

When one shall become guilty regarding one of these matters, he shall confess what he has sinned. (5:5)

Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, observes that in addressing the concept of *vidui*, confession regarding a sin, the Torah uses the word, *v'hisvadah*, which (loosely translated) means, "he shall confess," but should really be translated, "he shall confess (acknowledge) to himself." *Hisvadah* is *hispaail*, reflexive form, that denotes a confession of guilt pointed at oneself. The sinner is not expected to "make confession" (as they do in other religions), certainly not to G-d, Who knows everything. He does not require our confession to make Him aware of our sins. It is to himself that the sinner must admit that he "missed the mark", that he has a failing, a shortcoming in his character that has caused him to sin. Indeed, such a form of confession, a personal admission that one has sinned – a stark and thoughtful observation in the mirror accompanied by penetrating introspection – is the first critical step toward repairing one's ways. This represents a solemn resolution that is an indispensable prerequisite for his *Korban Chatas*, sin-offering. As such, the offering presupposes the individual's earliest resolve of *teshuvah*, repentance. The offering is the external expression of the resolve, which consists of *vidui* to oneself. Without this resolve, the offering has limited meaning.

Self-knowledge is the first step towards a resolve of *teshuvah*. Delusion is the antithesis of *teshuvah*, since, if one does not see clearly where, how and why he has sinned, he is incapable of mending his ways. As long as he is bound up in the deception that cloaks reality in his own mind, the sinner will continue being a sinner, the taint of his sin forever besmirching his life. One cannot expect to conduct his life in a truly punctilious manner as long as he is living under the self-imposed façade of duplicity. Furthermore, *Rav Hirsch* contends that a "broad" acknowledgement that one had sinned and admitting to himself in "general" terms that he is not "up to par" are not much better than no confession. One must keep in mind the specific area in which his transgression has occurred and focus on it, so that he can get to the root of his misstep.

The concept of *v'hisvadah*, self-acknowledgement, is far removed from the popular notion of "confession": be it in a religious milieu or to a friend or mentor. These forms of admissions of guilt are more mistake than virtue. A sin committed by a person is between himself and G-d; thus, it needs to be known only to Him. Revealing our shame to others is improper exposure. Shame/admission of guilt should be kept quietly in one's heart where he addresses his personal guilt.

Why is it so difficult to admit to oneself that he is wrong? Mistakes are hard to digest and even more difficult to swallow. We would rather hunker down and find some way to justify our actions than confront, admit and face the music. Psychologists have a term for this form of doubling down: cognitive dissonance. This applies to the tension we experience when we maintain two contradictory thoughts, beliefs, opinions, or attitudes. One might believe that he is kind-hearted, decent, benevolent – until the moment when, out of anger or other provocation, he acts out of

“character” and cuts someone off on the highway, slams a door in his face, or takes the last donut in the bakery that he knows his neighbor wants for himself. How does one cope with such dissonance? He denies his actions, either by justifying it or by blaming the other fellow. In any event, he was not the one that acted rudely.

Apologizing empowers the other fellow and belittles the wrongdoer, or so he thinks. Such a person is not open to constructive criticism, because, after all, he did no wrong. By digging in our heels, by refusing to acknowledge that we erred, by disregarding the feelings of the person whom we hurt and by refusing to apologize, we make it clear to everyone that we possess a flawed character and are, indeed, weak.

Perhaps we might take the concept of *v'hisvadah*, self-acknowledgement, a bit further. A wise person once said, “There is greater fulfillment in life knowing that one (at least) made the attempt, rather than settled and gave in from the onset.” Giving up hope before one even starts is a form of refusing to acknowledge one’s own potential. How many people have refused to give up hope in the face of adversity and succeeded beyond anyone’s dreams? When someone is told, “You don’t have a chance,” he can either throw in the towel, refuse to go forward, or prove others wrong. Indeed, adversity brings out the real us, the best that lays dormant beneath an exterior of mediocrity. How many great authors gave up when their first manuscript was ignored, and how many kept on writing – to prove everyone wrong? One who gives up on himself is guilty of *v'hisvadah* – refusing to accept his latent talents.

I came across an inspiring story in, “*Stories that Unite Our Hearts*,” by Rabbi Binyomin Pruzansky, which I take the liberty of sharing (with my own embellishment). There are *rebbeim* – and there are *rebbeim*. Some have classes comprised of students that are highly motivated. Others have classes in which the students had long ago given up hope of ever achieving success. A host of circumstances can cause such negativity in a student. This is not the forum to discuss these innocent “victims of circumstances.” *Baruch Hashem*, we have people who care, *rebbeim* whose boundless love for Torah, for their students, and for *Klal Yisrael* does not allow them to reinforce their students’ negativity. Thus, they make every attempt to encourage, cajole, empower and embolden them in order to ensure their students that, indeed, they can make it big – and they do!

Rabbi Fine (the name used by the author) is a *rebbe* who focused on effort, rather than test scores. If he saw a student try his hardest to study and master the subject, even if he missed his mark, he still considered him to be top drawer – a success. The young mind and heart looks at a test score and asks, “Is it all worth it? Even when I study all night, I barely get a passing grade. Why bother?” Observing the prevailing attitude in his class of high-attitude, low-achieving students, Rabbi Fine attempted to hearten them. Otherwise, he would get nowhere with them. He sought to encourage them, as illustrated by the following story.

“Boys, close your *Gemorahs* and relax. I want to tell you a story about a group of teenage students from one of the poorest, inner-city neighborhoods in Los Angeles, who were invited by a local

ranch owner to visit his property and spend the day riding horses.

“After a day replete with fun and relaxation, the wealthy rancher invited the group to join him in his large living room for snacks, drinks and conversation. He went out of his way to treat the boys like royalty. He called everyone to attention as he explained the reason for inviting them for the day. “You see, once upon a time, there was a young boy whose father was a horse trainer. The family traveled from place to place with no time to really set up roots. Money was extremely limited even though the father accepted whatever work was available.

“In high school, the boy had a teacher who gave the class an assignment for each student to write a paper about his dream in life. The boy wanted so much to do well, so he wrote an excellent paper about the 200 acre ranch he would own one day. He added the thoroughbred horses and massive palatial ranch house in which he would live. In short, the dream, albeit quite impressive, was absolutely unrealistic for a boy of such a poor, foot-loose background. The teacher disregarded the excellent presentation, and, instead of giving the boy an A, gave him a failing grade for writing an unrealistic dream.

“The boy was dejected. He thought he had done everything right. The teacher drove home a point: “From the background that you had, you have no chance of realizing such a far-fetched dream.” The boy thought about the teacher’s criticism and decided to return with the same paper, “Sir,” he began, “this is my dream. I hope to see it through to fruition. You can keep the failing grade, and I will keep my dream!”

“Boys, by now you must realize that that boy was me. I slaved and refused to give up. Today, you are sitting in the room of my dream. You spent the day having fun on the ranch which is the culmination of my dream. If you look at the back wall, you will notice my paper with the failing grade. It motivated me to work – to never give up on my dreams. Neither should you.”

Rabbi Fine concluded with his personal message to his students, “True, there are – and will be – times in your life when your dream seems unrealistic, almost audacious. You will dream: of one day completing the *Shas*, the entire *Talmud*; of becoming a *Rosh Yeshivah*; of being a fearless and inspiring communal leader. And then, someone will throw cold water on your dream, laugh at you, and say, ‘You? No way!’ Never give up! If you try your best, you will succeed.”

The greatest disservice we can do to ourselves is to refrain from making an attempt to succeed. This is especially true concerning success in Torah learning. It has nothing to do with acumen. True, someone with a superior mind has a head start, but he also has a greater obligation to succeed. Hashem gave him this gift for a purpose. Hashem is the Torah’s Author, and He assists those who assist themselves. The greatest loser is the one who does not enter the race!