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TORAH TIDBITS CONTRIBUTOR

SPECIAL PREPARATION FOR ELUL

Challenging Our Internal Voice

There was once a town suffering through a terrible drought. The Jews of the town were simple, G-d-fearing people. They were not great scholars, but they sincerely sought to serve their Creator with open hearts.

In those days in Poland, it was common for wandering preachers to travel from town to town delivering fiery sermons intended to frighten ordinary Jews into repentance. If a preacher could leave his audience weeping in despair and trembling with fear, he was considered successful.

One such preacher arrived in this drought-stricken town. Standing before the desperate crowd, he thundered, "How can you ask Hashem to send rain when you have not yet learned to serve Him properly? How dare you pray for your own needs when your own shortcomings are so great? Are you no better than spoiled, selfish children?"

And he continued in that vein, rebuking and condemning the people.

Unbeknownst to the preacher, however, another visitor had also arrived in town that day, a humble travelling melamed. Hearing the preacher's harsh words, he stepped forward to defend the wholehearted Jews before him.

"My dear Jews," he said gently, "don't you

know that Hashem loves you? That Hashem is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in kindness and truth? Don't become discouraged. Serve Hashem with joy! Serve Him with the confidence that He loves every one of you as a loving father cherishes his child."

Then he smiled and said, "Come. Let us dance with the certainty that Hashem hears our prayers. Let us dance knowing that the rain will come."

And they danced.

And soon afterwards, the rains came.

The travelling melamed was, of course, the Baal Shem Tov, whose teachings opened a new path in serving Hashem, a path rooted in joy, hope, love, and a deeply personal relationship with our Creator.

I first heard this story decades ago, and I have repeated it countless times since. Yet only recently have I begun to understand that this story is about me.

And maybe it is about you too.

How many of us speak to ourselves with the voice of the preacher? How often do we judge ourselves harshly, whether the mistake or failure is real or imagined? If I am honest, my inner voice often sounds much more like the preacher than the Baal Shem Tov.

In the story, it seems obvious which voice is the healthier one. Yet in our own lives, the critical voice so often wins. We mistake its harshness for honesty. We convince ourselves that relentless self-criticism is humility, accountability, or a necessary prerequisite for growth.

But perhaps it is none of those things.

Perhaps it is simply another strategy of the yetzer hara.

The voice that insists we are never good enough rarely inspires us to become better. More often, it leaves us discouraged, ashamed, and exhausted. The Baal Shem Tov understood something profound: people grow most deeply not when they are crushed by criticism, but when they are lifted by hope.

Self-criticism is a habit, like any other one. Difficult to break, but not impossible.

What is the key to changing that inner voice? The Lubavitcher Rebbe teaches that the way to get rid of darkness is by adding light. The more I learn to hear my inner “Baal Shem Tov,” the voice of compassion, encouragement, faith and possibility, the more I begin to see myself as Hashem sees me: not only as I am today, but as the person I am capable of becoming.

May we be blessed this Elul to recognize which voice we are listening to. May we learn to quiet the preacher within and make room for the gentle, hopeful voice of the Baal Shem Tov. May we know that when we serve Hashem with joy, trust, and love, we become capable of growing farther than fear could ever take us. And then, just like the townspeople, may we merit to feel Hashem’s blessings raining down upon us. ■

Shoshana Judelman is passionate about learning and growing through Chassidus. She gives shiurim to women in many communities around Israel, including Efrat, Elazar, Raanana and Jerusalem as well as at Midreshet Rachel V’Chaya. Shoshana also guides groups at Yad Vashem and leads journeys to Poland and other countries around Europe for JRoots.

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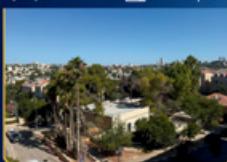


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