

You shall remember the entire road on which Hashem, your G-d, led you these forty years in the wilderness. (8:2)

The *Mesillas Yesharim* (Perek 1) writes: “For all the circumstances of this world, whether favorable or adverse, are in reality tests for a person to overcome.” Poverty and wealth are both challenges; likewise, tranquility and suffering are tests “provided” by Hashem for the purpose of giving the person the opportunity to garner reward once he successfully emerges triumphant. Life is a test, an opportunity to excel. The very awareness that what confronts us at every turn is nothing more than a test makes the encounter bearable – and surmountable. The Torah enjoins us to remember the travail and difficulty that accompanied us for the forty - year trek in the wilderness, but likewise to remember how Hashem protected us throughout the journey. Travail is Hashem’s way of cleansing us. True, when it happens, the pain is great, and *Klal Yisrael* experienced much difficulty, but, at the end of the day, the difficulty will be the catalyst for considerable reward. As long as we realize that it is all a test, it is so much easier to overcome – and to excel.

Horav Reuven Karlinstein, zl, relates a story which illuminates for us the concept of patiently looking beyond the cover, so that we see the truth beneath the façade. Czar Nicholai decided to travel incognito with one of his loyal aides for the purpose of obtaining a first-hand picture of his army’s morale. Word had reached the palace that the Czar’s soldiers, as well as his citizens, were not happy people. If Nicholai would pick up on this, he might be able to subvert a rebellion.

The two set out on their journey, and, after a few days, they had gotten a sense of the emotional climate of his subjects. It was not good. On their return trip to the palace, they stopped at a restaurant and ordered dinner. The restaurant was near an army base; thus, it was filled with soldiers enjoying a reprieve from battle. The mood was not great. Everyone was drinking, and, once they imbibed, their true feelings about everything that troubled them came forth. Understandably, their feelings towards the Czar were no secret.

Suddenly, one of the soldiers motioned to his friends, and, in a voice that was discernable across the room, said, “That man is the Czar.” His friend told him that he was losing his mind and that he should go back to his beer. He insisted, “I mean it. That is the Czar. I have been to the capitol, and I know how the Czar looks.” By now, the Czar was becoming quite anxious. If the other soldiers were to begin to believe the lone soldier, they would quickly tear him apart. Things began to appear not very encouraging. Suddenly, the Czar’s aide raised his voice to the Czar, and, as if he were giving orders to a lowly subordinate, he called out to the Czar, “Bring two ice cold beers – fast!”

The Czar was shocked by his aide’s behavior, but he was not going to reprimand him publicly, simply because that would be a clear giveaway. The Czar was so nervous upon his return with the two beers that he slipped and fell – spilling the beers. The aide went over and slapped the Czar across the face, mumbling how difficult it was to get good soldiers. For good measure, he gave the Czar a second slap and had him bring two more beers. Everyone was watching the spectacle,

smirking to themselves at the humiliation of the nervous bumpkin who had spilled the beer. One thing was for certain: they were now convinced that the bumpkin was certainly not the Czar. Things quieted down, and the Czar simply left the restaurant with his aide.

When they returned to the palace, the two travelers changed back to their positions: the Czar became the royal monarch; his aide went back to serving his master. The Czar, however, was extremely perturbed over the two slaps he had received from his aide. To slap the Czar is an egregious infraction, which carries the death penalty. To assuage his feelings, the Czar summoned his wisest advisor to share his misgivings with him. The advisor listened and then offered his counsel, "Your excellency, in my humble opinion, not only does your aide not deserve a punishment, but I feel he should be rewarded. He saved your life. By slapping you twice, he conveyed a very powerful and definitive message: 'This man is not the Czar. One does not slap the Czar.'"

There are moments in life in which we are slapped hard, beaten, stomped upon, etc. These are all tests. The travail saves us from much worse punishment. Just as the Czar's life was spared due to two slaps and a little humiliation, we, too, are granted reprieve when we are able to rise to our challenges and triumph over them.