

*Shemos, Rabbi David Mahler*

Over the past year, the *Torah* world has lost many great people who we often refer to as *Gedolim*. Early on in the pandemic, the Noviminsker Rebbe passed away. More recently, Rav Dovid Feinstein was *niftar*. In our community, we lost giants such as Rabbi Norman Lamm and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

We actually lost many more *gedolom* than you think. Allow me to explain.

Describing Moshe as a young boy, the *pasuk* (2:10) states, “*Vayigdal hayeled*”, the boy grew up. The very next *pasuk* reads, “*Vayigdal hayeled*”, that Moshe grew up and he went out to his brethren and saw their burdens.

The *Ramban* comments that these two juxtaposed *pasukim* both use the same term - *vayigdal* - to indicate the growth of Moshe. The *Ramban* points out that the first *pasuk* is referring to Moshe’s physical growth and the second refers to his spiritual development. In the former, Moshe grew physically, while in the latter, he became a “*gadol*” - a man of spiritual stature. This *pasuk* provides an insight into who the *Torah* considers to be an “*adam gadol*” – a great man.

The *Midrash* states that Moshe saw his people’s burdens, their difficult predicament, and cried. Witnessing their torture and suffering was painful for the young Moshe. He would say to himself – “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 *Ramban* 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 deeply about the fate of his fellow Jew. The degree to which a person feels the pain and troubles of another Jew defines how much of a *gadol* he/she is.

This is one of the true hallmarks of our nation’s greatest people. An *adam gadol* is not only a person who is a *Talmid Chacham*. It is not only a person who is meticulous about his performance of *mitzvos*. It is not only a person who excels in *middos*. The true *gadol b’Yisroel* is the person who empathizes with, and takes others’ troubles and needs to heart.

How does one attain such a level of *gadlus*? How does one reach this exalted level?

Rav Shimon Shkop, one of the great *Roshei Yeshiva* and *Torah* giants of pre-war Europe, in his introduction to his classic work, *Shaarei Yosher*, explains that there is an implicit dichotomy within each and every human being. From the moment that a person arrives in this world, he is interested in one thing and one thing only — himself! As a baby, he wants to be fed, held or cleaned. The child does not care whether his mother is sleeping or working. He needs her attention and his needs met immediately. As a child becomes a toddler, aware of the fact that there are other people in the world besides 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 others contradicts the innate human condition, which is to worry primarily about oneself.

Rav Shimon asks how is it possible for a person to bridge this dichotomy? The trick, he says, 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/her definition of *I* changes. When a person does something for his/her spouse, they do not think of it in terms of “I’m doing a favor for someone else.” The *I* has grown to encompass more than him/herself. It includes the spouse as well.

For the most self-centered individuals, their “I” is very limited. 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, a truly special soul, encompasses the entire 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 *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avos* (2:14) - “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” Of course, 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” simply consists of myself, then what am I? I am just a self-centered individual whose “I” ends at my nose.

At a *bris milah*, all those in attendance bless the newborn by saying, “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*?

I believe it was Rav Soloveitchik who explained the blessing is not intended that each young boy should grow up to be a Torah giant, but rather that the baby become a *gadol* according to the understanding of the *Ramban* and Rav Shimon Shkop – to expand his I. He should grow up and expand his horizons and think beyond himself.

As has been noted many times before, people are born with their hands clenched tightly. After 120 years, when a person passes on, the custom is to unclench the fists. A common saying is that when a person enters the world, he acts like he wants to grab it all for himself. However, when one leaves this world, he leaves with his hands open. The task in life is to open up our hands so that our concern is not just *I* but *we*.