

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

"Dignity: the quality or state of being worthy, honored, or esteemed; possessing a calm and serious manner" so my dictionary tells me. Somehow I think the word means much more than just someone's manner. For most, dignity is of the utmost importance. It makes us feel good about ourselves, and when it is shredded we feel bereft.

One thing the dictionary did get right is that dignity starts within one's own self. It is a state that emanates from within and can't be given or taken away by others.

Throughout Jewish history we have seen that no matter what our enemies did to us, we were able to maintain our dignity. It was only when we allowed our self-image to falter that we lost it. I remember learning this lesson as a young man. After all, as a student in Bobov, I had the best teacher. The Rebbe, zy"a, was the most dignified person I have ever met. His demeanor was pure kiddush Hashem, his bearing unquestionably regal. This came from his inner knowledge of what a Yid is meant to be. He told me once that although the Jews in Galicia were surrounded by rough and uneducated peasants who hated them, they were able to remain dignified because they never let themselves feel inferior or wanting.

The Rebbe often spoke of his experiences during the Holocaust. Throughout that hellish period he never lost his identity, even when he was forced to flee in the harshest of situations. More than once, he was sure his end had come. More than once, he said his final prayers with the certain knowledge that he would not live to see another day. Yet he never lost his dignity, for it was a building block of his inner being.

I was often astounded at how this nobility manifested itself later, when the Rebbe began to rebuild the shattered remains of his community. Things were not easy, and money was always scarce, yet he never became shattered or broken. In money-driven America, all who met this "foreign rabbi" spoke of his strength and calming joyfulness.

Another example of this was the sainted Lakewood rosh yeshiva, head of Lakewood Yeshiva, Harav Aharon Kotler, ztz"l. My father-in-law, z"l, merited to be on intimate terms with the "Lakewood Rosh Yeshiva" in the early days of that institute's existence. My shver was the shochet in Lakewood at the time, and he was often called upon to accompany the rosh yeshiva on his many fund-raising trips. The rosh yeshiva would sit and talk in learning with my father-in-law as they were driven from one place to another. Often as not, this gadol hador would meet with less than success; in fact, he was

often greeted with ridicule. Yet he never lost his dignity. His face always had a calm smile, and he went to great lengths to find merit in everyone he came across.

How does one do it? Is it for the few, the uniquely righteous? I don't think so. I believe those special souls are here to teach us through their actions, and every one of us can learn from their example.

Time has taught me one thing: dignity born from within can be destroyed only from within. We are all forced to face enemies, the most strident of which are the troubled thoughts and perceptions we carry in our own hearts. These "enemies" can eat away at the very essence of one's soul and destroy the calm that dignity brings.

King David was beset by an enemy who was suffering from a jealousy that had become all-consuming. This enemy was none other than his own father-in-law, Shaul.

At one point, David had to run away. He went into hiding with the help of his wife. She put into motion a plan whereby she pretended that her husband was lying in bed ill. The palace guards came to bring him to Shaul, and she showed them the sleeping form in David's room, which was actually a dummy. It fooled David's pursuers, and he had the opportunity to escape through an open window.

This story sounds fantastic and certainly not very dignified. Window escapes, dummies in bed and this fellow would one day become a king? How could this be possible?

The answer is that no matter how difficult the situation, David never relinquished his own self-awareness, his dignity. Yes, I may be on the run, and I may have to jump through a window or two, but I am Hashem's child, and I know that everything is in His hands.

David wrote Psalm 59 after his escape. Look at his words and think for a moment. Perhaps he is speaking not only of his external enemies, but also, and even more importantly, of the inner ones those that could have caused him the most damage.

Save me from my enemies, my God! Fortify me against those who rise up against me. This world is often a corrupt place. We all have enemies, both near and far. David speaks of those dark forces that "rise up," that gain recognition because of their evil intent. He asks for increased strength, because conquering one's own feelings of insecurity requires extra human vigor.

Look! Brazen men gather and lie in ambush to kill me, [though] I have neither transgressed nor sinned, Hashem. The loss of one's inner calm is devastating. And it doesn't happen all at once; rather, there are little cracks in our character that become gaping holes when put under pressure. We find ourselves ambushed by insecurities that have been festering all the while.

Shaul's hatred of David was caused by his own anger. His was a dark world, totally consumed by his jealous nature. When the jealousy was allowed to marinate in his angry heart, he lost all ability to put things into proportion. He soon came to the point where he tried to kill his own family, seeing

enemies instead of what they really were just shadows of his own fears. David was not the cause of Shaul's anger. Shaul was. David tells us that he never "transgressed" against these forces, and he speaks to Hashem as his witness.

[Though] I am without iniquity, they run and ready themselves [to kill me]. Rouse Yourself to my predicament and see. When the forces that drive others' jealousy are unleashed, those who are the focus of their hate have few choices. But David never lost himself. Instead, he asked Hashem to see his plight and his steadfastness and to help him in his time of need. David goes on to describe his enemies as hungry dogs. Rashi explains that a dog that is hungry cannot rest until it finds nourishment. David is saying that his enemies could never win, for they would find it impossible to take away his self-understanding.

If one realizes his own uniqueness, he will never surrender his dignity. Those seeking to destroy will end up howling like hungry dogs in the darkness of their self-made night, while the Davids of this world will find light in Hashem.

As for me, I will sing of Your power. Each morning I will sing out about Your kindness. You have been my fortress and refuge whenever I was in distress. The Jewish nation, and each individual Jew, has seen so much. We have been hounded, and our reputations maligned, yet we wake up in the "morning" to a new and better day. Yes, we may be distressed, but it is still "day," because we have never lost our dignity, and this is certainly His greatest kindness.

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