

To distinguish between the contaminated and the pure, and between the creature that may be eaten and the creature that may not be eaten. (11:47)

A Jew must know the Torah and its laws; otherwise, he is challenged to keep them. In order to carry out the will of Hashem, we must know what is His will and how to execute it properly. In most cases the distinction between “clean” and “unclean,” “pure” and “not pure,” what may be eaten and what may not be eaten, is evident and does not require a degree in higher Torah knowledge. It is, however, vital that we know how to distinguish between those categories that are similar to one another. For example, the slaughtering of an animal or fowl is an intricate procedure, in which a fraction of an inch determines its *kashrus* status. *Halachah* demands that the majority of the windpipe must be cut. This means that kosher versus *treifah* is determined by a millimeter. This concept applies in other areas as well, as *Horav Moshe Schwab, zl (Mashgiach Yeshivas Gateshead)* points out.

The *Mashgiach* observes how a moment can make a difference in *halachah*. *Shabbos* begins at sunset. One minute before sunset is Friday; one minute later is *Shabbos*. One minute before *Pesach* (the time declared when *chametz* is prohibited), bread may be eaten. A minute later, one who eats bread is guilty of *kares*, Heavenly excision. The same idea applies to a minute before *Yom Kippur*. Mere seconds distinguishes between life and death.

Likewise with regard to spiritual development. Every *mitzvah* that one performs elevates him. Indeed, he is no longer the same person as he was before he performed the *mitzvah*. He is now different; thus, more is expected of him. One *mitzvah*, and he is a new person. Responding *Amen* seems like a small, simple gesture, but it changes the very essence of an individual. Judaism deals with intricacies, whereby the slightest misstep can spell spiritual disaster. Likewise, the right word at the appropriate time can transform disaster into smash success.

The shortest *mussar shmuess*, rebuke/ethical discourse, was delivered by Hashem to Adam *HaRishon*. He asked Adam, *Ayeca?* “Where are you?” or (as explained by the commentators), “Do you know where you are?” Do you realize how far you have fallen from the spiritual apex that you were on? Do you realize that you sinned in the holiest place in the universe? Do you know where you are going? All this (and more) is included in this one brief word of rebuke. One word that speaks volumes.

One well-placed word can transform a person’s trajectory of life; it can imbue him with the self-confidence he needs to succeed, the courage to help him from falling deeper into the depth of morass. *Horav Yosef Yoizel Horvitz, zl*, revered as the *Alter* of Novoradok, was *Rosh Yeshivah* of the famed *yeshivah*, which had established eighty-five branches throughout Eastern Europe by the outbreak of World War II. His students were prepared to (and often did) risk their lives to disseminate Torah to the far reaches of the Jewish communities where they could make a

difference. One man had initiated all this. That, however, is not the end of the story. It is how it happened, what motivated him, and who altered his spiritual trajectory that provides us with a valuable lesson concerning the little things, the one word, one phrase, that can transform a life.

Rav Yosef Yoizel was not always a *Rosh Yeshivah*. In fact, it was the farthest thing from his mind. He was, instead, a successful textile merchant who was supporting his immediate family of eleven. Anyone with deep insight could perceive that this young textile merchant had much more to offer the Torah world than fabric. Indeed, if he could put his entrepreneurial skills to use for Torah causes, he would alter the “fabric” of Jewish minds and fill them with Torah. At one point, *Rav Yosef Yoizel* met the saintly *Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl*, father of the *Mussar* Movement and primary expositor for placing greater focus on character trait refinement. *Rav Yisrael* felt that the young man who stood before him should be devoting more time to Torah study. Furthermore, he perceived greatness and leadership qualities in him.

During the course of their conversation, *Rav Yisrael* pointed out that *Rav Yosef Yoizel* was spending too much time engrossed in commerce. As a result, his Torah studies were suffering. The young merchant asked, “If I spend my time learning, how would I live? How would I feed my family?”

Rav Yisrael's retort blasted the young man out of his materialistic reverie, “More to the point – with what will you die?!” This short rejoinder changed the trajectory of the future *Alter* of Novoradok and catalyzed a Torah revolution that resulted in the founding of eighty five *yeshivos* that were home to thousands of *yeshivah* students.

Rav Yisrael did not say much, but the brief comeback pierced the protective wall that the future *Alter* had built around himself and opened his mind to the truth. It does not require long winded discourses. It requires a few well-placed words spoken with sincerity and love.