

## Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh. (7:9)

What “merit” did the *mateh*, staff, have that it was used as the medium for carrying out some of the plagues against Pharaoh and the Egyptian people? *Rabbi Go’el Alkarif* suggests a powerful *mussar*, ethical lesson, to be derived from here. Prior to *Horav Yisrael Salanter’s* public emergence as the preeminent founder of the *mussar* movement, he lived quietly in Memel, Germany, with an idea, an idea that would transform the Jewish world. His innovation was to focus on *mussar* also. In addition to studying *Gemorah*, Jews should also work on their *middos*, character traits, refining and honing them, so that they would become better people, better Jews.

At that juncture in time, the *mussar* concept was not accepted in the *yeshivah* world. He needed to establish a *yeshivah* whose guiding principles would include the study of *mussar* in its curriculum. Unfortunately, his dream did not coincide with the reality of finding an appropriate venue and supporting such an endeavor. Obtaining a physical structure was at best difficult. One day, a Jewish carpenter in Memel, a simple, unlearned man who had heard of *Rav Yisrael’s* plight, made him an offer: “I will give the *Rav* a small room to be used for his *yeshivah*. I will make tables and chairs for the students to study. This room could serve as the cornerstone of his honor’s *yeshivah*.” Indeed, that little room, provided to him through the good graces of this carpenter, was the foundation of his *yeshivah*, upon which the *mussar* movement was founded.

We are all aware that the *mussar* movement transformed the *yeshivah*/Jewish world. It changed the way we think and the way we act, enhancing our interpersonal relationships and, ultimately, our *avodas hakodesh*, service to the Almighty. *Rav Yisrael* once commented, “What did that carpenter really give?” A small room with some simple furniture. Nonetheless, all of the *Toras ha’ mussar* which exists in the world is in his *z’chus*, merit! (This was expressed 170 years ago. The amount has since increased exponentially.) Every *mussar shmuess*, ethical discourse, will be for him a source of spiritual reward for posterity. Every *mussar* thought, innovation, inspiration is built upon his meager foundation: a small room and some furniture. All of this is because he lived in Memel, heard about the need and took action. His simple act of kindness transformed the world!

Returning to the *mateh*, staff, Hashem sought to teach that a simple staff – a wooden stick – can also be used *l’shem Shomayim*, for the sake of Heaven. It can be the medium for eliciting *kiddush Shem Shomayim*. One should never put down even the smallest, most insignificant entity, especially a person. The *mussar* movement taught us the significance of actions which appear to be insignificant.

When astronaut Neil Armstrong landed on the moon, he stepped out of his space capsule and made the first human step on the moon. His quote at the time was immortalized, “That’s one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.” We often go through life thinking, “I am just a cog in a large machine. What contribution can I make? What can I do that will change the world? What can a little guy like me achieve?” The carpenter in Memel made one small step. It altered the lives of countless Jews.

Three aspiring *yeshivah bachurim* in Baltimore, Maryland, wanted to go to Europe to study in *yeshivah*. It was prior to World War II. At the time, they had no reason to believe that learning Torah in Europe would ever be a problem. Their desire to learn was great. One impediment prevented them from realizing their dream: money. They had already been accepted—two had been admitted to Telshe, and one to Slabodka. Money was tight in America. Jews who observed *Shabbos* had an even greater challenge. Yet, some *yechidim*, individuals, were willing to take that “one step” for *Yiddishkeit*. A Jewish grocer in Baltimore, Philip/Uri Gundersheimer, had, despite tremendous financial pressure, refused to remain open on *Shabbos*, even during the depression years. He came forward and undertook the responsibility to pay for all expenses incurred by the three young men. They went to *yeshivah* all because a simple Jew took that first step.

Philip Gundersheimer died in 1943, at the age of ninety-five years old. He never did see his investment achieve complete fruition. Surely now, ensconced in *Gan Eden* receiving his just reward, he is unaware of what his one step accomplished. The three young men were: *Horav Mordechai Gifter, zl*, Telshe *Rosh Yeshivah*, who transformed the lives of thousands of *yeshivah bachurim*; *Horav Aharon Paperman, zl*, who, while serving as an army chaplain, inspired thousands of Jewish soldiers. This was followed by *rabbanus* in Plainfield, New Jersey, a principalship in Scranton, Pennsylvania, being Executive Director of Telshe Yeshivah and Director of Chinuch Atzmai; and *Rav Mendel Poliakoff, zl*, a *Rav* in Baltimore.

It is our task to act. Hashem determines the significance of our actions. One never knows.