

Every man shall fear his mother and father, and you shall keep My Shabbosos; I am Hashem. (19:3)

Shemiras Shabbos, Kibbud Av V'eim: Shabbos observance is juxtaposed upon the *mitzvah* to honor one's parents, concluding with Hashem reminding the people that He is G-d and everyone - he and his father and mother – must obey Hashem. We are to honor and even fear our parents, but they do not supplant the Almighty. Thus, if a parent's command is contrary to a *mitzvah* in the Torah, the son/daughter should respectfully refuse, because Hashem's command supersedes everything else. Three imperatives of such import in one *pasuk* (*Shemiras Shabbos, Kibbud Av V'eim*, and fear of Hashem and adherence to His command) comprise a considerable amount to digest. Indeed, each of these three requires its own thesis. Apparently, the fact that the Torah presents them all in one *pasuk* indicates a common bond with one another. *Horav Yosef Nechemiah Kornitzer, zl*, offers an innovative exegesis which sheds light on this unique relationship. He connects the above *pasuk* to a well-known statement in *Pirkei Avos* (3:1).

Akavya ben Mahallel omer, Histakeil b'sheloshah devarim v'ein atah ba l'yidei aveirah; “Look (stare/concentrate) at three things, and you will not come to sin: Where are you coming from (your source)? Where are you (ultimately) going to? (What will be your end?) Before Whom will you stand in judgment?” We come from a *tipah seruch*, drop/nothing; we will end up in the ground (decomposing in the earth). We will have to review our lives before Hashem. This *Mishnah* is meant to frighten us into confronting our mortality – before we consider sin. It should change the trajectory of our intentions and actions. It will certainly cause us to think twice before destroying our lives.

The *Mishnah* presents these three questions as negatives which are intended to prevent us from acting out our fantasies, committing a sin, transgressing a prohibitive command. If we truly concentrate on the message, we will not sin – unless, of course, we are foolish enough to say, “I do not care.” The *Mishnah* does not speak to those who do not care; on the contrary, it addresses the individual who cares, but occasionally loses control in his battle with the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination. *Rav Kornitzer* suggests that these same questions/observations can focus on the positive. Rather than underscore the lowliness of man, let us concentrate on his ability to achieve greatness, on the *gadlus ha'adam*.

Mei'ayin basa; From where do you come? We are all descendants of the *Avos* and *Imahos*, Patriarchs and Matriarchs. Let us take a moment to think about our roots, our rich, glorious heritage. Let us take a cognitive journey through our tumultuous – but incredible – history. Let us meet the *gedolim*, Torah giants, and the simple Jews who served Hashem amid self-sacrifice. This “glance” should hearten and encourage us. How can one sin when he is the repository of such *yichus*, illustrious lineage? This corresponds with *Ish imo v'aviv tirau*; Respect your parents: We come from awesome parents. Our forebears are impressive. They deserve our appreciation and respect. How can we turn our back on them by acting inappropriately and committing a sin in

the context of our relationship with Hashem?

A person should think about from where he hails. He descends from the holy Patriarchs and Matriarchs. They forged the path which we should follow. They lived lives of dedication, to the point of self-sacrifice in order to serve Hashem to the best of their capabilities. These are our ancestors. Looking back at the adversity that accompanied us throughout our history and our forebears who sacrificed for their beliefs, our roots should encourage us to scale the highest peaks of spirituality. After all, it is intrinsic to our DNA.

Next, we should focus on where we are destined to go: *Olam Habba*, the World-to-Come, the World of Truth and eternity. The reward for living a life committed to the spirit, to Hashem, is beyond extraordinary. We yearn to live in a perfect world, replete with spiritual pleasure and satisfaction-- without worry and pain. Our world is a *prozdor*, vestibule, to *Olam Habba*.

Last, before Whom we will stand in judgment. The mere thought of Hashem's greatness evokes awe and joy. Knowing that we can in some way, on some level, connect with the Creator of the Universe, Who views us as His children, evokes emotion that defies description.

Gadlus ha'Adam, the greatness of man, was the catchphrase of the *Alter, zl, m'Slabodka, Horav Nosson Tzvi Finkel*. It was the lodestar by which he navigated his *yeshivah* and guided his students. This concept was transported to America and *Eretz Yisrael* as his premier *talmidim*, students, became the pioneering *Roshei Yeshiva* who established Torah in these countries pre and post Holocaust. The story goes that *Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl*, father of the *Mussar*, character refinement, Movement, met the *Alter*. The future *Slabodka Rosh Yeshivah* asked *Rav Yisrael* what should be his *avodah*, function/service to the Almighty. *Rav Yisrael's* famous words were: *L'hachayos ruach shefalim u'l'hachayos lev nidkaim*; "To revive the hearts of the aggrieved and despondent." In other words, return their lives to them.

It is critical to be aware of the cultural backdrop in Europe when the *Rosh Yeshivah* established and guided *Slabodka*. The contemptible *Haskalah*, Enlightenment, movement with its vitriolic animus for Torah and all that it stood for, was rampant. Its adherents were bent on destroying the Torah Jew. They did this by destroying his self-esteem. What better victim than the *yeshivah* student who was about to start his life of devotion to Torah? They referred to him as a parasite, a free-loader, a ne'er-do-well who would amount to nothing. When you call a person a loser enough times, he will begin to believe it. *Rav Nosson Tzvi* taught his students to broaden the horizons of their minds – not to think small, but to think globally. This was the only way the community at large would learn to respect them and what they stood for. The appearance and dress of the *yeshivah* students, often the result of living lives of extreme poverty and neglect, certainly did very little to change people's perception of them.

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 external appearance affects his self-image. 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* transformed. Even more important, the students’ self-image also changed. The *yeshivah bachur* learned to view himself as a person of stature, 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 above the characterization of the proponents of the Enlightenment.

To develop a better perspective of *gadlus ha’adam*, I relate a well-known incident which occurred concerning *Horav Meir Chodosh, zl*, who was asked by a student to explain to him the philosophy of *gadlus ha’adam* 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 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 Zevulun* 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 enable him to make sense of it all.

At two o’clock in the morning, *Rav Zevulun* 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 Zevulun* 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 Yatzar* 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?

I conclude with an inspiring thought from the *Baal HaTanya*. Our self-esteem is dependent upon our perception of our purpose in life. Simply put, when one realizes that his purpose in life is noble and significant, his self-esteem is elevated. Conversely, when one's perspective of his purpose in life is short-sighted, he will have a similarly myopic sense of himself. *Reb* Zalmen Senders was a close *chassid*, follower, of the *Baal HaTanya*. He had been one of the wealthiest Jews in Russia until his fortunes were reversed, leaving him indigent. In complete surrender, he turned to his *Rebbe* with a *kvitel*, petition, in which he described his downfall from wealth to destitution. He begged the *Rebbe* to intercede on his behalf. The *Rebbe* closed his eyes and thought for a few moments until he looked up and said, "Zalmen, apparently you have given serious thought to your perceived needs. Have you taken a moment to think why you are needed?" The *Rebbe* implied that we are all here for a purpose, as part of a Divine Plan. All too often we are so obsessed with our own needs that we do not realize that Hashem created us for a purpose, which is to serve Him at all times, under all circumstances. Each one of us has a unique purpose for which Hashem specifically created that person. Fulfilling that purpose should engender self-esteem within us, because we are here to do what no one else can do.