

# “MEMAAYAN HACHAIM”

Mussar talks from the Masgiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlit"a

## The Main Aspect of our Divine Service in Elul: To Smile

**Approaching the Days of Repentance, we recall an amazing incident which offers a new understanding of our spiritual efforts during these days of mercy and forgiveness, the month of Elul.**

R' Yitzchok Blazer zt"l in his work Kochavei Or (pg. 59), relates what he heard from his mentor, R' Yisrael Salanter zt"l, may his merit protect us:

“Our teacher told us that when he was a precocious young man, the learning of mussar had grabbed his soul and focused his attention on the ways of Yiras Hashem. One erev Yom Kippur as he was walking to the Beis Midrash for Kol Nidre, he encountered one of the townspeople known for his high level of fear of Hashem. The awe and dread of the Day of Judgement was apparent on his face and tears soaked his cheeks. In his concern, young Yisrael asked him, “Is there anything you need?” This person in his sorrow and trembling, gave the lad no response.

In describing his reaction at that moment, said: “When I had passed beyond this individual’s line of sight, I asked myself, ‘What have I done wrong--how am I liable to this man? What is it with you, the man known for your Fear of Hashem, trembling with awe of the Day of Judgement—how does this awe affect your relationship with me? Are you not obligated to answer my direct question to you with respect? Isn’t answering me an aspect of the ways of doing good to others, of gemilus chasadim, an example of lovingkindness?”

Such a person, viewed by himself and presumably, by his peers as among “the great masters of Fear of Heaven”, in all likelihood felt himself secure in the knowledge that he had conducted himself with the character trait of “chasidus”, exemplary piety. After all, don’t the days of Repentance require one to be immersed in a sense of dread and awe of the Heavenly Judgement? In his mind, his behavior—giving no response to R' Yisrael due to his overwhelming fear of Judgement—was entirely appropriate. Yet, the founder of the Mussar Movement R'

Yisrael Salanter zt"l. could only exclaim: “What have I done wrong--how am I liable to this man? What is it with you, the man of Fear of Hashem . . . how does the awe of this moment affect your relationship with me? Are you not obligated to answer my direct question to you with respect?”

The concept is startling in its far-reaching implications. Even though a person may have acquired a lofty level of spirituality in his daily service of Hashem throughout the year, and he might be suffused with awe for his personal Divine Judgement, nonetheless, he is required to act towards his friend—any friend!—with pleasantness, with nachas ruach, and never to disconnect himself from the guidelines of derech aretz, common human courtesy towards his community and his acquaintances. This principle applies directly to us: we must remember that along with all of our Divine service during these Holy days we must never fail to be concerned with the needs of our neighbors. For all our focus on pious serving of Hashem, we must not forget that our friends are awaiting our smile, our children look forward to our benevolent attention. We must pay attention to this truth, that with all of our spiritual elevation during this season we must not disrupt in any way our pleasant conduct towards our friends and family or lessen any bit our concern for their growth and spiritual elevation. As young R' Yisrael zt"l, said, such behavior is “an aspect of the ways of doing good to others, of gemilus chasadim, an example of lovingkindness...” We are no less obligated in this conduct than Him.

I remember an incident which occurred many years ago when I was a young avrech in Yeshivas Mir. The Rosh HaYeshiva, R' Nachum Partzovitz zt"l. was seriously ill that Yom Kippur and due to the Rosh HaYeshiva’s weakness, he was unable to come to the Beis Midrash to join the tefillos. Therefore, the yeshiva staff erected a small room with a window to the Sanctuary so that R' Nachum could daven with the yeshiva students. Following mussaf, during the break prior to mincha, I walked along the corridor near the

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Rosh HaYeshiva's room, and I saw that his door was ajar. While I couldn't be so chutzpadik to take it upon myself to interrupt the Rebbe, I also couldn't imagine missing the opportunity to receive the Rosh HaYeshiva's blessing of a "Gmar chasima tova". I entered his room with trepidation, intending not to remain but a moment. The Rosh HaYeshiva saw me enter and called for me to come closer to his bedside. He warmly shook my hand and invited me to sit beside him. With affection he inquired how I and my wife were doing, how my children were, what was the health of my parents, etc. and he continued to "schmooze" with me with such warmth and tenderness even though it was the middle of the Holy Day, where everyone is preoccupied with his own spiritual world. When everyone else was using each precious moment to finish saying the Book of Tehillim or to learn another chapter in Rabbeinu Yona's Shaarei Teshuva, the Rosh HaYeshiva R' Nochum zt"l. found the time from his sickbed to relate to me with the affection of a Rebbe to a talmid, and to take such an interest in my personal life!

This is exactly the idea contained in R' Yisrael Salanter zt"l.'s words as cited by R' Itzele: "What have I done wrong--how am I liable to this man? What is it with you, the man of Fear of Hashem . . . Isn't answering me an aspect of the ways of doing good to others, of gemilus chasadim, an example of lovingkindness?" We must remember that along with our sensitivity to the seriousness of our avodas Hashem on these holy and spiritually elevated days, we cannot allow ourselves to forget our family, friends, and neighbors who look forward to our loving concern. Specifically, on these holy days we have an obligation to conduct ourselves with the sanctified attitude, cited by our sages "... Have you made your friend a king over you, with a pleasant mien?" **There is never a moment when one is exempt from the mitzvos of bein adam l'chaveiro, between a man and his friend.**

I found a support for these holy words of R' Yisrael zt"l. In parshas Ki Seitzei in the discussion of the obligation to return a lost object, the Torah states: "You shall not see the ox of your brother or his sheep or goat cast off, and hide yourself from them; you shall surely return them to your brother." (Devarim 22:1) The Ibn Ezra writes on this verse a cryptic comment: (When does the obligation to return a lost object apply?) "Even if you are in the process of going out to battle in war." The explanation of these words is as following—even when a person finds himself in a situation of stress such as war, nonetheless he must remain sensitive to his surroundings, to the extent that even if "you see your brother's ox being cast off, you may not hide yourself from them". That is, even though we find that in wartime many Torah prohibitions are permitted (cf. Rambam, Laws of Kings chapter 8:1 "Front-line troops who cross the borders

into non-Jewish lands, capture them and take prisoners are permitted to eat non-Kosher meats *Lit. Neveilos and Treifos.*, swine and so on, if they are hungry and could not find anything to eat except for these forbidden foods. They may also drink wine offered in the service of idolatry. By Tradition we have learned that "*houses filled with all good*" (Deut. 6:11) means beheaded boar, and the like.), nonetheless, the Ibn Ezra teaches us, one's obligation to his community continue unchanged, as we stated above-- **There is never a moment when one is exempt from the mitzvos of bein adam l'chaveiro, between a man and his friend.** Thus, it should be obvious that during the time of the Yomim Hanoraim we still have our obligation to maintain our attentive eye on the needs of those around us.

The Gemora in Chullin 54b, says: **And** are tradesmen **not** permitted to stand before Torah scholars? **But didn't we learn** in a mishna (*Bikkurim* 3:3): When the pilgrims bring their first fruits to Jerusalem, **all the tradesmen stand before them, and greet them, and say to them: Our brothers from such and such place, welcome?**

**Rabbi Yoḥanan said:** Yes, **they stand before** those bringing first fruits, but **they do not stand before Torah scholars.** **Rabbi Yosei bar Avin says:** **Come and see how beloved is a mitzva performed in its proper time, as the tradesmen stand before those** who brought first fruits, while **they do not stand before Torah scholars.**

The Gemara rejects the statement of Rabbi Yosei bar Avin: **From where** does one know that they rise out of respect? **Perhaps** the tradesmen stand only **in order not to cause** those bringing first fruits to **fail** and sin **in the future.** That is, if the tradesmen do not treat those bringing the first fruits with great respect, they may not make the effort to travel to Jerusalem in a subsequent year.

In explaining the Gemora's rejection of the statement of Rabbi Yosei bar Avin, Rashi writes: (What does the Gemora mean when it says that by not giving respect to those bringing first fruits, they will "cause those bringing them to fail and sin in the future"?) It means: if the tradesman do not give them a hearty welcome, full of honor, then those bringing the fruits will not come the following year due to the great effort involved (and lack of honor accorded to them).

We see from this Talmudic passage concerning the laws of bringing the first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem an important principle relevant to our discussion concerning our behavior during Elul. While the halacha is that tradesman may not stand even before Torah scholars (in order to concentrate on their work), during the season of Bikkurim, of bringing the first fruits, they are required to stand before those performing the mitzva. This obligation

stems from the logical rationale that if the tradesmen do not stand, “they will cause those bringing them (the first fruits) to fail and sin in the future”. As Rashi explains, the “failing” derives from: “if the tradesman do not give them a hearty welcome, full of honor” i.e. by not giving the arriving pilgrims smiles, showering them with brotherly love. Hence, the trademen (unlike in relation to Torah scholars!!) are required stand before the pilgrims, and as Rashi writes, to smile and to relate to them cordially as they greet them.

We learn from here the value of a smile and warm social interaction vis-à-vis our neighbors. If one greets his friend with a warm countenance, he is literally giving him life, inspiring him to return next year and to fulfill his pilgrimage obligations. On the other hand, if one does not show his neighbor a smile, he is no less than “**causing** those bringing first fruits to **fail** and sin **in the future**”. How great then is the power of a smile and warm greeting to one’s friend, especially during Elul when the Fear of Hashem and His Judgement is palpable?!

I have heard in the name of the Mashgiach Rabbi Avigdor Miller zt”l that was once asked “What is the main focus of our service of Hashem in Elul?” He answered, in his terse style: “To smile!” Neither fasts nor ascetic acts nor prostrating at the graves of the tzadikim are, according to Rabbi Miller, keys to Elul. Rather—“Smile!” Put in another way, the main focus of our behavior in Elul should be to relate to our friends with nachas, to recognize their qualities, and in so doing we can fulfill our Divine mission and purpose.

The Midrash says (Vayikra Raba 34), “Reb Yitzchok says, ‘the Torah teaches us proper behavior-- when a person fulfills a mitzva, he should do so with a complete heart. For if Reuven would have known the Holy One, Blessed be He would write in the Torah concerning him, ‘. . . and Reuven heard and saved him (Yosef) from their hand’ (Breishis 37:21)—he would have carried Yosef on his back and brought him to his father Yaakov. Further, if Boaz would have known that the Holy One, Blessed be He would write (in the book of Ruth) concerning him, ‘. . . and he (Boaz) handed her (Ruth) roasted grain’ (Ruth 2:14), he would have fed her from fatted calves.”

We derive from this Midrash the principle that to the extent that a person lacks an accurate awareness of the value and power of his actions, he will behave in a fashion without requisite alacrity and intensity. However, when the Torah itself explicitly describes the value of the actions, then we can perform the mitzvos described in an entirely different manner, with greater passion and spiritual content. We are all influenced by the actions of our fellows and what is said about them. What is the value of their behavior? When we appreciate and honor our fellow, we then fill him with

desire in all his deeds. Moreover, our friend becomes changed himself, and he is able to influence others.

So, too, in our Divine service during this month of Elul in which we are searching for merits which we can take to our Judgement, there will be no greater merit for us than to support our friends by opening their eyes to their unique strengths and virtues. Simply put, we must relate to our community, in every situation, with love and joy. Revealing our neighbor’s value, his inner hidden strengths, and helping him bring out his potential to actuality, recognizing that each and every Jew needs a good word, a supporting gesture—all of these actions help to bring out our friend’s inner value. Even more, these actions represent our greatest merits, measure for measure, for our spiritual growth.

Another experience which is etched indelibly into my heart is an incident which occurred with Maran Horav Shach zt”l, during one of his famous talks. This presentation was entitled “Ne’um HaShafanim”. In this lecture, Maran decried from the depths of his heart the situation in the secular kibbutzim. Assimilation, eating non-kosher food, and the rest—he cried out, “In what way are you Jews?” He explained that every nation has a “culture”, and ours is, l’havdil, the Holy Torah. Without the Torah’s commandments, in what way are these kibbutzniks fit to be called “Jews”? The content of the talk roiled the entire Jewish world, with media outlets throughout the world seeking curiously to hear the details of Maran’s talk. I, too, in my position as a young mashgiach at Yeshivas Ohr Yisrael, heard this speech, and I was profoundly inspired by the presentation of the Rosh HaYeshiva. The next day, I took a bus to Bnei Brak to personally visit with Rav Shach zt”l. In his home, and when I arrived I said, “Yesterday, the Rosh HaYeshiva gave an awesome presentation!” (lit.: truly wonderful words). At this, Moreinu zt”l, actually blushed and asked me, in his humble, pure way, “Taake? Truly?” The entire Jewish world is tumultuous, boisterous in its response to the Rosh HaYeshiva’s speech, and I was standing in front of the Gadol HaDor as a young avrech and I had just complimented him. Did Rav Shach need my *haskama*, my approval?!! Nonetheless, Maran blushed at my words, accepting the compliment. I saw then, that no matter the individual, everyone can appreciate a good word, a praise, even the Gadol HaDor.

Along these lines, I heard another incident when the Gaon R’ Chaim Shmuelevitz zt”l. became Rosh HaYeshiva of Mir (Poland) and had begun saying shiurim in the Yeshiva. During this time, there were numerous great lamdonim present at these shiurim, including R’ Leib Mallin zt”l., and others. The Mashgiach, R’ Yeruchem Levovitz zt”l, wanted to encourage and offer support to R’ Chaim, and therefore,

in the middle of one of the new Rosh HaYeshiva's lectures, R' Yeruchem brought out a letter which he had received from one of his former students. He read out loud, quoting the letter: "... the students here are toiling mightily to understand the chaburos of R' Chaim..." When he finished his quotation, he glanced in R' Chaim's direction, as if to say that "the chaburos of R' Chaim" the letter was referring to were the lectures of Rabbi Shmuelevitz. Yet, in truth, the intent of the student author of the letter was to let R' Yeruchem know that he and his friends were studying the essays of R' Chaim—Brisker, not R' Chaim Shmuelevitz! Afterwards, Rabbi Shmuelevitz related: Do you think that I didn't know that the letter R' Yeruchem read in my shiur was actually referencing R' Chaim Brisker? Of course I knew. But, believe me that till today, (many years later) I have a warm feeling from the Mashgiach's compliment!"

Again, we learn from here that every Jew in every situation needs to be valued, to be complimented. Even if the Rosh HaYeshiva R' Chaim Shmuelevitz zt"l knew that the intent of the letter was to reference R' Chaim Brisker, nonetheless, the incident cheered and strengthened him to continue with the presenting of his lectures as the new Rosh HaYeshiva, with the words—"... even till today, I feel the warmth..."

In Breishis Raba (61), the midrash cites the famous story with the students of Rabbi Akiva: "Twenty four thousand students learned from Rabbi Akiva, from Acco till Antiparos. All of them died during same period of time. Why? Because they were not generous to each other (lit. their eyes were narrow with each other).

We once explained this Midrash in the following manner: The sin which caused the students of Rabbi Akiva to pass away was not only because they did not relate to each other with honor (shelo nahagu kavod zeh b'zeh, Heb.). Rather, there was a deeper reason. That they did not relate to each other with honor stemmed from the fact that they did not relate to each other with generosity. Simply put, they could not "fargin" their friend, they could not dedicate themselves to bring pleasure to the other person. They could not see that each and every one of their community of students had a place in the group, and that "no one touches that which is prepared for his neighbor" (Heb. ein

adam nogeiah b'muchan l'chaveiro). It was for this reason that they were not fit of relate to their fellow with honor, because in their narrowness of spirit, they were worried that the honor which they might give their friend would lessen their own.

Once again, the story of R' Akiva's talmidim shows the significance of giving honor to others, of be able to "fargin" the other fellow. This was the root cause of their sin, as they lived in a zero-sum world—if they gave to their friend, it meant there was less for themselves. However, the truth of the matter is that by not conducting themselves with honor toward their friends, they broke the vessels with which they have been given to receive their portion in the Oral Torah. Specifically, by smiling at a fellow, seeking out his pleasure, can one bring out from him the hidden value within his character, and in that manner, merit himself to expand his own vessels to fulfill his mission in this world. We must remember and to plant deep in our heart that amidst the trembling and fear of the impending Divine Judgement, it is still incumbent upon us to act towards our fellow with nachas and to offer him respect. Moreover, as the Gaon R' Yisrael Salanter said, "What have I done wrong-how am I liable to this man? What is it with you, the man of Fear of Hashem... Are you not obligated to answer my direct question to you with respect?" The mitzvos between man and his neighbor apply at all times and in every situation, even as we saw above, in wartime, because every individual in every situation needs support and a smile. Through our warm mien to others, may we merit measure-for-measure on the Day of Judgement that we ourselves will be shown a nachas ruach from Heaven.



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