

ESTEEMED SELF-ESTEEM

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Make a count of the sons of Kehas from among the children of Levi by their families, according to their fathers' houses. (Bamidbar 4:2)

There are a lot of different topics discussed in this week's par- shah, but they all boil down to one common theme: self-esteem. Each section approaches the same idea from a different angle, teaching how a lack of self-esteem leads to sin, and how with self-esteem a person is capable of much more than they see when they look into the mirror. Sometimes having the heart of a lion counts for a lot more than having the body of one.

History is divided between the heroes and the losers, the latter group being those who have already lost the battle to the yetzer hara. There is almost no middle ground in-between, so a person either belongs to one group or another. The difference between the two groups? Self-esteem.

Self-esteem is one of those things in life we know is important but we still take for granted. In fact, all of life is really a battle to build self-esteem and to maintain it, because without it, a person becomes psychologically limited. This doesn't mean he can't function in everyday life like most people around him. It means that he won't expect much from himself, at least spiritually, and he will not grow much at all.

The "project" begins at home. When a baby is born, he doesn't even know he exists, or what that means. He's too busy looking "out" to really look "in," something that some folks don't do much of all of their lives. That's why children are capable of doing some pretty despicable things with very little remorse.

As a person grows older, he starts to develop self-awareness. He knows he exists, and that he exists with others who might be better than him. What is "better"? That is determined by the society in which a person lives. His self-esteem will be very much related to achieving what society has told him is important to achieve. The system itself will define success and failure, and a person's self-esteem will be based upon where he is on the ladder to success.

Parents, of course, are the first potential contributors to self-esteem, which means they have to have it themselves. If they don't, they usually tear down their children a lot more than they build them up, giving their children a poor first start in life. Lacking support from their parents, and therefore, self-esteem, children tend to underachieve, or worse, "invite" more psychological abuse from their "guardians."

Once the child goes out into the world, it can get a lot worse, depending upon the self-esteem a child built up and stored while still at home. If a child enters the world of strangers with a sense of, "I am a worthy being," he will be able to withstand all the counter forces that tell him just the opposite. There are a lot of people out there who have low self-esteem, just looking for someone they can put down to raise themselves up.

It is amazing, when you think about it, how fragile we are as a species, and how vulnerable we are to attack from others. In the animal kingdom it is about being physically attacked and only physical survival. In the world of humans, it is mostly about psychological attacks and psychological survival.

We need to believe in ourselves so much. We need to know that we matter, and are capable of doing meaningful things. Sometimes, psychological survival even comes before physical survival, because people can live with a minimum amount of food but they cannot live with a minimum amount of self-esteem.

That Nazi's, ysv"z, understood this and waged a psychological war against the Jewish psyche. Physical abuse? Incredible. Psychological abuse? A lot worse, because the point was not just to kill every last Jew, but to wipe away the spiritual energy they represented.

This was because Hitler ysv"z was not just a mass murderer, he was a Social Darwinist. He despised things like morality and conscience because they forced man to work against his nature. The animals don't this, he argued, so why should humans? Aren't humans such a more sophisticated form of animal?

The number one obstacle to instituting such a belief was the Jewish people and their Torah. Even Christianity and Islam Hitler saw as offshoots of Torah, and as the military strategy goes: cut off the head of the snake and the snake itself dies. Get rid of the Jews and man on his own will become completely secular over time.

What was really going on was that Hitler, ysv"z, and all of his cohorts suffered from low self-esteem. There are plenty of books that document this, and how his early life of low self-esteem led to his later life of extreme hatred and genocide.

There are basically two ways to deal with low self-esteem. A person can work on himself and develop self-esteem, or a person can eliminate everyone around him who makes him feel a lack of self-esteem. The first one is what life is all about and results in moral behavior, and the second one undermines the purpose of Creation and results in sin.

In this week's parshah, the Nazir represents the first approach. One of the main reasons for becoming a Nazir was to develop spiritual fortitude, in other words, a sense of spiritual worth. The Nazir was someone who saw spiritual weakness in himself and sought to repair the breaches. He worked on becoming a "crown" for God, so-to-speak.

The Sotah, in comparison, was just the opposite. How does a religious man and woman behave in

such an immoral manner? How can people do such things and live with themselves after? How can an adulterer face his wife or her husband and act as if nothing wrong happened?

There had to first be a breakdown in the relationship between husband and wife. There may not have been physical abuse but more than likely there was psychological abuse. Over time, an abusive relationship always wears away at a person's self-esteem because they're constantly being told, in one way or another, that they are unworthy.

When a person sinks low enough in life the pain can become so intense that any form of relief can seem justifiable. Pain is a "great" source of rationalization, and little hurts more than a sense of unworthiness. Little undermines the values of Torah and opens the door to sin more than a lack of self-esteem.

Thus the Torah refers to the counting of the Jewish people at the beginning of this parshah as a "lifting up" — naso. God told Moshe Rabbeinu, "Don't just count the Jewish people. Tell them that they count, each and everyone of them. Fill them with self-esteem so that they will be inspired to live a noble existence." Nothing inspires a person to act nobly more than a sense of self-worth.

At this time of year, as we're about to "reaccept" Torah once again on Shavuot, we are "invited" to live nobly. We are given the Torah to help us develop the proper self-esteem that makes this possible. All of the mitzvos and the narration work to help a person accomplish exactly this.

This is why the Torah makes a point of telling us, just in advance of receiving the Torah, that the Jewish people reached a high spiritual level called, "k'ish echad, b'leiv echad," which means, "like a single person with a single heart."

There are different ways to understand what these profound words mean and why they are important at such a critical time in Jewish history. One thing is for certain, and that is all Jews at Mt. Sinai felt equal to one another. One person did not feel less important than another, which allowed them to take the focus off themselves and put it on the receiving of Torah instead.

Without doubt, the awesomeness of the event helped tremendously with this. Great moments tend to make people less petty and less self-focused. This inspires a person to become more focused on the opportunity of the moment, and to use it in a constructive manner.

Thus, though we may not give much thought to our personal level of self-esteem, we ought to. Just as we should make sure we don't think too highly of ourselves because of a bloated ego, we should also make sure that we do not think too lowly of ourselves, which can actually interfere with humility, not facilitate it.

The bottom line? Learn Torah, and learn it deeply. Take its message to heart, and it will fill your heart with the proper measure of self-esteem. Torah will inspire you, and help you to live a noble and meaningful life.