NATURALLY! (NOT)

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Last night, I had the privilege of attending the hesped (eulogy) of HaRav HaGaon R' Moshe Halberstam zt"l, held in the famous Bobov shteibel on Rechov Chaggai in Jerusalem. For many years, the Bobov shteibel had the distinct honour of hosting Rav Halberstam every day for mincha/ma'ariv; this was why it was likewise deemed an appropriate venue for his eulogy.

There were many great speakers, including Rav Yaakov Yisrael Meisels, shlita, Rav of Kiryas Bobov in Bat Yam and son-in-law of the previous- previous Rebbe zt"l, and Rav Salant, shlita, who gives a derasha in the shteibel every week during shalosh seudos. The last hesped, delivered by R' Moshe's grandson, stands out in my mind.

He asked the following question: The Gemara (Eiruvin 54b) tells the famous story of Rav Preida, who, in a monumentally selfless act of dedication, would review each Mishna with an especially weak student 400 times! Only after 400 times would this student fully grasp the material, and Rav Preida would not allow him to settle for anything less.

Once, in the middle of their studies, there was a knock on the door. It seems Rav Preida's presence was requested at an urgent community gathering. He politely told them that he was presently in the middle of learning, and that he would come as soon as he finished reviewing the material with his student (little did they know what that meant!). Painstakingly, they continued to review the material 400 times, each time going over it as if it was the first. After the 400th time, Rav Preida, as he always would, asked his student to repeat it to him.

This time, however, he couldn't. Try as he might, he stuttered and stumbled and just could not get things straightened out. "My dear student," said Rav Preida patiently, "normally, after 400 times, you grasp the Mishna with great clarity. Yet now, even after we have gone over it 400 times, you still stumble. What was different this time that you remain unclear?"

"Rebbe," the student said, "from the time that they came knocking on the door to call you, I could no longer concentrate. I kept thinking, 'Soon Rav Preida will go... soon he will leave."

"Fine," said Rav Preida, "I am here. I am not going anywhere until we are finished. Try and concentrate, and let's start again..." He proceeded to teach him the Mishna another 400 times! The second time around, he got it straight.

At that time, the Gemara concludes, a heavenly voice rang out: "Rav Preida, take your pick: Either to

live 400 years, or that you and your entire generation will receive eternal bliss in the World to Come (in the merit of your great dedication)!"

"I choose," said Rav Preida, "the World to Come for me and my entire generation."

Said Hashem to the angels, "Give him both!!"

An exceptional story, and an exceptional reward. But in another place, he asked, the Gemara credits Rav Preida's longevity to something else entirely. Rav Preida's students once asked him: "Rebbe, what did you do that you merited to live so long?" (Apparently they never heard of this story.)

His answer: "I was always the first person to arrive in Beis Ha-midrash in the morning. (Megillah 28a)" Now even if they had never heard the story, he certainly hadn't forgotten it. So why did he give them a different answer?

R' Moshe's grandson answered brilliantly: There are people who by nature are not particular about how they spend their time. For such a person, if he were to, say, spend three hours in the hospital visiting a lonely old man, it would be a great mitzvah, no doubt, but no great surprise. He may on other occasions spend three hours shmuesing with some friends about matters of no great significance. Perhaps, as a result, he'll sleep in, and catch a super-late minyan. This is not to diminish the mitzvah that he did. But for him, giving away even big chunks of time is something that comes naturally.

But what if a person who is highly scheduled and never wastes even a minute were to spend the same three hours keeping the old man company—now that would be something to talk about!

The fact that Rav Preida was willing to give huge amounts of his precious time to study with his student was in itself a remarkable feat. But taken in the context of Rav Preida's nature—this was the same Rav Preida who never wasted a moment, never slept in, and was always the first person to open the beis ha-midrash in the morning—it is truly astonishing!

R' Moshe, his grandfather, he said, was the same way. For eight hours a day, he would see people, answer their questions, offer them advice (da'as Torah), and help them work out their problems. As Rav Meisels said, all over the world, old and young, rabbanim and laymen—whomever you asked would tell you, "R' Moshe—I'm very close with him!" And they all were. He gave endlessly of his time and energy to help others, always with a smile, and never asked for anything in return.

Yet by nature, R' Moshe was a very scheduled person. For many years, he would take a nap each afternoon—for exactly 13 minutes—no more, no less. In fact, after his death, when they were looking through some of his writings that he wrote when he was younger, it became apparent that his extreme generosity and ever-present smile didn't come naturally. Many times he had written in his personal diary, "Today I spoke to so-and-so impatiently—I have to work on that!" Ye'hi zichro baruch.

The generosity of Rabbi Chaim of Sanz zt"l, the holy Sanzer Rav, author of Divrei Chaim, is legendary.

R' Chaim, it is said, would never retire at night until he had completely emptied his pockets; every last penny was distributed to the poor and destitute.

Once, it is told, a distinguished scholar approached R' Chaim with a personal problem. He had, with G-d's help, succeeded in procuring a suitable match for his daughter. But now he was in desperate need of funds for the wedding, dowry, and other expenses. R' Chaim gave him generously, but the man was still short a substantial amount. "You know what," R' Chaim said, "in the city of Dinov lives a tzaddik—R' David. He is also well-to-do. Let me write you a letter. Take it to him, and hopefully he will give you a worthy sum."

The man took the letter, and set off to Dinov. There, he met R' David, son of the renowned tzaddik R' Hirsch Meilech of Dinov zt"l, author of B'nei Yisasschar. He gave him the letter. R' David, who deeply respected R' Chaim, gave the man generously. Along the way, he succeeded in collecting additional funds, and by the time he returned to Sanz, he was satisfied that he would be able to wed his daughter with honour and respect.

He returned to the Rav to thank him for his help.

"Tell me," said R' Chaim, "How did you do in Dinov? How much did R' David give you?" The man told him. "Really?!" exclaimed R' Chaim, "I would have thought he might have given you more generously!"

Somehow, the Sanzer Rav's words were eventually repeated to R' David. Needless to say, he was hurt by the criticism. "The Torah says (in this week's parsha, Kedoshim, 19:17): 'Do not hate your brother with your heart,'" R' David said. "I interpret this as follows: One should never be judgmental of others on the basis of one's own good heart! Everyone has areas in which they excel. Is it my fault that I was not blessed with the generous heart of the Divrei Chaim?!"

R' David's rebuttal made its way back to the Divrei Chaim. "It's a wondrous interpretation," R' Chaim remarked, "—however in my case, it's simply not true. I am not at all generous by nature. To the contrary, I was always very stingy, and had a very hard time parting with my money. It's something I grappled with for many years, until I completely overcame my lack of generosity. All the same, R' David's point is well taken."

We are often naturally attracted to areas in which we naturally excel. Of course, it's only right to use our G-d given gifts to serve Hashem in ways that others perhaps can't. But true greatness is not defined only by what is achieved in the end, but by the hurdles we had to overcome to get there.

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