



RABBI JUDAH

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Dedicated L'IluY Nishmas HaChaver
Shlomo Michael ben Meir z'l

Not a Laughing Matter

An American yeshiva student learning in the Gerrer Yeshivah Sefas Emes in Yerushalayim was set to return home, and wanting to make the most of his last hours in Eretz Yisrael, decided to spend the night davening at the Kotel. To his amazement, in the moments before dawn, Rebbe Yisrael Alter, the 'Beis Yisrael' of Gur, arrived to daven there as well. Thrilled at his good fortune, the young man approached the Beis Yisrael and requested a *bracha*.

The Rebbe looked deeply into the young man's eyes. "Tell me, what is the greatest praise a person can say about the Ribono Shel Olam?" Overwhelmed and intimidated, the young man could hardly speak as the Rebbe answered his own question: "There is no greater praise of Him than extolling the fact that the Ribono Shel Olam doesn't laugh at a Yid."

As the Rebbe continued on his way, the young man, speechless and confused headed back to the yeshiva on his way to the airport, where he noticed that the light was still on the office of the Rosh Yeshiva, the 'Pnei Menachem', Reb Pinchas Menachem, zt'l. He knocked on the door, and as he was welcomed in he asked the Pnei Menachem if he could shed light on the Rebbe's cryptic statement. Smiling knowingly, the Pnei Menachem explained:

"Imagine if a student were to act inappropriately and violate the rules of

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the yeshiva. Brought before me, he asks to be forgiven, declares that he regrets his actions, and that he'll never ever repeat the same poor choices. Of course, I will believe his sincerity and give him another chance. Now imagine that this person breaks the rules not once or twice, but again and again, and each time, he comes into the office and tearfully regrets his indiscretion, begging for forgiveness. How would a Rosh Yeshiva react? What could I say? 'Are you not making a mockery of the program, the rules, of me, of yourself?' His act of piety and sincerity is all a show, one big joke.

"This is how *basar v'dam*, a human being, might respond. However, when it comes to the Ribono Shel Olam, even if someone has fallen over and over, repeating the same mistakes again and again, his Teshuvah is accepted as if it is the first time he is seeking to change. This is *gevaldik* praise of the Ribono Shel Olam, who takes our efforts in Teshuvah and our *retzonos* to change seriously. For Hashem Yisborach there are no jokes and the sincere efforts of a *Yid* are no laughing matter."

"MAN PLANS, G-D LAUGHS"

"*Ki Seitze l'milchamah* — When you go out to engage your enemy...." Chazal interprets this opening pasuk of our



sedra to be a description of our eternal struggle with our lower self and *yeitzer hara*, our evil inclination. In this parshah of the month of Elul, we are instructed to “go out” and adopt a proactive stance in our efforts to draw close to Hashem and make good choices. While sometimes we may get discouraged, and we may need to begin again countless times, we must nonetheless “go out” and re-engage, over and over again.

As we approach the end of another year, we are looking forward to new beginnings, a year of health and stability. All too often this past calendar year we heard the old Yiddish aphorism quoted: *A mentch tracht, un Gott lacht*, “Man plans, G-d laughs.” Though this saying never sat well with me, this year it stung. It was as if the Ribono shel Olam were insensitive and deaf to our suffering and disappointment, snickering over our cancelled plans and misfortunes, *chas v'Shalom*. How could it be?

The truth is, however, man plans and sometimes Hashem sees fit to rearrange those plans for the best. If one thing is important to remember during this season of *Teshuvah*, it is that the desires of a Jew to draw close and fulfill Hashem's will are no joke — and no laughing matter. May we have the *bitachon* to “go out” as many times as it takes, no matter what obstacles or “enemies” may arise. And may HaKadosh Baruch Hu always see the good of our inner intentions, for the sincere efforts of a *Yid* are no laughing matter! ■

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