

The Monsey Message

Rabbi Sruly Koval / Parshat Achrei Mot / April 29, 2022

Last week our family was privileged to spend the final days of the holiday in Monsey, New York with our siblings and their families. As we are so blessed to be part of a special extended family, it is always uplifting for me to spend quality time in their orbit, observing their conduct, the way they treat and interact with other people, as well as being inspired by each of their unique spiritual journeys. Admittedly, part of that is also simply due to leaving my home environment and seeing things from a fresh vantage point, as well as the incredible Jewish resources that are available in the Monsey community.

A real holiday highlight for me was being able to pray the Passover holiday services in a Chassidic synagogue that truly uplifted my soul. The 4-hour long service went by quickly, filled with devotion, song and dance. All told, it was an enriching and enjoyable holiday for me and for our family!

The Jewish lifecycle and calendar cycle are meant to provide us with nuggets and opportunities of personal improvement, with each Jewish holiday providing its unique jumping off point for spiritual growth. A mystical birds-eye view of the Jewish calendar presents an elaborate roadmap for character refinement. A major component of the Passover experience, specifically, is meant to help free us from our own personal Egypts, from the emotional and spiritual forces that enslave us and hold us back from becoming better versions of ourselves.

At our JFX pre-Passover men's event, I quoted the late Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski who lists resentment as a classic example of a negative character trait that enslaves so many people. When we allow other people to live in our brain rent-free, we end up hurting nobody but ourselves. I too struggle with this enslavement, and often my mussar radar is looking to break free from this particular form of enslavement.

It's extremely difficult to change a middah, improve a negative character trait. In fact, the great 18th century mystic and scholar, the Vilna Gaon, says that it is easier to master the entire Talmud than it is to change one negative middah! But sometimes we are presented with bite-size divine opportunities to work on a particular trait. Last week in Monsey I had my chance.

Wednesday morning, my first morning in Monsey, I joined my father, brother and nephews at a local synagogue. After the service ended, someone came over and asked me if I was Sruly Koval. He looked familiar, but I couldn't place his face. As soon as he told me his name, I immediately felt a pit in my stomach. He was an old high school nemesis of mine. I

would not call him a bully, nor would I say that he made my life miserable, but he sure did have a knack for making me feel inadequate. He knew just how to get under my skin, and he did so frequently. When he told me his name, and I recognized his former 18-year-old face a lot of those buried, negative emotions came rushing forward.