

The Ultimate Source for Inspiration

Behar Bechukotai 5781

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One of the most precious commodities in life is a sense of inspiration. Where it exists, even the most daunting obstacles seem perfectly surmountable. Where it is absent, even the smoothest terrain seems formidable.

As we prepare ourselves for *Zman Matan Toratenu*, the familiar Mishnah in Avot comes to mind: Hillel was wont to say: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”¹.

Rashi interprets this Mishnah in a conventional sense. If I will not perform the mitzvot of the Torah, then, who will perform these commandments for me? I cannot look towards others, Hillel was teaching, when it comes to fulfilling that which is expected of me.

Rambam, however, takes a subtly different approach, but one which is replete with resonates deeply. Rambam focuses not on one’s personal responsibility to perform the commandments, as Rashi did, but one’s responsibility to serve as one’s own ultimate sense of inspiration. Actions, inexorably, will follow.

Expanding on Rambam’s approach, Rabbeinu Yonah notes that inspiration which is derived from external sources, from compelling speakers, charismatic personalities, best selling books, is always short lived. As we all know from personal experience, despite the marketing, very, very few speakers truly ‘change one’s life.’ In truth, very few speakers even change one’s day.

According to this approach, Hillel was attempting to save us all some suspense. The only way to live a truly inspired life is not through any short term fix, but the daily, grinding work of shaping one’s character to the point where one’s own set of habits and

¹ Mishnah Avot 1:13

discipline is itself a propulsive force. As we count each day in the Omer, building one upon the other, in perfect succession, we mirror this process, of the slow, steady work of character development.

Hillel came by this honestly. The Talmud teaches us that the young, impoverished Hillel, living hand to mouth, eked out a living serving as what we might refer to as an Uber driver.

One wintry day, with no one looking to go much of anywhere, Hillel didn't even have the paltry sum necessary to enter the Beit Midrash. With the guard unwilling to waive even this paltry fee, Hillel took it upon himself to ascend to the roof of the Beit Midrash, and listen through a skylight to the Torah being learned by Shemaya and Avtalyon. When a blizzard came that night, Hillel nearly perished, and had to be rescued from hypothermia. The point of this Talmudic narrative is clear: the man who would become the leader of the Jewish people, the greatest sage in Israel, got there the old fashioned way, through inspiration, and through perspiration.

As Hillel himself so famously concluded the Mishnah, 'If not now, when?' There is, when it comes to undertaking that painstaking work of character development, there is no time like the present.