

Shoftim, 5780
Rabbi Zev Wiener

Deep in the heart of Jerusalem's Meah Shearim neighborhood, off the main drag full of eateries and bookstores, lies a small, hidden shop, belonging to a pious Jewish scribe. I was introduced to this store by a friend many years ago, who led my wife and me on a behind-the-scenes tour of the neighborhood. The scribe, an unassuming man known locally for his scrupulousness and wisdom, spoke in a soft voice with a big smile. While I remember being impressed by his manner and his artisanship, I was most intrigued by something that he apparently has instructed every visitor who enters his store for decades. Regardless of whether you intended to make a purchase or not, the scribe insisted on asking you to memorize the words of Rashi (citing the Sifrei) on this week's Parasha (18:13):

תמים תהיה עם ה' אלוקיך

התהלך עמו בתמימות ותצפה לו ולא תחקור אחר העתידות. אלא כל מה שיבא עליך קבל בתמימות, ואז תהיה עמו ולחלקו.

Walk with Him in wholeheartedness. Look forward to Him, and do not obsess over future events. Rather, whatever He brings upon you accept wholeheartedly, and then you will be with Him and of His portion

This practice was new to me. I had never heard of anyone insisting that customers memorize any part of Torah or Mishnah, let alone a comment of Rashi. While every comment of our sages is laden with wisdom, apparently there was something about this particular statement of trusting in what the Almighty has in store for a person that the scribe felt was so foundational, so pertinent to life, that he wanted every Jew to carry it at all times. It has been many years since I met that scribe, but I have continued to reflect upon this experience, and I find this teaching of Rashi to be a guiding compass throughout my life.

One of the existential challenges for all of us as human beings is striking the delicate balance between productive planning and graceful relinquishing. Living in a world of inherent unpredictability, we of course have to consider the future. The Almighty demands of us to take life seriously, to plan, to deliberate, and to anticipate things that we can control. And yet at the same time, when we worry excessively about things that we cannot control, we release stress hormones, raise our blood pressure, and futilely squander the precious time that He has given us in this world. Instead of enjoying days of blessing and joy, we languish in agony. Instead of sleeping to feel refreshed in the morning to perform our mission in this world, we stay up at night ruminating, draining our battery like a car spinning its wheels in neutral. It is indeed staggering to consider how much of the pain that people experience in their lifetimes stems from

hypothetical concerns about the future over which they have no control. While the feared concerns may or may not ultimately come to fruition, the only result that is guaranteed to happen is that the present moment will be abjectly lost. This is not how the Almighty wants us to live.

“תמים תהיה עם ה' אלוקיך” teaches us that anxiety that cannot effect change is not only unhealthy, but also spiritually obstructive. We must try as hard as we can in life. But ultimately, when we reach the inevitable impasse at which there is nothing more that we can do or know, we must let go, and allow the Ribono Shel Olam to write the final act. Don't waste precious time or valuable mental bandwidth dwelling on things that cannot be actively changed. Rather, do whatever you can do, and trust that the Almighty is with you, and that one way or the other, things will work out, even if we do not live to see how that is. Just as a business partnership carries a clear delineation of responsibilities -- I am responsible for certain tasks and my partner is responsible for others -- so it is in the Divine partnership of life. Our responsibility in this world lies in the matters we can affect, and everything else is routed to His department. We are not absolved of responsibility to strive, and at the same time, we live in peace knowing that, at the end of the day, it is not all up to us.

We are not angels, nor are we robots. Letting go of all uncontrollable worries to walk wholeheartedly with the Almighty may not always be feasible, especially during trying moments, and that is OK. But as the wise Jerusalem scribe taught me, the more that we commit this idea to memory -- not in a cold cognitive way, as if memorizing for an exam, but rather, with a passionate motivation to inculcate the principle into our very being -- the greater our chances of more frequently living the Torah's goal of tranquility of spirit and body.

I think about this teaching not infrequently nowadays when it comes to the children of our community. Much has been written about how devastating the recent lockdown experience has been for children, and for good reason. Removing children from their normal routines, isolating them from their peers, and exposing them to a situation full of unknowns is certainly not something that any parenting manual would ever encourage. And yet, at the same time, despite the significant problems, the experience has also afforded parents the opportunity to teach their children one of the greatest lessons in Chinuch that they could ever convey -- that in life, we can face uncertainty and be OK. That life is not always predictable, controllable, or according to plan. And that despite this, even if we have moments of fear and moments of frustration, we do not panic. The Ribono Shel Olam has given us a protocol to follow, and the show must go on. We calmly continue to march forward making the best decisions with the limited information that we have, trusting in Him to guide us through the unknowable future: תמים תהיה עם ה' אלוקיך. I believe that a lesson like this, experienced through firsthand example from a parent, is ultimately far more valuable than the missed school classes, which can always be made up. May our unwavering faith in the קורא הדורות מראש bring an end to the suffering speedily.