

“Let us make man in Our image and in Our likeness.” (1:26)

Adam, man, is the yetzir kapav shel Ha'kadosh Baruch Hu, fashioned by the hands of Hashem. He is the ultimate creation, exceeding all that preceded him. This is reason enough to reflect upon what it is that distinguishes Adam from all other creations. The commentators focus on various human attributes, which enable man to soar far beyond Hashem's other creations. Let us focus on one of these attributes. Horav Simcha Bunim, zl, m'Peshischa traces the root of the word adam to damah, compare and contrast, distinguish and differentiate, analyze and understand. Man is gifted with the power to think and use his mind to discern between right and wrong, foolish and wise, blessing and curse. One who does not cogitate, who does not make use of his G-d-given qualities, is not simply a fool; he descends to the level of the subhuman. He becomes much lower than an animal who at least possesses instinct.

Binah, understanding, consists of the ability to understand what is taking place before one's eyes, delve into a concept and understand what makes it “tick;” draw conclusions; make decisions and discern the truth. This is what renders man a “man.” It is Hashem's most precious gift. When properly pursued, it enables one to come closer to Hashem. Indeed, we pray to Hashem for binah three times daily, in tefillas Shemoneh Esrai: Atah chonein l'adam daas, “You graciously endow man with wisdom;” u'melameid l'enosh binah, “and teach insight to a frail mortal.” Man's intelligence is his primary characteristic, it sets him apart from animals. Without binah, we are neither able to draw proper conclusions, nor to achieve intellectual discernment.

Binah is the foundation of ethical character. One who has no binah, who has “no clue,” has no ethicality. He simply cannot be a mentch in the true sense of the word. Indeed, Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl, was wont to say, “The cardinal mitzvah that one should observe is, ‘You shall not be a fool.’” Rav Yisrael was acutely aware that an intellect, which has at its root an awareness of the feelings of others, is a prerequisite for human relations. One who does not “understand” – who is not “with the program” – is often self-centered and totally oblivious to the concerns and feelings of others. Hashem did not place us in this world to live solely for ourselves. We are here to serve others. In order to live up to this raison d'etre, one must be a mentch; he must possess binah.

What does it mean to be a mentch? Veritably, it means many things and reflects many qualities, most of which center on ethical character. Are ethics that significant? What is the worst that can happen if one is nisht kein mentch? Let me share the following vignette which I read, compliments

of Rabbi Yisrael Besser's book, *Warmed By Their Fire*. It will give us all something to "think" about.

An elderly woman (whom we will identify shortly) emigrated from Russia to Eretz Yisrael. This was no ordinary woman. She was the scion of an illustrious lineage, the granddaughter of a sage who had transformed the Torah world. Regrettably, she was far-removed from religion. Russia did that to people. The virulent Haskalah, Enlightenment, was a scourge that destroyed the minds and lives of thousands of unassuming Jews. Despite this woman's lack of affiliation with Torah Judaism, the venerable Roshei Yeshivah who sat before her listened with reverence and awe. They imbibed every word she had to say, for she was relating memories of her saintly grandfather. Her grandfather was the Chafetz Chaim, zl, the quintessential Torah teacher and prime example of what a human being suffused with Torah can achieve.

The woman recalled a conversation that she had had with her grandfather many years earlier, when she was young, idealistic and greatly under the influence of the secular winds of change that were captivating Russian youth. Entranced with the promises of science and technology, the generation was quickly shedding the archaic trappings of the shtetl and, with it, its religious beliefs.

As a university student living not far from her grandfather, she once came to visit. In the ensuing conversation, she asked a pressing question. "Zayde," she said, "there is a brilliant world out there, a world of technological advances in which anything is possible. When will you come out of the darkness and limitations of your old-fashioned world?"

The Chafetz Chaim looked at his granddaughter through his piercing eyes and replied, "Zei, they, with their technology and sophisticated science, will one day develop a bomb with which they will succeed in killing many people. With their science, they will bring death and destruction to the world."

Then the tone of his voice dropped to a whisper as he continued, "Ubber mir machen mentchen – but we are developing people! Do you hear? Mir machen mentchen!"

I think the Chafetz Chaim's response defines the meaning of the word mentch.

