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Elul – A Time to Learn from Mistakes

A Tzaddik Falls Seven Times – and Rises

Shlomo Hamelech teaches us (Mishlei 24:16), שָׁבַע יִפּוֹל צַדִּיק וְקָם – *The tzaddik falls down seven times, and gets up*. A tzaddik who is an *eved Hashem* does not despair if he falls. He will pick himself up time and time again, and continue serving Hashem.

Someone once came to Rav Moshe of Kobrin and bemoaned his endless failures in *avodas Hashem*. The tzaddik asked him, “What does a person do when he falls off a horse?” The man replied, “He does everything he can to get back on the horse as quickly as possible.”

“Here as well,” said Rav Moshe, “the focus of *avodas Hashem* isn’t that you never fall. **We are meant to focus on getting back up as soon as we can.**”

While this is the simple explanation of the *pasuk*, there is a deeper lesson that can greatly help us in our *avodas Hashem*.

How Did He Get There?

Observing a tzaddik, we tend to wonder: How did he reach such lofty *madreigos*? He lives in the same material world that we live in, where powerful forces of *tumah* lurk, and he also has a *guf* that appreciates worldly pleasures. How did he become a person who yearns for Torah, *tefillah* and *kedushah* more than anything this world has to offer?

Shlomo Hamelech tells us that a righteous person draws strength from a source that remains hidden from the eyes of many people.

Is it the tears that pour down onto his beard as he davens? Is it his connection to other tzaddikim? Or is there some *segulah* that helps him?

The *pasuk* in Mishlei doesn't mention any of those possibilities. What the tzaddik does have is *שָׁבַע יְפוּל צַדִּיק* – the experience of falling. Even a bad fall can help a person achieve the highest *madreigos* if he knows how to utilize it properly. The tzaddik didn't only fall once. One fall wouldn't have enabled him to reach those *madreigos*. Shlomo Hamelech is teaching us that if we see a tzaddik who has attained high *madreigos*, he must have fallen many times.

Of course, most of us have fallen far more than seven times without becoming tzaddikim. The problem is that **we are missing one word, וָקָם - and he gets up!** The tzaddik knows how to learn from each downfall, and to utilize his experience to grow and progress. **Nothing can help a person rise in *madreigos* more than the experience of rising from a fall.**

If you come upon a tzaddik, you should know that he has fallen repeatedly, picked himself up, and grown from the experience. Without those failures, he would never have become the tzaddik you see today.

Growth of a Tzaddik

Let's illustrate a tzaddik's development.

At thirteen years old, he was just like any other person. He had a physical body full of youthful energy and felt drawn to anything pleasurable, no matter how meaningless. He experienced ups and downs. He wrestled with his *yetzer hara*. **The difference is that he tried to understand his failures.**

Eventually, even though he continued to fall, **he was able to identify the mistake that led to each failure, and to learn from those mistakes.** This knowledge helped him avoid repeating past errors.

Priceless Experience

Imagine a boss who wants to hire an employee. He receives two resumes. One was submitted by a talented young man who has completed a certified course in the knowledge required for the job. The

other applicant isn't as talented as the first, but he has twelve years of experience working in the field.

Most employers would prefer to hire the second applicant. Their reasoning is easy to follow: **Increased proficiency comes chiefly from making mistakes.** Someone who has made mistakes and learned from them is far more expert in his trade than one who has never erred, because he actually knows what works and what doesn't. "אין חכם כבעל" – הנסיון - There is no one as wise as the person with experience."

A well-trained beginner, who has learned a particular profession by studying or hearing lectures about what should and shouldn't be done, does not internalize that information. Although he might have absorbed a lot of knowledge, he may entertain doubts about the accuracy or urgency of the instructions. And even if he doesn't, they remain theoretical until he actually gets his hands dirty, makes mistakes and draws the appropriate conclusions. With time and experience, the parameters of his tasks become so clear to him that you can question him in his sleep and he will answer correctly.

An unfortunately common example can be found in the world of finance. A person hears about an investment opportunity and is confident that he will make a large profit. He ignores friends who try to tell him that there is no guarantee he will profit.

If he breaks even, he won't be discouraged. He'll remain confident that the next investment is sure to make him wealthy. However, if he loses a significant amount of money and emerges bruised and battered by the experience, he will have learned an important lesson. He won't just *believe* that a person can 'lose his shirt' by investing; **he'll know it because he experienced it.**

When you see someone who has succeeded, you can be sure not only that he has made mistakes and experienced failures **but that he has also learned from them**, stood up, and applied himself once more, making the most of the wisdom he gained.

Daas: True Wisdom

Let's listen in once again to the thoughts of someone who wonders how his old friend from yeshivah became a tzaddik.

"He fooled around in yeshivah like the rest of us. He broke the same rules we did. He had aspirations, but so did we. What gave him the power to fulfill those aspirations, instead of letting them remain empty words as the rest of us did? He got married, had children, and had to deal with the same challenges we faced. How did he do it?"

The answer, in one word, is *daas*. **When the knowledge and understanding you have gained penetrate so deeply into the essence of your *nefesh* that it even affects your body, you have *daas*, true wisdom.** "דעת קניית מה חסרת?" – if you have acquired *daas*, is there anything you're missing?" (Vayikra Rabbah 1:6). If you have *daas*, you will eventually reach your goals.

Daas doesn't depend on a particular quantity of knowledge, or on your enthusiasm about what you know. It's enough for one piece of knowledge to penetrate deep inside you to the place that is called *daas*. That means **it reaches the nexus that connects your wisdom and your actions**. Your actions can now be guided by your wisdom.

The Greatness of Daas

In *Maseches Berachos* (33a), we learn:

R. Ami said: *De'ah* is great for it was placed between two Names of Hashem. As it says, כי א-ל דעות ה' (Shmuel II, 3).

R. Elazar said: The Mikdash is great because it was placed between two Names of Hashem, as it says (Shemos 15:17), פעלת ה' מקדש ה'.

R. Elazar went on to say: If someone has *de'ah*, it is as if the Beis Hamikdash was built in his days.

De'ah is connected to the Beis Hamikdash, because that was the place that was designed for acquiring *da'as*. When a person brought a *korban chatas*, the deep comprehension of his wrongdoing meant that his *teshuvah* could transform him and prevent him from making similar mistakes in the future.

Young children don't yet have *daas*. We can warn a small child dozens of times not to play with fire because it's dangerous, but he won't really understand. He may avoid playing with fire because he doesn't want to get punished, but if he feels no one will know, he won't resist the temptation.

However, if he burns his hand and suffers, he acquires a level of *daas*. Not only will he avoid playing with fire, but he may need help later in life to overcome the fear of fire.

Of course, some foolish people get burned and then ignore the lesson they should have learned from it. However, someone who chooses to learn from experience will gain an incomparably clear understanding of the dangers posed by fire.

Fire comes in many forms. If a person created hurt feelings that led to a family feud, he shouldn't look for other people to blame. **He should transform his mistake into a gift by examining the chain of events** that resulted in this *machlokes*. *This machlokes should never have happened. Where did I go wrong? I was probably overtired, and that's why I spoke disrespectfully.*

With a few minutes of introspection, he has gained valuable *daas* and saved himself from immeasurable suffering in the future.

This is the unique gift of *daas*. When we learn and become inspired, we gain *chachmah* and *binah*, but only when we are 'burned' do we acquire *daas* that pushes us to change. As we gain more and more *daas*, we become the tzaddik who has turned seven downfalls into the foundation of greatness.

The Missing Ingredient

When I was in *yeshivah*, each time a group of us discussed *ruchmiyus*, there was one *bachur* who waxed poetic about the *chiyus* he got from learning late into the night. There was just one problem. He would wake up at 10 or 10:30 in the morning. **He had *chachmah* and *binah*, but was lacking *daas*.** His excitement while learning late at night was genuine, but without *daas*, it couldn't get his body out of bed on time.

Someone who regularly wakes up at 4:30 a.m. shared his story.

Over thirty years ago, I had a lot of difficulty getting up for Shacharis. I was a *cheder rebbi* and my problem was so severe that I would wake up just in time to get to school, without davening first. When recess came, I speed-davened and returned to the classroom.

One day, I suddenly felt that this simply could not continue. I decided to get up like a lion at 4:30 a.m.

I kept this up for quite a while, but started to suffer from exhaustion. One morning after Shacharis, I found myself thinking that I should just return to my habit of sleeping late, so that at least I'd have the energy I needed for the day.

I walked out of shul and met the tzaddik Rav Eliyahu Roth, Rav Shlomo of Zhvil's *shamash*. He stopped me and asked me a question about the first *pasuk* of Tehillim 134. שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלֹת הִגָּה בְּרָכוּ. אֶת ה' כָּל עַבְדֵי ה' הָעֹמְדִים בְּבַיִת ה' בְּלֵילֹת

"Why does the *pasuk* speak of servants of Hashem, *avdei Hashem*, as opposed to friends of Hashem, *yedidei Hashem*?"

"A *yedid*," he answered, "will gladly do favors for his friend, but he won't give his friend everything he has. An *eved*, on the other hand, gives his master everything. He will give up precious hours of sleep, even if it means he will be exhausted the next day. Those who 'stand up in the house of Hashem at night' are *avdei Hashem*."

As soon as the tzaddik shared that thought with me, my heart started pounding. I felt that Hakadosh Baruch Hu had sent me a message. I continued to wake up at 4:30, no matter what. Thirty years later, I still start my day at 4:30.”

This story gives us a beautiful example of a Jew who utilized his failures to reach a level of *daas* that changed his life.

The Chazir with Split Hooves

Once, when the Arvei Nachal was visiting Rav Baruch of Mezhibuzh, Rav Baruch honored him by asking him to share a *dvar Torah*. The Arvei Nachal said:

We know that a person’s *tafkid* in this world is to progress in *avodas Hashem*. It is always possible that he will fall, and his disappointment in himself will lead him to *yiush*, despair.

It is vitally important not to fall into *yiush*. **Aside from the destruction caused by *yiush*, it means he will miss the opportunity that this failure brings with it.** Failure gives us a chance to ascend to unprecedented heights.

It is like a person who is walking along the road and comes to a pit. He has no choice but to jump over the pit to the other side. What does he do? He takes a few steps back, runs toward the pit, and just before the edge, he uses his momentum to take a running leap and reach the other side.

In *avodas Hashem*, a person who progresses step by step doesn’t have the momentum to take a giant leap. But when a wrong decision sets him back a few steps, **he can take a running jump and reach levels that were previously unattainable.**

However, the only way he can build up that momentum is by **taking the time to understand why he fell**, and to truly absorb the lessons of his experience.

The Arvei Nachal went on to explain the *pasuk* (Vayikra 11:7) וְאֵת הַחֲזִיר וְהָאֵת הַחֲזִיר - (Literally: *And the chazir [is forbidden], because his hooves are split and divided, but he doesn't chew the cud*).

The word *chazir* is related to the word חזרה, to go back, to retreat. When a person regresses a few steps, he should know that he has the ability to be *mafris parsah*, to take big steps. And he can only take that leap forward **if he doesn't chew his cud**, meaning that he doesn't get stuck repeatedly ruminating over his failures instead of moving forward. If he utilizes those setbacks correctly, he can now move forward with great strides.

Many organizations that help people handle specific challenges were founded by individuals who had to contend with a similar challenge. They struggled – and failed – and discovered ways to succeed. And now they share their hard-won wisdom with countless others, helping them to overcome their challenges. These are shining examples of those who have fallen and then taken great strides.

The Man of a Thousand Failures

To learn Shlomo Hamelech's lesson is to view life very differently. A person sees a Jew, whose fulfillment of mitzvos *bein adam laMakom* and *bein adam lachaveiro* earns him the admiration and love of everyone he meets. If he finds himself wondering how this person reached such levels, the voice of Shlomo Hamelech is speaking to him: ***You are looking at a man of a thousand failures.***

If he only says, "Nu, there are special *neshamos* in every generation," he is not a true student of Shlomo Hamelech. People aren't born with the *madreigos* they reach in adulthood. (*Sefarim* do say that there are unique individuals who are on high levels of *kedushah* from the moment they were born. They are exceptional tzaddikim who are sent into the world entirely for the needs of the generation. That phenomenon is not part of the regular *seder ha'olam*.)

When he sees a Jew who has fallen and sinned repeatedly, he is looking at someone who can become a *gadol* and *tzaddik*. The Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh explains that Chazal's statement, במקום שבעלי תשובה, עומדים אין צדיקים גמורים יכולים לעמוד of the *baal teshuvah*. Chazal wanted us to know that ***baalei teshuvah* have lessons to teach us that we can't learn from *tzaddikim gemurim*.** *Baalei teshuvah* have learned from their mistakes and utilized the power of *daas* to reach great heights.

Atonement for the Entire World

In the end of *Maseches Yoma*, Chazal say, "Whoever does an *aveirah* and repents atones for himself and for the entire world."

Commentators throughout the generations have tried to explain how one person's *teshuvah* for a single *aveirah* brings atonement to the world. Rav Akiva Eiger says that since all Jews are connected and responsible for each other, an individual Jew's *aveirah* damages every other Jew. When he does *teshuvah* for that *aveirah*, he repairs all of that damage.

However, in light of what we have learned, we can arrive at another explanation. Just as it's possible to learn from our own mistakes and achieve greatness, we can also learn from others' mistakes. Chazal's statement, "כל ישראל ערבין זה לזה", all Jews are responsible for one another," means that when I see my fellow Jew fall, I should feel that I have also fallen. **I can learn from his defeat, and then from his victory as well. When he does *teshuvah*, he blazes a path that we can all follow** in our quest for redemption.

Chazal say (*Nazir* 2a), "Whoever sees a *sotah* in her degradation shall become a *nazir*, abstaining from wine."

One who witnesses the shocking death of the *sotah* will recognize that wine can cause people to lose their self-control. He therefore decides to abstain from wine so that he doesn't transgress.

The Baal Shem Tov asked:

Why does someone who saw the *sotah's* punishment have to abstain from wine? We would assume that whoever witnessed her death has learned the most powerful lesson possible about the evils of dissolute behavior. He shouldn't need to abstain from wine. Isn't it everyone else, those who didn't see the degradation of the *sotah*, who should take extra steps to protect themselves?

The answer is that **if Hashem arranged for you to see the degradation of the *sotah*, that is a message warning you to protect yourself from sin.** You must heed that message and take steps that will stop you from approaching the slippery slope of *arayos*.

Sometimes such opportunities come our way naturally. If a close relative made mistakes that led to bankruptcy, you learn to avoid those mistakes even though it wasn't your business that failed. Because of your close connection to your relative, it can be as if you endured that financial crisis yourself.

Tzaddikim go through this process every time they see anyone doing an *aveirah*. They understand that **if *min haShamayim* it was decided that they should witness the sin of another Jew, it must be that they are meant to learn from his mistakes and do *teshuvah* for a similar type of transgression.** They feel so close to every Jew that they experience his fall as if they themselves had fallen.

Chiddushim in Teshuvah

A wise man once told me, "Life's too short to learn only from my own mistakes." How right he was! If we have to wait to learn everything from our own mistakes, we may live almost an entire lifetime without fixing many key aspects of our *avodah*. We don't want to learn from a mistake at age seventy and look back and say sadly, "I wish I had learned this lesson decades ago."

Hakadosh Baruch Hu enables us to learn from the mistakes of others. However, the most helpful lessons are the lessons we learn from those

who have not only made mistakes but also learned from them and utilized that wisdom to fuel their growth and progress. **This is how even one person's *teshuvah* for a single *aveirah* can bring atonement to the entire world. His *avodah* brings *daas* into the world** that is now available to everyone.

How can a person who lives in South Africa learn from a Jew in Brazil who did *teshuvah* for an *aveirah*? The Chida, in his *sefer Rosh Dovid*, tells a story about the Beis Yosef.

It once happened that the Beis Yosef had difficulty explaining a particular *sugya* to his *talmidim*. He stayed up all night struggling to understand the *sugya*. Just before dawn, his eyes were enlightened *min haShamayim* and he discovered a beautiful way to resolve the difficulty.

When he arrived in the *yeshivah*, he told his *talmidim* that he now had a *pshat* in the *sugya*. One *talmid* reported that he had also tried to understand the *sugya*, and asked for permission to share his *pshat*. The Beis Yosef agreed, and to his surprise, the *talmid* presented the same conclusion that the Beis Yosef had discovered after struggling all night long.

The Beis Yosef felt disheartened seeing that a young *talmid* easily arrived at the same *pshat*. That night, the Maggid – a *malach* who regularly learned with the Beis Yosef – revealed the secret.

“For a new light of Torah to enter the world, someone has to toil in learning. Once someone has toiled, and the light has entered the world, any person who studies that *sugya* can enjoy the benefit of that light that illuminates it.”

We learn from Chazal that *teshuvah* works the same way. A person who truly learns from his mistakes brings a light of *teshuvah* into the world. **His toil in the darkness of his errors is the instrument that brings that light into the world.** That light of *daas* can then illuminate the darkness in the lives of countless individuals.

Rising During Chodesh Elul

Elul is the month that is particularly auspicious for *teshuvah*. If you look back at the year and see mistakes and failures, don't lie down and cry. Put a smile on your face and start to count your failures. Don't ignore them. Take advantage of them by utilizing them. You will then approach Rosh Hashanah as a new and wiser person.



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