

SELF-INSPIRATION: A TOOL FOR LIFE

THE FIRST QUESTION THAT BEGS TO BE ASKED about "connectedness" is whether we are talking about a religious value and imperative, per se, or merely an element that is perhaps critical in furthering religious commitment and observance.

To determine the religious significance of "connectedness," its Hebrew equivalent must be considered. Yet, while we have a very powerful experiential sense of "connectedness," we struggle to translate it. It would be appropriate, therefore, to explore Torah terminology in search of parallels.

While many mitzvos predicate actions, others address understandings and perspectives (e.g., *emunah*), and still others mandate emotion, such as *ahava* (love), *yirah* (awe) and *simchah* (joy). These emotions are halachically required (e.g., *simcha* on Yom Tov, and *ahava* and *yirah* at all times), yet these obligations seem to go beyond mere halachic mandates. The Kuzari explains that the emotions of *simcha*, *ahava* and *yirah* form the basis of all of Judaism, bringing the individual closer to G-d. It would seem that the Kuzari is identifying these obligations as an added dimension of every other mitzvah, rather than as simply independent obligation among many others.

Under the Kuzari's formulation, every mitzvah includes components of deed, of understanding of its conceptual structure,

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and of emotion (awe/love/joy). When we speak of “connectedness,” then, it is this emotional dimension of Torah. If so, the Hebrew word is "*dveikus*," which, when broken down into its component parts, consists of "*ahava*, *yirah* and *simcha*."

Though there are many sources that identify emotional experience as an integral part of Judaism, here are four examples:

Kuzari: The Torah teaches us that there are three foundations for Divine service: awe, love, and joy. Come close to G-d with all three of these. Indeed your contrition on days of fasting do not bring you closer to G-d than your joy on Shabbos and Yom Tov, if the joy emanates from understanding.... and if your joy in mitzvos elevates you to a state of song and dance, this too will become a form of Divine service, and through it you will cleave to G-d.

(Kuzari: II 31:50)

Maimonides: And what is the way to love and fear G-d? When a person contemplates G-d's deeds and wondrous creations, and realizes the boundless wisdom inherent within them, he is filled with love and praise, and is overwhelmed by a great craving to know G-d, as David said, "My soul thirsts for the living G-d." And as he is thinking these very thoughts he is thrown back with fear and realizes that he is an infinitesimal being, benighted, standing with his minute cognizance before the all-knowing G-d.

Mishnah Torah (Hilchose Yesodei HaTorah 2:2)

Baal HaTanya: ...when someone contemplates G-d's boundless greatness, it produces awe in his mind and fear in his heart. The love of G-d is then ignited in his heart, and he craves and yearns with a burning desire to cling to G-d with all his heart and soul.

(Tanya: 1:9)

Chazon Ish: If a person is possessed of a most sensitive soul and it is a moment of tranquility, free of physical craving, and he scans the heights of the heavens and depths of the earth, he is overwhelmed and astounded: for the world appears as a closed secret, mysterious and wondrous. This

riddle grips his mind and heart, and he feels faint, lifeless, for he is possessed by this mystery, and yearns with his entire soul to solve it. He would walk through fire and water for [this understanding]. For what is the use for life, if that pleasant life's secret is withheld from him?

(Emunah U'Bitachon: 1:1)

As disparate as these sources are, they all point in one direction – that having an intense religious/emotional experience is a core Torah principle.

As central as this experience may be to the fulfillment of Torah, it remains elusive. The reason for this is that *HaKadosh Boruch Hu* has endowed us with a very powerful faculty called “habit, which usually serves a very positive function. This faculty controls our repetitive activities and frees our mind for the irregular situations that require original thought. Thus, can we brush our teeth, get dressed and drive to work with minimal thought. Unfortunately, however, the tendency to allow habit to control our behavior also affects routine activities that are important, such as those that are religious.

Because of the repetitive nature of our mitzvos, even prayer, study, charity etc. – which should be natural expressions of thought or emotion – become merely another pre-programmed act. Over time, these very positive activities become automatic processes, essentially “hardwired” into the psyche. Notwithstanding how powerful or passionate the original motivation, as soon as the action becomes a repetitive activity, there is a great risk that it will settle into a thoughtless routine.

The first to highlight this problem was the prophet Yeshaya, who castigated Israel with the words, “and their fear of Me was an act of habit (*mitzvas anashim melumada*)” (29:13).

In more recent history, the two movements of *mussar* and Chassidus were initiated out of recognition that, while Klal Yisroel's commitment to observance and even study of Torah may have been sufficient, it had become habitual; the emotional dimension of *avodas Hashem* was lacking, if not absent. Here is a quote from each movement that reflects this goal:

There is a need for “*beinonim*” (people doing the requisite mitzvos but internally imperfect) to find a solution to the following problem: many times their hearts are as impassive as stone, and they cannot open their hearts to prayer. Also that impassiveness leaves them unable to distance themselves from mundane pleasures. (Tanya 1:29)

What is the real fear of G-d? ...The mere knowledge thereof does not affect a person, as Chazal themselves have taught us, “the wicked know that they are on the way to doom, do not think that it is forgotten from them.” (Ohr Yisroel 9)

Both Chassidus and the *Mussar* Movement emphasized the essential need for deliberate efforts to stimulate an emotional dimension to *shmiras hamitzvos*. Offering specifics about how poses a challenge, however, for the techniques developed to accomplish this are as diverse as the numerous subgroups within each of the movements. Slabodka and Novardok, Kotzk and Breslov, Chabad and Kelm share the conviction that a means to inspire emotion in *avodas Hashem* must be constructed out of the fabric of Torah and mitzvos, but each emphasized a distinct focus and approach. That merely adhering to the letter of the law and expecting *ahava* and *yirah* to “happen” spontaneously, however, was agreed to be generally ineffective.

For some people, a *niggun* (music) or *hisbodedus* (alone time) may be most effective, while for others it may be *hisamkus* in *daas Elokim* (delving into knowledge of G-d). Some respond to scathing *mussar vaadim* (groups) while others grow in response to poetic and lofty paeans to the *gadlus* (greatness) of Hashem. But regardless of the means adopted, each approach had the purpose of evoking that elusive emotional dimension of Torah.

This emotional dimension must be evoked for two reasons: First, as mentioned, *ahava*, *yirah* and *simcha* are core Torah values, and second, when Torah observance reflects solely a sense of duty and obligation, the commitment eventually withers and atrophies. Eventually, it simply dissipates entirely.

Both the *Mussar* Movement and Chasidus faced stiff opposition from other camps within the Torah world. In fact, two of the most significant *gedolim* of the past century – the Chazon Ish

and the Brisker Rov – expressed criticism of both movements. These *gedolim* certainly did not contest the need for *ahava* and *yirah*. In fact, simply reading the excerpt from the Chazon Ish’s *Emunah U’Bitachon*, quoted above, reflects the deeply emotional dimension of his *ahavas Hashem* (which is confirmed by personal accounts of people who knew him). Similarly, the Brisker Rov’s *yirah* was legendary. His whole being was suffused with *yiras Hashem*.

Yet both *gedolim* had reservations about the formal approach of the *Mussar* Movement. They feared that formalizing an independent focus on *mussar* risked giving the impression that it was not a dimension of Torah. There was a risk that such an independent focus could result in “spirituality” being loosed from its Torah moorings. They believed that *ahava* and *yirah* could be achieved more safely and effectively through serious and intense Torah study in isolation from corrupting, outside influences, along with a fastidious adherence to the details of mitzvah observance. And each of them was certainly a paradigm of that vision.

Yet, even the Chazon Ish, between the lines of his criticism, acknowledged that it was the *baalei mussar* who succeeded in igniting the young generation with *yirah*. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine someone learning Torah and keeping mitzvos with the perseverance of a Chazon Ish or Brisker Rav without having achieved a powerful, emotional commitment.

The yeshivas in Europe that adopted *mussar* principles, tended to have a towering and inspiring figure as their *Mashgiach Ruchani* (Spiritual Advisor), such as the “Alters” of Slabodka, Novardok and Kelm, R’ Yerucham Levovitz, R’ Chatzkel Levenstein, R’ Isaac Sher, R’ Yosef Leib Bloch and many others. These giants were people whose own statures made them observable paradigms; their words and thoughts were inspiring, and they considered it their task to guide talmidim to spiritual elevation.

After World War II, a shift began to occur. There were increasing concerns that a strong emphasis on *mussar* risked distracting yeshiva students away from serious Torah study and potentially towards a “faux spirituality.” As a result, the role of

the *Mashgiach Ruchani* lost some of its emphasis on promoting *ahava*, *yirah*, etc. and became focused more on enforcing the yeshiva's expectations, both through rebuke and by imposing disciplinary action. Whereas the old *Mashgiach* had been a powerful *mashpia* (positive influence), the new *Mashgiach* reflected the more literal sense of the word (supervisor): in other words, the Yeshiva's police chief.

During one of his Yom Tov visits to my brother-in-law, Rav Nossou Tzvi Finkel, zt"l, R' Shlomo Wolbe, zt"l – perhaps the leading *mussar* personality of recent times – lamented, “The *Mashgiach* is a dying profession. No one needs or wants them. Eight of my *talmidim* who worked as *Mashgichim* were fired this year. It was not because they were inept or ineffective, but possibly to the contrary.”

The spiritual void now being observed could very well be substantially due to this absence of true spiritual guidance. Though the few who are learning with the perseverance and intensity exemplified by the Brisker Rov and the Chazon Ish have not suffered as a result, they are in the minority. Most yeshiva *talmidim* today are learning due to a mixture of duty, competitiveness and social expectations. With no opportunities to develop the additional dimensions of *ahava* and *yirah*, it is almost inevitable that they will one day find themselves with a hollow and “disconnected” feeling.

I would like to offer two points in the direction of remedy. The first addresses the agent of change, and the second the necessary technique.

The most effective catalyst to change may be the parents of yeshiva students. As the “clientele” of the yeshiva, their demands can heavily influence the yeshiva's policies. In considering a potential yeshiva, parents will frequently ask, “How smart are the *bochurim*?” Or, “how strong is the *hasmada* (constancy of learning)?” They may also ask, “Are there any bad *chevra* (peers)?” To impress the parents with the appearance of success, yeshivas will often retain a brilliant Rosh Yeshiva, and, to enforce their highly impressive rules, a tyrant of a *Mashgiach*.

They will also adopt a fine-tooth admissions selection process and will then maintain an atmosphere of brutal competitiveness.

Perhaps things would change if parents began to ask as well (and perhaps primarily): “Is there someone in this Yeshiva who I would want as a paradigm for my son to emulate? Does the person have tools to convey his message to a young *bochur*? Is there someone who can guide a teenager or young adult through the ups and downs, and help him understand himself? Do the *bochurim* in the yeshiva exude a *simchas hachaim* (joy of life)? Is there palpable warmth in the davening? Do the *mussar shmuessen* (talks) merely seek to strengthen the structure of the Yeshiva, or are they intended to build the student?” These questions should be asked not only by parents of weaker students, but even by those parents fantasizing that their children will one day evolve into the most brilliant minds of the next generation.

Once parents appreciate that inspiration and personal development are not achieved automatically, but rather require high-level input, this input will be furiously sought. And once parents demand this dimension of *chinuch* from their sons’ yeshivas, those yeshivas will make sure to respond to this need. After all, *kinas sofrim tarbeh chochmah* (jealousy of scholars increases wisdom).

The second issue that deserves attention is the “technique” of inspiration.

Human anatomy provides a useful metaphor. Muscular stimulation happens in two ways: massage and workout. A person being massaged is a passive participant, while a person working out is the active agent. Both exercises have positive effects, but there are great differences. The massage must be administered by an outsider, its effects are of short duration, and repeated massages produce diminishing returns. A workout, by contrast, is self-administered, has a long-lasting effect, and is no less valuable when it is repeated.

Today’s “inspiration,” unfortunately, is too often analogous to the massage. Whether it is a tear-jerking “new” story, an engaging speaker with exceptional oratory skills or a singer with

a penetrating new *niggun*, the inspiration that results may be genuine, but – like a massage – it has notable shortcomings: we are dependent on someone else who is not readily available, the inspirational effects are short-lived and, after a while, more of the same does not continue to move us.

Through his urging of the study of *mussar*, R' Yisroel Salanter sought to introduce a far more substantive form of inspiration. The study of *mussar*, of course, was nothing new – nor was the presence of inspirational speakers, then known as *maggidim*. R' Yisroel's innovation was in *how* to learn *mussar*. Some elements of his approach were:

- Secluding oneself from others (the darkened *beis hamussar* was that environment);
- Picking an apropos *pasuk* or quote from Chazal, and visualizing it to make it as vivid as possible;
- Repeating that *pasuk* or Chazal with a singsong, many, many times, until its emotional impact is felt.

There is still much lip service given to R' Yisroel's teachings and to the *mussar* movement in general (today there are even self-identified *mussar* yeshivos), but the movement itself has all but disappeared. If we could have a genuine *mussar* experience today, we would have the tools to motivate ourselves constantly. We could replicate this process to improve our davening, and to properly prepare ourselves to perform mitzvos and celebrate *yomim tovim* with a special emotional note.

The similarity between this approach to *mussar* and the techniques suggested by the Baal HaTanya is astounding. His great tool for evoking *ahava* and *yirah* in the emotionally impassive is conducting a spirited dialogue with oneself. In general, the Tanya's advice for progressing in *avodas Hashem* is either through deep contemplation of G-d, or by having a dialogue with oneself!

In summation: The challenge we face today is certainly not new. The giants of *mussar* and Chassidus struggled with it, as did so many generations, all the way back to Har Sinai. Those of us from the yeshivish/*mussar* tradition are guilty of neglecting almost completely the remedy we claim literally saved the

Yeshiva World in the past: *mussar b'hispaalus*. And the best catalyst of change may very well be the wise and concerned parents who choose to seek this treasure for their children.

