



RABBI JUDAH

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The Great Question

Rav Yehoshua Eizik Shapiro, zt”l, known as Rav Eizele “Charif”, ‘the Sharp’, was a Rav and Av Beis Din of Slonim, Lithuania. Respected for his brilliance and mastery of Torah as well as for his ‘charifus’, passion, intensity and witticism.

When Rav Eizele’s oldest daughter reached marriageable age, he sought out a fitting match, and traveled to Volozhin to consult with the Netziv and vet potential suitors. Entering the beis medrash, Rav Eizele posed a complex and challenging question on the *sugya* that the yeshiva was learning. The premise was that if one of the *talmidim* posed a worthy *teretz* or ‘answer’, he might be considered an appropriate match for the *gaon*’s daughter.

One by one, the *talmidim* attempted to answer the perplexing Talmudic question, and one after another were summarily refuted by R’ Eizele. After days of deliberation without any of the *talmidim* having proposed a satisfactory solution, R’ Eizele departed Volozhin, disappointed that he couldn’t find a young man who met his high intellectual standards. As the wagon reached the outskirts of the city, however, R’ Eizele heard someone running after him, calling out — it was one of the yeshiva students.

As the wagon came to a stop, a *talmid* named Yosef caught up and stood below R’ Eizele’s seat, flushed and out of breath. R’ Eizele turned to the young man “So, *Nu?* Have you come up with a *teretz?*”

“No... unfortunately I haven’t... But please, tell me, what is the answer? What is the correct understanding of the *sugya?* I really want to know....”

Rav Eizele smiled broadly. “Ah! A *bachur* filled with *ratzon*, desire to learn and understand Torah! Such a *mevakeish*, such a seeker, is exactly the kind of *shidduch* I am searching for my daughter!”

And that is how the great *mevakeish*, Rav Yosef Shleifer became Rav Eizele Charif’s son-in-law.

The tragic episode of *mechiras Yosef*, the sale of Yosef, unfolds in our sedra. Yosef travels from the valley of Chevron seeking out his brothers who were pasturing in Shechem. When he arrives, Yosef has an enigmatic encounter that will ultimately change the trajectory of world history:

וַיִּמְצְאוּהוּ אִישׁ וְהֵנָּה תַּעֲשֶׂה בְּשׂוּדָה וַיִּשְׂאֵלוּהוּ הָאִישׁ לְאָמֹר
מַה תְּבַקֵּשׁ:

A man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, “What are you seeking?”(37:15)

This mysterious man, identified by *Midrash Tanchuma* as being the Malach Gavriel, informs Yosef that his brothers have gone to Dotan. Reb Menachem Mendel, the Kotzker

Rebbe, zy'a, understands this meeting in the field as representative of our wandering through life in search of meaning, trying to find our place. In this cryptic interaction, the Kotzker explains it is as if the heavenly messenger is preparing Yosef for the challenging path that lies before him. Like Yosef, despite our intentions, plans and expectations, we have no idea of what is actually going to unfold in our own story: we could, God forbid, be thrown into a 'pit', 'sold into slavery', separated from loved ones, falsely accused, exiled and isolated. And we could be miraculously redeemed, raised up from the depths, honored and chosen to lead, guiding vast numbers of people with God-given wisdom. Throughout all the ups and downs of life, however, we can always remember to ask of ourselves, *Mah tevakeish?* 'What am I really looking for, what is my true desire, what do I want from my life?'

As a teenager, Reb Hertzl Shechter, z'l, studied at Mesivta Torah Vodaath, and was a talmid of the legendary builder of Torah and people, Reb Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz zy'a. Hertzl was perpetually running late for Reb Shraga Feivel's 9am *Tanach shiur*, and was summoned to Reb Shraga Feivel's office to address his laxity. "Nu, Hertzl, when are you going to start coming on time?" Fidgeting uncomfortably in his seat, the teenager managed nothing more than a muffled "*Im yirtzeh Hashem*, if God wants." Reb Shraga Feivel was not to be put off so easily and shaking his head, replied, "*Nein, nein, nein...* not *im yirtzeh Hashem*. *Im yirtzeh* Hertzl! You have to decide if Hertzl wants!"

That single, direct comment from Reb Shraga Feivel guided Rabbi Shechter toward a lifetime of growth, *avodas Hashem*...and

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In the beginning, Yosef went seeking his brothers; ultimately, many years later, the brothers themselves came to Yosef, and the family was reunited. We become who we yearn to be and sincerely aspire to be. The power of *ratzon* is in imagining ourselves in our finest moments, the highest version of ourselves, as who truly want to be — and then believing that this is the real me. It is both the *ratzon Hashem*, and our true *ratzon*, that we strive toward our highest potential; it is certainly '*im yirtzeh Hashem*', and deep down, it is also '*im yirtzeh* me'!

Though it may be unlikely that we will encounter an angel in the field who will challenge us to consider our direction and place in the world, this Shabbos invites us to refocus on the '*sugyos*' that are most essential in our lives, and to ask of ourselves, מה תבקש, 'What is the "*teretz*" that I truly desire, what is it that I really want?'

.....

ואמנם כבר ידעת שהנרצה יותר בעבודת הבורא יתברך
שמו הוא חפץ הלב ותשוקת הנשמה...

"You already know what is most desired in the service of Hashem: desire of the heart and longing of the soul."

(Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzato, *Mesilat Yesharim*, Zerizus 7) ■