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by Rabbi Yaakov Finestone

## HOW LARGE A GIFT DID YOU GET?!

### PARSHAS SHOFTIM

The onset of the month of Elul should be an awakening call. It signals that there is only one month before Hashem judges us and determines our fate. During this month, Hashem's Holy Presence is extra close to us. We have an especially golden opportunity to come close to Hashem. Our *teshuva*, our repentance, will be more readily accepted at this time. It is incumbent upon us to improve our ways. Often, if one tries to improve everything at once, he is totally unsuccessful. We will be more successful if we try to improve in fewer areas. We should think of one or two areas in which we can improve. We should resolve to take those one or two things and make a permanent change. Even if it is only a minimal change, Hashem will see that we are trying and we will be considered amongst those who are doing *teshuva*.

The Vilna Gaon told the Dubno Maggid that it was challenging to avoid feeling pride and avoid feeling that he was better than other people. After all, Hashem granted him a very high level of wisdom and the ability

to delve into the secrets of the Torah. That greatness could make him more prone to feeling a tinge of arrogance. The Vilna Gaon asked the Dubno Maggid for a *moshel*, parable, to inspire him to overcome this temptation.

The Dubno Maggid began with a question on the p'sukim. It says that a Jewish king should have two personal sefer Torahs written (**Ha'emek Davar** 17:18 says that he does not have to write them himself), one of which he should always have with him. "...He is to read it all the days of his life, in order that he learn to fear Hashem and to guard every word of this Torah.... That his pride does not increase over his brothers and he does not stray from the commandment right or left...." (*Devarim* 17:19-20). The Dubno Maggid asked what the connection is between the caution against undue pride in the first part of the pasuk and the warning against disregarding Hashem's commandments?

The Dubno Maggid answered his question with a beautiful *moshol*. Several merchants were traveling home from the fair, after buying merchandise that they planned to sell later, at a profit. One of the merchants was leading a horse who was pulling a carriage laden

*"That his pride does not increase over his brothers and he does not stray from the commandment right or left...." (Devarim 17:19-20).*

with valuable merchandise. Walking alongside him was another man pulling a small pushcart filled with an assortment of cheap articles. The wealthy merchant turned to the small trader and said, "How dare you

keep company with me and walk alongside of me as if you were my equal." The small trader acknowledged that the merchant was wealthy and well known. He pointed out that they had both purchased their merchandise on credit. The trader's purchases were not costly whereas the merchant's purchases were very costly. Thus, the merchant's debt was much greater than the debt of the small trader. The trader said, **"You may be much richer than I, but the burden of debt that you carry is correspondingly much greater than mine!"**

Similarly, in the Torah, Hashem admonished the Jewish kings, telling them that they are no better than their subjects. They may have a lofty position and may be wealthy but "the greater the gifts that you have received from Hashem the greater your debt to Him!" Therefore, the kings had to put in much effort not to be overbearing and not to deviate from Hashem's mitzvos, "either to the right or to the left". This was the message that the Dubno Maggid also gave to the Vilna Gaon, that "the greater the gifts that you have received from Hashem the greater your debt to Him!". (*The Maggid of Dubno and His Parables* by Benno Heinemann)

**Rabbeinu Yona** says (Shaarei Teshuvah 3:34) says that the trait of pride, of arrogance, is among the severest sins and is an abomination to Hashem. Pride is the very first midah that sefer **Orchos Tzadikim** discusses, as it says because “**pride is the doorway to many evils**”. The Torah warns a king against pride. Certainly, an ordinary person should not attempt to lord over another. Even if one only thinks in his heart that he is better than someone else it is still abominable in Hashem’s eyes. An arrogant person forgets Hashem and thinks that his successes are due to his own intellect and actions. In reality, all our successes are due to Hashem.

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All of us have challenges. Often, we look for special *sugulos* such as davening by the grave of a tzadik or getting a bracha from a great rabbi. There is actually a very, very powerful *segulah* that we can readily do. That is, to respond to kaddish, with all our concentration, “*Amen, Yehei Shmei Rabbah mevarach l’olam ul’olmei ulmaya*”, “May His great Name be blessed, forever and ever”. When someone does that, the **Talmud** (Brachos 3A) says that Hashem

says, “Happy is the King Who has such praise in His house”.

The **Talmud** (Shabbos 119B) brings Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi who says that all who respond, “*Amen, Yehei Shmei Rabbah mevarach l’olam ul’olmei ulmaya*” with all their might, can annul all harsh heavenly decrees. **Rashi** explains, “all one’s might” means one’s total concentration. **Rif** says that even an evil decree of 70 years can be ripped up when we respond “*Amen, Yehei Shmei Rabbah mevarach l’olam ul’olmei ulmaya*” with all our concentration! Answering “Amen, Yehei Shmei Rabbah...” with one’s total concentration can change one’s entire destiny!

The **Chofetz Chaim** (Mishna Brura, Siman 56) says that certainly one should be exceedingly careful **not to speak** in the middle of *kaddish*! **Meseches Derech Eretz** brings a story with Rabbi Chama who saw the prophet, Eliyahu with thousands of camels carrying anger, to punish those who speak during *kaddish* or *kedusha*. **Sefer Chasidim** brings a story of one chasid who saw his friend, another chasid, who had died. His face was green. Why? Because he spoke during 3 parts of tefillah, one of them being during *kaddish*. **Mate Moshe** quotes a Midrash that tells of a chacham who had died. He appeared to his student in a dream and had a stain on his forehead. Why? Because he was not careful to refrain from speaking during the shalich tzibbur’s recitation of *kaddish*.

**We should always remember that every Jew is special. Our looks, our wisdom, or our success do not make us better than anyone else. Everything we have is from Hashem.**

**The more that we have, the more Hashem expects of us.**

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**We should also remember the special segulah of answering kaddish with total concentration. Certainly, we should never ever talk during kaddish!**

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Rabbi Yaakov Finestone is the director of JEP Queens. For almost 50 years JEP Queens has been in the forefront of kiruv. JEP has changed the lives of thousands of Jewish children enrolled in public schools and kiruv schools. Many are shomrei Torah and mitzvos today because of JEP.

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