with fields and vineyards was both for their sake - that they should remain dedicated to serving Hashem, and for the sake of the public - so that that they should set an example to the whole nation about *mesirus nefesh* for Torah. Rav Schneider would talk about how those *avreichim* who sit and learn for many years with diligence are the *shevet levi* of each generation, and serve as role models for the entire nation by instilling in them concepts of self-dedication for Torah.

Rav Chaim Chaikel Greenberg, who was the rabbi of a small community near Vilna before the War, told Rav Sternbuch that when he went to see Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky and ask him for guidance about the tasks and duties of a communal rabbi, Rav Chaim Ozer mentioned a long list of tasks [seeing to the education of boys and girls, establishing Torah and educational institutions based on traditional principles, seeing to the *kashrus* of the local *mikveh*, establishing Torah *shiurim*, seeing to the *eiruv* and *kashrus* of food, warning about *chilul Shabbos*, seeing to the needs of the poor, the orphans and the widows of his town to make sure all their needs were being met], and Rav Greenberg thanked him and left, but Rav Chaim Ozer then ran after him and said, “I forgot the main thing, the main thing is that you should sit and learn with *hasmodah*, because if the inhabitants of the town see their rabbi learning, that makes an indelible impression on them, and they will seek to emulate him. On the other hand, if the rabbi neglects his Torah studies, he will be belittled and unable to influence his congregants properly”.

Rav Chaim Brisker was once approached by a delegation of *baalei mussar* which tried to convince him to introduce fixed *mussar sedorim* in Volozhin Yeshivah. Rav Chaim responded that they already had a fixed “*mussar session*”, since all the students were exposed every morning to the heartfelt cries during *Ahavo Raboh* of the *Rosh Yeshiva* (the *Netziv*), and witnessing this increased the *yiras Shomyaim* of each student. Sometimes being exposed constantly to a “*living mussar sefer*” can be more effective than *mussar* speeches.

### FAITH IN TURBULENT TIMES

*Take the Leviyim from among the Bnei Yisroel and cleanse them* (8:6)

The *Medrash Tanchuma* says that the tribe of Levi exhibited self-sacrifice to sanctify the name of Hashem in order that the Torah should not be revoked, because when the Jews were in Egypt they neglected the Torah and circumcision, and served idols, but the tribe of Levi were all righteous and kept the Torah. Immediately Hashem said “and the Leviyim shall be for Me”. In other words, they were the only tribe that kept the Torah, thereby ensuring that the Torah would not be revoked from the nation.

Rav Sternbuch recalls how in the middle of World War II, when the Holocaust was taking place, his *Rosh Yeshiva*, Rav Moshe Schneider read out this *medrash* and said that by

believing in Hashem during a time when such terrible calamities are taken place, and people are blaspheming, asking questions about where Hashem is, our faith in and of itself constitutes a sanctification of the Divine Name, and Hashem holds the small group of *bnei Torah* who declare His name in the highest esteem.

In our time too about 80% of the nation has shed the yoke of Torah, and only a small portion of Torah-true Jews remain. The winds of heresy and immorality abound, and people forget about Hashem, hanging on to various idols and powers in the expectation that they will save them. When we lead a life of Torah and *mitzvos* and turn only to our Father in Heaven to save us, we thereby observe the *mitzvah* of sanctifying Hashem's name. All the more so, when we publicize our faith in public, because we are then *mekadesh shem shomayim borabbim*.

## SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

*Let them cause a razor to pass over all their flesh (8:7)*

Rashi cites Rabi Moshe Hadarshan who says that the *Leviyim* had to undergo this procedure to atone for the firstborn who had served idol worship, which is called "sacrifices of the dead", and since a *metzora* is termed a dead person, the *Leviyim* were required to be shaved just like a *metzora*. However, according to this explanation it is difficult to understand why the *Leviyim* had to be shaved, and not the firstborn, and, in any case, we also do not find anywhere that idol worshippers are shaved.

A *metzora* who speaks *loshon horo* is sent out of the camp and shaved so that he will become repulsive, and other people will keep a distance from him. That way he will learn to bridle his speech and refrain from speaking *loshon horo* in the future. The *Leviyim* had to shave their hair in order to look different from the rest of the nation. Since they were the recipients of *ma'asros* some members of the nation were likely to consider them as "parasites" living off other people. By shaving their heads the *Leviyim* are given the message that they must be willing to endure humiliation like a *metzora*, and that they must not let such attitudes affect their pride at being soldiers in Hashem's army.

Nowadays, as the Rambam tells us (*Shmitta Veyovel* 13:13), anyone who dedicates his life to Torah acquires the status of a *ben Levi*, and they too must have the confidence and positive pride to be able to swim against the tide of public opinion, and oppose warped ideologies. Only *daas Torah* guides their actions, regardless of the reactions of people around them. For example, *avreichim* who may have family members who do not understand why they do not go out to work, must withstand ridicule or contempt from outsiders and boost themselves with the knowledge of the great rewards awaiting them.

## LONG LIFE

*From the age of fifty he shall retire from the service of the work, and do no more work (8:25). Rashi: The work of carrying on the shoulders; however, he can return to locking the gates, singing, and loading the wagons.*

Why does Rashi refer to the work of locking the gates, and not opening them? We can understand this on the basis of a statement made by the Chofetz Chaim, who said that anyone who has reached the age of fifty has to slacken his interest in worldly matters to some extent, and prepare himself for the world that is completely good (in addition to "locking," *ne'ilah* also means "closing"). Hence, Rashi's reference to locking the gates may be taken as an allusion to the work that we should intensify as we reach the age of fifty and enter the closing stage of our lives.

Fifty is the age at which a person gives advice to others (*Avos* 5:24). The Chofetz Chaim says that if others come to receive advice from him, then all the more should he consult with *himself* about his final destination in life, and prepare provisions for his final resting place.

Doing this is also a *segulah* (remedy) for long life, because if someone is busy intensifying his *avodas Hashem* and preparing for his eternal future, Hashem is more likely to have pity on him and grant him long life in order to facilitate his desire to delve into Torah and *avodas Hashem*. On the other hand, if he wastes his time on vanities, he risks his whole future, because Hashem may not deem it fit to prolong his life.

## **GATEKEEPERS**

*He shall minister with his brethren [literally: he shall serve his brethren] in the Tent of Meeting to keep the charge, but he shall not perform the service (8:26)*

Sometimes a person's main task in this world is to serve his brethren by performing charitable deeds and the like. A charity overseer once told Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld that he had decided to resign from his position and dedicate his life to learning Torah. So far from expressing his delight, Rav Sonnenfeld responded that the *gemoro* says that a *levi* with the job of singing, who instead serves as a gatekeeper, is subject to death by the hands of Heaven (*Erchin* 11b).

Just like the work of the *leviyim* was divided between gatekeepers, guards and singers, so too are some people required to dedicate their entire lives to Torah, whereas others are supposed to put a greater emphasis on other aspects of *avodas Hashem*. The main thing is that everybody's intention should be to perform the will of our Father in Heaven. Rav Sonnenfeld told this person that he should continue with his current activities.

## **PERSONAL GROWTH**

*Please do not leave us . . . for you shall be to us [instead of] eyes. (10:31)*

We would have thought that the generation of the wilderness had no shortage of *zekeinim* to enlighten and guide them. Why did they need Yisro?

The *ba'alei mussar* explain that transgressing Jews and the *Eirev Rav* claimed that an ordinary person could not become sanctified and serve Hashem - that was the prerogative of Moshe Rabbeinu, the "*ish haElokim*," who was completely different from any other person.

Yisro had tried out every type of idol worship known in his time before discovering the Torah. This happened by virtue of his persistence and honesty, and in his journey for the truth he reached extremely high spiritual levels. His personal example served as an example for the *Eirev Rav* and transgressing Jews of the levels a person can attain through his own efforts. However distant he may be from Hashem, he is capable of recognizing Him and coming closer to Him by contemplating the meaning of life.

Rav Sternbuch heard an alternate explanation from the late Satmar Rebbe, Rav Yoel Teitelbaum. Yisro grew up among non-Jews, and had been one of Paroh's advisers. He was therefore very familiar with the outlook and mentality of the *Eirev Rav*, who were now having a negative influence on the Jews, and giving them much trouble. Hence, he was uniquely qualified to advise the nation about how to deal with them. In our generation too, *baalei teshuvah* have an insight into the souls of our erring brethren and are especially qualified to assist us in our dealings with them.

In any event, according to both explanations, only the *Eirev Rav* and transgressing Jews were in need of Yisro, not the rest of the nation *chas v'shalom*, who had Moshe Rabbeinu as their leader. He was the eyes of the nation.

In each generation, the *Gedolei Yisrael* are called the “eyes of the congregation” because they have a special power of discernment. They do not merely consider the present, but rather look into the future and perceive the potential danger of certain things for the Jewish nation, when the rest of the nation does not yet perceive it.

## **MARRYING OFF CHILDREN**

*Did I conceive this entire people? Did I give birth to them, that You say to me... Where can I get meat to give all these people? Alone I cannot carry this entire people for it is too hard for me (11:12-14)*

Several decades ago a *talmid chochom* told Rav Sternbuch that when his children became of marriageable age, he did not have a cent to marry them off, and someone suggested to him that he should travel to America to collect, but he was doubtful about this. So he went to ask the Tshebiner Rov, Rav Dov Berish Weidenfeld, whether he was obligated to make efforts to such an extent for the sake of marrying of his children. The Tshebiner Rov replied by citing the above *possuk*. Moshe's argument implies that the only reason he felt exempt from seeing to the physical needs of the nation, when according to the natural course of affairs it was impossible to obtain food for them, was that he had not given birth to the nation, but if they had been his biological children, he would indeed have been obligated to see to their sustenance, even in a situation of “where can I get meat to give all these people... it is too hard for me”.

Based on this, the Tshebiner Rov ruled that this man was obligated to travel to America and to undertake even activities that went beyond standard levels of effort and involved many difficulties, in order to sustain his children and to marry them off.

## **ATTAINING THE LEVEL OF MOSHE RABBENU**

*Not so is My servant Moshe; he is faithful throughout My house. (12:7)*

The Rambam writes (*Hilchos Teshuva* 5:2) that any person is capable of being a *zaddik* like Moshe *Rabbenu*. However, even if someone lives for thousands of years he would still fall far short of the levels attained by Moshe *Rabbenu*. So what does the Rambam mean?

Rav Elchonon Wasserman explained that even though Moshe was endowed with immense capabilities far beyond those possessed by anyone else, anyone who utilizes his own specific capabilities to the utmost is a perfect *zaddik* no less than Moshe. Moshe is called an *Eved Hashem* (*Devorim* 34:5) because he served Hashem with all his senses and capabilities, and subjected his entire being to performing Hashem's will. Anyone who does the same, using the specific tools with which he has been endowed by Hashem, also acquires the title “servant of Hashem”, and is therefore considered as righteous as Moshe *Rabbenu*.