



RABBI SHALOM

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Living Beyond Achievement

The Gemara (Kedushin 31a) relates the well-known story of Dama ben Netina. The *Chachamim* sought to purchase from him a precious stone for the *Choshen* (known as the *yashfeh*), corresponding to the tribe of Binyamin. The key to access the stone, however, lay beneath his father's pillow. Despite the enormous sum offered (sixty ribo), Dama refused to wake his father.

The following year, Hashem rewarded him: a Parah Adumah was born in his herd. When the *Chachamim* came to purchase it, Dama acknowledged that he could demand any price. Yet he requested only the exact sum he had forfeited in honoring his father.

This Gemara is often cited as a striking example of the greatness of a non-Jew who fulfilled *kibbud av va'em* at the highest level. And indeed, it is. But as Rav Yaakov Neiman in Darkei Mussar teaches, there is another

dimension that reveals not only the greatness of Dama ben Netina, but the unique greatness of a Jew.

A SUBTLE BUT PROFOUND DIFFERENCE

At first glance, the story is inspirational. But upon deeper reflection, it highlights an even greater characteristic of Am Yisrael. It is written: **אם יתן איש את כל הון ביתו באהבה בוז יבוז לו** - if a person were to offer all the wealth in his home for love, it would be scorned. (Shir Hashirim 8:7)

A Jew does not "sell" a mitzvah. A mitzvah is not a transaction, not something to be exchanged for profit. It is an expression of a relationship with Hashem. Even if, in rare cases, one may speak of "selling" reward, the mitzvah itself is never for sale.

Dama ben Netina, for all his greatness, ultimately relates to the mitzvah in transactional terms. When the opportunity arises, he effectively says: *I forfeited money for that mitzvah - now I will recover it.* The act is noble, but the framework is still one of exchange.

A Jew, by contrast, lives in a different reality. A mitzvah is not something one trades, rather it is something one lives.

FORGETTING GREATNESS

There is a second, equally profound distinction.

The Gemara states: "לשנה אחרת" - in a later year. Not necessarily the following year, but some time afterward. Yet when the *Chachamim* arrive, Dama immediately recalls his earlier act. It remains vivid, present, and central in his mind. A person of true spiritual stature, relates differently to his own

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accomplishments. When a Jew performs a mitzvah, he strives to forget it.

Not out of ingratitude, but out of humility. Not because it lacks value, but because dwelling on it breeds complacency and arrogance. The focus must always shift forward: *What more can I do? Where do I still need to grow?*

The great figures of Klal Yisrael lived with this mindset. They did not define themselves by what they had already achieved. Their gaze was always fixed on what remained unfinished. Even Moshe Rabbeinu, the greatest of all prophets, declares: **“אתה החילול”** *“להראות את עבדך”* - *You have only begun to show Your servant.* (Devarim 3:24). If Moshe saw everything as merely a beginning, how much more so must we.

“HASHEM REMEMBERS WHAT WE FORGET”

This idea is beautifully captured in the teaching of Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasso. On Rosh Hashanah we recite: **“הקדוש ברוך הוא זוכר”** *“כל הנשכחות”* - Hashem remembers all that is forgotten. This operates in both directions. If a person performs a mitzvah and then forgets it, Hashem remembers it. But if a person clings to the mitzvah, reliving it with pride, then, so to speak, Hashem says: *You are holding onto it; I need not.*

Conversely, if a person commits a sin and forgets it, Hashem remembers. But if the person carries it with him - *“והטאתי נגדי תמיד”* - with regret and teshuvah, then Hashem allows it to fade.

A Jew’s avodah, then, is paradoxical:

- Forget your mitzvot
- Remember your responsibilities

WHY A PARAH ADUMAH?

This perspective also sheds light on a striking question: why did Hashem reward Dama specifically with a Parah Adumah? Surely, Hashem has many ways to grant reward.

Dama could have succeeded in business, found treasure, or prospered in countless ways. Why orchestrate such a specific and rather rare event?

The answer is that the reward itself became part of the lesson. By bringing the *Chachamim* back to Dama, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* created a moment of contrast, a living encounter between two worlds:

- A non-Jew who excels in a rational mitzvah he understands
- A Jew who is prepared to give everything for a mitzvah beyond comprehension

The Parah Adumah represents the ultimate *chok*, a mitzvah without logical explanation. And yet Klal Yisrael embraces it with complete devotion. Dama teaches the power of human morality at its finest. But Klal Yisrael embodies something even greater: a relationship that transcends understanding. That is the deeper greatness of Am Yisrael.

We live in a world that constantly measures worth through achievement, recognition, and memory. We are conditioned to catalog our accomplishments, to build identities around what we have done. The Torah life asks something radically different. Perform a mitzvah and an act of *chesed* and then move on to the next. Don’t dwell on past accomplishments, rather focus on constant improvement. We ought to serve Hashem as proud individuals - not for what we have previously accomplished but for who we have yet to become. ■

