

WHAT CONSTITUTES A "GADOL"?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 400 - Sh'nayim Mikra V'echad Targum. Good Shabbos!

What Constitutes a "Gadol"?

The pasuk [verse] in this week's parsha says, "The boy grew up (vayigdal hayeled) and she brought him to the daughter of Pharaoh and he was a son to her. She called his name Moshe, as she said 'For I drew him from the water'" [Shmos 2:10]. The very next pasuk says, "It happened in those days that Moshe grew up (vayigdal Moshe) and went out to his brethren and saw their burdens" [2:11].

The Ramba"n comments that these two juxtaposed pasukim both use the same term -- 'vayigdal' -- to indicate the growth of Moshe. The Ramba"n points out that the first pasuk is referring to Moshe's physical growth and the second pasuk is referring to his spiritual growth. In the first pasuk, Moshe grew physically. In the second pasuk, he became a 'Gadol' -- a man of spiritual stature. This pasuk provides an insight into who the Torah considers to be an 'Adam Gadol' [great person].

The Medrash, on the phrase "Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren and saw their burdens," states that Moshe saw their burden and cried over them. He would moan "Woe is me over your fate. If only it could be me who would suffer rather than you." He would then roll up his sleeves, so to speak, and participate in their hard labor.

The juxtaposition of the term "Gadol" (which the Ramba"n attributes to spiritual greatness) and the mention of Moshe's participation in the suffering of his brethren is a clear indication that the Torah's definition of a Gadol is someone who cares about the fate of his fellow Jew. The degree to which a person feels the pain and trouble of another Jew, defines how much of a "Gadol" he is.

This is one of the true hallmarks of the great personages amongst the Jewish people. An "Adam Gadol" in Israel is not just a person who is proficient in Torah. It is not only a person who is meticulous about his performance of mitzvos. It is not only a person who is perfect in his personality characteristics (midos). The true Gadol b'Yisroel is the person who empathizes with and encompasses the troubles and the needs of his brethren among the children of Israel.

If we picture in our minds people -- past or present -- who earned the title "Gadol b'Yisrael", invariably we one of the characteristics of such a person was his participation in the needs of the masses.

How does one attain such a level of spirituality? Rav Shimon Shkop (1860-1940), in his introduction to his classic Shaarei Yosher, writes as follows: There is an implicit dichotomy in every human being. From the moment that a every person arrives in this world, he is interested in one thing and one thing only -- himself! When a child is brought into this world and wants to be fed at 2 o'clock in the morning, the child does not care whether his mother is sleeping or not sleeping. "I'm hungry. I want to be fed." That is the only thing that interests the child.

As a child becomes a toddler, aware of the fact that there are other people in the world beside himself, he is still most concerned with himself. This is what the human condition is all about. People are primarily worried about themselves. Yet, there is an obligation upon a human being to worry about more than just himself. He needs to worry about the next person as well. But invariably worrying about the next fellow contradicts the innate human condition, which is to worry primarily about oneself.

Rav Shimon Shkop asks, "How does one bridge this dichotomy between worrying about myself and worrying about the next person?" The 'trick' is, he said, to expand the parameters of what defines 'myself'.

Most normal people do have a bigger "I" than merely themselves. When a person gets married, his definition of "I" changes. "A man's wife is like his own self." When a person does something for his wife, he does not think of it in terms of "I'm doing a favor for someone else." His "I" has grown to encompass more than himself. It includes his wife as well.

For the most self-centered individuals, their "I" stops at their nose. Other individuals have an "I" that encompasses a spouse, parents, and children. The entire family circle is generally not viewed as "someone else" when we do favors for them.

Rav Shimon says that the "I" of a great person, one who walks in the path of Torah, encompasses the entire Jewish nation. When a person can expand the parameters of his own "I" to include his entire society, he is a greater person. The bigger the definition of "I", the bigger is the measure of greatness (gadlus).

Rav Shimon then provides this astute interpretation of the famous Mishneh in Avos [1:14]: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" Of course, Rav Shimon says, a person must worry about himself, because ultimately if he does not worry about himself, who will worry about him? But "k'sheANI l'atzmi" -- when my whole "I" just consists of myself, then what am I? I am just a self-centered individual whose "I" ends at his nose.

In 1905 there was a fire in Brisk. In olden times without the equipment and efficiency of today's fire

departments, fires used to be fought with "bucket brigades." Inevitably, a large portion of the city burnt down in flames. People were without houses. In that period, Rav Chaim of Brisk did not sleep in his bed. He slept in a room off of the shul. His family tried to convince him to come back to his normal sleeping quarters. He responded, "How can I sleep in the comfort of my bed when there are people who do not have a roof over their heads?"

This is an "Adam Gadol." Rav Chaim was a person whose "I" was defined in terms of his entire city and in terms of his entire people.

This could also be the interpretation of the age-old prayer (recited at a circumcision) of "This little child will become a Gadol" (zeh haKatan Gadol yiheyeh). Of the millions and millions of little children who have had this prayer recited at their circumcisions how many have really gone on to become "Gedolim"?

Perhaps we are not necessarily requesting that the little baby become a "Gadol" in learning only. A person can become an "Adam Gadol" in other ways as well. This eight-day-old baby, who is now only interested in one thing - himself, will one day become a "Gadol". He should grow up and expand his horizons such that he becomes more than a self-centered individual (ANI l'atzmi).

People are born with clenched hands. After 120 years, when a person dies, the custom is to unclench the fists. A common proverb is that when a person enters the world, he acts like he wants to grasp it all for himself. But when a person leaves the world, he leaves with his hands open. The task in life is to open up a person's hands so that his concern is not just the "I", but extends to the entire world.

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.
Technical Assistance by [Dovid Hoffman](#); Yerushalayim.

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