

AN UPLIFTING EXPERIENCE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

This Shabbos we read Parshas Naso, the longest Torah portion of the year. The parsha begins with a census of the families of the tribe of Levi, and by describing the various tasks that these families performed in the transportation and service of the Mishkan (Tabernacle).

Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, "Take a census of the sons of Gershon, them too, according to their fathers' house, according to their family." [4:21-22]

A similar thought is found in many sifrei Chassidus which explain this passage homiletically. The sons of Gershon, alludes, they say, to those who feel "cut off" and detached from the Torah, from their community, and perhaps from Hashem. [The word Gershon stems from the root ger - foreigner, or gerush - divorce, estrangement.] Moshe is told: Nas es rosh bnei Gershon - Lift the heads of these Jewish children, whom, for whatever reason, feel distanced and separated from Israel.

The pasuk, they say, is a message to the leaders and educators of the Klal Yisrael never to allow any Jew to become estranged from the Torah. To the best of our abilities, we must try to detect the signs of rejection and despair, and do everything we can to make sure that everyone is given an equal chance to grow and thrive within a Torah environment.

In our times, when our educational institutions place a such great deal of emphasis on scholastic achievement in Torah-study, it is especially important to remember that not all children/students are equally gifted. The below-average student, if not given the attention he/she needs, is a prime candidate to become a "son of Gershon," discouraged and unhappy with their Yiddishkeit. If their rebbes and teachers are not sensitive to their needs, it can be devastating to their self-confidence and self-esteem.

This explanation is a lesson and a message to all of us - teachers, parents, even friends - to make sure that nobody is made to feel that they have no place among the Torah-observant community. Whatever their abilities, whatever their talents, every Jew is important and unique. If we notice a friend, a student, or even our own child, and we are concerned that they may be having feelings of rejection and distance from the Torah, we have to do our utmost to correct this by encouraging and helping them as much as we can. We must "lift up their heads" by helping them through their difficulties; and not add to their dejection by treating them harshly and insensitively.

Recently, a friend told me an amazing story which happened to him. One Friday night he was sitting in shul when his friend approached him. "I have to tell you the most amazing vort [Torah thought]

which I heard from Rabbi Yechezkel Grubner of Detroit," he said. "He asked the following question: We find in the Gemara the concept of Rabo Muvhak - an intimate Rebbi. While one is obligated to show respect to any rebbi who has taught him Torah, there is a special obligation to show honour to one's rebbi muvhak, the rebbi who has taught him most of the Torah he knows. Now, in the time of the Gemara, when a student often studied with the same rebbi for many years, it would have been quite common for one to have a rebbi muvhak, from whom he had acquired the vast majority of his Torah knowledge. But nowadays, when children are educated in institutions, advancing year-by-year from one rebbi/teacher to the next, no one rebbi could truly be credited with having taught a child the majority of his Torah knowledge. So where, in our times, is the concept of rebbi muvhak to be found?"

"I'll tell you where," he said. "Sometimes a child is not enjoying his learning; he finds Talmud Torah difficult, frustrating or unenjoyable. Then along comes a friend, or a rebbi, or a parent, and takes the time and effort to sit down with him and help him along. They encourage him and study with him at his own level and pace, until the child slowly begins to acquire a love for Torah study and an appreciation of its beauty. This person, without a doubt, has the status of rabo muvhak - an intimate rebbi. After all, any Torah which he will learn from this point on will be at least in part due to the attention given to him by the one who took the time to do so."

My friend, who deals with a lot of "problem students," was very touched and encouraged by this thought. That same Friday night, just minutes later, one of the boys whom he had taught in the previous year approached him to say good Shabbos. This boy had begun the year as an embittered, lacklustre student, but was now excelling in his studies.

"Good Shabbos Rebbi Muvhak!" he said.

My friend was taken aback! Never had he called him thus. "Why did you call me that?" he asked.

"I don't know," the boy said, "it just came into my head."

I am not an expert on the upper realms, but somehow my friend felt that this occurrence was some degree of "Heavenly consensus" to this interpretation of rebbi muvhak.

There are so many "sons of Gershon" out there waiting for someone to come along and "lift up their heads" - to stop seeing them as a problem, and to start seeing them as an unpolished jewel waiting to shine and take its place in Hashem's holy crown, along with all the other gems of Klal Yisrael. Wherever we find ourselves in life; a yeshiva bachur, a rebbi, a parent, a friend, there are always opportunities to give a little time and caring to those who still feel distanced from the Torah, and to help them to appreciate its sweetness.

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