

# FIRST IN SERVICE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*Do not take from him interest and increase...let your brother live with you.<sup>[2]</sup>*

The *pasuk* is the source for the famous ruling regarding travelers who are left with one flask of water, containing a sufficient amount for one to make his way to civilization, but not both of them. R. Akiva rules that the owner of the flask may drink the water and not share it with his fellow, even though that will lead inexorably to his death.

"Your own comes first!" has become the slogan of a generation, zealously observed by many. Few, however understand it properly.

Chazal<sup>[3]</sup> praise Moshe's "*chassidus* and wisdom" for tending to the remains of Yosef while the rest of the nation gathered the gifts proffered by the Egyptians eager to see them leave. They cite the *pasuk*<sup>[4]</sup> "The wise of heart will seize mitzvos, but the foolish one's lips will become weary." This is hard to understand. Perhaps Moshe's selflessness in assisting Yosef can be seen as an act of piety. But what did this have to do with wisdom? Also, was he in fact the only one fulfilling a mitzvah? HKBH had specifically requested of them that they ask their Egyptian neighbors for gifts. Those who enriched themselves by following Hashem's instruction were also seizing mitzvos!

People seem to differ greatly in their responsibility to their fellow man. We could easily identify those we would consider to be righteous in this regard, those we would call evil, and many someplace in between. In truth, however, all that separates them is a small error about timing.

Most people will profess the belief that every person has a dual obligation. He must concern himself with his own needs, and those of his family; he is responsible to his nation, and to humanity as a whole. Even the worst of people will concede that this latter concern is implied in his being created in the image of G-d. To ignore such a responsibility makes one no better than an animal.<sup>[5]</sup>

Despite the universal acceptance of such responsibility, relatively few implement it. The reason for this failure is the small error about timing. Most people prioritize their own needs, arguing that after they are addressed, they will then turn to helping others. They support this program with the rule with which we opened this essay. "Your own life comes first!" The practical result of such thinking, however, is that they never get to the needs of others, because they never complete the task of providing for themselves first! At one point does a person feel that he has done enough for himself

and his loved ones? He always, always finds himself in the midst of a work in progress.

The truly righteous invert the order. They reason that if they attend to their obligation towards others first, they will not fail to make the time to provide for their own needs. Self-interest will simply not allow them to forget them, or to defer them indefinitely.

Chazal express this pithily.<sup>[6]</sup> "The names of the righteous precede their names; the names of evildoers, however precede them." Sometimes, they observe, the Torah uses a formula in which a name is stated first, e.g. "Naval was his name," while at other times the formula is reversed, and the actual name that the person is called is put in the second position, e.g. "His name was Boaz." By "name" they mean the impact the person leaves on the greater world. The righteous first turn to their obligations to others and only later return to their own interests. Evildoers do the opposite.

Thus far we have discussed choosing between two courses of action, where one is a mitzvah – helping others – while the other is not – attending to one's own needs. What should happen when a person stands at a fork in the road, and both paths in front of him lead to mitzvos? The *Bnei Yisrael* in Egypt found themselves in such a quandary. Two different mitzvos were dropped into their laps simultaneously: tending to Yosef's remains, and plundering Egypt. The latter was time-sensitive. Egyptian generosity could come to a quick end – the Egyptians might change their minds. The former could be addressed any time. Yosef's bones had been safely stored for centuries. They weren't going any place quickly. The logical choice, we might have said, was to seize the moment, and fulfil Hashem's direct command to enrich themselves. When that exercise would conclude, there would be time enough to retrieve Yosef.

It would not have happened. Moshe understood – and hence he is praised for his "wisdom" – that those pursuing Egyptian wealth would not be able to extricate themselves from this pursuit. They would constantly tell themselves, "Just one more bracelet. One more gold bar." It would never end. By placing the wealth-producing mitzvah first, they effectively precluded their participation in the other commandment. By inverting the order, Moshe could accommodate both. That took wisdom, not just piety.

We are still puzzled. Whatever the consequences, the fact remains that a bona fide *derashah* tells us that the Torah expects us to put our own needs before those of others!

Our Torah stipulates<sup>[7]</sup> that agricultural workers cannot be prevented from eating their fill of the produce with which they labor. Chazal<sup>[8]</sup> rule that what the worker eats is unrelated to his wages. He is entitled to consume far in excess of his actual wage. One condition, however, must be met. The worker may not eat the very first fruit or vegetable that he plucks. His first labor belongs to his employer.<sup>[9]</sup>

Should we not take note of the message here? What are we, if not workers for our Master, sent to an

earthly expanse, there to labor on His behalf? Our purpose is not to eat, drink and enjoy, but to toil for some purpose unique to our personalities and gifts. Still, Hashem does not frown on our delighting in the pleasures of this world, in satiating ourselves with its richness. Like the worker that the Torah licenses to eat while he works, HKBH allows us to take and enjoy far in excess of our productivity.

One condition, however, needs to be fulfilled. Our first labor belongs to Him. We can toil for ourselves only after first working on His behalf!

While the Torah does not ask us to extinguish our sense of self and our responsibilities to our loved ones, the citation of "Your life comes first!" has become a distortion, allowing us to evade all sorts of important things. It should never and can never interfere with what should be primary in our view of life. We are here in this life for a purpose, as servants of the One Who gives us life and all else. Doing our best to serve Him must remain paramount.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh, Behar, by R. Yechezkel Libshitz zt"l. Offered in honor of the *chasuna* next week בִּשְׁטוּ"מ of Zvi Aharon Adlerstein and Chani Kahn-Rose.
2. Vayikra 25:36.
3. Mechilta 13:19.
4. Mishlei 10:8.
5. It is hard to believe that the author wrote these words less than a hundred years ago. Today, almost every element of this argument has been rejected by large parts of mankind, including the existence of G-d, the specialness of Man, his creation in G-d's image, and the difference of Man from animal. Of course – and perhaps because of this – hundreds of millions would balk at the suggestion that Man has any "responsibility" towards others – unless he found such responsibility a source of personal pleasure or meaning.
6. Bamidbar Rabbah 10:5.
7. Devarim 23:25.
8. Bava Metzia 92A.
9. Rama, Choshen Mishpat 337:7.