

faith. Imagine that the *baal/baalas chesed* is ill and the manifold acts of *chesed*, which were demanding, to say the least, when he/she was healthy, are now overwhelming. This is when *mesiras nefesh* kicks in, since there is probably no one who either can -- or is willing to do the job with the same finesse and modesty. The following *dvar Torah* addresses such an issue.

The *Divrei Chaim*, *Horav Chaim Halberstam*, *zl*, of *Sanz*, refused to give his *haskamah*, approbation, on an *halachic sefer*. Many *Talmudic* scholars had approached him with their publications hoping to garner his written approbation -- to no avail. He did, however, give one *haskamah*, indeed, a very strong approval on a *sefer*, because it explained a very difficult *Talmudic* passage. While this was certainly not the first volume of *Torah* expositions to render brilliant explanations, it was the first and only *sefer* that received the *Sanzer's* approbation. Apparently, there was a *pshat*, exposition, given by the author that so impressed the *Sanzer Rav* that he said, "This *pshat* could only have been written by an individual whose *mesiras nefesh*, devotion to the point of self-sacrifice to Hashem, and his incredible *middos*, character traits, are exemplary."

The exposition in question is concerning the *pasuk* in *Tehillim* 42:2, *K'ayol taarog al afikei mayim*, "As the hart longs for water streams (so does my love for you)." An *ayol* is a male specie of hart; *taarog*, longs, is in the feminine gender. It should have either written *yaarog* (male gender) or *ayalah*, female hart. It cannot be both. The author quotes *Chazal* that an *ayalah* (female) has a very narrow womb. When she prepares to give birth, she bends down and she screams seventy times, a number equivalent to seventy words which comprise *Tehillim* 20 (*Yaancha Hashem b'ym tzarah*, "May Hashem hear you on the day of trouble." At that point Hashem dispatches a specie of serpent which strikes the hart on the womb, tearing it, thus allowing the fetus to emerge. Hashem guards over the hart when she gives birth.

Chazal teach us another characteristic of the *ayalah*. She has incredible compassion. When there is a drought due to lack of rain, all of the *chayos*, beasts, come before it and ask that she pray for rain. The *ayalah* cries out to Hashem and the Almighty responds, preparing for her a spring of floating water, so that the animals can satiate their thirst.

Two wonderful characteristics, but what happens, asks the author, if both opportunities for crying out happen to present themselves at the same time? Which one takes precedence: the *ayalah's* terrible birth pains; or the animals need for water? The author replies that when presented with the needs of others, the *ayalah* (female) "forgets" (disregards) that she is female, and becomes (like) an *ayal*, male hart (that does not give birth), and she prays for water. Thus, the *ayalah* becomes an *ayal* -- when necessary to help others with her *chesed*.

The *Divrei Chaim* was greatly impressed by this very thoughtful and inspiring exposition. He added, "When

one seeks to achieve the ultimate in *middos*, he must expunge from himself any vestiges of personal interest, so that his entire focus will be on the act of *chesed* for others. Only when a person thinks only of others can he properly execute the act of *chesed*.

Va'ani Tefillah

Bareich – בריך עלינו... את השנה הזאת... ושבענו מטוביך **aleinu ues ha'shanah ha'zos. V'sabeinu mituvecha. Bless upon... this year... and satisfy us from Your bounty.**

Two lessons may be derived from this *brachah*: the positioning of it in the sequence of *Bircas Shemoneh Esrai*; and its content. First, as the ninth *brachah*, it follows immediately after *Bircas Refa'ainu*, the blessing for healing. We derive from here that good health -- physical and emotional -- takes precedence over a living. In other words, one should not place his concern about the means he employs for earning a living over his health. If earning a living takes its toll on his health, it is not a "living." Indeed, it is the opposite.

Second, the *brachah* addresses the importance of satisfaction from one's living. We receive so much from Hashem. Yet, we fail to acknowledge its Source and certainly neglect to pay gratitude. Furthermore, there are individuals who, despite earning a living, find every reason to impugn their work. They are never happy and always complaining. Thus, we ask Hashem to satisfy us with His bounty: we should recognize, acknowledge and appreciate that Hashem is the Source of our bounty and that He has selected the very means that serve as the source of our bounty.

לע"נ האשה החשובה

ברכה טובה דבורה בת ר' חיים יוסף פאיר ע"ה

נפ כ"א טבת התש"ס

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

נדבת

מצחם שמואל ורויזע דבורה סלומון

ע"ה In memory of Mrs. Toby Salamon

Parashas Shemos

תשע"ה

פרשת שמות

ויאמר אל עמו הנה עם בני ישראל רב ועצם ממנו
He said to the people, "Behold! The people, Bnei Yisrael
are more numerous and stronger than we. (1:9)

Wherein lies our strength? What are the characteristics of Judaism and its people that catalyzed fear in Pharaoh? We are: united with Hashem; united with family; united in ourselves; secure in our beliefs and in our distinctiveness. When Haman sought to eradicate the Jews of Persia, he told Achashveirosh, *V'daseihem shanos mikol am*; 'Their laws are different from every other people' (*Megillas Esther* 3:8). *Horav Bunim*, *zl*, *m'Peshicha* interprets this to mean: "Their 'law' is to be different/to be distinct from all peoples." Our distinctiveness is what has preserved us as Jews throughout the millennia. Those who assimilated did not fare well -- neither spiritually nor physically.

In *Sefer Devarim* 26:5, the Torah describes the Jewish people in Egypt as "a nation -- great, strong and numerous." The *Pesikta* (*Devarim* 46a) adds *Melamed*, this teaches, *"She'hayu Yisrael metzuyanim sham*; the Jews were distinct there." How did they stand out? The Jews were distinct from the Egyptians in their clothing, food and language. Other commentators add that they also maintained their Jewish names. The only way to survive in an (spiritually) alien culture is to remain alien! The secret of the spiritual survival of our ancestors was their distinctiveness. They maintained their qualitative greatness by preserving the quality of their spiritual attachment to their tradition. They distinguished themselves from the Egyptians in the areas most often given to assimilation: language; name; clothing and food. We could not "go out" with them. We looked different and spoke differently and had different names. All total -- we were different. Thus, they wanted nothing to do with us. As long as we retain our "foreign" status, we preserve our spiritual and moral superiority.

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, *Shlita*, relates the story of his 95-year-old Jewish neighbor, who, whenever he found the *Rav* at home, would approach him and say, "You should know that during the Holocaust, there were many Jews like you with beards, *payos*, and dressed in Jewish garb. The Nazis forced them to wear a Jewish star on their clothing -- and then they slaughtered them!" The man was filled with questions, primarily: Why specifically were the Jews forced to wear the yellow star which brought about a clear demarcation between Jew and gentile? After a while, the *Rav* shared the following story with the unfortunate Jew:

In the *Sefer Meshivas Nefesh*, *Horav Yochanan Luria*, *zl* (who was one of the *Chachmei Ashkenaz*, circa 17th century), relates that at that time, the government also

decreed that the Jewish population wear a yellow star, in order to call attention to them. The purpose was to deride and humiliate the Jew, making him the laughing-stock of the country. He wrote, "When I was commanded by the local officer in Strasbourg to wear the yellow star, the local priest (who had respect for the *Rav*) asked me what this symbol on my garment represents. I was afraid to tell the truth: that the local officer who sought to humiliate me was behind this. If the officer would discover that I had reported him, I would be punished. Worse, the entire Jewish community would become victim to his anger. I therefore replied, 'I do not know why. It is the decree of the king.'

"The priest, however, was no fool. The priest said, 'You might not know, but I know the reason that there is such a decree against the Jews. Hashem chose you from among all of the other nations, because He wanted you to distinguish yourselves. He gave you specific *mitzvos* which would safeguard and underscore your distinctiveness. Such *mitzvos* as *Bris Milah*, *Tzitzis*, *Tefillin*, and *Mezuzah* serve as clear signs that you are different -- that you are clearly a member of the Jewish religion.

"Hashem did this so that, when a gentile meets a Jew and sees him wearing *Tzitzis*, he will inquire. The Jew will respond that *Tzitzis* are to serve as a reminder of Hashem's *mitzvos*. Since the Jew is so embarrassed to be different that he shuns these *mitzvos*, Your G-d declared that you wear a Jewish star -- for no rhyme or reason. It is a sign that fools and simpletons wear on their clothing, so that everyone will know that they are fools!"

Rav Zilberstein now turned to the elderly Jew and said, "The answer to all of your questions can be found in the words of the priest, 'Do not blame the Torah observant crowd for the yellow star.' We are proud of our distinction. We wear *Tzitzis* with pride. Judaism is our greatest source of pride. Blame, instead, those who have distanced themselves from Hashem and His Torah. They have caused the gentiles to separate us from them."

Being distinct is a badge of honor -- not shame.

ויצו פרעה לכל עמו לאמר כל הבן הילוד היארה תשליכהו וכל הבת תהיון

Pharaoh commanded his entire people, saying, "Every son that will be born -- into the river you shall throw him! And every daughter shall you keep alive." (1:22)

While Pharaoh had originally issued an edict for the Jewish midwives to kill the male Jewish babies and allow the females to live, he now wanted all of the boys -- even Egyptians -- drowned. This decree was the result of Pharaoh's

astrologers pinpointing the day that the Jewish savior would be born. They also foretold that his downfall would come through water. Thus, Pharaoh had all of the male children born on that day put to death through water. How small-minded they all were in thinking they could foil Hashem's plan. Moshe *Rabbeinu* was raised in Pharaoh's palace by none other than the princess. Water, in the guise of the rock which Moshe struck, did actually play a role in his downfall in his not being allowed to enter *Eretz Yisrael*.

In the *Haggadah*, this *pasuk* is used to represent *amaleinu*, our toil, a reference to Hashem's seeing our suffering in Egypt. *Amaleinu* is defined as *Eilu ha'banim*; "these are the children (sons) which Pharaoh had killed." *Rabbeinu Chaim m'Lunil* writes that the *banim*, sons, were considered *amaleinu*, our toil, because, *Ha'yageia la'rik mikra amal*, "One who works for naught; his work goes to waste, thus, it is considered *amal*." The *Malbim* (*Yair Ohr 3 shoresh amal*) writes: *Amal hu libli tachlis b'maasav*; "to work without purpose in one's activities." The obvious challenge to this definition comes from the Torah's words, *Im bechukosai teileichu*; "if you will follow in My decrees" (*Vayikra 26:3*) upon which *Rashi* writes: *Shetiheyu ameilim baTorah*; "That you will toil in Torah." In other words, following Hashem's decrees means that one toils in Torah.

This idea of *ameilus baTorah* seems to be inconsistent with our earlier explanation of the term *amal*. Certainly, one who toils in Torah is doing so for a purpose. He does not consider his learning Torah an activity which has no *tachlis*. It would be absurd to say that Torah study is an endeavor that is for naught.

Horav Baruch Mordechai Ezrachi, Shlita, explains that the primary lesson imparted by the *amal* (as explained by *Rabbeinu Chaim m'Lunil* and the *Malbim*) is that when any activity does not have a purpose that activity is transformed into *amal*, pure toil. *Ameilus* is an activity which one performs without ambition, for no purpose, with no consequence. Thus, bearing children so that they could be immediately drowned by Pharaoh was *amal*, since having these children had no overt purpose.

Ameilus baTorah, toiling in the field of Torah erudition, certainly brings with it great results. It bears fruit like no other endeavor and engenders reward that is unparalleled in its infinite value. Also, Torah molds a person's character, both ethically and morally. We must, therefore, assume that *ameilus* with regard to the Torah has nothing to do with the context of the endeavor; rather, it defines the attitude of the actual endeavor. One who learns Torah does so purely because it is Hashem's command. He does not study for the sake of reward, for *siyata diShmaya*, Divine assistance, or for the fruits of his achievement. He studies Torah because it is the *dvar Hashem*, word of G-d. The fact that Torah learning engenders many rewards – such as Heavenly assistance and character refinement -- does not change the fact that the endeavor is performed solely for the purpose of the activity – not the fringe benefits.

Alternatively, *v'es amaleinu eilu ha'banim*, raising children to achieve each one's individual potential can be difficult – if a person does not understand that Hashem does not just drop off a *neshamah*, such that some "make it" and some do not. A parent who gives up on his/her child due to his/her perception of the child's deficiency of character is guilty of heresy (*Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita*). If Hashem has entrusted you with a child, it is clear that only

you are able to raise that child properly, as Hashem does not give a person a *nisayon*, challenge, that he cannot handle. Since it is impossible to know the potential of each child, one may not prematurely give up on any child. Anyone who has been in *chinuch*, or any perceptive parent, can attest to this verity.

Some students might be considered wild; other students might even be considered uncontrollable; and then there is the young boy whose behavior is what I would term so incorrigible that it is beyond words. Not a day passed that he was not involved in some shocking experience. The boy was not a "bad boy"; he simply had no concept of self-discipline. The *rebbeim* in the school felt that unless drastic action was taken, this boy would have a negative influence on his class – even on the general student body.

Matters came to a head when, one day, one of the *rebbeim* entered the school's *bais hamedrash* and heard noises emanating from the *Aron Kodesh*. He opened the *Aron* and found – to his shock – a goat! He knew that only one person could have had the audacity to perpetrate such an unspeakable act. Our wayward student was brought to the *menahel*, principal, who said, "Enough is enough!" The student was to be expelled. At that moment, the strangest thing happened: the boy refused to move from his seat. Even when the *menahel* pointed to the door and said "get out," the boy sat motionless, refusing to move. "What do you want?" asked the *menahel*. "Take me to the *rav* and head of the *Bais Din* of our city."

The administration knew with whom they were dealing. This boy would not budge until he got what he wanted. He was that type of personality. They decided to grant his request and brought him before the *Av Bais Din*, head of the city's court. The boy was prepared to speak in his own behalf and asked to be heard, "What you are about to do to me by ejecting me from the school will affect not only myself, but also my children who will be born to me after I marry and establish my home. (Obviously, with a deficient Jewish education, his future appeared bleak and that of his children even bleaker.) Did you discuss this with my 'children' before you made the decision to expel me from school?"

Everyone assembled at the *bais din* stood dumbfounded. They had never heard such a question posed by an adult before, let alone a young boy. Since they did not know how to answer the child, the *Av Bais Din paskened*, decided, that the boy should remain in school. (I do not know if the boy's behavior changed drastically or at all. He remained in school and completed his studies.)

A number of years ago an outstanding young man, a Torah scholar of note, who was one of the top students in one of *Eretz Yisrael's* premier *yeshivos*, became engaged to a special girl from a wonderful family. The *chassan's* father, who was a noted *mechanech*, educator, stood up before the crowd and related the above story – underscoring the disastrous impact that negative *chinuch*, deficient education, could have had on this boy's future children. He stopped for a moment and said, "I am the grandson of the one who at the last moment saved himself from being ejected from the school. Look at who has descended from that boy!"

We never know to what heights each individual will rise. So many factors and circumstances can alter the trajectory of a child's growth. Therefore, it is the responsibility of each *mechanech* (and, of course, the

parents) never give up hope and to put all of their strength into seeing that the potential of each child is realized.

ויגדל משה ויצא אל אחיו וירא בסבלתם

Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren and observed their burdens. (2:11)

Moshe *Rabbeinu* grew up. What was his act of "growing up"? How did he manifest his maturity? He went out to his brethren and observed their burdens. In other words, Moshe's act of maturation was his identification with his people. How did he identify with them? He did not just wear a "yellow star" as an armband; he intended to see their suffering and grieve with them. It is easy to identify with the Jewish People when they are riding high. What about when they are bent over, suffering from back-breaking labor, ridiculed for being different, disdained and debased as the cause of all of the Egyptian woes? Are we willing to hold our collective heads up high and proudly declare, "I am a Jew!" This is what Moshe did on his first "outing" from the palace. *Vayeitzei el echav*, "He went out to his brethren." He made no secret about his biological connection with the Jews. He was one of them. These were his brothers. Moshe not only acted kindly, but he did so as a Jew.

Our people are essentially kind. After all, even the most alienated Jew considers *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, the very foundation – and probably the most definitive – *mitzvah* of Judaism. *Shabbos, kashrus*, morality, ethics, all stand far removed from *tikkun olam*. Sad, but true. Nonetheless, *chesed*, acts of lovingkindness, definitely course through the veins of the Jewish People. Acts of lovingkindness are a vital part of our DNA. Jews throughout the world stand at the forefront of every major act of *chesed*. Yet, how many are prepared to underscore that they are executing these wonderful acts of kindness specifically because they are Jewish? It is not about us; it is about glorifying Hashem's Name. There is much more to Judaism than *tikkun olam*; rather, it is about *kavod Shamayim*, glorifying Heaven, and teaching the world that there is a *Ribbono Shel Olam*.

Moshe did not just leave the shelter of the palace; he went out as a Jew, to do what Jews do best: to carry out acts of lovingkindness; to shoulder the pain and misery with others, with his brethren. I was inspired with this idea from an article I read about an amazing Jewish woman, whose simple act of kindness inspired a gentile author to respect Jews and Judaism. I loosely quote from a book entitled *Civility: Manners, Morals and the Etiquette of Democracy*, by Stephen Carter, a professor of Law at Yale University.

"In the summer of 1966, my parents and their five children moved to large house in Cleveland Park, a neighborhood in the middle of Northwest Washington, D.C. – at that time, a lily-white enclave. [Obviously, the Carter family were African Americans]... My first impression (of the neighborhood) was of block upon block of grim, forbidding old homes, each of which seemed to feature a massive dog and spoiled children in the uniforms of various private schools. My two brothers and two sisters and I sat on the front steps, missing our playmates, as the movers carried in our furniture. Cars passed what was now our house, slowing for a look, as did people on foot. We waited (longingly) for somebody to say hello, to welcome us. Nobody did.

"... I watched the strange new people passing us, and, wordlessly, I watched back. I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here. I knew...

"And all at once, a white woman arriving home from work at the house across the street from ours turned and smiled with obvious delight, waved and called out, 'Welcome!' in a booming, confident voice I would come to love. She bustled into her house, only to emerge minutes later with a huge tray of cream cheese and jelly sandwiches, which she carried to our porch and offered around with her ready smile, simultaneously feeding and greeting the children of a family she had never met – and a black family at that – with nothing to gain for herself except perhaps the knowledge that she had done the right thing. We were strangers, black strangers, and she went out of her way to make us feel welcome. This woman's name was Sara Kestenbaum. Sara died much too soon, but she remains in my experience one of the great exemplars of all that is best about civility."

The author, Stephen Carter, was twelve years old when his first encounter with civility, by way of a Jewish woman, took place. Three decades later, that encounter remained a vivid memory that inspired his 1999 book. Obviously, a number of important lessons can be derived – lessons which could have been derived from a host of other, but similar, stories.

I chose this one, which was based upon the observations of a gentile, because he was moved, not only by the act of kindness, but by the individual who performed it (in his words): "An observant Jew, whose family was deeply religious." I do not know their level of observance, but, unquestionably, they did not hide who they were and to what religion they adhered, to the point that the gentile assumed that this was the act of an observant Jewess. In the words of the gentile author, who learned a powerful lesson from this woman (a lesson that every young Jewish child knows), "Civility creates not merely a negative duty not to do harm, but an affirmative duty to do good." This is how we perform *chesed*. It is a requirement to perform acts of *chesed*. It is also important not to conceal the fact that the act of kindness permanently shaped the image of Jews in the mind of a young African American boy – an image that would remain with him throughout his life. Who does not remember the countless acts of *chesed* by *Hatazalah* following the 9/11 bombings? Or the outpouring of generosity and kindness proffered by the *Satmar Chassidim* of Williamsburg? When we act in the manner that we should, we declare, "This is the way Jews act." When we, regrettably, do not act in an appropriate manner, we allow them to say, "Well, that is the way Jews act."

Some acts of *chesed* are simple to carry out. Writing a check, if the money is in the bank, does not – for the most part – make difficult demands upon a person – unless he is the type of person who would easier "part with his life than with his money." At times, acts of *chesed* demand that we go to places that are not *geshmack*, pleasant, or deal with individuals who not only do not appreciate our efforts, but often spurn them. *Chesed* often demands *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice and dedication, to an inherently Jewish ideal, which is one of the pillars of our