

## You shall listen to the Voice of Hashem, your G-d, and you shall perform all His commandments and decrees. (27:10)

The command to listen to Hashem's *mitzvos* follows on the heels of Moshe *Rabbeinu's* declaration, *Ha'yom nihiyeha l'am*, "Today you became a people." Today you have indicated that you have reached the level of maturity critical for becoming a nation. Now that you are a card-carrying member of *Am Hashem*, the nation of G-d, Hashem expects you to act appropriately for someone of this caliber. Sadly, we are influenced by the society in which we live, and we often view ourselves through the lens of the secular, immoral society which surrounds us. As a result, we become victim to the damaging effects of, "What will everyone say?" When we constantly adapt to meet other's expectations of ourselves, a situation develops that can lead to a loss of personal authenticity and a disconnection from one's true self.

The pressure to conform to the opinions of others can create significant stress and anxiety, as one feels the constant need to please at all cost and to avoid criticism. Over time, this can lead to a dependency on external validation, rendering it difficult to develop a strong, independent sense of self-worth. This emotional turmoil can impact one's ability to serve Hashem properly.

One who views himself negatively may feel unworthy or incapable of serving Hashem. This leads to a diminished sense of purpose in performing *mitzvos* and engaging in Torah and *tefillah*. Joy plays a key role in serving Hashem. One who has a negative self-perception cannot get over the "hump," his negativity sapping any joy within him. Thus, religious duties become burdensome, rather than elevating. The next step in his spiritual digression is a lack of trust in Divine Providence. One who is negative can hardly feel that he has a unique role in life. The ability to overcome challenges is vital to spiritual growth. That, together with a sense of resilience, can help one turn his negative feelings around and return him to the realization that, as a member of *am Yisrael*, he is at the pinnacle of Creation.

This is especially true for the *ben Torah*, who must realize that, by virtue of his devotion to Torah study, he elevates himself to the apex of *Klal Yisrael*. Without Torah, we are no different than any other nation. Torah is what connects us to Hashem, and Torah is our lifeblood. Nonetheless, some individual will always be at risk of falling prey to what they think are the opinions of others. As a result, they begin to believe in what the others say, and lose their self-esteem. They have, however, a greater problem: The fellow who thinks that others have a diminished opinion of him, reaches the point that he has convinced himself that he is a loser, that his many achievements are of no value. After all, no one is *machshiv*, respects, appreciates him.

Self-convinced low self-esteem is a state in which an individual has convinced himself that he is worthless or inadequate – despite evidence or feedback to the contrary. The belief often is the result of negative past experiences. The following story is proof positive of this sad verity.

A young *kollel* fellow had fallen under the misconception that external appearances make the man. If someone does not appear distinguished, people will just look through him as if he does not exist. This, he felt, was the reason that hardly anyone gave him the time of day. People ignored him in the *kollel*; his wife took him for granted. Indeed, when he raised his hand to flag down a taxi, the driver kept on going – completely ignoring him. He decided that, once and for all, he was going to change all that. He went to a prominent hat store in Bnei Brak and purchased a homburg. Now, people would notice him.

He paid for the hat and left the store. Immediately, he raised his hand to signal a *monit*, taxi, and three cabs pulled up. What a change in appearance can create, he mused to himself. He entered the *kollel* to a chorus of “good mornings,” shortly after which two distinguished members of the *kollel* came over to speak with him in learning. The final coup occurred when he returned home to a welcome from his wife to which he was no longer accustomed to. The homburg had changed everything. He felt important, distinguished, *chashuv*, respected.

He shared his new experience with his wife, explaining how a homburg that had cost

a few hundred *shekel* had made him a new man. His wife looked at him and asked, “Where is this ‘magic’ homburg?” “On my head – where else?” he replied. She said, “I see no homburg – neither did you come home sporting a homburg.” Suddenly, he realized that he had paid for the hat and left it in the store!

End of story. It was not the hat. It was he himself. He had changed his attitude concerning himself. He thought that the hat had changed him, when, in fact, he had changed himself. Self-esteem is self-generated. When one feels good about himself, he needs no external accouterments or public acclaim. The perceived homburg gave the *Kollel* man the added boost and self-confidence that he needed.