

So Moshe, servant of Hashem, died there. (34:5)

When the *Chafetz Chaim* was *niftar*, passed away, on *Elul* 24, 1934, *Klal Yisrael* was thrown into collective mourning. The preeminent *tzaddik hador*, saint of the generation, his impact was felt throughout the entire Torah world. During the year of mourning, **Horav Elchanan Wasserman, zl**, primary student of the *Chafetz Chaim*, had occasion to be in England. He was asked to eulogize his revered *Rebbe*, to render an appreciation of his unique personality, his saintly spiritual demeanor, his extraordinary achievements on behalf of *Klal Yisrael*. *Rav* Elchanan spoke inspiringly about his *Rebbe*. The following is an excerpt of his *hesped*, eulogy (free translation).

“Let us attempt to imagine that we had been alive in Moshe *Rabbeinu*’s generation, when our quintessential leader took leave of his precious people. What would the *hespedim* be like? He was the greatest *Rebbe* of all generations. Is there one Jew that has not been affected by his life, his teachings? It would take hours to attempt to explain his greatness aptly, to relate his contribution. Veritably, we might only grasp but a miniscule appreciation of who Moshe *Rabbeinu* was. Yet, our Torah encapsulates Moshe’s essence with a mere two words: *eved Hashem*, servant of Hashem. What profundity lies concealed within these two words? What hidden meaning is implied by the words ‘servant of Hashem’?

“In the *Midrash Tanchuma (Lech Lecha 8)*, *Chazal* provide us with the following analogy. A wealthy businessman left *Eretz Yisrael* for an extended business trip overseas. Travel in those days was not a simple jaunt. It involved much danger and meant being separated from one’s loved ones for a long period of time. The businessman took his trusted servant with him, leaving at home his *ben yachid*, only son, who was too young to travel. It was a difficult decision, but the father was hoping that the trip would be successful, so that he would be able to return home quickly. He took a considerable sum of money and goods with him, in the hopes: that he would sell his goods at a sizable profit; and that he would be able to purchase more goods at a reasonable price. He was there but a short time when he suddenly became gravely ill. He was acutely aware that he was not going to return home. His days were numbered, and he would never see his son again.

“One major worry entered his mind: How could he provide for his son and family when he had his entire financial portfolio with him? While he had trusted his servant in the past, could he trust him when it involved a large sum of money? What would prevent the servant from taking everything for himself? If he were to write a will, how could he guarantee that it would ever reach the hands of his son? He came upon an amazingly clever idea.

“He summoned his servant and said to him, ‘You have been my trusted servant for years. I have relied on you in so many areas of my daily endeavor. Out of a profound sense of appreciation, I bequeath to you all of my possessions. I ask of you only one favor. Please get in touch with my son and inform him that he may take for himself one item.’ The servant was ecstatic over the fact that he was now a wealthy man. Thus, he had no qualms about presenting his master’s son with one item from his vast newly-acquired wealth. The servant returned home and conveyed the sad news

of the passing of his master. He extended his condolences to the son and informed him of his father's will.

"The son was stupefied. His father was a wise man who had loved him. Why would he give everything to the servant and leave only one item for him? He went to visit the *rav* of their community and posed the predicament to him. At first, the *rav* was incredulous. He knew the boy's father to be an astute businessman, in addition to being a wise and resourceful member of his community. How could he do something like this? He thought a few moments as he studied the will, and he suddenly jumped up, 'Your father is brilliant!' he screamed. The *halachah* is stated clearly in the *Talmud, Mah shekanah eved kanah rabo*, 'Whatever a servant acquires belongs to his master' (*Pesachim* 88b). Take the servant for yourself. Thus, everything that he owns will belong to you!"

Rav Elchanan concluded the *Midrash* and said, "This is the underlying meaning of the Torah's eulogy of Moshe: *eved Hashem*. Whatever Moshe possessed in the area of *ruchniyos*, spirituality, belonged to Hashem. Everything that Moshe did – every endeavor, every *mitzvah*, every good deed – all reverted to Hashem, because Moshe was the quintessential *eved*, servant, totally devoted to his Master. Moshe reserved nothing for himself, because he did not view himself as a separate entity. He belonged wholly to Hashem. Therefore, the Torah has only one appellation for Moshe: *eved Hashem*. These two words aptly describe Moshe. Everything that he did, all of the achievements of his entire life, all belonged to Hashem. He had nothing, because it all reverted to his Master. Can there be a greater epitaph?"

Rav Elchanan summed it up, "This is every Jew's mission: to be an *eved Hashem*. The *Chafetz Chaim* achieved this pinnacle of service."

In other words, a servant is acutely aware that his goal in life is to serve his master, and that each and every one of his achievements belongs to his master. The more he negates himself, the greater is his value as a servant. In his *Nitzozos*, *Horav Yitzchak Hershkowitz, Shlita*, relates the following story, which complements this idea.

A Jew who had wandered off from the path of religious observance once came to a holy man to petition his blessing. The holy man asked him, "Do you observe Torah and *mitzvos*?" "No," answered the man. The man, however, did not end the conversation with his negative response. He decided to add somewhat of a rationale to justify his lack of observance. "*Rebbe*, the Almighty has millions of Heavenly Angels at His beck and call. They carry out His commands to the fullest extent. Does it matter to G-d if one simple Jew like me performs the *mitzvos* or not? Will it really make a difference if I keep *Shabbos* or not?"

The holy man was not deterred. "Tell me," he asked, "what is your profession?" "I am an artist," the man replied.

“What is the most beautiful piece of art that you have ever seen? What captivated you the most?” the rabbi asked the artist. After a few moments, the artist replied, “I once saw a breathtaking painting of a sunset across the Kinneret. It was absolutely the most life-like imagery I had ever seen.” “How much was the sticker price on that painting?” the rabbi asked. “Six million dollars” was the quick reply.

“Incredible!” the rabbi declared. “A picture that sells for six million dollars! What is there about this picture that catalyzes people to pay such an astronomical sum to own it? Indeed, we could go together to the seashore and shoot countless digital photos of the sunset, which would cost us a fraction of the money. What about this painting is so special? What is the difference between a painting crafted by a well-known artist and a picture taken by a professional photographer?”

“Well, the artist spends hours, days, weeks, at times working under difficult conditions to paint such a perfect picture,” the artist explained.

“All of this toil – coupled with the artist’s expertise – can translate itself into hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of dollars. Six million dollars, however, is an outrageous amount of money to ask for a picture which can be taken with a camera. You still have not explained to me why the price should be so outrageously high,” said the rabbi.

The rabbi continued, “Let me explain to you why the painting is so expensive. A photograph cannot lie. The photographer cannot alter the image that is present before him. His camera captures what he sees. There is no work involved on the part of the photographer. He focuses his camera lens on the subject and presses a button. What he sees is what is printed on the paper. An artist is different. He has the ability and talent to alter the scene, to darken the sky, change the hue of the water’s color, present a different texture of the sand. Indeed, he can do anything, but he does not. He suppresses his instincts to innovate, to change, to express his inner personal feelings, because he wants the painting to be true to its reality. He wants to present a picture perfect image of the sun setting on the Kinneret, without personal embellishment of any kind. This is why the painting is so expensive. It is the product of extraordinary talent and exceptional devotion to a goal of presenting the scene as it existed at that time. Anyone can take a photograph, but it takes a unique and dedicated artist to prepare such a painting.

“You asked why Hashem does not have the Heavenly Angels perform the *mitzvos*. What impact can a simple human being have in the Heavenly scheme of things? Angels are programmed to follow Divine Will. They have no *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, to deter them from their pre-ordained goals. Human beings have to overcome so much in order to perform a *mitzvah k’tikunah*, in accordance with Hashem’s Will. It takes enormous effort, enthusiasm, and joy to overcome the challenges and obstacles presented by the crafty *yetzer hora*; at times, it even demands one to triumph over physical and economic challenge. Yet, all of this effort pays off when a *mitzvah* is performed properly. It means so much to Hashem – much more than the six million dollar painting.”

This is the meaning of *eved Hashem*. A true servant of Hashem allows nothing to stand in the way of his serving the Almighty. He is focused on his mission, a soldier completely dedicated to his service. At times, the “*frum*” *yetzer hora* encourages him to embellish the *mitzvah*, to enhance it with his own innovation. He does not listen, because he follows only what Hashem tells him to do. He is a loyal and trusted servant. He knows no other way.