

It was in the fortieth year... when Moshe spoke to Bnei Yisrael. (1:3)

Rashi comments, “This teaches us that Moshe *Rabbeinu* did not rebuke them until immediately before his death.” *Rashi* continues that Moshe derived this from Yaakov *Avinu*, who also waited until he was on his deathbed to rebuke his sons. Yaakov said, “Reuven, my son, why did I not rebuke you earlier? It was so that you should not leave me and join up with Eisav, my brother.” This comment begs elucidation. Reuven was a holy person who, for the slightest vestige of sin, sat in sackcloth and fasted for a lengthy period of time. To say that rebuke would drive him to leave the *Shivtei Kah*, tribes of Hashem, and join Eisav, his uncle, is to suggest that he was quite far from virtuous. Furthermore, if Yaakov believed that rebuke could generate such a negative reaction from Reuven, can we even begin to imagine the negative effect it would have on us?

To have a better perspective concerning the spiritual descent that a degrading experience can catalyze, we turn to *Chazal*, *Chagigah* 5b: “*Rebbi* (Rabbi Yehudah *HaNasi*) was holding a *Kinos*, Book of Lamentations, in his hand. He read it. When he reached the *pasuk*, ‘He has thrown *Yisrael* from the Heavens to the earth,’ it (the Book of *Eichah*) fell from his hand. He exclaimed, ‘Indeed (they have fallen), *m’eigra ramah l’birah amikta*, from a high roof to a deep pit.’ What is it that *Rebbi* saw in the falling book that illuminated his understanding of the *pasuk*? *Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz*, *zl*, explains that he realized that the book’s place in his hand or on the floor was irrelevant to its condition. Where the book was situated was not the issue, but rather, how it arrived there. It was the fall that damaged the book. (Being on the floor did not damage it – the fall did.) Likewise, the tragedy of *Klal Yisrael* is not where they are now in *galus*, exile; rather, it is the downfall and shock of the abrupt decline, “from on high to down low,” that battered them terribly. “He has thrown (*Yisrael*) from the Heavens to the earth.” The change of location from Heaven to earth did not impact *Klal Yisrael* as profoundly as much as the fall itself.

Coping with adversity, especially if it is sudden, can have a devastating transformative effect on a person. The tribe of Dan rejected Shlomis bas Divri’s son, and, when no one supported him, he blasphemed. In one split second he lost his worlds: this world; and the World-to-Come. He could not handle the fall. The Jewish People did not react much better when Moshe *Rabbeinu* (according to their erroneous calculation) was late in returning from Heaven. When the *Satan* depicted for them an image of Moshe on his deathbed being transported by angels, they lost it. Their spiritual descent resulted in the Golden Calf, for which we are still paying to this very day.

We all confront situations that can – and do – engender a spiritual descent. Some can succumb to a free-fall and have great difficulty returning. Others fight every step of the way, grasping at anything they can, to prevent their fall from causing serious, lasting damage. A person must be constantly on guard when he confronts a challenge, a period of adversity, lest he be caught off guard and edge too close to the precipice. The plunge is far more damaging than where one lands. One can always climb back up – unless – the fall in and of itself has caused him to lose his nerve,

to be deprived of his self-control. Once his presence of mind has been impugned, he will have neither the desire nor the willpower to climb back up and return to his original spiritual status. A spiritual wound requires time to heal. We must give the person who has fallen time – support, comfort – and encouragement. To turn our back on him is to encourage spiritual suicide. It is all about time, patience and perseverance.

Horav Sholom, zl, of Probisht (Father of Horav Yisrael Rizhiner) was wont to say, “When a garment becomes soiled with mud and one hurries to clean it (while the mud is still moist), he will cause the stain to soak deeper, as it becomes absorbed in the fibers of the cloth. Rather, he should wait until the mud becomes completely dry, and then, with light rubbing it will all come off without leaving a mark.” People are not much different. Give them time and support – they will return – as long as they know that they are wanted.