

day in June, I light the candles for Sammy and recite *Kaddish* for him."

Jewish empathy transcends observance and the possibility of receiving gratitude. We are all family. It is who we are. It is what we do.

ואלעזר בן אהרן לקח לו מבנות פוטיאל לו לאשה ותלד לו את פנחס
Elazar, a son of Aharon, took for himself from the daughters of Putiel as a wife, and she bore to him Pinchas. (6:25)

Rashi comments that the name Putiel refers to two ancestors of the wife of Elazar: Yisro and Yosef. Putiel was a name given to Yisro, because he fattened calves for idol worship. (Putiel is a contraction of Putim, fatten, and *l'Kail*, to G-d, for idol-worship – not Hashem.) Yosef *HaTzaddik* is also called Putiel (Putiel being derived from *pitpet b'yitzro*), because he disparaged or toyed with his *yetzer hora*). This was not Yisro's only other name. He had seven names. Why is it that with regard to Elazar's wife, mother of Pinchas, the name of Yisro which is used is one that has a derogatory connotation?

Horav Mordechai Gifter, zl, explains that, while at first blush Putiel does seem to signify negativity, if we were to look "outside the box," beyond surface appearances, we realize that the consequences of Yisro's fattening calves for *avodah zarah* were not that negative. Yisro's idol worship was purposeful. He was looking for the real thing. Thus, he served every religion under the sun until he found the true religion, the one true G-d, Creator and Master of the world. So, while fattening calves for idol worship is certainly not a laudatory endeavor, it may be viewed in an acceptable manner. Yisro searched for the truth. As a result of his fattening calves, he found it! Thus, Putiel is far from derogatory. It was his *modus operandi* for finding the truth – for finding Hashem!

The *Rosh Yeshivah* observes that character traits are transferred hereditarily through the family lineage. Yisro made searching for the truth, an inexorable intolerance for anything that smacked of falsehood, a part of his essence; to a degree – it was his life's mission. This quality was inherited by his descendants, of whom Pinchas stood out. Years later, when the leader of the tribe of Shimon, Zimri *ben Salu*, flagrantly and in complete abandon of Torah law and the nations' rabbinic leadership, challenged Hashem with an act of public desecration, Pinchas was the one who saw through the darkness and ambiguity and took action. The Torah teaches us that when Zimri came before Moshe *Rabbeinu* and the Elders, "the Elders wept at the entrance of the *Ohel Moed*" (*Bamidbar*25:1-7). *Chazal (Sanhedrin 82a)* explain that they wept because they had forgotten the law of *kanaim pogin bo*, the zealous one should take action and kill the perpetrator who had liasoned with the gentile woman. Pinchas was imbued with the ability to uncover the truth, to see the through the forces of darkness, recalled the *halachah* and saved the day. Thus, Putiel is far from

disgraceful.

Rivkah *Imeinu* grew up in an environment that was clearly not conducive to positive spiritual growth. Yet, she rose above her murky roots and became the second Matriarch, the woman who successfully filled the void in Yitzchak's life left by the passing of his mother, Sarah *Imeinu*. Growing up with a father such as Besuel and a brother like Lavan, she developed a perception of the destructive forces of evil. She was surrounded by it, and she was able to transcend it. In the long run, she sort of benefitted from this arrangement, since she was now able to see through Eisav's ruse, his smokescreen of false piety. She saw him for who he was and did not fall prey to his sham. She clearly perceived the hollowness of his life, the falseness and hypocrisy. In her situation, like that of Pinchas, the murky background from which she emerged served a positive purpose.

Va'ani Tefillah

***Teka b'shofar gadol* – תקע בשופר גדול לחרותנו**
***l'cheirusenu*. Sound the great shofar for our freedom.**

In referencing the return of the exiles to our Holy Land, we underscore that our homeland has maintained its overwhelming loyalty to us. When we were gone from the Land and it was overrun with our conquerors, the Land did not produce for our enemies. *Eretz Yisrael* is in mourning over the loss of its children. It is only when we will return, with the advent of the Final Redemption, that the blessings which relate to *Eretz Yisrael's* fertility and sustenance-giving nature will be fulfilled. Thus, we petition Hashem thrice daily that He return His children to His Land. This will be heralded by the clarion call of the *great shofar*.

Why *great shofar*? We think also of the *shofar* blast that heralds the great Judgment Day, the *Yom HaDin* when we will all be judged. When the Torah was given to us, we trembled to the sound of the *shofar* that accompanied it. Thus, when we think of *shofar*, we think of two *shofars*, two purposes of the *shofar* – judgment and freedom. The *shofar* blast engenders excitement when it heralds the *Yovel*, Jubilee Year, the excitement mounting as we think about the ingathering of the exiles; it is then tempered when we realize that the *shofar* call is also a reminder of the Day of Judgment from which no one escapes. We think about all of this as we recite the tenth *brachah* of *Shemoneh Esrai*.

לזכר נשמת

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Parashas Vaera

תשע"ה

פרשת וארא

וידבר ד' אל משה ואל אהרן ויצום אל בני ישראל ואל פרעה
מלך מצרים להוציא את בני ישראל מארץ מצרים
Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon and commanded
them regarding *Bnei Yisrael* and regarding Pharaoh, king
of Egypt, to take *Bnei Yisrael* out of Egypt. (6:13)

Easier said than done. Hashem commanded Moshe and Aharon to take the Jews out of Egyptian bondage. Two problems surfaced: Pharaoh has to agree, and the Jews have to want to -- and believe that they actually can -- leave. Moshe *Rabbeinu* had earlier voiced his concerns, but Hashem told him not to worry. The *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* explains how this played out. Hashem told Moshe, "I have appointed you to be their ruler." That is wonderful. Who says that the nation that had been enslaved body and soul, for 210 years, was prepared to accept Moshe's leadership? How did Hashem allay Moshe's concern? How could Moshe convey to the people that he was their new ruler in a way that would ensure their acceptance of him? Words have very little power (unless they are humiliating someone). How could Moshe's mere words of introduction as their new leader cement a relationship of respect that they would follow? Perhaps, had Moshe been imbued with a heavy dose of supernatural powers, it might have had greater impact.

Furthermore, if Hashem had wanted the people to accept Moshe and Aharon as their leaders, should He not have conveyed this message directly to the people – not simply to Moshe and Aharon? *Horav Nissan Alpert, zl*, compares this to the well-known story of the *chassid* who told his *Rebbe* that he had just received a Heavenly Revelation via a dream that he (the *chassid*) was to become the next *Rebbe*. The holy *Rebbe* replied, "As long as the only one having this dream is you, it will not receive much positive response. Had it been the *chassidim* who had this dream, rather than just yourself, you might be in a more acceptable position." In other words, it is not enough that one believes that he should be the leader. His people must believe it, if he is to be accepted. A leader who is not on the same page as his followers is not much of a leader – since no one is following him. What is meant by Hashem's "assurance" to Moshe that He has appointed him to be *Klal Yisrael's* ruler?

Rav Alpert explains that Hashem imparted an important lesson in leadership (in reality, in education) to Moshe. In order for the people to listen to Moshe, it was vital that Moshe make himself into a king. To the extent that Moshe succeeded in the presentation and implementation of this role – to that degree would the people listen. In other words, people look up to a leader, but the leader must act

like a leader and be worthy of his leadership role.

How was this transformation to occur? How did Moshe, the holy person who previously had been an individual, become *Klal Yisrael's* ruler? First and foremost, a slave does not understand the concept of royalty. Someone who descends from monarchy, who has royalty in his blood, has a greater ability to appreciate the significance of the power and leadership ability that a king manifests. Aristocracy understands aristocracy.

Having said this, we understand the approach that Moshe had to take in order to inspire the people to listen to him. If we look at the *pesukim* that follow, the Torah records the heads of the Jewish households and their lineage. *Klal Yisrael* was not a nation comprised of ordinary slaves. They were descendants of the Patriarchs. The heart and soul of the *Avos* rests squarely within the DNA of each and every Jew. We are royalty! The sons of kings, the descendants of believers, we are different. It was up to Moshe to teach the nation its lineage, its history. He had to teach them to believe in themselves, to realize that they were *bnei melachim*, sons of kings. Once they recognized their own royal heritage, they could acknowledge Moshe as the ruler of the nation.

The student of true Jewish history is taught a perspective on the panorama of events through the lens of Torah, which will infuse him with a sense of pride in our heritage. Without such a perspective, he ends up focusing on the events themselves, rather than the lessons that they impart. It has been specifically this narrow sweep of events that has given rise to the revisionist approach to history, evinced by the secularists who pick apart events to suit their spiritually distorted fancy. Indeed, the secular streams that have infected Judaism have robbed the unknowing Jew of his/her pride in their heritage.

The secular historian, whose bias against traditional and spiritual leadership is quite evident, has, over time, spawned a school of history that totally ignores G-d's "involvement." We study "events," "people," "issues," but never the guiding Hand of the Creator in catalyzing these events. We refuse to "connect the dots" for fear of having to acknowledge the clear fact that it did not just "all happen." There is purpose, mission and destiny in everything and everyone. To ignore this verity is selfishly to undermine history and deceive oneself.

When we study our history, we develop a sense of pride in our heritage. The ability to connect to the glorious culture that preceded us is invaluable. Conversely, our inability to relate to history, to look back with deep pride, to place people in their correct time frame and perspective, engenders within us a certain naiveté and outlook that is counter-

productive to living a full life according to Torah. Torah gives us a total blueprint from where we hail, so that we can embrace that blueprint with confidence. Thus, the false accusations leveled against us by our enemies will not sway us, nor will we be compelled to live a life of apologetic acquiescence. This is what happened to our secular co-religionists. Their break with the past created a distortion in their self-esteem and severed their identity with the historical continuum of our nation. Tragedy and revival have always been aspects of our historical continuum. We look forward with great anticipation to that glorious day when we will no longer suffer tragedy, when challenges and adversity will be a thing of the past, when revival will be our constant motif and everlasting companion.

In order for Moshe *Rabbeinu* to succeed as ruler over the nation, he had to explain to the people who they were. When the people would be able to perceive themselves as royalty, then they could respect Moshe as king. When a teacher or *rebbe* enters the classroom, he is immediately on a stage. Long gone are the days when a teacher's presence alone demanded respect – from students as well as their parents. Today, a *rebbe* or teacher receives respect the hard way – by earning it. I was reading a thesis by a highly acclaimed motivational educator who posits that one of the best ways to earn a student's respect is by being the kind of person your students want to become. Another perspective is that, if your students do not want to replicate your success, then you really do not need to be there. We promote success by first modeling it. Our students should want what we possess. (This does not mean material success. I refer to *middos tovos*, character refinement. This obviously applies to parents as well.)

When a student sizes up a teacher, he looks at the outward presentation of his self – how he walks, dresses, acts, speaks, responds. The student who learns best is the one who says, "I want that. I want to be like him/her."

How we act makes the difference in how we ultimately become accepted. If we do not have "it," it will be very difficult to impart "it." A student of the *Chasam Sofer* came to him requesting *semichah*, rabbinical ordination. The *Chasam Sofer* noticed that when he entered the room, he did not kiss the *mezuzah*. The sage reasoned that, due to his nervousness in anticipation of the upcoming examination, he had forgotten to kiss the *mezuzah*. The *Chasam Sofer* told him to return the next day. He wanted to see if he would kiss the *mezuzah* upon his return.

On the next day, the student failed to kiss the *mezuzah*. This already served as sufficient reason for the *Chasam Sofer* to disqualify him from the rabbinate. Simply, a *rav* must instill *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, in his congregation. If he has a deficiency, the people will eventually notice it, precluding his ability to lead. When the people lack the respect they should have for their leader, he has lost his ability to lead.

**ואלה שמות בני לוי לתלדתם גרשון וקה ומררי
These were the sons of Levi in order of their birth:
Gershon, Kehas and Merari. (6:16)**

Shevet Levi was the one tribe that was excluded from the Egyptian bondage. They studied Torah all day, while their brethren slaved for Pharaoh. One should not think for a moment that they had it "easy," since they did not work. Pharaoh was no fool. He knew that, as long as a

segment of the Jewish People maintained its bond with the Torah, the nation would survive. In order to break Levi's bond with the Torah, Pharaoh decreed that only those who worked were entitled to food: no work; no food. He thought that he could starve the *Leviim* into breaking with the Torah. He did not know the Jewish People. They might themselves not learn, but they knew quite well that their survival was based upon the learning of *Shevet Levi*. Thus, they brought a part of their meager portion to the Levi. This is how and why they all survived.

The members of *Shevet Levi* were troubled over the fact that they were not performing the same back-breaking labor as their brethren. They empathized with their toil, their pain, their misery. Thus, Levi, the *rosh ha'mishpachah*, head of the Levite family, gave his three sons names which alluded to the exile: Gershon – they were sojourners in a land that was not theirs; Kehas – their teeth were blunted from the slavery (Keihos); Merari – their lives were embittered. This, explains the *Shlah HaKadosh*, teaches us to empathize with another Jew's pain – even if the pain is distant from you. Another Jew's pain is your pain.

During World War I, when many Jews were displaced and suffering, the *Chafetz Chaim, zl*, refused to sleep comfortably in a bed. He slept in his chair. The *Chazon Ish, zl*, would receive letters from all corners of the world: letters petitioning his blessing; letters from people who were in dire straits, suffering immeasurable pain, who needed his sage advice or, simply, a shoulder to cry on. He responded to each letter, addressing every concern and giving his blessing when needed. He saved each and every letter. When the *Chazon Ish* was *niftar*, passed away, the question was raised concerning the many thousands of letters that filled boxes and boxes. Indeed, someone asked why he had saved those letters.

Horav Dov Yoffe, zl, explains that he had once asked this question of the *Chazon Ish*. The response indicates the greatness of the *Chazon Ish* and the extraordinary thoughtfulness and empathy he had for all Jews. "When a Jew writes a letter to me," the *Chazon Ish* explained, "he imbues it with all of the pain and misery that he is experiencing. The tears that seem non-existent soak every page. The pain and suffering -- every bit of emotion that is coursing through his body -- are very much a part of the letter. If so, how can I simply discard such an emotion-laden letter?"

We have just given the reader a tiny glimpse of the empathy evoked by two of the *gedolim*, Torah leaders, of the previous generation. What about Jews that are not *gedolim*: *amcha*, Your people, *Yidden*, to whom *chesed*, lovingkindness, in all its forms, is an inherent part of their lives? We perform *chesed* not simply because we are compassionate. We feel for the other fellow; we perform *chesed* because their pain is our pain; we feel their pain. We empathize for them because they are us!

Let us take this a bit further – two steps further. What about the non-practicing Jew, the Jew who basically identifies as a Jew, but observes nothing? Does he empathize with his brethren? If *chesed* is a part of our DNA, then it should cross the lines – applying equally to the non-observant as well. Last, what about empathy toward someone who is gone – who has passed from the world? The *Chazon Ish* saved letters, because they represented a Jew's pain. How far does empathy reach?

Clearly, different levels of *chesed* exist, and various personalities are involved in its execution. Some follow the Torah's guidelines; others follow their hearts. For some, Jew and non-Jew are alike; for others, they reach out to everyone – for varied reasons. The following story moved me. It is not the traditional story about a devout Jew who went out of his comfort zone to help his brother. In fact, this story is about a Jew, who, although he did very much for his people, emerged from the Holocaust a changed person. He sought revenge for what happened to his collective Jewish family. He felt the pain and anguish experienced by his brothers and sisters, but he was not prepared to accept Hashem as part of his life, at least not to the point of religious observance. We are not the ones to judge a Jew who suffered through those years. The story gives us a new perspective on Jewish empathy.

Simon Weisenthal was an Austrian Holocaust survivor, who, following the war, became the premier Nazi hunter. While he was sitting in his office in Vienna one day in 1965, a woman, Mrs. Rawicz from the city of Rabka, came by on her way to testify at a war crimes trial. She related to him the story of Sammy Rosenbaum, describing him as "a frail boy with a pale, gaunt face and big, dark eyes, who appeared to be much older than his nine years of age." But, then, many children during the Holocaust aged quickly and showed it.

Sammy's father was a tailor who lived with his wife, young son and daughter in two musty rooms and a tiny kitchen in an old house. They were a happy family. Sammy accompanied his father to the synagogue every Friday night after his mother and sister lit the *Shabbos* candles. Everything changed in 1940 when the SS set up a training center in a former Polish army barracks outside of Rabka. It was the early phase of the war, so the SS platoons would shoot their victims, anywhere from fifty to one hundred and fifty daily. This was the way the SS trained their troops to become hardened and insensitive to what they would soon be doing. They wanted speed, no fuss, and maximum efficiency.

The school's commander was a cynical and brutal hardened SS man. Untersturm – fuhrer Wilhelm Rosenbaum walked around with a riding crop. His very presence inspired spine-chilling fear in the inmates of the "training center."

In early 1942, all of Rabka's Jews were ordered to present themselves at the local school to "register." As would happen throughout Poland, the sick and elderly were deported, and the others would labor for the Wehrmacht. As they were going through the names, Rosenbaum noticed the names of the Rosenbaum family. He went berserk, beating his riding crop on the table and screaming insanely, "How dare a Jew have my good German name!" He immediately threw the list of names on the table and stormed out of the room. Everyone knew what this beastly outrage meant: it would only be a matter of time before the Rosenbaums would be murdered.

The SS training center "students" practiced executions in a clearing in the forest. Rosenbaum watched with a careful, almost clinical, eye, to see if a soldier demonstrated any semblance of emotion as he shot the hapless Jews. Mrs. Rawicz (who was testifying) worked in the training center as a charwoman, cleaning off the blood from the boots of the SS, and then polishing them. One Friday morning in June, 1942, as she stood bent over cleaning, she

saw the Rosenbaum family – father, mother and fifteen year old daughter – being led by two SS men to the clearing place. Behind them, walked Rosenbaum. The witness related that the mother and daughter were immediately shot. Then Rosenbaum took out his anger on the father because, after all, he was the one who had introduced the Rosenbaum name to his family. With his riding crop swinging, he mercilessly beat the father senseless – for what? For having the same name as he. Then he emptied his revolver into the martyr.

Rosenbaum was still enraged. Where was the boy? Without Sammy, his vengeance would not be complete. There still remained a Jew who bore his name. When he discovered that Sammy had gone with a work detail to the quarry, he immediately dispatched an unarmed Jewish kapo to bring Sammy to him.

The kapo went by horse drawn cart to the quarry, and when he saw Sammy, he waved. Everyone stopped working. The Jews all knew the meaning of that wave. Apparently, Sammy's time had come.

Sammy looked up at the kapo and asked, "Father, Mother and Paula – where are they?" The kapo just shook his head. Sammy knew. They were dead. Sammy spoke matter of factly, "Our name is Rosenbaum, and now you have come for me." He alighted the wagon and sat down next to the kapo. Sammy did not run into the woods. He did not cry. He knew what must have transpired. He knew that he was next. There was no running. These creatures were fiends of the lowest order. Sammy asked the kapo if he could stop – one last time – at his house. The kapo said yes.

On the way, the kapo related to Sammy what had taken place earlier that morning. They arrived at Sammy's house, went in and noticed the partially eaten breakfast. By now his parents and Paula were already buried, and no one had lit a candle in their memory. Sammy cleared the dishes of half-eaten food off the table and placed candlesticks on it. Sammy put on his *yarmulke* and lit the candles: two for his father; two for his mother; and two for his sister. He began to pray, then he recited *Kaddish*, the prayer recited for the dead, for them. Sammy remembered that his father always recited *Kaddish* for his parents. Now that he was the surviving member of his family, it was his turn to say *Kaddish*.

Sammy began to walk toward the door, suddenly stopped, shook his head – and returned to the table. Sammy had remembered something. He took out two more candles, placed them on the table, lit them and prayed. (Later on, when it was all over, the kapo said, "He lit those candles and said *Kaddish* for himself.") Sammy came out of the house and sat down on the wagon next to the hardened kapo, who was now crying. The kapo wiped his tears, and they rode back in silence to the camp. The boy did not speak. He touched the older man's hand to comfort him – to forgive him for taking him to his death.

They arrived at the clearing in the woods, where the accursed SS Untersturmfuhrer was waiting with his students. The abominable creature screamed out, "It's about time!" He raised his revolver and shot the child.

Simon Wiesenthal concluded the story, "No tombstone bears Sammy Rosenbaum's name. Quite possibly, had the woman from Rabka not come to my office, no one would have remembered him. But every year, one