

But they did not heed Moshe, because of shortness of breath and hard work. (6:9)

Imagine that a person is afflicted, persecuted, the victim of a vicious and cruel despot who has enslaved him for years. One would think that if someone would come along and tell him that it will soon be over-- he will be able to leave -- he would jump for joy and begin counting the minutes until the cuffs would be off and he could finally say good-bye to his life of misery. Yet, we see here that, when Moshe *Rabbeinu* and Aharon *HaKohen* told *Klal Yisrael* that it was finally all over, they paid no attention to them. They continued their slave labor as if nothing had happened! Had they lost all sense of feeling? Should they not have given Moshe and Aharon's message at least some consideration? Why did they completely ignore their message?

It is all about self-esteem. When a person gives up hope, he no longer cares about anything. He does not believe that salvation is just around the corner. As much as he has waited to get out, he no longer believes that it is possible. When one no longer believes in others, the next step is his own lack of self-confidence. He has lost his self-esteem. Without self-esteem, one cannot function. While many do go through the motions, that is all they are doing – going through the motions. *Horav Nachman Breslover, zl*, teaches that the greatest gift we can give a person is the gift of self-esteem. If we can return a person's self-confidence, then we have saved him.

I am very sensitive to the following story, since I am personally privy to similar instances on a regular basis. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach was asked to visit an upstate New York prison that was home to a number of Jewish inmates. The holidays are an especially sad time for those incarcerated in restricted environments. It is a time for families to come together and share in each other's joys. In prison, one is confronted with ultimate loneliness. Prisoners have a feeling that life has moved on and left them behind. Thus, anyone who can make the effort and has the emotional temerity to visit, in order to make a fellow Jew's life a little better is performing a special *mitzvah*. Rabbi Carlebach was well known for his love of all Jews. He considered reaching out to the unaffiliated his special mission.

Baruch Hashem, Jews comprise a very small percentage of prison inmates and even those, for the most part, are not serving time for the commission of violent crimes. When we look at the crime from the victim's standpoint, however, who is to define the meaning of "violent"? It was *Chanukah* time, and Rabbi Carlebach did not hesitate to accept the invitation.

It was not a short drive – three hours each way, but, to him, it was well worth the effort. The rabbi spent time with the Jewish inmates, employing his signature storytelling and singing. He then surprised the prison officials when he asked to be allowed to visit the rest of the prisoners. After receiving permission, he went to each block, every cell, and embraced each and every inmate and said to them, "I love you, my brother." Obviously, the reaction was varied. Some wept, others scoffed, but no one ignored his visit. He went on to visit the dining hall where he approached

hundreds of inmates, embracing and encouraging each one in the same manner. No one was going to suggest that he was prejudiced. Regardless of religious belief, color or race, the rabbi visited each man and gave him the same treatment.

As Rabbi Carlebach was about to leave, suddenly, a large, burly inmate came running over to him. This man was a giant, heavily muscled and covered with tattoos. "Rabbi, Rabbi," he called out. "Yes, my holy friend," Rabbi Carlebach replied with his standard greeting. "How can I help you, my holy friend?" The giant of a man stood for a moment and awkwardly looked at the ground, then suddenly burst out, "I loved your embrace so much; can I have one more?"

Rabbi Carlebach gave his characteristic smile, opened his arms and embraced the prisoner. The man wrapped his arms around the rabbi and began to weep profusely. They stood that way together for a few moments: the prisoner weeping; the rabbi euphoric. Finally, the man told the rabbi, "Never in my life have I been embraced in this way, with such love. Had I been fortunate enough to have been hugged like that ten years ago – I would never have turned to a life of crime!"

Hanging on the wall in the pediatric ward of Hadassah Hospital, is an aphorism from Rabbi Carlebach: "When you put your children to bed at night, tell them how pretty they are; and when they wake up in the morning, tell them how beautiful the world is".

When a person's attitude is positive, he has the ability and fortitude to deal with the difficult challenges of life. In order to have a healthy, positive attitude about life, one must first feel good about himself. Without self-esteem, one simply has no fuel with which to go forward.