

Elazar, son of Aharon HaKohen, took for himself from the daughters of Putiel as a wife. (6:25)

Rashi explains that the name Putiel alludes to two of the ancestor's of Elazar's wife. She was of the seed of Yisro, *she'piteim agalos l'avodah zarah*, "who fattened the calves for idol worship," prior to his learning about and accepting the true G-d. Also, she was of the seed of Yosef who is called Putiel, *she'piteim b'yitzro*, "he overcame his evil-inclination." In this sense, her father came from either *Shevet*, the tribe of Efraim or Menashe, and her mother was of the seed of Yisro. Thus, Elazar was either Yisro's son-in-law or grand-son-in-law. In his commentary to *Meseches Sotah* 43a, the **Ben Ish Chai** wonders why the Torah would allude to Yisro's far from illustrious past. Referring to him as one who fattened calves for idols is certainly not praiseworthy. Indeed, we are admonished not to abuse or insult a convert. We are prohibited from recalling his earlier idolatrous behavior. Why would the Torah do this to Yisro, who "also happened to be" Moshe *Rabbeinu's* father-in-law?

Rav Yosef Chaim explains that the Torah is actually alluding to the distinction of Yisro. At one time, he had been so devoted to idol worship that he fattened the sacrificial calves. That he ultimately achieved distinction, not only as Moshe's father-in-law, but also by being beloved and revered by the entire Jewish nation, was quite praiseworthy.

In a similar statement, in commenting on the *pasuk* in *Shemos* 22:20, "Do not abuse a stranger," the **Chasam Sofer** asks: What abuse is there to remind a convert of his past life? The mere fact that he overcame and transcended his earlier indiscretions is in of itself an incredible praise. We remind the *ger* that he rejected a life of idol worship in order to cleave to a life of sanctity.

In his inimitable manner, **Horav Yaakov Galinsky, Shlita**, offers another explanation of the admonition against reminding a *ger* of his sordid past. He quotes a story that made headlines during the time that it occurred. In the city of Vilna, there was a poor shoemaker who had struck it rich. Overnight, he went from abject poverty to a life of wealth and luxury. While most people were happy for him, one of the city's old guard, a man who had accumulated his wealth over time and whose snobbery matched his bank account, was upset with this shoemaker's *nouveau riche*. Things came to a head when the shoemaker made a wedding for his daughter in the main thoroughfare, a practice reserved for only the effete rich.

When the shoemaker was walking his son down to the *chupah*, marriage canopy, this rich man walked up to the shoemaker, removed his shoe, and, in a loud voice for all the spectators and guests to hear, asked, "How much will it cost to fix my shoe?" The humiliation spread all over the shoemaker's face. He was speechless with shame. Indeed, if he could have located a hole in the ground in his vicinity, he would have buried himself there.

When the preeminent *Mussar* sage, **Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl**, heard of this incident, he

remarked, "I am certain that the previous *rabbanim* and educators who lived in that city are presently being taken to task for not having taught their community to refine their character traits." It was such an incident that motivated *Rav Yisrael* to establish the *Mussar*, ethical character refinement, movement.

Rav Galinsky asks what was so crude about the incident. Indeed, how did the wealthy man humiliate the shoemaker? On the contrary, the mere fact that he was today making a wedding amid the lap of luxury, when yesterday he had been begging for alms, is in itself a most praiseworthy statement. It should make the shoemaker feel good about himself, knowing that only "yesterday" he had been dead broke and "today" he could enjoy life together with the city's wealthy.

The *Maggid* explains that he had a good friend who had suffered together with him in Siberia. Their pain and travail, starvation, bitter cold and constant fear, were a reality to both of them. Indeed, they had shared so many painful moments together. Yet, when, after many years *Rav Galinsky* met his old friend, the first statement that emanated from his friend's mouth was: "I do not want to talk about Siberia. Absolutely not! I have expunged that period from my mind. I never want to remember that miserable period. I have too much despair in my life. I do not want to add to it!"

Imagine asking him why he did not want to remember this period. You were saved! You will no longer have to relive that miserable period in your life. You are out! Why not talk about it now, but from a different vantage point? The answer is, explains *Rav Galinsky*, that, indeed, both are true. One should be overjoyed, as well as be ashamed. In *Avos d'Rabbi Nosson*, we find that Rabbi Akiva was once lecturing to his students, when his mind wandered back to his earlier days when he was quite distant from the Torah scholar without peer that he later became. At that point, the sage became very depressed, because he realized how much time in his earlier life he had wasted. He then declared, "*Modeh ani*, I thank Hashem for granting me the opportunity to be among those who sit in the *bais ha'medrash* and not be among those who sit all day and waste their time."

Indeed, this is how a person should act. One should be heartened by his achievements in the vast sea of *Talmud* and *Halachah* whose depths he is beginning to plumb. If this is true, however, we revert back to the *Chasam Sofer's* question: Why is it prohibited to remind a *ger* of his past?

Apparently, we must derive from here that the pain experienced by a person is neither determined by – nor is it dependent upon – how much true shame he has experienced. Even if he had gone through a humiliating experience from which he not only did not derive any pain – he actually became uplifted and heartened by it – it is forbidden. We do not deride nor mock a person, regardless of the reason or purpose.

When the Torah refers to Yisro as Putiel, it is not to deride him. It is to flatter him for being able to overcome the incredible challenge of *avodah zarah*. If, however, by calling Yisro Putiel, he might become offended – it would be categorically prohibited – regardless of our rationale. How often do we see someone mocked, humiliated, and degraded, yet he says, "Think nothing of it. It does not

bother me"? While it may be true, the mocker still loses his portion in *Olam Habba*, the World to Come. Could it be worth it?