

## **The one who said of his father and mother, “I have not favored him”; his brothers he did not give recognition and his children he did not know; for they (the Leviim) have observed Your word and Your covenant they preserved. (33:9)**

As Moshe *Rabbeinu* prepared to bless *Shevet Levi*, he characterized it according to the unusual qualities and virtues of the people. He related their unwavering devotion to the Almighty, their consummate ability to withstand and triumph over the most difficult challenges – all because of their intense fealty to Hashem. Nothing stood in their way – not even their most personal commitments. Their commitment to Hashem transcended everything. This quality was evinced during the sin of the Golden Calf when Moshe declared, *Mi l'Hashem elai* – “Whoever is for Hashem, join me!” (*Shemos* 32:26). *Shevet Levi* came forth in unison, ready to perform their leader's bidding. His every request was their command. Indeed, it was Torah. They were told to rid the congregation of those who had sinned with the Golden Calf. For some, this meant taking the lives of a maternal grandfather, brother by the same mother, or even a daughter's son. Undoubtedly, the filial love was there, but the dedication to Hashem was stronger.

These actions clearly indicated the spiritual mettle which distinguished the members of *Shevet Levi*. They never thought of themselves; their personal lives and loves had no bearing if it was incongruous with Hashem's word. They were prepared to divorce themselves from normal human emotion. It is for this reason that part of Moshe's blessing appears incredulous, almost misplaced. Moshe says, *Ki shamru imrasecha u'brisha yintzoru*, “For they (the *Leviim*) have observed Your word and Your covenant they persevered.” Is this not what every single Jew must do? Is this a reason for singling out *Shevet Levi*?

**Horav Avraham Zelmens, zl**, derives an important lesson from here. The most distinguished Jew, regardless of his extreme level of *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice and devotion to Hashem and his Torah, must still be cognizant and ever-vigilant of the most simple *mitzvah*. Commitment to the most high, the loftiest, most demanding, emotionally trying *mitzvos* does not excuse him one iota from his total responsibility to the other *mitzvos*! A Jew must be committed across the board – to everything. Doing the “big stuff” does not excuse any form of unbecoming behavior. *Davening* a long *Shemoneh Esrai* does not allow for one to act inappropriately towards his friend. One should not say, “I am cut out for the ‘exotic’ *mitzvos*.”

We can underscore an even deeper lesson. We observe that there are two extremes in religious observance. There are those who are unable to get over the “hump,” to obligate themselves to perform the more difficult *mitzvos*, settling instead for those *mitzvos* which represent less of a challenge. There are also those Jews who undertake the most difficult, challenging *mitzvos*, yet are unable to *daven* properly, to be meticulous concerning *krias haTorah*, the reading of the Torah, etc.

They will battle against any infringement upon Torah law; they will withstand the most trying challenges, yet are unable to do so, or do not “apply” themselves properly to the daily endeavor of being an observant Jew.

An *adam ha’shaleim*, complete/perfect Jew, is one who does it all, who rises above filial emotion when necessary, yet is meticulous in carrying out each and every *mitzvah* to its fullest extent. Thus, the blessing to *Shevet Levi* concludes: *Yoru mishpatecha l’Yaakov v’Sorascha l’Yisrael*; “They shall teach Your ordinances to Yaakov, and Your Torah to *Yisrael*.” Only one who has achieved *shleimus* as a Jew, complete devotion under all circumstances, is slated and suited to teach others.

Perhaps we may take this a bit further. The members of *Shevet Levi* were destined to be the nation’s teachers due to their overall commitment to Hashem and His Torah. While this does not preclude their level of Torah scholarship, it does bring into question why the nation’s Torah teachers were not selected from the tribe that had produced the greatest scholars. Since when does the manner of a person’s *avodas Hashem* determine his ability to teach? The members of *Shevet Yissachar* did not budge from their commitment to intense Torah study. Should they not have been the nation’s pedagogues? Imagine a university seeking a professor of math; certainly their choice would be based upon erudition – not devotion to and passion for math.

Apparently, Torah study is different. Authored by the Divine, it is much more than a compendium of knowledge and wisdom. Torah is a way of life – our way of life. Other forms of study are mastered by understanding, with excellence being achieved through scholarship. Not so Torah. Only one who lives the Torah to the fullest, who achieves *shleimus*, can truly impact the Torah experience to his students. A great *rebbe* certainly must be knowledgeable, but if he does not exemplify Torah living to its zenith, his ability to teach becomes substandard.

Moshe *Rabbeinu* was the greatest *Navi*, prophet. Indeed, in the Torah’s epithet to him, it writes *V’lo kam navi od b’Yisrael k’Moshe*, “Never again has there arisen in *Yisrael* a prophet like Moshe” (*Devarim* 34:10). Yet, when we refer to Moshe, we say *Rabbeinu*, our Teacher, or *Rabban shel kol Yisrael*, the Teacher of all *Yisrael*. His distinction as the greatest prophet seem secondary to his leadership as *Klal Yisrael*’s quintessential *Rebbe*.

Perhaps this is because Moshe, the *Navi*, did not reach the entire Jewish People individually as did Moshe, the Teacher. *Rabban shel kol Yisrael* means that Moshe was *rebbe* to every Jew. Each and every Jew felt a personal affinity to Moshe *Rabbeinu*. After all, he was his *rebbe*. In addition, every *rebbe* throughout the millennia steps into Moshe’s shoes. We cannot become *Neviim*, but the ability to mentor another Jew is available to us all.

There is no dearth of *rebbe* stories. Many people have had a mentor who impacted his life in some special way. In searching for that special story, I came upon an episode which occurred with **Horav Shimon Shkop, zl**, *Rosh Yeshivah* of Grodno, and one of the greatest Torah mentors of the last century. This story was related by a student of Grodno long after he had left the *yeshivah* and had

suffered the travails of the Holocaust. He explained how, despite the many tragedies that had been a part of his life, he still maintained his unwavering commitment to *Yiddishkeit*. This is his story:

"I was a young boy when my parents sent me to study in the *mechinah* (high school) of *Yeshivas Grodno*. My parents were very poor and could not even afford the rail ticket to send me there. The decision was made for me to walk to Grodno – a distance of about three days. They gave me a little food to take along and instructed me that when I ran out of food, to ask for food from members of the Jewish communities which I would pass. This was *mesiras nefesh*, devotion to Torah, in those days – both on the part of the parents, and the youngster who left home by foot with little food, with no money and no contacts.

"I slept on the *shul* benches or on the floor wherever I found one. I was constantly worried whether I would find some food. More importantly, I was anxious about my *bechinah*, entrance exam. I was concerned that if I fail, I would humiliate my parents. I would have to return home, humiliated and dejected. These thoughts traversed my mind as I devoted every available moment to preparing for my test.

"I finally arrived at the *yeshivah*, hungry and tired, totally spent from my difficult trip, but I was ready for the *farher*, test. The students whom I met directed me to the *Rosh Yeshivah*'s "office," which was actually the kitchen in his home. I was about to meet one of the preeminent *Roshei Yeshivah* in the world – in his kitchen which also served as his office.

"The *Rosh Yeshivah* welcomed me with an endearing smile which immediately made me at ease. Now, for the *bechinah*. After asking me concerning my basic family history, my origins and where I had previously studied, *Rav Shimon* said, 'I have only two questions to ask of you. That is it.' I thought to myself, 'This was it; I was about to take my entrance exam based upon two questions.'

"My first question is," *Rav Shimon* began, "When did you last have a warm meal?" I was shocked by his 'first' question, although I do not think he was as taken aback with my reply, 'I last had a warm meal three weeks ago!' The *Rosh Yeshivah* immediately rose from his chair and apologized for his lack of culinary proficiency. Regrettably, his *rebbetzin* was not home. I would have to suffice with whatever he could put together for me! I was shocked beyond belief; I had never before seen a man prepare a meal – not even my father, and here was *Rav Shimon Shkop* bustling around the kitchen – for me, a youngster from a small village, who was not even his student!

"As soon as the meal was prepared, *Rav Shimon* placed it before me and waited to see that I had enough. Indeed, he filled my plate a second time, until he could tell that I was satiated. I *benched*; the table was cleared off and now it was time for the second question: "Now we will continue with the next question." I assumed that now that I had eaten, the *bechinah* would begin in earnest. 'Tell me,' *Rav Shimon* asked, "when did you last sleep in a bed?" I did not believe his question, but it was as I am telling you. He wanted to know when I had last slept in a bed. I told him the truth, 'I do

not remember, it has been so long.' Rav Shimon took me by the hand and led me to a bed. He 'tucked' me in, and I slept that night like I had never slept before. The next morning I discovered, to my chagrin, that I had slept in the *Rosh Yeshivah's* own bed!

"This was my entrance exam to *Yeshivas Grodno*. My life has not been easy. I survived the horrors of the Holocaust, watched most of my family and friends perish *al Kiddush Hashem*. Yet, I never faltered; I never wavered in my devotion to *Yiddishkeit* and my commitment to Torah and *mitzvos*. Why? What kept me going? What gave me the strength to overcome? It was the 'two questions' that comprised my entrance exam to Grodno."

We now have an idea what it is that characterizes a *rebbe* and the everlasting impact he can have on the life of his student.