

Each man by his banner, according to the insignias of his father's household. (2:2)

While talents, skills, acumen, financial support and family background each plays a role in one's success, the role is, at best, supportive. The attribute which plays the leading role in garnering one's success is ambition, one's aspiration and striving to work his way to the top. Personal effort, dedication and the ability to withstand and ultimately overcome challenges, lay the groundwork upon which success is established. It is the interplay of these elements that shapes an individual's journey towards the top. This does not, by any means, disregard the role of talents, financial resources and upbringing. It is just that, if one does not put forth effort and persevere, his success will maximally be extraneous and short-lived.

We may distinguish between focused and controlled ambition. Ambition which is focused and clearly defined involves setting specific goals. One creates a structured plan and dedicates his efforts towards achieving his objectives. He stays the course, committing himself to a path, and makes well-informed decisions, using common sense to reach his desired outcome.

In contrast is uncontrolled ambition, the product of lack of direction and planning. A person with uncontrolled ambition is often driven by his desires, and has yet to develop a clear understanding of how to achieve his goal. This leads to impulsive decisions, scattered efforts and unpredictable results. He will certainly achieve unintended consequences which undermine anything good he might have yearned to achieve. This person will always find someone or something to blame for his lack of success. It will never be his lack of focus and discipline.

Another hindrance to success is an individual's desire to be like everyone else, ignoring his own unique individual talents and attributes. One of the primary lessons to take away from the *degalim* is individuality. One should be himself. This means understanding and accepting his own unique qualities and strengths, as well as his flaws. He should adhere to his values and maintain genuine connections with others, fostering a sense of authenticity in both actions and relationships. External pressure can cause a person to cave in and ignore his personal identity, what it represents and what it stands for. To be oneself is a journey of self-discovery which allows the individual to navigate life authentically, embracing the richness of his individuality.

Each *shevet*, tribe, had its own identity which was symbolized by its *degel*. Just as each nation and country has its own flag which represents it, its geography, its culture, its nature, and its citizenry, so, too, did the *degalim* represent the distinctiveness of each *shevet*. The problem surfaces when Reuven wants to be Shimon and vice versa. *Horav Elazar M. Shach, zl*, was wont to say, "The primary benefit derived from the *Alter m'Slabodka's/Horav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, zl*, principle of *gadlus ha'adam*, the greatness/potential of man, was to acknowledge (and appreciate) that each and every person is blessed with his own unique, individual qualities. Thus, one should apply himself to being who he was meant to be – not someone else."

Horav Isser Zalman Meltzer, zl, met an old friend of his, *Horav Shmuel Yitzchak Hillman, zl*. They had been study partners in Volozhin. *Rav Hillman* was the *Av Bais Din* in London, having authored twenty volumes of commentary on the *Talmud (Ohr Ha'Yashar)*. At the time, *Rav Isser Zalman* was *Rav* of Slutzk and the author of the *Even Ha'Azul* on the *Rambam*. *Rav Hillman* said to his revered friend, "We both authored *sefarim*. However, I am certain that had I attempted to write the *Even Ha'Azul*, and you the *Ohr Ha'Yashar*, we never would have achieved such success. (In other words, "my *Even Ha'Azul* would not achieve the pinnacle of success achieved by your writing, and vice versa had you written the *Ohr Ha'Yashar*.") *Rav Isser Zalman* agreed, saying, "This is because each *sefer* is the product of our personal talents and attributes." (I am not you, and you are not me. Each individual *sefer* represents the uniqueness of its author.)

Horav Dov Yoffe, zl (Mashgiach Kfar Chassidim), would often relate the following vignette. The *Sfas Emes* was orphaned at a young age. He was raised by his grandfather, the saintly *Chiddushei HaRim*. It is well-known that, in his commentary to *Chumash* and in his many lectures, he would constantly quote his grandfather. In his commentary to the *Talmud*, however, the *Chiddushei HaRim's* innovative thoughts are rarely, if ever, mentioned. He did not necessarily concur with his grandfather with regard to *p'shat*, the interpretation and understanding of the passage in the *Talmud*. When the *Sefas Emes* was *niftar*, passed away, the elders of *Chassidus Gur* (of which the *Sefas Emes* was the *Rebbe*) hesitated to print his commentaries on the *Talmud*, since they did not embody the same brilliance and sharpness evinced in the *Chiddushei HaRim's* writings. They turned to the great Torah luminary of their time, *Horav Chaim Brisker, zl*, for his sage advice. *Rav Chaim* encouraged them to print his commentaries. Indeed, once they were published, *Rav Chaim* was an avid reader of the *S'fas Emes*.

Rav Dov Yoffe added a powerful observation: "Imagine, had the *Sefas Emes* forced himself to follow his grandfather's *derech ha'limud*, approach to learning, despite that this *derech* was not in tune with his acumen and depth of understanding. Regardless of whether he did this to find favor in his grandfather's eyes, or because he sought to impress the *chassidim* that he was following the path of *Gur* as dictated by the *Chiddushei HaRim*, he would not have succeeded to the extent that he did. He applied his acumen, his logic, his *derech ha'limud* to achieve the extraordinary success that he enjoyed.

The *Chafetz Chaim, zl*, decried those who sought excuses upon which to blame their underachievement. He would render the *pasuk, Shal ne'alecha mei'al reglecha*, "Take your shoes off your feet" (*Shemos* 2:5) innovatively. Some people attribute the blame for their not achieving their G-d-given potential to their not being blessed with the attributing circumstances that played a role in the success of others. "If I would be in his shoes, things would be different." "If I had his money, brains, *yichus*; if I had different 'shoes,' I would have achieved greater success in Torah. If life would have been easier for me, I would not have anxiety, and my relationships would not suffer as they have." The list goes on, with different excuses, but it all boils down to one thing: his shoes. The Torah tells him, "Take off your shoes!" Everyone should view himself as walking barefoot. Hashem does not want Reuven to be Shimon. He wants Reuven to be Reuven! No more

excuses. Be yourself! That is what Hashem wants of us.