

“And Yosef said to his brothers, “I am Yosef” ... But his brothers could not answer him because they felt disconcerted before him.” (45:3)

In addressing the concept of *tochachah*, rebuke, the Midrash states, “Woe to each one of us on the Day of Judgment, woe to each one of us on the Day of Reproof.” Yosef was the youngest of the tribes, but when he said, “I am Yosef,” the brothers were overcome with shame at their misdeeds. When Hashem reveals Himself to each one of us announcing, “I am Hashem,” we will certainly be unable to respond as a result of our humiliation. The words, “to each one of us,” which in the vernacular of the Midrash is rendered, “*I’fi mah shehu*” “each one according to what he is,” is a powerful statement. What does it mean? Does emphasizing the status of each individual make a difference in the rebuke?

Horav Shalom Schwadron, z.l., takes a pragmatic approach towards explaining this Midrash. Among young men who spend their time in a yeshivah environment, some learn more, while others learn less. There are those, however, who just fall through the “cracks”. For some reason they just are not successful, never achieving the standard of scholarship which they are capable of attaining. They justify their limited accomplishment, attributing it to being on the short end of the Almighty’s gift of acumen. Some people are bright, but this particular individual does not perceive himself as one of them. Some have the ability to delve into the Torah’s profundities, but he just does not have the “*keilim*,” utensils/abilities, necessary to attain such a level of erudition. The individual’s response is: I am not bright enough, astute enough, diligent enough.

The excuses would be almost admissible if the individual’s lack of “ability” was consistent. Yet, suddenly, when he assumes a position outside the parameters of the Torah educational network, he becomes a “*macher*,” mover and shaker. He exhibits sheer brilliance in *klal* work, communal endeavors; his business acumen is sharp and penetrating; his devotion to, and diligence in, carrying out his projects is nothing short of incredible. What happened?

Indeed, this individual will have to give an explanation to a Higher authority. When he will come to the *Olam Ha’emes*, the World of Truth, *Olam Haba*, he will be asked about this inconsistency. He will be questioned why his “head” was not able to handle the Torah study, but when it came to secular pursuits, he manifested capabilities beyond the scope of what he had previously demonstrated in the yeshivah. The answer is obvious: It is not his head; it is his heart. It is the *ratzon ha’lev*, the will of one’s heart, that determines what his “head” will be capable of achieving. He simply does not want to learn! He would rather devote his time to other pursuits.

When we wonder what motivated his original response, what was there that suggested his “incapability” to make it in the Torah world, his answer would be: his friend, his classmate. He looked around and saw how well everyone else was performing, how smart they were, how diligent and dedicated they were. He decided that he was not as well-equipped as they to master Torah

knowledge. He sought to be like them, and when he saw that his aspiration was not a reality, he gave up trying. Regrettably, too many of us want to be like someone else. Hashem wants us to achieve our own potential, not that of someone else. He will rebuke us “I’fi mah shehu”, “each one according to what he is.” We are not to compete with others, but only to be ourselves.

How does one go about maximizing his own potential? Horav Eliyahu Lopian, z.l., draws the following picture: People attribute greater significance to the few mitzvos they perform, the little learning they do, the small amount of time they invest in acts of chesed, kindness, than they are really worth. Indeed, one may think that when the moment that he returns his soul to his Maker occurs, he will be greeted with “open arms”, accorded great honor and seated “up front” in the place of honor. All this because of his paltry observance, but he is sadly mistaken. When he confronts the moment of truth, he will clearly see that he wasted a good part of his life on foolishness. How many of us determine the quota of time we can expend on Torah study and endeavor, only to waste so much of our precious time on frivolous preoccupation. Imagine the valuable credits we could have earned for a life of eternal bliss.

Horav Schwadron relates a famous story about the great gaon and Rosh HaYeshiva of Volozhin, the Netziv, z.l. Upon completing his magnum opus, his commentary on the Sheiltos D’Rav Achai Gaon, he made a great feast and invited many scholars to join in his celebration. He explained the reason for this unusual display of joy: “When I was a young boy of nine years, I overheard my father and mother speaking about me,” related the Netziv. ‘What will be with our Naftalik?’ his father asked. ‘We have provided him with a number of the finest rebbeim, Torah teachers, but to no avail. He just does not seem to be interested. Perhaps, we should teach him a trade.’ When I heard this, the Netziv continued, I was heartbroken. My father was about to let me become a baal melachah, tradesman. How could this happen to me? I began to cry bitterly. I then made up my mind that nothing would stand in my way. I was going to study diligently and become a talmid chacham. This sefer is the fruit of my labor, the result of my studies.”

“Imagine,” continued the Netziv, “had I not wept. What would have become of me? I would have become a tradesman. What is so bad about that? Let us say I would have become a tailor. I still would be observant; I would attend shul every day. I would even set aside time everyday to study Torah. In short, I would be an observant Jew, true to my heritage, devoted to Hashem. Is that so bad?

“Veritably, there is nothing wrong with such a scenario. When I would come up to Heaven, however, they would say to me, ‘Naftali, Naftali, you were a good Jew. But was that your purpose in life? Were you placed on the world to become a tailor? Do you realize that with your acumen and ability you could have authored the Haamek Shaaloh on the Sheiltos? True, you lived a decent life, but did you achieve your potential?’

“Now you understand why, with the completion of this commentary I am overwhelmed with joy.”

Each individual is judged according to what he is and what he could and should have become.

Horav Schwadron ends his thesis with a penetrating thought from the Alter, z.l., m'Slabodka. The Alter was once standing by the window of his study when he motioned to his student Horav Aizik Sher, z.l., to come and join him. "Look out the window and see the large cemetery outside," the Alter said to Reb Aizik. "You might think that the cemetery is the large field situated at the outskirts of the city and that this is only a public street. You are wrong. There are people going back and forth – people with incredible potential for greatness in Torah. But, they were 'inspired' to choose another field of endeavor. Do you know what is written about such a person? 'Here lies the great saint and scholar, the eminent Rosh HaYeshiva etc.' This person could have achieved the greatest heights, but he did not. His epitaph accompanies him through the street. There is, however, one difference between the cemetery outside the city and the one in front of our eyes. There they bury dead people. Here they bury live ones." This is one story we might want to remember as we make decisions about our future and that of our children. What we decide today may one day come back to haunt us.