

You shall make sacred vestments for your brother, Aharon, for glory and splendor. (28:2)

Kavod and *tiferes* are terms which are associated with the dignity of man and the requirement of manifesting this sense of reserve and class. When we mention the *gadlus ha'adam*, greatness of man, one immediately thinks of Slabodka, the *yeshivah* whose *Mashgiach*/founder, the *Alter zl*, of Slabodka, **Horav Nosson Tzvi Finkel**, was its primary exponent. I take the liberty of expounding on the subject and its intended impact on the Jewish imperative.

When *Rav* Nosson Tzvi Finkel was about to launch his *yeshivah*, he asked *Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl*, founder of the *Mussar*, character refinement, movement, "On which foundations shall I build my *yeshivah*?" *Rav* Yisrael replied, applying the *pasuk* in *Yeshayah* 57:15, *L'hachayos ruach shefalim u'lehachayos lev nidkaim*, "to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the despondent." This *pasuk* became the cornerstone of the *Alter's* work. His goal was to uplift his students' spirits, broaden the horizons of their mind – not to think small, but to think globally. This was at a time when the self-image of the *yeshivah* students was on the defensive end of a Jewish community that treated them with complete disregard.

The *Alter* focused on man's greatness and his power in the world. He shied away from the *anochi afar va'eifer*, "I am dust and ashes" attitude, which had won favor in the eyes of some educators; rather, he saw it as his imperative to develop man's stature as vital to his elevation. He attempted to infuse each of his students with a sense of his own significance and responsibility, as the consequence of his role as the crown of Creation. When one realizes his incredible potential, he will begin to acknowledge the awesome responsibility that rests on him. This awareness is a great motivation for him to exert himself to realize his potential. Thus, with the realization of what he is and what he could achieve, he is availed that most wonderful gift which eludes so many: the gift of joy.

The *Alter* battled valiantly on behalf of the *yeshivah* student's stature and sense of importance, in his own eyes and in the eyes of the Jewish community. Regrettably, *yeshivah* students were considered to be on the low end of the totem pole. The world was changing as a result of the changing "isms": Communism, Socialism, secular Zionism. These movements were in addition to the pervasive *Haskalah*, Jewish Enlightenment, which was responsible for the destruction of the spiritual lives of countless of unknowing Jews. The espousers of these organized trends treated those who devoted their lives to Torah study as wastrels who had no part in the greater world outside. The appearance and manner of dress of the *yeshivah* students, often the result of poverty and neglect, certainly did not ameliorate their preconceived self-satisfying notions.

The *Alter* demanded that his students be scrupulous in their behavior, both within the environs of the *yeshivah* and in their interaction with the outside world. He insisted that they dress properly, neatly and respectfully – indeed, *l'kavod u'letiferes*, "for the dignity and beauty of the Torah." He

understood that one's self image is affected by his external appearance. The attire upon which he insisted included a short-coated suit and a hat, no beard, and hair to be cut in a manner considered respectable by conventional norms. Slowly, the townspeople's attitude toward the *yeshivah bachurim* changed. Even more important, the student's self-image also changed. He learned to view himself as a person of stature, as a *ben Torah*, a *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, who exemplified the embodiment of Torah – not an *am ha'aretz*, one unschooled in Torah erudition. In other words, the world saw where he excelled, over and beyond the characterization of the proponents of the Enlightenment.

One of the *Alter's* most prominent disciples, an individual who represented Slabodka in the fullest sense, was *Horav Meir Chodosh*, *zl*, venerably known as the *Mashgiach*. He transmitted his *Rebbe's* philosophy of life to his many students in *Eretz Yisrael*. In his biography, his daughter, *Rebbetzin* Shulamis Ezrachi, relates the following two telling vignettes:

Horav Isaac Sher, *zl*, was the son-in-law of the *Alter* and *Rosh Yeshivah* of Slabodka. He was a man who walked and stood with an erect carriage, eyes cast down to the ground. It is related that, in his youth, he would walk with a stooped nature. The *Alter* wanted him to walk erect, upright, the way one should walk. One day, he called *Rav Isaac* over and said to him, "Go buy yourself a pair of *pince-nez*." These were a type of elegant eyeglasses which was stylish at the time. The problem was that they did not have ear pieces. They stayed on by pinching the bridge of the nose. The only way to keep the *pince-nez* from falling off was by standing very erect.

The student followed the *Mashgiach's* instructions, purchased the glasses, and, a short time later, they fell off his nose and shattered. *Rav Isaac* felt terrible. The *Alter* noticed that he was not wearing the glasses, and, after finding out what had happened, gave his student more money to purchase another pair of *pince-nez*. This time, *Rav Isaac* was much more careful; he kept his head straight and his shoulders erect, so that he would not allow the glasses to slip downward and break. This is how *Rav Isaac* learned to walk with an upright posture.

Horav Simchah Wasserman, *zl*, came to Slabodka and introduced himself to the *Alter*. "How is your father?" the *Alter* asked. (This was a reference to *Horav Elchanan Wasserman*, *zl*, *Rosh Yeshivas Baranovitz* and one of Europe's pre-eminent Torah leaders.) *Rav Simchah* replied, *Nisht kasha*, "Not bad". The *Alter* became visibly upset: "Is this the way you speak about your father, as though he were a horse in the stable?" This is really the reason I came to Slabodka," *Rav Simchah* replied. "I heard that here one learns how to speak (properly)." The *Alter* calmed down.

One last story: A *Kollel* fellow in Chevron visited *Horav Meir Chodosh*. During the course of the conversation, he asked the *Mashgiach* to explain the philosophy of *gadlus ha'adam* to him, as it was manifest in Slabodka. The *Mashgiach* answered, "All that I can explain to you will be theoretical and worthless until you see the behavior of **Horav Zevulun Graz**, (*zl*), *Rav* of Rechovos. I suggest that you take a trip to Rechovos and spend a day with the *Rav*."

The *avreich*, young man, traveled to Rechovos and presented himself at the house of *Rav* Graz. “Does the *Rav* have a place for me to spend the night?” he asked. The *Rav* asked no questions. Here was a young man, properly dressed, from a good family – why not? The *Rav* immediately invited him in and prepared a bed for him to sleep.

The young man was excited about his good fortune. He went to bed and feigned sleep. Perhaps he would notice something during the night that would validate what he felt were the strange instructions of the *Mashgiach*.

The night went by, and, after a few hours of learning, *Rav* Zevullun retired to bed. The young man figured that it was all a waste. One does not go to Slabodka to learn how to sleep, but the *Mashgiach* did say that it would all be explained. So, he was determined to remain awake all night. Something was going to happen that would make sense out of it all.

At two o'clock in the morning, *Rav* Zevullun arose from his bed to use the facilities. The young man figured that this was it. He might as well get a few hours of sleep and return to the *Mashgiach* with a “mission not accomplished.” Then the most unusual thing took place. *Rav* Zevullun went over to the closet, removed his *kapote*, frock, and *homburg*, hat, and then, when he was clothed in his rabbinic garb, he recited the *Asher Yotzar* blessing, with great *kavanah*, concentration and intention.

It now all made sense. The “greatness of man” is not measured by how he acts in public. The barometer for *gadlus ha'adam* is determined by how he acts in middle of the night, in the privacy of his own home. When he makes the *Bircas Asher Yotzar* upon leaving the bathroom, does he spend a few minutes to realize that he – the crown of Creation – is about to speak to the Creator, so that he dresses accordingly?