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A Giving Heart

Our lives are filled with opportunities to impact change. Perhaps now more than ever, we look around and see families struggling, individuals stepping up. We see that the world can be healed through acts of kindness between one another. Perhaps, there is one population in particular who has the gift of seeing the world with unlimited potential - that is our teenagers.

There is something to be said for the teenage years, when one looks at one's life ahead as a blank canvas of potential. The challenge, though, is making the right choices and taking the right paths that will set one on the ideal route to follow into adulthood.

One of those choices is figuring on what element of personal development to place emphasis.

The Mishnah in Avot 2:13 recounts an interaction with Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai where he tasks his students to discern the most important trait for man to strive to

Mazal Tov

to Aytan & Rivki Himelstein and family
on the birth of their granddaughter

achieve. Each of these talmidim of Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai bring a relevant response to the question posed to them. What should we focus on to be the best versions of ourselves? R' Eliezer's suggestion of 'a good eye', is explained by the Rambam to be a total satisfaction with his life, void of jealousy of others. R' Yehoshua's response of a 'good friend' is understood by most poskim to be someone who is willing to offer constructive criticism and someone from whom we can receive that corrective guidance. R' Yose had said 'a good neighbor', which according to Rav, is critical because those who surround us tend to have the greatest influence on us, and R' Shimon's response of 'considering the outcome of a deed' is explained by the Meiri to mean having foresight and planning ahead for all circumstances.

The winning response is that of R' Elazar who believed that a 'good heart' was the most important virtue, for, as Rav explains,

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from a good heart flows all good actions and character. It is obvious that all of these attributes are commendable, but what is so revolutionary about R' Elazar's response is that in our efforts to succeed outwardly, we must first turn inward.

A good heart is the lifesource of our existence; the passion behind our choices, the ability to serve Hashem with love and to see goodness and the potential around us. As Rabbeinu Yonah teaches, one good attribute can serve as the spark for the overall pursuit of a noble path.

I have had the tremendous privilege of serving as the Director of NCSY GIVE, a remarkable summer program for high school girls who spend five weeks volunteering throughout Israel. Over the last twelve years I have watched as these high school girls internalized the values of *chessed* and *achrayut*, and returned home as empowered community leaders.

The experience is truly transformative and is clearly marked by each NCSY GIVER's new awareness of and investment in their '*lev tov*', their good heart. There is no greater moment than when you watch as a teen unlocks that potential within. I often recount the story of a GIVER, as we affectionately call our girls, who arrived on the program on fire and ready to change lives. Her first volunteer encounter was with an older gentleman at a nursing home, to whom she gushed happily about her Jewish pride and deep appreciation to be in Israel. He listened but after a few minutes, stopped her to clarify that as much as he respected her

personal feelings, he did not share a love for religion, a love for Israel or a love for much else- especially family.

The older man proceeded to tell her that he had not been in touch with his son in years and had never even met his grandchildren. Though heartbroken by his words, this GIVER chose to channel her '*lev tov*' and harness her teenage innocence, handing him a piece of paper with her name and phone number, and encouraging him to be in touch if he ever wanted to speak about the *brachot* of being a Jewish person.

Their interaction ended there and she went on to have a fantastic summer of honing and polishing her '*lev tov*'. Several weeks after the summer, this girl received a voicemail from an unknown number. When she went to listen, she realized that the message was from the older gentleman in the nursing home. He reintroduced himself and explained that as much as he tried to forget their encounter, he could not get her words or her passion out of his head. He continued to explain that those words led him to call his estranged son and reconnect and that the next day, he would be moving in with his son's family, meeting his precious grandchildren for the very first time. He ended his message with thanks and a reminder to her that you never know the power of one interaction, one word, or one gesture.

Though Judaism appropriately focuses on learning from our elders, I would also like to encourage us to learn from our youth so that we discover the passion and good heart within each of us. ■