

Back to School

The Road to Temimut

Shoftim 5779

I.

I remember almost nothing about my university graduation. To be honest, none of the speakers said anything terribly profound.

The seemingly innumerable university administrators who spoke failed, for whatever reason, to impart some lasting message of wisdom or virtue.

I felt very blessed to have family there, and I do remember being taken out to eat afterwards. But, as far as the graduation goes, I remember nothing.

That is, with one exception.

At some point in the highly ceremonial day, a doctorate, not of the honorary sort, but an actual doctorate, was awarded to a woman in her late 90's. This woman had not been working on the same dissertation since her mid 20's, thankfully, but, clearly, decided to go back to school, at some point, later in life, and was able to attain

this milestone. Not only that, but it was announced that she was going to begin a teaching position in her field!

II.

This past week, as summer, in the practical sense, ended, millions of children and teachers returned to school. It wasn't only students and teachers who were impacted by this, but the stores all had their special sales, the outfits, the binders, the special erasers.

But, perhaps, it shouldn't only be the children who are impacted, but, perhaps it should apply to all of us as well.

In this week's parshah, we read, תמיים תהיה עם ה' אלוקיך. *Onkelos* interprets this verse in the sense of שלם, to be whole, to be complete, in service of Hashem, and Ramban understood this to be a Torah level commandment.

For Ramban, this sense of wholeness connotes total faith in the Almighty's mastery of the universe, but we might suggest that a different aspect of wholeness is being referenced.

Perhaps we are called upon not merely to believe, wholly and completely, in His mastery of the universe, but we are called, wholly and completely, to perfect ourselves in His service.

As the Midrash notes, Hashem Himself is described in this fashion, **הצור¹ תמים פעלו כי כל דרכיו משפט**.

If this is true, then perhaps we might wish to inquire how we might best cultivate this sense of wholeness, of total devotion to the service of Hashem.

We have a model in the Torah itself. If our goal is, **תמים תהיה עם**, then we may recall an **איש תם**, someone who achieved a level of wholeness, our forefather, Yaakov. How did he achieve this? He was a **יושב אהלים** - he learned, he studied.

It is true, to be sure, that Yaakov did so in his youth- **ויגדלו הנערים**. And yet, Yaakov is consistently described in rabbinic literature, as being involved in learning, in study. In the House of Shem and Ever. With his son Yosef, and finally, in his twilight years, with his grandson Ephraim.

Apparently, the road towards proper action and proper character, so much on our minds during this season of teshuvah, runs through careful study. As our Sages said, **כל שאינו בכלל משנה אינו בכלל מעשה**. The road towards cultivating a deep and abiding, and even loving relationship with Hashem, depends on our knowledge, **האהבה לפי הידיעה**, as Rambam reminded us.

¹ מדרש תהילים קי"ט:א

In our Torah portion, we read of the Jewish king, who was literally required to carry around a Sefer Torah that he himself had written, and read from it constantly, **והיתה עמו וקרא בו כל ימי חייו**, so that he would be properly directed in his heart and in his actions.

III.

We would be fooling ourselves if we did not mention that this becomes ever more difficult as the responsibilities of life multiply: family, financial responsibilities, running a household. It is not easy at all.

And yet, for all of us, we have to remind ourselves of the value of constantly going back to school, no matter how old we might be, even a woman in her late 90's can receive a doctorate.

Rambam once inquired, until when in a person's life must they study Torah, and he answered, **עד יום מותו**, until the very last day.

Our Sages felt strongly that there was not one set curriculum for each person, and that, within reason, a healthy diversity should be encouraged, **אין אדם לומד אלא במקום שלבו חפץ**, people learn best in an area which naturally intrigues them, which piques their curiosity.

Today, perhaps, more than ever, there are so many wonderful opportunities. Come to the Monday night group where we will spend the next number of weeks preparing for Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. Join the book club. Listen to a recording online. Hebrew, English, Spanish, Russian, so much is available today.

If you have five minutes, then use them. You won't regret it. It will spark another five, and another, and soon, you might even realize that you have, not all the time in the world, but perhaps more than we initially thought.

IV.

Study is, and always has been, our national pastime, **מורשה קהילת** **יעקב**. Torah does not belong to the elite, to me, to the rabbis, to the kohanim, but to each and every one of us, the entire Jewish people.

As Rambam wrote, **הרי זה מונח ועומד ומוכן כי מי שרוצה יבא ויטול**. It's open to anyone, and it's open to everyone. It's never too late. As we strive to draw closer to Him this Elul season, we understand that the road to **תמימות**, to **אלוקיך עם ה'**, to being an **איש** **תם**, or an **אשה תמה**, runs through **ישיבת אהלים**, our constant study, going back to school.

