

Yitro 5781
Rabbi Zev Wiener

When Hashem prepares to give the Torah on Mount Sinai, He instructs the Jews:

ועתה אם שמוע תשמעו בקלי ושמרתם את בריתי והייתם לי סגלה מכל העמים
*And now, if you listen well to Me and you keep My covenant, you will be a treasure to Me
from among all the nations (19:5)*

In explaining the apparently redundant verb, “שמעו תשמעו” -- literally “*listen, listen*” --
Rashi cites the Midrash:

אם עתה תקבלו עליכם יערב לכם מכאן ואילך שכל התחלות קשות
*If you accept (the Torah) upon yourselves now, it will be pleasing to you from now
on, for all beginnings are difficult*

On a basic textual level, the teaching of “כל התחלות קשות” -- *All beginnings are difficult*, seems to describe the technical difficulty of adhering to the Torah. While engaging in Torah study and Mitzvah observance may initially appear to be challenging and arduous, if you stick with it, it will get easier. On a broader level, however, it seems the Midrash is providing guidance for how we must face the challenges that we encounter in any sphere of life. While many of us may be inclined to give up at the first sign of adversity or failure, we are enjoined to remember, כל התחלות קשות -- *All beginnings are difficult. But don't get discouraged -- they get easier*. Just because something seems insurmountable now, does not mean that it will remain insurmountable forever. Even if a person has failed at something for many years, be it an addiction, a relationship, or earning a livelihood, he or she should never despair. Difficulties are, by definition, just the “beginning.” To a Jew who believes in Hashem’s love and the eternity of the soul, the end is always good.

How we are taught to approach challenges and setbacks affects everything in our life. One can readily imagine the difference between a child who grows up being chastised at every setback, “you’re not good at anything, you’ll never succeed,” and a child who faces the same challenges but is gently taught, “כל התחלות קשות” -- *it’s always hard at the beginning. But hang in there, things will get easier...you’ll be OK.* While the first child may grow up to develop a mindset that is harsh and despairing, the second

child will seemingly be more likely to adopt an inner voice that is gentle, resilient, and optimistic. Regardless of our upbringing, each one of us has a spiritual Father who always believes in us and reminds us to never give up, as the Midrash so poignantly reminds us.

The first book that I ever recall reading of Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski z'l was "It's Not as Tough As You Think." I chanced upon this work on the bookshelf of a dorm-mate of mine and was intrigued by the title. I was instantly drawn to Rabbi Twerski's remarkable synthesis of Torah wisdom, common sense, deep human understanding, and unflinching optimism in everything that he wrote. As the title of that book succinctly conveys, Rabbi Twerski consistently taught in all his writings that even in the most challenging of situations, there is always hope. That no matter how low a person feels, he or she always has worth. That even though "כל התחלות קשות" -- most challenges are almost never quite "as tough as you think." The fact that Rabbi Twerski could promote such hope, despite having lived through the darkest period in world history and having spent his life regularly interacting with the most painful forms of mental illness, is all the more inspiring.

Rabbi Twerski taught us all that Torah is not just a book of do's and don'ts, but a "תורת חיים" -- *a Torah of Life*: the ultimate source of meaning, self-esteem, and hope that a person can receive. He showed repeatedly that the principles of the Torah are as relevant to life nowadays as they were when they were first given at Mount Sinai thousands of years ago. On a personal level, his writings played a very significant role in my own life's path, and I remain deeply grateful to him for taking the time to speak with me when I first considered pursuing a career in psychiatry. Through his selfless wisdom, he inspired a generation of Rabbis and congregants alike, and the extent of his impact is likely hard to overstate. As we recount the acceptance of the Torah on Parashat Yitro, may we all learn from his most unique approach to live the wisdom of כל התחלות קשות in all facets of our lives.