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by Rabbi Yaakov Finestone

DO YOU WANT TO BE LIKE THAT GUY ON THE TRAIN!

PARSHAS NETZAVIM-VAYELECH

How would you feel if you would have been the man on the train, the innkeeper, or the rabbi in the following stories? *The great mussar luminary, **Rabbi Yisrael Salanter zt"l** was traveling by train from Salant to Vilna. He was sitting in a smoking car holding a lit cigar. [This was before it was known that smoking is harmful to your health.] A young passenger approached him and started yelling about the smoke. Although it was his right to smoke, as it was a smoking car, Rav Yisrael immediately put out the cigar and opened the window to let the smoke out. The same fellow shouted again at the rabbi, telling him to shut the window as it was now getting too cold. Upon arriving in Vilna, the young man noticed the hundreds of people waiting to greet a famous rabbi who was on the train. When he realized that the great rabbi was the man that he had been very rude to, he became very distraught and profusely begged Rabbi Yisroel for forgiveness.*

***The Brisker Rav, Rav Yehoshua Ber Soloveitchik zt"l**, was once caught in a blinding snowstorm. He and his wagon driver realized that they would have to find a place to stay overnight as the roads were becoming impassable. It was late at night when they arrived at an inn. After banging on the door for a while, the sleepy innkeeper finally opened his window and said that the inn was closed. The wagon driver called out and said that it was freezing outside and that the roads were becoming impassable. Grudgingly, the innkeeper came downstairs and opened the door. The innkeeper was not interested in tending to them, but he told them that they could stay in a side room. The room was cold, but it was much better than being outside in the frigid cold. The Rav and his driver settled in for the night. About a half hour later, more travelers were banging on the door of the inn. One of the travelers called up that the rebbe was downstairs, together with some of his followers. The innkeeper saw that there were about twenty travelers outside. That meant good business. He ran to open the door and greet the guests. He invited them in and brought them drinks and*

"You stand this day all of you before Hashem; your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with all the men of Yisroel." (Devarim 29:9)

refreshments. Soon, they were all warm. The rebbe went to wash his hands and passed the side room where the other two travelers were shivering in the cold. The rebbe noticed them and recognized the great Torah luminary, the Brisker Rav. He brought the Brisker Rav into the dining room where the other chassidim were sitting. When the innkeeper returned to the dining room with more food, the rebbe castigated him for putting the gadol hador, the great Torah leader of that generation, in that frigid room and without giving him any refreshments to warm him up. The innkeeper had not recognized the Brisker Rav and immediately begged for forgiveness. He said, "I am sorry, I did not realize who you were." ... The Brisker Rav forgave him and taught him a very important lesson. "You are begging my pardon because I am the Brisker Rav. That is not why you should be asking forgiveness. You should be asking forgiveness because it was wrong of you to behave like that to any Jew that may have come to your inn. No one should be left in the cold." (Around the Maggid's Table by Rabbi Paysach Krohn)

Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky zt"l was one of the Torah leaders of his generation. One day, as he was taking a walk, he noticed a five-year-old girl crying. He stopped what he was doing [which was most likely learning], went over to the girl and asked her why she was crying. She said that she was crying because her friend made fun of her dress. Rabbi Abramsky asked her for her name. She said that it was Shoshana. Rabbi Abramsky told her to tell her friend that the rabbi said her name was beautiful, and her dress was beautiful. The young girl ran back to her friends with a big smile on her face. (More Maggid Stories for Children by Chaviva Krohn Pfeiffer)

The first pasuk in our Parsha says that you are all standing before Hashem referring to the *nesiim*, the leaders of the twelve *shevatim*, tribes, together with all the people. **The Yalkut Shimoni** says this pasuk teaches us that even though the *nesiim* and other officers were leaders over the people, and the people had to listen to them, in the eyes of Hashem all the Jews were equal.

The **Alshich zt"l** says a similar point. In the beginning of **Parshas Matos** (Bamidbar 30:2) Moshe first told a particular commandment to the *nesiim* before teaching it to the rest of the Jewish nation. **Rashi** explains that Moshe did this to honor the *nesiim*. The same procedure was followed with the teaching of the Ten Commandments. First Moshe taught the laws to Aharon, then to Aharon's sons and then to the *nesiim*. Only afterwards did Moshe teach the laws to the rest of the Jewish nation. (Shmos 34: 31-32. see **Rashi**

there). In our Parsha, the pasuk says, "You stand this day all of you before Hashem; your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with all the men of Yisroel." (Devarim 29:9). The **Alshich** questions why Moshe changed the pattern and said the current message to the entire Jewish nation, at one time. The **Alshich** says that the words of the pasuk itself answer the question. Previously, when Moshe taught the people, he honored the *nesiim* by teaching them first, before the rest of the nation came to him. Here, all the people were already standing together before Hashem to make a covenant with Hashem. Once everyone, the *nesiim*, the officers, the elders, ... and the water carriers were all standing before Hashem, there was no distinction between "greater" and "lesser" people. Once they were all standing before Hashem, there was no way for a human to determine which person was greater in the eyes of Hashem or which person deserved more honor. Someone whom the people feel is deserving of honor and prestige may actually be considered lesser than a simple Jew, in the eyes of Hashem. Hashem has a different equation than we do, to determine who is a more honored person.

According to the **Alshich** we cannot discern who is greater in the eyes of Hashem. How would we feel if the person whom we had treated disrespectfully, suddenly became our boss? How would we feel if, after 120 years, we go to Heaven and see that someone whom we had treated disrespectfully, is highly respected in Heaven?

Obviously, we should treat everyone with respect, as everyone is created in the image of Hashem.

An added motivation to do so may be the realization that the person whom we disrespect may be among the most respected up high. We don't want to be like the man on the train or the innkeeper who found out that the people to whom they acted rudely were well-known and highly respected people. We should try to be like the rabbi who treated everyone, even a five-year-old girl, with respect.

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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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