

And Yosef said to his brothers, “I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?” ... The Yosef said to his brothers, “Come close to me, if you please,” and he said, “I am Yosef, your brother... me, whom you sold to Egypt.” (45:3,4)

Anyone who reads these *pesukim* is struck with the same questions: Why did Yosef repeat, “I am Yosef”? He stated in *pasuk* 3, “I am Yosef,” and immediately in *pasuk* 4, he repeated, “I am Yosef.” Furthermore, the first time that he “introduced” himself, his brothers’ reaction was one of fear and disconcertment. Why in his second “introduction” did he reiterate, “Whom you sold to Egypt”? Obviously, this was a sore point, as their reaction evinces. Why rub it in? The *Sfas Emes* offers a powerful explanation which teaches us an important lesson in *avodas Hashem*, serving the Almighty. When Yosef originally introduced himself by saying, “*Ani* Yosef,” the brothers were frightened. They saw before them a wholly righteous, totally committed Yosef, who, despite having lived in the decadence of Egypt, far removed from the spiritually pristine environment of his home, had been able to maintain himself on a spiritually refined plateau. Imagine, had he not been deprived of a Jewish home for this period, he would have been that much greater. This was a compelling reason to be frightened.

When Yosef observed his brothers’ reaction, he became concerned, because they were wrong in their assumption. Thus, he countered, “*Ani* Yosef...whom you sold to Egypt.” He was in effect saying, “Do you want to know how I achieved such spiritual distinction? It was specifically because I was in Egypt, away from home. My eminence in Egypt is a result of my ability to overcome temptation, pain, loneliness, filth and a harsh physical and spiritual environment. All these years of travail since ‘you sold me’ to Egypt transformed me from the Yosef at home with remarkable potential, to the Yosef, viceroy of Egypt, replete in my spiritual observance and commitment. Egypt was the spiritual crucible that honed and tempered me for this position.”

We have no idea what catalyzes our spiritual achievement, but, in all probability, the very travail that might have embittered us and provoked serious questioning on our part has become the catalyst for our success. A distinguished *rosh yeshivah*, who has earned a reputation as a *gaon* and *tzaddik*, related how he had achieved such distinction. During his youth, he was among the elite students in a premier *yeshivah* in *Eretz Yisrael*. A well-to-do businessman chose him as a *chosson*, son-in-law (obviously the young couple met and were attracted to one another). Sadly, this man used much of his wealth to pamper his spoiled children. (This is not always readily apparent when boy meets girl.) Thus, it did not take long before the young husband realized that as far as his wife was concerned, his primary function in their marriage was to cater to her irrational whims. She acted as if he were another one of the many toys that her father had purchased for her. In short time, they divorced, and the girl’s family initiated a smear campaign that practically destroyed his reputation and emotional well-being.

One of his friends encouraged him to pay a visit to the tomb of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. He listened and spent some time there immersed in fervent and passionate prayer, storming the Heavens for a positive ending to his travail. One night, thinking that he was alone, he raised his voice in prayer, "Hashem! I can no longer take it ... I am about to give up hope...Please have mercy on me in the merit of the holy *tzaddik* who is buried here. Help me!" As soon as he concluded his prayer, he noticed that another Jew had been in the room where he was praying. The man approached him and asked, "Please tell me your story. Perhaps I could help. If not, I can at least listen. At times, having someone who will listen is in and of itself comforting."

The man listened to the entire bitter story of this young man's life: his outstanding success as a scholar; his failed marriage; and the ensuing slander to which he was subjected. It was a bitter tale, but then many people endure various challenges – both physical and emotional; some are able to navigate through them better than others. This young man was apparently drowning.

The stranger addressed him, "You are a scholar, and, as such, you are certainly aware that the *tzaddik* that is interred here (Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai) endured much travail and pain, years of living in hiding without family, so that the government who wanted him dead would not succeed with their plans. He had no food, no clothing, but he kept on studying Torah amid terrible depravation. It is because of what he experienced that he was able to reach the pinnacle of success that he achieved. You should know that some of our greatest and most illustrious *gedolim*, Torah giants, climbed the ladder of success on rungs of pain and affliction. They reached the apex of Torah scholarship through toil, sweat and tears. Your present experience will catalyze your ascension to the heights of Torah and *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven. Never lose faith; never give up hope. Follow the lesson taught by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and you, too, will one day look back at this travail as the catalyst for your success in Torah."

It was a moving and inspiring speech, but it was not enough. The young man was a delicate soul who had been thrown around like a rag, and persecuted by a spoiled wife and her doting, foolish father who was responsible for her immature attitude toward life. He required something more, someone contemporary who had suffered and endured. He needed to hold onto someone to whom he could personally relate.

The stranger continued, "Let me tell you about someone whom I personally know, an individual who achieved the epitome of righteousness, a miracle worker whose connection with Heaven was evident, who was guided by *Ruach HaKodesh*, Divine Inspiration, on a regular basis. I refer to *Horav David Moshe, zl, m'Kretchnif, Admor* of Rechovot. One day, a close student asked him what turning point in his life had catalyzed his incredible rise to spiritual eminence. The *Rebbe* replied: 'Auschwitz. Prior to the Holocaust, I was just another student. When I came to Auschwitz, I decided that I was dedicating my life wholly to Hashem. I would do it all: keep every *mitzvah* with utmost *mesiras nefesh*; self-sacrifice; study Torah, regardless of the danger; sing *zemiros* on *Shabbos*, even though there was no such thing as a *Shabbos* meal. As I carried heavy cinder blocks on my shoulders, however, I sang *Shabbos zemiros*. Whatever I have achieved in the realm

of spirituality is solely due to my experience in Auschwitz!”

The Jew concluded with a simple, but profound, insight, “Do you know the difference between a train and an airplane? An airplane can go anywhere with great speed. A train can only go so fast and is limited to areas that can support rails. The real difference, however, is something else. A plane is not encumbered, while a train is land-based and, thus, can only travel where there are no obstacles in its path. A plane simply flies over the obstacles. Once you detach yourself from the ground, from your attachment to earthiness, you will soar. Hashem has mercifully taken you ‘off the ground.’ The world that you lived in until now turned against you. You have been granted the opportunity to soar to the Heavens. Change your life and return to the *bais hamedrash* which used to be your home, and you will see in due time that nothing will stand in your way.”

The young man listened and, for ten years, he immersed himself in Torah study. His fear of Heaven became strengthened, as did his Torah erudition. These ten years were his spiritual gestation period during which he merited an unprecedented feeling of closeness to Hashem, an encyclopedic knowledge of Torah, and a lofty attitude toward *mitzvah* observance – achievements which could not have been realized without the travail that refined him by “lifting him off the ground,” so that he could soar to the Heavens.