Jewish Tribune – Beshalach

**Taking Your Foot off the Gas**

Rav Zalman Sender Shapira zt”l, was a towering rabbinic figure in Lithuania at the turn of the 20th Century, a genius in Torah renowned for his righteous ways. He authored a multi-volume work on Seder Kodshim and was the primary influence and rebbe of his son, Rav Avraham Dov-Ber**,**the last Chief Rabbi of Kovno and author of Devar Avraham.

Rabbi Judah Mischel tells the story of Velvel, the vasser treger (water carrier) in Rav Zalman Sender Shapira’s town. Velvel was a simple, gentle soft-spoken person. who made up for his lack of education and sophistication with his hard work, stellar middos and endearing temimus and sincerity.

One day, Velvel the came to Rav Shapira with a heartfelt request. For too long he had been ‘on the outside’ of what was happening in the beis medrash in their town; he desperately desired to understand what the learned men were discussing while engaged in chavrusa learning, to be able to follow and participate in the rabbi’s shiurim. Velvel wanted to be a talmid chacham: “Bless me,” he pleaded with quiet yearning, “to become a talmid chacham….”

Rav Shapira took the earnest request seriously. “Please say it again, loud and clear - loudly, like you really mean it: ‘I want to be a talmid chacham!’ Go ahead….”

Velvel blushed with emotion and said it with increased volume and determination. “Again, louder,” answered the Rav, “Shout it!”

Unaccustomed to raising his voice, Velvel took a deep breath, and cried out with all of his strength, “I want to learn Torah and be a talmid chacham! I want this so, SO MUCH, Rabbi! I WANT TO LEARN TORAH!! Please…” he burst into tears, “please bless me….”

Velvel’s passionate cries pierced Rav Zalman Sender’s soul. He closed his eyes, and a heartfelt blessing poured forth for his success in talmud Torah.

The next morning, Velvel arrived early to the Beis Medrash for davening, sat down in his usual spot, and began to learn. Line after line, page after page, he sat motionless and fiercely focused. That evening, after work, he returned to the study hall and continued to apply himself. Day after day, week after week, Velvel’s hasmada, his determined, uninterrupted learning, began to bear fruit. The words and ideas on the pages began to come alive and flow with grace and power, and his mind and heart filled with insight, clarity, and the bright, holy joy of Divine Presence.

The great Rav of Slutzk (and later the rosh yeshiva of Eitz Chaim in Yerushalayim), Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer would repeat this ma’aseh, and describe how extraordinary it was to see Velvel’s transformation from a ‘regular’ person into a full-fledged scholar. He would marvel and note how the entire town had witnessed how an ‘underprivileged’ middle-aged man completely changed his identity, making learning the center of his life, growing day by day until he was recognized as a knowledgeable and brilliant talmid chacham in every sense of the word.

Towards the end of this week’s sedrah, we read of Amalek’s attack on Klal Yisrael. Sadly, this early display of antisemitism resonates in today’s world. And while it seems to be recording a story of long ago, there are messages that are pertinent to our times.

Moshe, Aharon and Chur ascend the mountain that overlooks the battle ground. The possuk states:

**וְהָיָה כַּאֲשֶׁר יָרִים מֹשֶׁה יָדוֹ וְגָבַר יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְכַאֲשֶׁר יָנִיחַ יָדוֹ וְגָבַר עֲמָלֵק**

When Moshe would raise his hand, Klal Yisroel would prevail and when he would rest his hand, Amalek would prevail (Shemos 17,11)

Rav Zalman Sender Shapira notes that the Torah does not say **"כאשר ישפיל"** (when Moshe would lower his hand) but **"כַאֲשֶׁר יָנִיחַ"** (when he would rest his hand).

Rav Shapira therefore notes that in order to succeed, it is necessary to make a concerted effort - **כַּאֲשֶׁר יָרִים**; but to fall, it is sufficient to simply rest or stay static - **כַאֲשֶׁר יָנִיחַ**. The fall will be inevitable. It doesn’t require the parallel concerted effort to fall, it is just a question of staying still, of taking your foot off the gas.

The situation in Eretz Yisrael continues. Days become weeks and weeks become months. It is important to maintain the sense of urgency in our tefillos and in our hearts. Taking our foot off the gas and losing focus means an inevitable downward trajectory, not remaining still.

Sometimes a holy water carrier can remind us of the importance of crying with passion and of desiring to aspire. IYH we should all hear besuros tovos very soon.

**Rabbi Golker is the Menahel of Hasmonean High School. To listen to his shiurim, go to TorahAnytime.com or JewishPodcasts.Org**