

## **And he (Moshe) said, “If I have found favor in Your eyes...let my Master go among us...and pardon our iniquity and our sins, and take us as Your own possession.” (34:9)**

On the first day of *Selichos* we plead with Hashem: *Pnei na el ha'telaos v'lo l'chataos*; “Turn to our sufferings and not to our sins.” We understand that we have failed to keep our commitment to Hashem. He has given us so much and asked only that we maintain our fidelity to Him, that we observe His commandments. We failed because of all that is going on in our lives: troubles, problems, adversity, economic issues, health issues, spousal issues, children issues. Our mind is overburdened with *telaos*, *tzaros*, troubles.

The *Gaon, zl, m' Vilna* was an outspoken proponent of *aliyah*, emigration, to *Eretz Yisrael*. He wanted to personally relocate to the Holy Land. It was not, however, part of Hashem's plan for him. The *Gaon's talmidim*, students, did make a strong, dedicated effort to immigrate there. It was a difficult and dangerous undertaking, given that the high seas were not easily traversable with the wooden sail/ships that was the mode of travel over two centuries ago. If one survived the ordeal and safely embarked in the Holy Land, he had experienced a miracle. Since survival in the Holy Land was also far from a bed of roses, these individuals were highly-dedicated, spiritually devoted to living a life of greater connectivity to Hashem in a place that bespoke spirituality, where every stone and mound of earth was sacred.

The leader of the group (*Perushim*, as they were called) was *Horav Yisrael Shklov, zl*, a primary student of the *Gaon*. He endured much adversity in his journey to and sojourn in *Eretz Yisrael*, but he was the leader who trail-blazed the *Talmidei HaGra's* settlement in *Eretz Yisrael*. (There were also others, such as *Horav Menachem Shklov, zl*, who settled and established communities.) *Rav Yisrael* led a group of 150 men, Torah devotees who sought an elevated level of spiritual ascendancy. Their boat was old and flimsy, having seen better days, its captain experienced, but wary of such an undertaking. The boat had no berths. Each man found his place on the floor, and this was his seat. A few days into the journey, the seafarers encountered a major storm, one which the captain nervously claimed the likes of which he had not seen in thirty years of traveling the high seas. He was very upfront with *Rav Yisrael*, “Prepare for the worst. If this storm does not subside, we will all drown at sea.” *Rav Yisrael* asked to address his group.

“*Morah v'rabbosai*, my dear friends, the captain has informed me that we are all in dire straits. We are all believing Jews who have dedicated our lives to serving Hashem. As such, I feel that it is prudent to use this time to repent and ask Hashem for His forgiveness. Thus, if it is decreed that we should not survive this journey, that we will leave this world as devout penitents. The *Talmud* teaches that *viduy*, confession, should be recited quietly, so that no one hears his fellow's sins. To vocalize one's sins publicly is shameful. Since we are standing at the brink of death, however, I feel that in order to generate hope that our confession will serve as the catalyst for our atonement, we should render our confession publicly, so that the shame will atone for our sins.” They decided

that the youngest student among them should begin the proceedings.

The young man stood up, shaking uncontrollably and weeping profusely, overcome with guilt concerning his one sin, "I am ashamed and humiliated to stand before you, for the purpose of confessing to a sin that I committed for two years: During this period, I lied to my mother!" They all looked at him in disbelief. He was an upright, scholarly young man. Who would have believed him capable of prevaricating to his mother?

"I am the oldest of nine brothers. When I was young, our family moved to Vilna where we lived in an apartment adjacent to that of the holy *Gaon*. My father had a little grocery whose proceeds supported our family. The walls being thin, my father would sit at night glued to the wall, listening to the *Gaon* learning. One night, my father heard the *Gaon* reiterating over and over the words of *Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* and his son, Rabbi Eliezer, concerning those who, rather than study Torah, spend their days in pursuit of livelihood. *Manichim chayei olam v'oskim b'chayei shah*, 'leave eternal life aside and engage in temporal life.'

Hearing the *Gaon* repeat this phrase over and over penetrated into my father, to the point that the next day, he announced, 'I no longer will spend my day engaged in pursuit of temporary livelihood while my spiritual life is laid to waste. I am now undertaking to spend my entire day immersed in the sea of Torah.' My mother immediately stepped up to the plate and offered to run the store. At one point, business was bad, and we were faced with severe economic hardship. My mother closed the store and began baking *challah* to sell in town. When this enterprise proved insufficient to sustain our family, my mother cleaned homes, all so that our father could spend his day learning Torah. Indeed, my father was totally unaware of my mother's extraordinary efforts to allow him to continue learning.

"Days passed, and the economic adversity in our home became more intense. It was then that I started my 'lie.' I told my mother that the *cheder* I attended would be serving lunch. For two years, my mother would ask me, 'Yankele, did you have lunch?' and I replied, 'Yes.' This is my lie for which I am terribly ashamed." He sat down and once again broke down in incessant weeping.

Hearing this story and *Rav Yankele's* "lie," *Rav Yisrael* stood up and raised his eyes and his hands Heavenward and declared, "Hashem *Yisborach*, during *Selichos* we plead that You turn to our suffering and ignore our sins. I ask You instead to look at our sins, at what we consider a sin. Yankele's lie allowed him to fast all day to save money. When You will gaze down and analyze their sins, You will see what type of activity this young man considered to be a sin."

At that moment, the storm subsided, the water calmed down and the ship was once again sufficiently sea-worthy to reach their destination in *Eretz Yisrael*. This story has been transmitted throughout the generations. Indeed, the saintly *Satmar Rav, Horav Yoel Teitelbaum, zl*, would relate it to his followers at the beginning of *Chodesh Elul*, in order to arouse them to *teshuvah* before the *Yomim Noraim*.