

You shall not taunt or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (22:20)

The Torah shows its concern for the proper treatment of the weak, helpless, abandoned and the stranger/convert, who feel alone, estranged, although they should be welcomed and embraced. It is sad that there exist among us the few who lord over others due to their own insecurities. These people consider themselves better, privileged, powerful when, in fact, they are the ones who are weak and pathetic. The prohibition against any mistreatment of a *ger*, convert, is prefaced with a serious reminder to look back to our own history, when we were strangers in the land of Egypt. A newcomer to a religion is a standout, feeling ill at ease and inadequate. He/she feels different. We must embrace the *ger*, including him/her into our own lives, our religious and social milieu.

Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl, suggests a deeper message implied herein. As the Torah admonishes us concerning *mitzvos bein adam l'chaveiro*, commandments that address our relationships between man and his fellowman, it is vital that we learn about and appreciate who our fellowman is. Without an appropriate, intelligent assessment of our fellow's essential character, nature, principles and values – plus his challenges, background and achievements – we will fail to treat him with the necessary respect the Torah demands of us. In other words, we should not bunch everyone together into a “one size fits all” category. Some people require greater attention, more empathy and compassion than do others. In order to treat our fellow Jew properly, it is critical that we intuit our fellow, realize who he is, digest his personality and needs and be cognitive of what he has experienced and endured to reach his present station in life.

The *Mashgiach* compares this to a medical student who must first study pathology, initially becoming proficient in recognizing and understanding the workings of every organ of the human body, before going on to study illnesses and their therapeutic cares and cures. One can hardly become a physician without first having studied the human body. Likewise, one must study his fellow before he can assess how to treat him.

Rav Yeruchem extends this analysis to *mitzvos bein adam laMakom*, commandments that deal specifically with our relationship with Hashem. It is incumbent upon us to ponder, identify, and delve into the *darkei Hashem*, ways of the Almighty, in order to serve Him properly and carry out His *mitzvos* to their fullest and most optimum level. We support this notion from a brief reading of *Bircas HaTorah* where we ask Hashem, “May we and our offspring and the offspring of Your people, *Bais Yisrael*, all of us, know Your Name and study Your Torah for its own sake.” *Yodei Shemacha*; “know Your Name,” precedes *v'lomdei Torasecha lishmah*; “and study Your Torah for its sake.” Should it not be the other way around – with *limud*, study of Torah, taking precedence to knowing Hashem? Apparently, in order to perform the mitzvah of *limud haTorah* properly, one must “know” Hashem, recognize and appreciate His greatness and glorify His Name. Only then, when we recognize the distinction of its Divine Author, can we begin to appreciate the depth of His Torah.

Perhaps we may derive from this thesis that one who does know Hashem, or, alternatively, once was observant and knew the Almighty, a *shanah u'pireish* – was learned as well as observant, but now is no longer interested in maintaining his relationship with Hashem, knows deep within his psyche that he is wrong. He knows Hashem, but no longer wants to study or observe. Such a person commits transgressions, overtly desecrating the Torah; yet, he is aware that he is wrong. He continues to sin, but the *geshmak*, pleasant satisfaction that would normally accompany his outrageous behavior, is missing. He knows Hashem, thus “depriving” him of the enjoyment associated with transgression, which one who never knew or learned would have. The *shanah u'pireish* is like a rebellious child who, if he possesses any emotion, feels bad that he is turning against his parents who have raised him.

This attitude was quite evident during the sin of the Golden Calf when, according to *Targum Yonasan ben Uziel*, the sinners “cried with joy” before the calf. Joy and crying are not consistent with one another. They are not synonymous with one another. Tears are usually the emotional expression of one who is sad. (Tears of joy are different.) These people knew they were acting inappropriately, but they could not control their passions. On the one hand, they were prepared to renege their relationship with Hashem, but the happiness they expressed was superficial. Inside, they were crying because they knew Hashem, and they knew that they were wrong.