

## Hashem Elokim called out to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” (3:9)

Hashem certainly knew the location of Adam’s hiding place; rather, He wanted to determine if Adam knew where he (himself) was. One must know where he is with regard to fulfilling his potential. We often sell ourselves short, settling for mediocre success, because we (or others) have convinced (us) ourselves that this is all that we are capable of achieving. One day, we will stand before the Heavenly Tribunal and will be presented with a Heavenly image of who we could have been. Hashem asked Adam, *Ayeca*, “Where are you,” in comparison to where you should be? This is a question which we should ask ourselves all the time, and the answer should spur us to continued growth.

The well-known story of *Horav Zusia, zl*, of Anipole, underscores this idea. The great *tzadik* was at the waning stages of his life. At this point, he became increasingly introspective concerning his mortality. One day, his students, noticing that he was depressed, asked what was troubling him. He explained that he felt that his end was near, and he was concerned that he might not have achieved sufficient merit to gain entry into *Olam Habba*, the World to Come. His students countered, “But, *Rebbe*, you have the patience of Hillel (the great *Tanna*), the wisdom of Shlomo *Hamelech* and the humility of Moshe *Rabbeinu*.” To this, *Rav Zushia* said, “My dear students, I am not concerned about my response when I am asked: ‘Why were you not more like Hillel; like Shlomo *Hamelech*, Avraham *Avinu* or Moshe *Rabbeinu*?’ I am concerned how I will respond when they ask me, ‘Why were you not like Zusia?’” (He meant the Zusia which Heaven had in mind.)

The greatest competition in life is not when we compete against others, but when we compete against ourselves - our own potential. We can study the strengths and weaknesses of our competition and design a plan of action so that we will succeed against them. Do we know (or are we willing to acknowledge) our strengths and weaknesses? Do we have a clue what is our potential? The only advice that we can apply to ourselves is to try as hard as we can. Be sincere in our efforts. Be honest with ourselves. If we can do more or better, do it!

In 1986, the United States Army, reeling from poor recruitment, added a new slogan: “Be all you can be.” In other words, they dared young men to maximize their potential. This slogan, which lasted for two decades, made a huge difference. Too many of us are complacent with our meager successes, and, as a result, settle for less.

The Heavenly potential with which we must reckon is on a completely different standard. One can go through life and be quite successful. He may be a big *baal tzedakah*, a philanthropist, learn a few hours per day, even become a scholar of note; be involved in multifaceted acts of *chesed*, helping numerous people. If, however, his Heavenly image is to have used all of his G-d-given talents and skills for Torah only, then he has fallen short of his potential.

Hashem intimated to *Adam HaRishon*, “I expect better of you.” The first man had no room for error, as the *yetzir kapav shel HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, he was fashioned by Hashem. The Almighty does not make mistakes, neither should Adam. It is not in his Heavenly “job description.”

*Horav Chaim Soloveitchik, zl*, was once walking on the street when he chanced upon a young, teenaged non-Jew leading two large horses. He kept the horses in line with the help of a large stick, which he used whenever one of the horses veered off the straight path. These two horses went wherever the boy directed – almost as if they did not have minds of their own (which they do not). No argument, no protest; whatever the boy wanted, they followed his directions. *Rav Chaim* was amazed. The horse is one of the strongest animals. It has the extraordinary ability to pull large, heavy wagons loaded with people or produce. Yet, these two horses just followed wherever they were led. He wondered, “How is it possible for such a young boy to control two such strong horses?”

“The answer is,” declared *Rav Chaim*, “that they are horses and, as such, are unaware of their extraordinary strength. If they would possess half a brain, they would be leading, not being led.”

*Rav Chaim* applied this idea to explain *David HaMelech’s* exhortation, *Al tiheyu k’suss k’fered ein havin*, “Be not like a horse, like a mule, uncomprehending” (*Tehillim* 32:9). This statement begs elucidation. In the previous *pasuk*, *David* declares, “I will educate you and enlighten the path which to travel. I will advise you with what I have seen.” We, the “students,” are waiting and prepared to hear and learn from the master a lesson that is not simply crucial – it will be life-altering. What is the lesson? “Do not be like a horse.” One would think that the great *Melech Yisrael* would impart a lesson that carries greater profundity than, “Do not be a horse.” One does not need the king to inform us of something which every person who possesses a modicum of common sense knows (or, at least, should know).

*Rav Chaim* explains that *David Hamelech* was teaching us that we should not be like the horse who is unaware of its enormous strength, and, as such, allows itself to be guided and driven by a child. A horse does not know its potential, and, therefore, allows itself to be controlled to the right and to the left, all on the whim of whoever is leading. Likewise, one who is clueless to his inherent potential will allow the *yetzer hora* to manipulate his life.

We are (sadly) aware of instances in which individuals whose self-esteem could use a boost judge themselves through the eyes of others. In other words, if my friend or mentor or even spouse (and especially children) does not see my potential (the one which I personally see), I will accede to their value rating. My choices in life will be predicated by my identity as seen through the lens of others. While this is clearly nonsensical, it occurs much more than we care to admit. *Horav Elimelech Biderman, Shlita*, relates the following anecdote.

A young man convinced himself that he was a mouse. He clearly was unhinged and needed to be confined to an institution to address the emotional needs of a human being who thought he was a

mouse. The young man's parents were people of means who would give anything to have their son cured of his *meshugas*, insanity. They hired a distinguished psychologist who felt he could help their son. The psychologist's technique was to have the disturbed young man repeat, "I am not a mouse. I am a human being," a number of times each day. Three months passed, and the doctor felt that it was time for the young man to return home. He no longer felt that he was a mouse. The therapy had been successful.

The excited parents picked up their son and, after speaking to him, acknowledged that he was doing well. He no longer thought himself to be a mouse. "I am not a mouse!" he emphatically told his parents. "I am a human being." "Is this not true?" he asked his parents. He so needed their support after having been committed for three months.

"Yes, yes, this is true!" his parents replied. They were so relieved that finally they had their son back.

They pulled into the driveway of their home, and, as soon as the door was open, the young man ran off. Worried, they searched for him, only to find him crouching beneath a car.

"Why are you hiding under a car?" the parents asked (almost in unison).

"I saw a cat," the son replied.

"Why should that bother you? You are not a mouse. You are a human being," they argued.

The young man replied, "Yes, I know that I am not a mouse, but does the cat know that?"

The young man was superficially cured. Beneath the surface, he thought himself to be a mouse. Moreover, he was concerned about what the cat thought. Even if he believed himself to be a human being, if the cat viewed him as a mouse, he was a mouse. His self-identity was determined by the cat.