



RABBI JUDAH

MISCHEL

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Where Have I Been?

Rav Shlomo Heiman, zt'l, Rosh Mesivta of Torah Vodaath, was renowned as a clear and deep thinker, and a dedicated master teacher. Each *shiur* he gave was an event filled with drama, suspense, passion and emotion. Rav Shlomo used every ounce of strength when teaching, and by the end would often pass out, completely exhausted.

One winter morning, Rav Shlomo arrived at the yeshivah amid a blizzard and found just four talmidim at shiur. Instead of cancelling, postponing or giving a scaled down version of what he had prepared, Rav Shlomo was all-in. He delivered a full shiur with all the dramatic flair and excitement as if he were addressing a full *beis medrash*. Concerned for the Rav's health and energy, one of the talmidim motioned to the room and whispered, "Rebbe, there's only four of us here..."

Rav Shlomo glanced around the near empty Beis Medrash and thundered, "Four talmidim? You only see four talmidim?! I'm speaking to you, your descendants, your future generations and students... there are hundreds and hundreds of *Yidden* learning Torah here today!"

Our sedra this week is a continuation of Moshe Rabbeinu's parting address, his 'final *shiur*' to Klal Yisrael:

אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלַכֶּם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם...

"You are all standing this day before Hashem...

וְלֹא אַתְּכֶם לְבַדְכֶם אֲנִי כֹרֵת אֶת־הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת... כִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יֵשְׁנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ עַמֶּד הַיּוֹם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֶת־אֲשֶׁר אֵינָנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם:

"I make this covenant... not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before Hashem and with those who are not with us here this day." (Devarim, 29:9, 13-14).

Rashi quotes *Midrash Tanchuma* (Nitzavim, 3), saying that all who were physically present at Mount Sinai — more than two million women, children and men, embodying the souls of all future Jews — experienced the Revelation of *Matan Torah*. Remembering this powerful fact brings us back to our national and personal mission and baseline. All of us were standing there, completely present before the Infinite One.

The Baal Shem Tov taught that "*Ha-yom, this day*" is a reference to Rosh Hashanah, the day on which we all stand in judgment before Hashem. Therefore, on each year, Parshas Nitzavim precedes Rosh Hashanah,

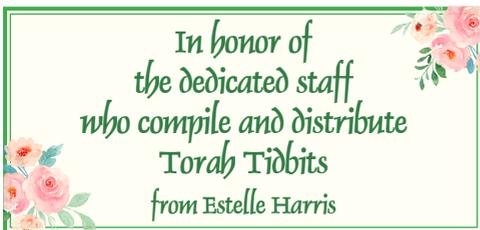
and at this critical moment it transmits to us words of reproach, encouragement and *mussar*, urging us to remember that no matter the deficiencies in our service of God, we are to believe in our connection with Hashem and to know that we can always repair what we have damaged:

כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוה היום לא נפלאה הוא
מקנה ולא רחוקה הוא. לא בשמים הוא... ולא מעבר לים
הוא... כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד, בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו.

“For this commandment (*teshuvah*)... is not concealed from you, nor is it far away. It is not in Heaven... Nor is it beyond the sea... Rather, it is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so you can fulfill it!” (30:11-14)

“If I am the king, why haven’t you come to greet me until now?”

Rebbe Aharon haGadol of Karlin strode toward the *amud* to begin Shacharis of Rosh Hashanah, with the customary *niggun*. As the Rebbe reached the end of that dramatic melody leading to the proclamation of “*HaMelech*,” he fainted and collapsed in awe. The chasidim rushed to revive the Rebbe, who soon stood up on trembling legs, steadied himself, and continued to lead the relieved congregation in



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prayer. After the davening, the chassidim gathered around him to understand what had occurred.

The holy Karliner explained, “During the Roman siege of Yerushalayim, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai went to plead with Vespasian to spare the lives of the Jews of the Holy City. When he encountered Vespasian, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said, שלמה עלך מלכא שלמה עלך מלכא, “Peace upon you, O king, peace upon you.” Vespasian’s anger flared and retorted, מחייבת תרי קטלא, “You are liable for two death penalties: first of all, you addressed me as the king, which I am not. Furthermore, אי מלכא אנא עד האינדא אמאי, “If I am the king, why haven’t you come to greet me until now?” (Gittin, 56a)

The Karliner explained: “When I was about to declare *HaMelech*”, I suddenly remembered Vespasian’s rebuke, and my heart grew faint. Standing before Hashem, coronating Him as the King of Kings, all I could think was the question, “If I am the King, why haven’t you come to greet Me until now?”

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Somehow, despite the clear message in our

sedra, as well as the month-long Elul shofar blowing, extra davening, and emphasis on preparation for the new year, it seems that every year we ask ourselves: ‘How is it already Rosh Hashanah — where have I been? I am not ready to approach Hashem this *Yamim Nora'im!*’

This Shabbos, as we prepare to ‘stand’ before Hashem and declare His *Malchus* on Rosh Hashanah, let us remember, כי קרוב, אֵלֵינוּ: we are “very close”; there is no such thing as a space devoid of Godliness. We all stood at Sinai; ‘Far away’ from Hashem is simply a construct. The right time and place for teshuvah is exactly wherever we are, “in our mouths and in our hearts”. Hashem is waiting for us. The opportunity is right here, right now, and it all depends on us.

The question is not how many chevreh have shown up to the shiur. I need to ask myself, have I arrived? How much of me is ‘here’? If we haven’t been fully present in moments of holiness, tefillah or mitzvah observance, Rosh Hashanah is an opportunity for us to stand before the King and re-establish direction and intention — to let the Ribbono Shel Olam that we are ‘all in’, now and forever. ■

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