

SHEMINI 5773
Rabbi Aharon Ziegler

HANDLING HUMILITY

After the death of the two sons of Aharon, Moshe tells Aharon, [Va'yikra 10:3] “Of this did HaShem speak saying, ‘I will be sanctified through those who are close to Me, thus I will be honored before the entire people’”.

The Gemara Zevachim [115b] elaborates upon this. Moshe consoled Aharon by saying “I knew that the Mishkan was going to be sanctified through the death of someone close to G-d. I thought that it would be either you or me, because we are the holiest ones here. I now see that your sons, Nadav and Avihu were greater than either of us”

At first glance it seems strange and out of character that Moshe Rabbeinu, the most humble of all men would speak that way about himself. But the fact is, a person who denies his own identity and talents is not humble, but rather, deceiving himself. An Anav [humble person] should know precisely who he is. There is a famous story about Rav Chatzkel Abramsky who once was called upon to testify in a secular court. His attorney asked him to state his name and his position. The attorney then asked, “Is it true that you are the greatest living halachic authority on the European continent?” Rav Abramsky said, “Yes, that is true.” At that point the judge interjected and said, “Rabbi Abramsky, is that not rather haughty on your part? I thought that your laws and ethics teach you to be humble”. Without any hesitation, Rav Abramsky responded, “I know we are taught to be humble, but I am now under oath.”

Recognition of one’s status and talent is not haughtiness, as long as he remembers that what ever talents he has is a gift from Heaven. As long as he says “It is not my strength and the power of my hand that has brought me this great wealth, it is not my brains, it is not my talents, in is not innate. It is a blessing from HaShem.” A person remains humble by realizing and remembering that all of his achievements in this world are only through the good graces of G-d, and that these things can come and go, G-d forbid.

Let me share with you a beautiful story about the Taz, [1586-1667], the author of the Turei Zahav on Shulchan Aruch. There was once a little girl named Leah, who

lived in a poor family in Eastern Europe in the 1600s. Many weeks would go by when their family had nothing to eat on Shabbat. Shabbat is supposed to be the most joyous day of the week, but how sad it was for parents when they couldn't provide for their family.

One week, through extraordinary effort, Leah's family managed to obtain a small chicken for Shabbat. The mother began cooking the chicken for their family meal, when she noticed that one of the bones seemed swollen, a sign that the chicken might be treif. Leah was sent with the pot to show it to the Rabbi. The Rabbi inspected the chicken and indeed declared to be treif. Leah was heartbroken. She was ashamed to tell the Rabbi that she and her family have nothing else to eat this Shabbat.

As she is walking out of the shul she noticed an old man dressed in rags sitting in the corner by himself. She remembered hearing about this man. He was being punished by the community council and was forced to sit in the corner of the shul for three days for his transgression.

The man, who was new in town, was working in the local slaughterhouse. The shochatim saw that he was knowledgeable in Halacha, and began asking him questions that came up in the shechita process. When it was discovered what the old man was doing, the community council was enraged that someone dared to issue halachic rulings instead of the Rabbi. They therefore imposed this harsh sentence of being forced to sit in the corner of the shul for three days so that everyone who passed will understand what a terrible thing he did.

Leah felt sorry for him and went over to him. The man noticed her eyes stained with tears. He asked her what was wrong. She explained about the chicken, emotion flowing as she spoke. The old man, feeling her pain, asked her to show him the chicken. He examined it carefully and realized that the swelling had been caused by the cooking. The bone itself was completely intact. He said, "This chicken is perfectly kosher! Who told you it was treif?" "The Rabbi told me".

The old man was now in a quandary. He knew that the Rabbi would be enraged if he pronounced it kosher after the Rabbi had declared it treif. It would make his presence in town even more intolerable. The only solution was to make the Rabbi come to that conclusion himself. He told Leah, "Tell the Rabbi to look in Yoreh Dei'a and see the Turei Zahav on 34:4. Tell him that if he would look there, he may change his mind."

Leah approached the Rabbi, who agreed to look into that commentary, simply to humor this distraught little girl. When he read it, he was shocked. It clearly indicated that this type of chicken was indeed kosher. “You may tell your mother that she may serve this chicken without hesitation. But tell me, how in the world would you ever know of this Taz?” “The man sitting in the corner of the shul told me.” This made the Rabbi wonder as to the identity of this man. This was a very scholarly reference. Not many people would know of it, and certainly not by heart. Who could this man be?

The Rabbi ordered his assistant to summon the Community Council and to bring the man before them. When they arrived the Rabbi asked the man to tell them his name. “My name is Dovid” the old man said softly.

“What is your last name?”

The man was silent for several moments. Finally he asked the Rabbi, “May I be allowed not to answer that question?”

This made the Rabbi even more suspicious. He reasoned that if the man did not want to divulge his last name, then his name was probably the key to the mystery.

“As the Rabbi of this town, I order you to tell us your last name.”

“Segal,” replied the man.

“Dovid Segal!!!”. At this point the Rabbi turned white, “Hagaon HaRav Dovid HaLevi Segal, author of the Taz. Woe is to me. What have I done to the Gadol HaDor? Everyone in the room was in shock.

The Rabbi, weeping bitterly, fell on his face and begged, “Please forgive us for thinking that you issued halachic rulings instead of the Rabbi. I am the one who issued halachic rulings instead of the Chief Rabbi of all Jewry, the author of the Turei Zahav. Our sin is greater than we can bear.”

The Taz calmed the Rabbi. “What happened here is my fault. I chose to hide my identity. You did the right thing based on what you knew. I was indeed an unknown stranger issuing halachic rulings in your town. I am to blame. You are completely innocent. You are forgiven.”

There is still one unanswered question. How did the great and famous Taz come to be in that town – anonymously?

After the Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648-1649, close to a million Jews were forced to flee their homes and wonder in refuge. The Taz decided that he had enjoyed a great deal of fame and respect, reverence and awe from Jews who came worldwide to visit him and ask him halachic questions. Now he had the opportunity to learn Torah in poverty and anonymity. The Taz's wonderful wife went along with this plan.

The Taz understood that the information he gave Leah would probably wind up revealing his identity, but how could he stand by and allow this little girl to suffer? How could he watch her tears and do nothing? No lofty plan was worth it.

It is said that when the wife of the Taz heard that her husband had been discovered she shed two tears. One tear was that of sadness, because her husband's plan had been ruined, and one of joy for the same reason.