

Hashem spoke to Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai. (1:1)

The *Midrash* teaches, “The Torah was given through three media: fire, water and wilderness.” The defining characteristic of *Klal Yisrael* throughout the ages has been their extraordinary ability to be *moser nefesh*, to self-sacrifice, for the Torah and their faith. Our People went to the executioner’s scaffold, the fires of the *auto de fe*, and the gas chambers with their faith and commitment intact. Whenever the tyrants gave them the choice of their religion or their life, the decision was always their religion. This unique power of commitment was highlighted during these – and other – challenging incidents in the history of our people.

Avraham *Avinu* was flung into a fiery furnace, due to the threat that he presented to the prevailing pagan belief. By his very action of self-sacrifice, our Patriarch infused our nation with the DNA of *mesiras nefesh*. To dispel the notion that *mesiras nefesh* was an individual proclivity, with only a select few that were committed enough to act – our nation demonstrated its commitment by the waters of the Red Sea. We now have fire and water. What about enduring commitment? Veritably, we have proven our readiness during the singular demand on our lives. Are we ready, however, to live a life of self-sacrifice – day in and day out? The answer to this question came during our forty-year trek in the wilderness, in a desert fraught with danger. Fire, water and wilderness demonstrated our spiritual mettle. *Zocharti lach chesed ne’urayich*, “I remembered for you the kindness of your youth... following after Me, in the wilderness, in an unsown/unchartered land” (*Yirmiyahu* 2:2). *Horav Meir Shapiro, zl*, posits that these three *nisyonos* – trials of fire, water and wilderness – each representing its own unique form of *mesiras nefesh*, served as the catalysts for *Klal Yisrael* to receive the Torah as a *kinyan olam*, eternal acquisition, whereby the Torah is ours forever.

Yet, not all of us are prepared to accept challenge – especially when it involves our children. The *Chidushei Ha’Rim, zl*, was wont to say, “I see a *olam hafuch*, upside down world. The *Talmud* (*Niddah* 16b) teaches that prior to one’s birth, it has already been Heavenly decreed whether he will be wealthy or poor. Concerning his spiritual proclivity – whether he will be righteous or wicked – it is not decreed, since *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, is not Heavenly mandated. Yet, parents seem to worry regarding their son’s *parnassah*, livelihood (which is Heavenly-designated), and ignore their son’s spiritual advancement (expressing little to no concern regarding his spiritual direction in life).”

A good school makes a difference; a great *rebbe* can change a child’s spiritual trajectory. At the end of the day, however, success or failure often harks back to parental input, care, love and spiritual indoctrination. Parents can love their child, but, if they themselves are clueless concerning the appropriate spiritual direction he should take, then we have a serious problem. The following story demonstrates how a young couple, from the onset of their marriage, committed themselves to the idea that the spiritual ascendance of their family would be primary in their lives.

Rav Uri Zohar, Shlita, visited a *Talmud Torah* in Beer Sheva. It was in a neighborhood not known

for its strong affiliation with Torah and *mitzvos*. This is why he was there: to encourage the community to support the *Talmud Torah*, so that their children would grow into *bnei Torah* and eventually alter the direction of their community, which was seriously gravitating toward a completely secular lifestyle. Rav Zohar noticed a retired gentleman who clearly looked out of place. He was attired in clothing that suited a resident of Bnei Brak. Furthermore, the parents who might be enrolling their children in school were young enough to be his grandchildren. The man explained that his son was the principal of the *Talmud Torah*, and he (the father) was here to lend his support with the parents.

Clearly, Rav Zohar was taken aback by the man and his son. The look on his face begged some form of explanation from this man. The man was only too happy to tell his story: “My livelihood came from the earnings I had from a kiosk that was situated in the center of town. My wife and I worked day and night to support our four sons and four daughters, all of whom are scholars (or married to scholars) who have assumed positions in various areas of Jewish educational endeavors throughout the Holy Land. We have incredible Torah *nachas* from our children – all because of my wife.

“It was the day after our wedding, and I walked into the kitchen of our tiny apartment to find my wife weeping bitterly. I asked her what was wrong. She replied, ‘My mind is aflame with a question: We pray – for what? For a livelihood? Everyone knows that what a person earns is determined by Hashem. One can work day and night, but he will still earn only that which he is destined to earn. Pray for health? While it is true that we must hope that we will not become victim to a terrible illness, but this, too, is Hashem’s decision. I think that the area in which we should place all of our hopes and prayer is for our future children’s educational development – that they grow up to become *bnei Torah*.’

“When I heard my wife’s emotional words rendered the day following our wedding, I immediately agreed. This has become the primary focus of our own lives: our children’s education. If you visit my house during the lighting of the *Shabbos* candles, you will see my wife crying copious tears for her children – even today, after they are all married and successful!”

Rav Zohar concluded his story. A simple couple – who were far from simple – unless one considers sincerity to be simple. Our prayers should not commence suddenly when something goes wrong, but, from the moment of marriage, this should be the goal upon which we place our initial and principal focus.