

PENINIM ON THE TORAH
PARSHA BOOKLET
Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum
PARASHAT VEZOT HA'BRACHA

*And this is the blessing that Moshe, the man of G-d, bestowed upon Bnei Yisrael before his death.
(33:1)*

Moshe Rabbeinu blessed the nation shortly before he passed from this world. Is that not obvious? He certainly did not bless them after he died! This is why Rashi comments, Moshe said, "If not now, when?" The Maharal, zl, m'Prague, explains that the Torah is teaching us that the blessing of a manhig, leader, is most appropriate towards the end of his life. As long as the leader is vibrant and executing his duties with vigor and stalwartness, it is his function to admonish when needed, exhorting the people to raise their level of observance. He must point out their sins, regardless of the reaction and backlash that he may incur. He must move forward with intensity and fairness, never flinching, never holding back. When he approaches the sunset of his life, as he nears the very end, it is now time to change his tone, to display love and affection and bless his flock accordingly.

Perhaps there is another thought that might be implied by Moshe's blessing the people prior to his death. People fear death. It is a natural and normal fear, but it should not be that way. When a person understands the meaning of life and its focus on preparing oneself for the Eternal World, death no longer takes on the image of finality, but rather, as a bridge to a different and better world. Thus, one who has prepared himself, who has lived a "good" life in the Torah sense of the word, does not fear death. He does not welcome it, because one never knows if his achievements have rendered him worthy of eternal repose, but he is not obsessed with fear of the unknown.

Moshe achieved a spiritual status throughout his life like no other human. He understood the meaning of life and the meaning of death. He had nothing to fear. He was calm and relaxed as he blessed the people prior to his death. He was also teaching us an important lesson. One should not fear death. To fear death is to lose perspective on life. One should "respect" death, recognizing its compelling nature and the ramifications of this bridge to the world of truth. Throughout one's life, he prepares himself for this experience. Such an individual may rightfully fear the unknown, but he does not fear the concept of death. To him, it is not an end, but rather, the beginning of eternal life. He can bless with dignity, thinking rationally, with courage, as he takes leave of a life well-lived. He can say goodbye to his family knowing that he did not let them down. Death is inevitable. Fear of death is not.

From His right hand He presented the fiery Torah to them. (33:2)

Rashi explains that Hashem gave the Torah to Klal Yisrael amid fire and lightning. This mode of presentation carries great significance for the way we should study the Torah and for our level of commitment to it. Horav Elimelech, zl, m'Lizhensk comments that this spectacular manner of delivery was designed to impress upon the people that one must fulfill the Torah with the fire of fervor and self-sacrifice. This has been the legacy of Har Sinai - fire and self-sacrifice. Anything less than total commitment is no commitment. There is no dearth of stories that demonstrate our People's devotion to the Torah. In light of the siyum, culmination of the Torah, I will relate a Simchas Torah story.

In the Hassag Camp of the Czestochowa Ghetto, the spoils taken from the Jewish inmates were kept under the guard of the SS. As impossible as it may seem, one man managed to penetrate the warehouse where a small Torah scroll was stored. He was the Jewish cobbler whom the Germans honored and even called, "der shuster-meister," the master shoemaker, for his excellence in his craft. Well, he got his hands on a Sefer Torah on the day that was Simchas Torah. Naturally, when he brought it in to camp, the inmates danced around it. After all, it was Simchas Torah, the day on which we celebrate with the Torah.

How did he do it, and why? The "why" was easy. He cared. It was Yom Tov. That they were interred in a dread Nazi concentration camp did not mean that they should renege on their obligations. It was Simchas Torah, and one is supposed to dance with the Torah. How did he manage to smuggle out an entire Torah scroll under the watchful eye of the Nazis? It was a small scroll, and the cobbler wrapped it tightly around his body. Somehow, the guards did not notice it. Miracle of miracles! Furthermore, he did this as the Nazis were gathering all the scrolls to make a large bonfire and burn them.

The men placed the Torah between the boards of one of their beds. On Simchas Torah they made hakafos, walking around the bed. They were afraid to expose the Torah to public view, lest it be confiscated and destroyed. They did not fear for themselves; they feared for the Torah. They cared. Silently they sang, Sissu v'simchu b'simchas Torah, "Rejoice and be happy in the Torah's rejoicing, for it is our strength and our light!" Eventually, this Torah made its way to Eretz Yisrael where it was placed in the Gerrer shtiebel in Bnei Brak. Mi k'amcha Yisrael. "Who is like Your nation, Yisrael?" From the fire of Sinai, through the fires of the Crusades, the pogroms and the Holocaust, we have not lost our fervor and our commitment.

Of Zevulun, he said: Rejoice, O'Zevulun, in your excursions, and Yissachar, in your tents. (33:18)

Yissachar and Zevulun were two brothers/tribes that had a unique and profound relationship. While Yissachar spent his days and nights engrossed in Torah study, Zevulun engaged in maritime commerce in order to support Yissachar. One brother studied; the other worked, each sharing in the fruits of his brother's labor. Rashi notes that Zevulun's name precedes that of Yissachar, despite the fact that Yissachar preceded him in birth. This is because Zevulun made Yissachar's Torah study possible. What a wonderful and meaningful relationship! Let us momentarily transport ourselves to another world, the world of Truth, Olam HaBah, to see how this partnership is faring. Clearly, Zevulun is sitting next to Yissachar. After all, they are partners! Yissachar's Torah study was enabled by his brother, who spent his life engaged in nautical pursuits. Now, how is Zevulun going to comprehend Yissachar's

dialogue with the other Torah scholars that are present? Zevulun certainly did not have the time to become a master of erudition. He was busy working. This seems an unlikely reward, considering that Zevulun will have no clue concerning the proceedings going on around him.

Horav Yaakov Kaminetsky, zl, posits that Zevulun not only receives reward for supporting Yissachar, he also gains his yedios ha'Torah, knowledge of Torah. Otherwise, his reward would have a value that is ambiguous, at best. He cites the Chida, zl, who maintains a similar position. The Chafetz Chaim, zl, also contends that the machazik Torah, supporter of Torah, will amass the knowledge of Torah, as well as receive his due for supporting Yissachar. The question that confronts us is how does this occur? If one learns, he knows. If he does not learn, however, how will he know? Torah is not something that one gains without toil. Even if "Zevulun" were to be miraculously granted Torah knowledge as he enters Olam Ha'bah, can it be on the same level as Yissachar, who devoted his life to study Torah with yegia, toil? How can Zevulun "pick up" the Torah which Yissachar studied "one hundred and one" times, just like that?

Rav Yaakov explains that prior to its birth, an embryo studies the entire Torah with a malach, Heavenly angel. As soon as the infant is about to enter the world, an angel comes and sort of "slaps" him above the mouth, causing him to forget all that he has learned. He now has before him a lifelong mission to retrieve that which he has lost. The pasuk in Sefer Iyov 5:7, declares, "Adam l'amal yulad," "Man is born to toil." He must toil to gain Torah knowledge. Furthermore, the Talmud in Berachos 63b, says that Torah is preserved only in one who "kills" himself to acquire it. Apparently, toil is an integral part of Torah erudition. Therefore, our lifelong endeavor is to gain back what we have lost.

Zevulun spent his entire life toiling in the field of commerce so that Yissachar could toil in the field of Torah. Now that his life has come to an end and he is about to enter the world of Truth, the toil that he expended to support Yissachar's Torah will be counted in his favor, and he will retrieve the Torah that he studied prior to his birth. He learned - he toiled. Now, his life has coalesced, and he enters Olam Habah as a talmid chacham, consummate Torah scholar.

Horav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, zl, offers another twist to explaining why Zevulun's name preceded Yissachar's. The one who studies Torah experiences an incredible sense of simcha, joy. This is a joy that cannot be described. One has to experience studying Torah to have this feeling. Thus, Zevulun is missing out on the simchas ha'chaim, joy of life that is a fringe benefit of Torah study. To allay this, the Torah places his name first.

How does placing his name first make up for this loss of joy? Perhaps, we might suggest that the simchah which is inherent in Torah study results from identifying the "course" of study with its Heavenly source. When one realizes that the Torah which he is studying is Hashem's Torah, he derives incredible joy from this connection, from this relationship. Likewise, being placed eternally in Hashem's Torah is an experience that delivers outstanding joy. This joy is magnified when the individual receives superior status in the study of Torah, because it indicates a closer relationship with the Almighty. Can there be a greater source of joy?

Thus, Yisrael will dwell secure, solitary, in the likeness of Yaakov. (33:28)

Rashi explains that one day, when the enemy is driven out, there will no longer be a need for Jews to band together and live in large communal groups for protection. Now, they will be able to live individually, secure, "each under his vine and under his fig tree." In an attempt to define the concept of

badad, solitary, the Yalkut Shimoni makes the following remarks. "It will be badad - not like the badad of Moshe Rabbeinu, who said, Hashem badad yanchenu, "Hashem alone guided them" (Devarim, 32:12). It will also not be like the badad of Yirmiyah HaNavi who said, Mipnei yadecha badad yashavti, "Because of Your mission, I sat alone" (Yirmiyah, 15:17). Rather, it will be like the badad expressed by the wicked Bilaam, Hen am l'vadad yishkon, "Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude" (Bamidbar 23:9).

In Likutei Tikun Shlomo, Horav Binyamin Shlomo Spitzer explains that the goal of the Jewish nation from its inception as a nation through its receiving the Torah at Har Sinai was to be separate, without any intermingling with the gentile nations. In order to maintain a level of kedushah, holiness, it is essential that a strong partition be in place to maintain their distinctiveness. Regrettably, the alternative to disengagement is assimilation, which has been the root of many of our problems throughout history. In order to prepare us for this "experience," Hashem first led us through the wilderness. The reason for this was simple: Just like a child must be trained and educated, so did the nascent Jewish nation have to be protected, to be in the experience of solitude. Living "alone" would prepare them for a life of dedication to Torah - without disturbance of any kind.

This was not, however, Hashem's real goal. They were not to live in isolation, in a desert, surrounded by nothing. The next step in their educative process was one of exile. They were hounded, chased, oppressed, reviled and persecuted by their enemies. Once again, they were alone against the world. No one wanted them. Everybody hated them. They only had each other. This was still not the experience that Hashem sought for them.

This is the understanding that the Yalkut expresses: that it was not Moshe's badad, being led in the wilderness, that Hashem sought for them; nor was it Yirmiyah's badad, of persecution and exile that was Hashem's goal for them. It was the badad that Bilaam envisioned, a solitude in which the Jewish people will live in the world community, secure, protected, respected and admired. What will separate them from assimilation? It will be their own self respect: their pride in being Jewish; their pride in being the Am Hashem; nation of G-d; their pride in being committed, observant and devoted Jews. They will not need to assimilate, because they will realize how distinctive it is to be a Jew. That is the true definition of badad - not alone, but outstanding.

*Fortunate are you, O Yisrael, who is like you! O people delivered by Hashem, the Shield of your help.
(33:29)*

Our salvation is only in Hashem, Who is the Shield of our salvation. This relationship is truly unique; it is one that we must acknowledge and sustain through our tefillos. Harav Chaim Friedlander, zl, explains the nature of prayer as the medium for maintaining our closeness with Hashem and as the vehicle for catalyzing our salvation in times of need. He cites the Midrash that comments concerning Mordechai's salvation from Haman's diabolical plan to hang him on the scaffold that he had prepared for him. Suddenly, the tables were turned, and Mordechai was no longer the victim. He was dressed in the king's royal garments, paraded through the streets on the king's royal steed, led by none other than the evil Haman! The Midrash asks, "What caused Mordechai to achieve such greatness? What brought about this sudden turn of events whereby the victim became the victor?" They explain that it was because Mordechai understood fully well what was occurring and what was behind these decrees. He began to pray - and he continued praying even after the king had conferred eminence upon him. He immediately returned to his sackcloth and prayer.

Incredible! One would think that after achieving such a victory like being led through Shushan, perched on the king's royal steed and guided by the most distinguished minister in the land, Mordechai would go home and throw a Kiddush! No, instead he went back to his siddur and sat down on the ground and cried out in prayer. Why? Is this the correct response to continued salvation? After all, Hashem obviously answered his prayer. Why did he return to his sackcloth and continue to pray?

This teaches us an important principle with regard to prayer. The trials and tribulations that challenge us do not happen to stimulate us to pray. Tzarah, trouble, is not the cause, and tefillah, prayer, is not the effect. Prayer is not a medium to catalyze yeshuah, salvation. If this were the case, once the yeshuah arrives, there would be no reason to continue praying. Mordechai did continue praying as before. Why? This indicates that tefillah is the cause for tzarah, and the vicissitudes and troubles serve as a vehicle to arouse and inspire man to move closer to Hashem via prayer. In other words, the objective is to move closer to Hashem. The method is prayer. The prayer is the means that continues on even when the salvation has already materialized. On the contrary, now that one has experienced the closeness, he should strive to intensify and deepen it. Even when Mordechai saw a glimmer of hope, he continued praying.

He became King over Yeshurun when the members of the nation gathered - the tribes of Yisrael in unity. (33:5)

Rashi explains that Hashem is Klal Yisrael's King in the most complete sense only when the people unite to do His will. Just as achdus, unity, prevailed at Har Sinai when all of Klal Yisrael accepted the Torah, so, too, does Hashem reign only over a nation that maintains a sense of harmony in belief and action. The Navi writes in Melachim I 3:3, "And Shlomo loved Hashem, walking in the statutes of David, his father; only he sacrificed and burnt incense in high places." Rashi explains that while Shlomo acted in a manner similar to David HaMelech, he deviated in one area from his father's practice: he delayed the construction of the Bais HaMikdash for four years, during which he continued to offer his sacrifices in the "high places," a reference to the personal Bamos, altars, that each individual placed on top of his roof or in his yard. According to Rashi, Shlomo HaMelech is criticized for delaying the construction of the Bais HaMikdash. This is not consistent with the pasuk that intimates that his only infraction was continuing to make use of the Bamos. Why do we have this apparent contradiction? As long as there was no Bais HaMikdash, offering sacrifices on a Bamah was totally permissible. If so, why does the Torah note the continued use of the Bamah, while it seems to ignore the primary dissatisfaction with Shlomo for having delayed the Bais HaMikdash?

Horav Shmuel Truvitz, zl, cites the Netziv, zl, in his commentary to Shir HaShirim, who writes that we would be wrong to suspect Shlomo of indolence concerning building the Bais HaMikdash. The reason that he took his time in building the Bais HaMikdash, is that as long as there was no Bais HaMikdash the people were free to use their personal Bamos, allowing for increased latitude of expression of one's love for, and gratitude to Hashem. The Bamah was available everywhere. Anyone could sacrifice in any place.

This is, regrettably, where Shlomo erred. While individual service is wonderful and meaningful, it is not the optimum that Hashem desires. Hashem does not want individual service, in which each person does his "own thing." He wants all of Klal Yisrael in perfect harmony and in total unity to worship Him collectively from one Bais HaMikdash through the medium of one service. As Moshe Rabbeinu told Korach, "We have one G-d, one Aron HaKodesh, one Torah, one Mizbayach, and one Kohen Gadol."

Hashem is one, and unity among His subjects is the precise manner in which He demands that we serve Him. Everything in our lives focuses on bringing together the various parts into a single, consolidated unit. While there is strength in numbers, this strength reaches its apex when all of its parts act in perfect harmony together, as one. This does not demean individual expression. On the contrary, every individual's personal contribution is significant, as long as each is focused on the same goal. Horav Yaakov Kamenetzky, zl, notes that Hashem divided Klal Yisrael into individual degalim, banners, each relating the singular traits of its shevet, tribe. This was done, however, only after the Mishkan was erected and placed in the middle of their encampment. They first had to all be focused on one unified goal - then, they were free to express themselves individually.

Of Levi he said, Your tumim and your urim befit Your devout one. (33:8)

First, Moshe Rabbeinu stressed Levi's position as the tribe from which the spiritual leadership, the Kohanim, of the nation emanated. Then, Moshe turned to the tribe as a whole, focusing on its bravery and steadfast loyalty in the desert. He then blessed the Leviim as the teachers of the nation. The commentators note the omission of Shimon from the blessings. This is due to the fact that Shimon was severely criticized by Yaakov Avinu and the tribe's later participation in the worship and consequent moral deviation concerning the Baal Peor idol. The Sifri notes that at one time, Shimon and Levi had equal status in the eyes of their father, Yaakov. After their reaction to Shechem's violation of their sister, Dinah, Yaakov was angry at them. Indeed, on his deathbed, he said, "Accursed is their rage for it is intense and their wrath for its is harsh." (Bereishis 49:9)

What ensued since that day, such that now Levi is extolled and Shimon is ignored? The Sifri compares this to two individuals who borrow from the king. After awhile, one repays the king his debt, while the other one not only does not repay his debt, but he even borrows again. Likewise, at Shechem, both Shimon and Levi acted in a manner that was censured. They lost it, and, therefore, Yaakov castigated them for their rage. Years later, in the wilderness, when Moshe Rabbeinu proclaimed, *Mi l'Hashem eilai*, "Whoever is for Hashem - to me!" (Shemos 32:28), Levi came forward. Shimon did not. At that time, Levi reimbursed the "king" for his debt. Shimon did not. And again, years later in Moav, under the leadership of Zimri, Shimon's tribe resorted to a complete moral breakdown. It was Pinchas, from the tribe of Levi, who saved the day. Shimon "borrowed" again, while Levi, so to speak, lent to the "king."

We now understand what occurred, and how Levi corrected his problem, while Shimon magnified it. I think, however, there is a deeper meaning to Chazal than the aforementioned. In his *Haamek Davar*, the *Netziv*, zl, writes that when Shimon and Levi avenged their sister's honor, they did so for disparate reasons. Levi sharply felt the insult and profanation of Hashem's Name, the terrible slight to His honor. If people would lose respect for the people that respect and serve Hashem, they would ultimately lose respect for Hashem. Levi therefore acted for -- and in the Name of -- G-d. This is later demonstrated both when his tribe stepped forward in response to Moshe's clarion call of *Mi*

l'Hashem eilai and when Pinchas slew Zimri in order to put a stop to the plague that was decimating the nation.

Shimon also avenged his sister, but for a different reason: he had intense feelings of family loyalty. The honor of his family was defamed. He felt compelled to do something about it. Both Shimon and Levi demonstrated extreme loyalty, but the foci of their allegiances were discordant.

Later on, during the incident of Baal Peor, their loyalties were divergently expressed: Levi's led to elevating Hashem's honor; Shimon's led to disaster. In the confrontation between Zimri, the Nasi of the tribe of Shimon, and Pinchas, scion of the tribe of Levi, Pinchas avenged Hashem's honor, while the tribe of Shimon resorted to moral degradation and open rebellion.

All of this indicated that these two brothers were not the same - in any way. Levi acted with rage and wrath, but his true character was expressed in his total commitment to Hashem. *Mi l'Hashem eilai!* aptly defines Levi's essence. Shimon, on the other hand, did not just act with rage and wrath; his response was an expression of a basic flaw in his character. Rage and wrath are necessary traits which one, at times, must employ when one contends with a vicious enemy whose goal is to undermine and usurp the Name of Hashem. When it pits one brother against another, however, for personal reasons, it is far from being worthy of a blessing.

So Moshe, servant of Hashem, died there. (34:5)

According to one opinion in Chazal, the last eight pesukim of the Torah were written by Moshe, but, rather than using ink, he wrote the last words with tears. The Torah comes to an end with the passing of Moshe, the quintessential rebbe of the Jewish nation, the man who dedicated every fibre of his being to Klal Yisrael. This conclusion to the greatest volume that has ever been recorded is written with tears - Moshe's tears. It is very difficult to accept that Moshe wept over the words, "So Moshe, servant of Hashem, died there." Our leader led a perfect life. No man ever achieved the pinnacle of spirituality and the unprecedented relationship with the Almighty that personified his life. Moshe's place in Gan Eden was assured. Moreover, he was acutely aware that his stay in this world was coming to an end before the nation which he had so faithfully led would enter Eretz Yisrael. Why did he weep?

If I may use my homiletic license, I would like to suggest that Moshe cried for the words, *And no one knows his burial place to this day* (ibid, 34:6). What is the significance of these words? I think that the Torah is conveying a powerful message. Throughout the millennia, millions of our people have been persecuted and put to death through the most cruel and inhuman means. For the Jew, however, there is something even worse than death: not having the opportunity to be laid to rest in a kever Yisrael. Throughout our history, millions of Jews have been deprived of a Jewish burial. This is a tragedy of epic proportion. Hashem Yisborach addressed this dilemma when He personally buried Moshe and concealed his burial site. Hashem was teaching us that every Jew who does not reach kever Yisrael is buried personally by the Almighty - and He knows the spot. Just like Moshe, whom He buried, so, too, have millions of our brothers and sisters been buried by Hashem.

Moshe Rabbeinu realized the implications of the words, and no one knows his burial place. He understood deeply what these words would mean to the millions of Jews, who, like himself, would be buried by Hashem. So he cried. These were not tears of sadness. They were tears of pride in knowing that, regardless of what our enemies do to us, they will never triumph. Hashem will never forsake us. And this is how the Torah concludes.

*And by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of Yisrael.
(34:12)*

The Torah records every significant moment of Moshe Rabbeinu's life that impacted his nation for all time to come. His activities -- whether they be in the area of leadership or social justice, his relationship with the Almighty, or his character traits - are all presented either overtly or in the context of a subtle lesson. If we were to sum up his life's endeavor and search for the crowning lesson, that action for which he is to be remembered for posterity, it would be found in the closing words of the Torah. The words that seemingly serve as our quintessential teacher's epitaph are: And by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of Yisrael. Moshe is to be remembered for his yad chazakah, strong hand. What does this mean, and what message does it convey to us?

The Midrash at the end of the parsha cites a fascinating dialogue that took place between Moshe and Hashem. Moshe asked Hashem, "The Torah which I received from Your Right Hand, perhaps when I leave this world, it will be called by another name?" (A name attributing it to another individual.) Hashem replied, "Heaven forbid! It will always be called with your name." Hence the pasuk, Remember the Torah of Moshe, my servant. (Malachi 3:22)

Horav Nissan Alpert, zl, suggests that Chazal here underscore the overriding significance of limud haTorah, the unmitigated study of Torah. Veritably, we have 613 mitzvos and specific principles of belief, together with a host of exhortations concerning our interpersonal relationships and how we must act in every aspect of our daily lives. What is the briach hatichon, middle bar, that sustains and supports our lives? What is the most important aspect of Judaism? It is limud haTorah. Moshe was acutely aware that during his tenure as leader the focal point would be Torah study. What about after his death? What would be the agenda of his successors? Would the ensuing leadership underscore the primacy of other mitzvos and transform them into the cardinal principles of Judaism? Would they say that the most significant way to serve Hashem is through action, through endeavor, but not necessarily through Torah study? True, study is important - but not all-important.

Moshe feared that people would relegate those who spend their lives immersed in Torah study to a distant second place. Action! Doers! That is what Klal Yisrael needs - not "bank kvetchers," bench pressers. They would not understand that Torah study is what maintains us. For forty years in the wilderness, they did nothing else but study Torah. Moshe taught them nothing else. They did not need anything else. In fact, the last mitzvah in the Torah, the one that he "squeezed in" shortly before his final farewell, was the mitzvah of writing a Sefer Torah. That was it: Torah, Torah - and more Torah! Everything else was secondary.

Now, as Moshe stood at the threshold of his grave, he asked Hashem, "Was it all for naught? Will Torah study be forgotten?" Hashem assured him that our people will never forget the significance of Torah study. It will always have primary status within the framework of Judaism.

This is the meaning of U'lchal hayad hachazakah, "and by all the strong hand" Moshe accepted the Luchos representing the Torah in his two hands, seeing to it that the study of this Torah would be imbued into the hearts and minds of Klal Yisrael, so that it would their yad ha'chazakah.

Our gedolei Yisrael, Torah leaders, have exemplified this quality to the fullest. While many were gifted with exceptional minds, the common denominator between them all has been their unparalleled and uncompromising love of Torah. Their diligence in studying Torah under the most

brutal conditions has been the foundation of their greatness. Horav Yisrael Gustman, zl, one of the most brilliant Roshei Yeshivah of the past generation, was well known for his consummate love for Torah. During the Nazi destruction of Europe, Rav Gustman displayed his great love for the Torah that he so diligently studied. Rabbi Yechiel Spero in *Touched By A Story 2*, relates that when the Nazis invaded his village, Rav Gustman was forced to flee for his life. He ran deep into the forest on the outskirts of town. There, he was able to create a makeshift hideaway for himself and his family in a small alcove of a pigsty. He remained in this "hole" for six months. One can only imagine what this experience can do to the mind and nerves of a person, but Rav Gustman was different. Despite the deplorable conditions, he was able to recite and review the Talmud Zevachim by memory over thirty times! Is it any wonder that we considered the novellae which he composed during that period as some of his most treasured?

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consolidated unit. While there is strength in numbers, this strength reaches its apex when all of its parts act in perfect harmony together, as one. This does not demean individual expression. On the contrary, every individual's personal contribution is significant, as long as each is focused on the same goal. Horav Yaakov Kamenetzky, zl, notes that Hashem divided Klal Yisrael into individual degalim, banners, each relating the singular traits of its shevet, tribe. This was done, however, only after the Mishkan was erected and placed in the middle of their encampment. They first had to all be focused on one unified goal - then, they were free to express themselves individually.

Of Levi he said, Your tumim and your urim befit Your devout one. (33:8)

First, Moshe Rabbeinu stressed Levi's position as the tribe from which the spiritual leadership, the Kohanim, of the nation emanated. Then, Moshe turned to the tribe as a whole, focusing on its bravery and steadfast loyalty in the desert. He then blessed the Leviim as the teachers of the nation. The commentators note the omission of Shimon from the blessings. This is due to the fact that Shimon was severely criticized by Yaakov Avinu and the tribe's later participation in the worship and consequent moral deviation concerning the Baal Peor idol. The Sifri notes that at one time, Shimon and Levi had equal status in the eyes of their father, Yaakov. After their reaction to Shechem's violation of their sister, Dinah, Yaakov was angry at them. Indeed, on his deathbed, he said, "Accursed is their rage for it is intense and their wrath for its is harsh." (Bereishis 49:9)

What ensued since that day, such that now Levi is extolled and Shimon is ignored? The Sifri compares this to two individuals who borrow from the king. After awhile, one repays the king his debt, while the other one not only does not repay his debt, but he even borrows again. Likewise, at Shechem, both Shimon and Levi acted in a manner that was censured. They lost it, and, therefore, Yaakov castigated them for their rage. Years later, in the wilderness, when Moshe Rabbeinu proclaimed, *Mi l'Hashem eilai*, "Whoever is for Hashem - to me!" (Shemos 32:28), Levi came forward. Shimon did not. At that time, Levi reimbursed the "king" for his debt. Shimon did not. And again, years later in Moav, under the leadership of Zimri, Shimon's tribe resorted to a complete moral breakdown. It was Pinchas, from the tribe of Levi, who saved the day. Shimon "borrowed" again, while Levi, so to speak, lent to the "king."

We now understand what occurred, and how Levi corrected his problem, while Shimon magnified it. I think, however, there is a deeper meaning to Chazal than the aforementioned. In his *Haamek Davar*, the Netziv, zl, writes that when Shimon and Levi avenged their sister's honor, they did so for disparate reasons. Levi sharply felt the insult and profanation of Hashem's Name, the terrible slight to His honor. If people would lose respect for the people that respect and serve Hashem, they would ultimately lose respect for Hashem. Levi therefore acted for -- and in the Name of -- G-d. This is later demonstrated both when his tribe stepped forward in response to Moshe's clarion call of *Mi l'Hashem eilai* and when Pinchas slew Zimri in order to put a stop to the plague that was decimating the nation.

Shimon also avenged his sister, but for a different reason: he had intense feelings of family loyalty. The honor of his family was defamed. He felt compelled to do something about it. Both Shimon and Levi demonstrated extreme loyalty, but the foci of their allegiances were discordant.

Later on, during the incident of Baal Peor, their loyalties were divergently expressed: Levi's led to elevating Hashem's honor; Shimon's led to disaster. In the confrontation between Zimri, the Nasi of

the tribe of Shimon, and Pinchas, scion of the tribe of Levi, Pinchas avenged Hahsem's honor, while the tribe of Shimon resorted to moral degradation and open rebellion.

All of this indicated that these two brothers were not the same - in any way. Levi acted with rage and wrath, but his true character was expressed in his total commitment to Hashem. *Mi l'Hashem eilai!* aptly defines Levi's essence. Shimon, on the other hand, did not just act with rage and wrath; his response was an expression of a basic flaw in his character. Rage and wrath are necessary traits which one, at times, must employ when one contends with a vicious enemy whose goal is to undermine and usurp the Name of Hashem. When it pits one brother against another, however, for personal reasons, it is far from being worthy of a blessing.

So Moshe, servant of Hashem, died there. (34:5)

According to one opinion in Chazal, the last eight pesukim of the Torah were written by Moshe, but, rather than using ink, he wrote the last words with tears. The Torah comes to an end with the passing of Moshe, the quintessential rebbe of the Jewish nation, the man who dedicated every fibre of his being to Klal Yisrael. This conclusion to the greatest volume that has ever been recorded is written with tears - Moshe's tears. It is very difficult to accept that Moshe wept over the words, "So Moshe, servant of Hashem, died there." Our leader led a perfect life. No man ever achieved the pinnacle of spirituality and the unprecedented relationship with the Almighty that personified his life. Moshe's place in Gan Eden was assured. Moreover, he was acutely aware that his stay in this world was coming to an end before the nation which he had so faithfully led would enter Eretz Yisrael. Why did he weep?

If I may use my homiletic license, I would like to suggest that Moshe cried for the words, And no one knows his burial place to this day (ibid, 34:6). What is the significance of these words? I think that the Torah is conveying a powerful message. Throughout the millennia, millions of our people have been persecuted and put to death through the most cruel and inhuman means. For the Jew, however, there is something even worse than death: not having the opportunity to be laid to rest in a kever Yisrael. Throughout our history, millions of Jews have been deprived of a Jewish burial. This is a tragedy of epic proportion. Hashem Yisborach addressed this dilemma when He personally buried Moshe and concealed his burial site. Hashem was teaching us that every Jew who does not reach kever Yisrael is buried personally by the Almighty - and He knows the spot. Just like Moshe, whom He buried, so, too, have millions of our brothers and sisters been buried by Hashem.

Moshe Rabbeinu realized the implications of the words, and no one knows his burial place. He understood deeply what these words would mean to the millions of Jews, who, like himself, would be buried by Hashem. So he cried. These were not tears of sadness. They were tears of pride in knowing that, regardless of what our enemies do to us, they will never triumph. Hashem will never forsake us. And this is how the Torah concludes.

*And by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of Yisrael.
(34:12)*

The Torah records every significant moment of Moshe Rabbeinu's life that impacted his nation for all time to come. His activities -- whether they be in the area of leadership or social justice, his

relationship with the Almighty, or his character traits - are all presented either overtly or in the context of a subtle lesson. If we were to sum up his life's endeavor and search for the crowning lesson, that action for which he is to be remembered for posterity, it would be found in the closing words of the Torah. The words that seemingly serve as our quintessential teacher's epitaph are: And by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of Yisrael. Moshe is to be remembered for his yad chazakah, strong hand. What does this mean, and what message does it convey to us?

The Midrash at the end of the parsha cites a fascinating dialogue that took place between Moshe and Hashem. Moshe asked Hashem, "The Torah which I received from Your Right Hand, perhaps when I leave this world, it will be called by another name?" (A name attributing it to another individual.) Hashem replied, "Heaven forbid! It will always be called with your name." Hence the pasuk, Remember the Torah of Moshe, my servant. (Malachi 3:22)

Horav Nissan Alpert, zl, suggests that Chazal here underscore the overriding significance of limud haTorah, the unmitigated study of Torah. Veritably, we have 613 mitzvos and specific principles of belief, together with a host of exhortations concerning our interpersonal relationships and how we must act in every aspect of our daily lives. What is the briach hatichon, middle bar, that sustains and supports our lives? What is the most important aspect of Judaism? It is limud haTorah. Moshe was acutely aware that during his tenure as leader the focal point would be Torah study. What about after his death? What would be the agenda of his successors? Would the ensuing leadership underscore the primacy of other mitzvos and transform them into the cardinal principles of Judaism? Would they say that the most significant way to serve Hashem is through action, through endeavor, but not necessarily through Torah study? True, study is important - but not all-important.

Moshe feared that people would relegate those who spend their lives immersed in Torah study to a distant second place. Action! Doers! That is what Klal Yisrael needs - not "bank kvetchers," bench pressers. They would not understand that Torah study is what maintains us. For forty years in the wilderness, they did nothing else but study Torah. Moshe taught them nothing else. They did not need anything else. In fact, the last mitzvah in the Torah, the one that he "squeezed in" shortly before his final farewell, was the mitzvah of writing a Sefer Torah. That was it: Torah, Torah - and more Torah! Everything else was secondary.

Now, as Moshe stood at the threshold of his grave, he asked Hashem, "Was it all for naught? Will Torah study be forgotten?" Hashem assured him that our people will never forget the significance of Torah study. It will always have primary status within the framework of Judaism.

This is the meaning of U'Ichal hayad hachazakah, "and by all the strong hand" Moshe accepted the Luchos representing the Torah in his two hands, seeing to it that the study of this Torah would be imbued into the hearts and minds of Klal Yisrael, so that it would their yad ha'chazakah.

Our gedolei Yisrael, Torah leaders, have exemplified this quality to the fullest. While many were gifted with exceptional minds, the common denominator between them all has been their unparalleled and uncompromising love of Torah. Their diligence in studying Torah under the most brutal conditions has been the foundation of their greatness. Horav Yisrael Gustman, zl, one of the most brilliant Roshei Yeshivah of the past generation, was well known for his consummate love for Torah. During the Nazi destruction of Europe, Rav Gustman displayed his great love for the Torah that he so diligently studied. Rabbi Yechiel Spero in *Touched By A Story 2*, relates that when the Nazis invaded his village, Rav Gustman was forced to flee for his life. He ran deep into the forest on the outskirts of town. There, he was able to create a makeshift hideaway for himself and his family in a small alcove of a pigsty. He remained in this "hole" for six months. One can only imagine what this experience can do

to the mind and nerves of a person, but Rav Gustman was different. Despite the deplorable conditions, he was able to recite and review the Talmud Zevachim by memory over thirty times! Is it any wonder that we considered the novellae which he composed during that period as some of his most treasured?

He (Moshe) carried out Hashem's justice and His ordinances with Yisrael. (33:21)

In Pirkei Avos, 5:18, Chazal teach us, "Whoever makes a multitude meritorious; no sin shall come through him..." Moshe Rabbeinu attained virtue and brought the multitude to virtue; therefore, the merit of the multitude is attributed to him, as it is stated, "He carried out Hashem's righteousness and His ordinances with Yisrael." We live in a complex world, in an environment that is not necessarily conducive to spiritual growth. While whether or not to sin consciously is based upon a person's individual discretion, it is often difficult to avoid an inadvertent sin. When we act in haste without forethought, we might suffer unfortunate consequences. A thoughtless word can sometimes cut cruelly, producing severe repercussions. Indeed, even an innocuous statement can be misconstrued, so that it influences others in a negative manner. The Mishnah conveys to us its prescription for protection against sin: lead others to virtue and righteousness; be concerned with the spiritual welfare of others; and you will earn Hashem's special concern. Circumstances will be so ordained that the *mezakeh es ho'rabim* will not lead others astray by his needless word or action. His hand will not cause others to sin. Chazal explain that one who leads others to merit will never be the cause of transgression, because it would cast him in a negative light to his disciples; the beneficiaries of his good work should merit *Olam Habah*, the eternal merit, and he should merit perdition. His destiny remains eternally linked with that of his beneficiaries.

The Mishnah cites Moshe Rabbeinu as an example of the *mezakeh es horabim*. He was a master at leadership, bringing his people to spiritual and moral growth through forty years of difficulty. Never did he flinch or falter. How did he do it? His portrait in Midrashic literature indicates one sterling quality as the primary factor in his success: he was able to bear the people patiently to the utmost limits of human endurance. They turned against him time and again out of fear, anxiety and hysteria. Their suspicions, resentments and other critiques were the outgrowth of hundreds of years of cruel servitude. Their complaints against Moshe were beyond ludicrous.

Yet, Moshe Rabbeinu, the consummate leader, the quintessential *manhig Yisrael*, rarely retorted with impatience or anger. Moshe serves as the paradigm for all leaders. Who today is not the subject of petty, carping criticism? The frustration and irritation which a leader experiences certainly takes its toll. Yet, we are not to condemn, but rather to defend our constituents, realizing that they are human and, therefore, subject to human frailties.

While Moshe did entreat Hashem to overlook Klal Yisrael's behavior, when he spoke to them, it was altogether different. He was stern and demanding, exacting and unrelenting. He taught them *middos*, character refinement; he imbued them with hope and reverence. He also taught them the Torah. His teachings were tempered with love, even when he upbraided them for their stubbornness and insolence and took them to task for their ingratitude. Yes, he was demanding, but he was also thoughtful. He did not merely seek to discipline; rather, his goal was to inculcate values, inspire virtues, and imbue their lives with spiritual meaning.

This principle holds true for every principal, teacher and guide. Teaching, mentoring, instructing

are all terms referring to a role in preparing the next generation. It is not easy, but then nothing of value comes without effort. It can, at times, be demeaning, frustrating, thankless to name just a few of the "negatives." There is no endeavor, however, that provides greater and more enduring satisfaction than the knowledge that we have played a role in shaping the life of another Jew. We might not receive our "thanks" in this world, but we will receive our appreciation with the ultimate reward from Hashem. We will be repaid not only for those that we have helped directly, but we will also receive reward for all those in generations yet to come who will learn Torah or become finer Jews as a result of our toil. Indeed, to teach is to achieve immortality.

We have to add one more point. Immortality is achieved when one teaches that way. Let me explain with the following story: Horav Shlomo Heiman, zl, the distinguished Rosh HaYeshivah of Torah Vodaath, was an individual of incredible depth and breadth. His shiurim, lectures, were brilliant masterpieces which were presented in a manner unlike many of his peers. When he taught, the shiur came alive; in fact, the room came alive as he would shout with almost breathless ecstasy as he explained the words of Chazal and their commentaries. His eyes gleamed, his hands waved to and fro, while his entire body gyrated as he expounded on Chazal. When the shiur was over, Rav Shlomo would collapse from the physical exertion.

It was one particular cold, snowy day in the early 1940's when New York was blanketed with snow. Only four talmidim, students, showed up for shiur. Undaunted, Rav Shlomo delivered his shiur as if the room were packed with hundreds of students. Sweat rolled down his face as he passionately presented the finer points of Jewish law to the four skeptical students. As he paused to catch his breath, one of the four asked, "Rebbe, please, why are you getting so worked up? There are only four of us!"

Rav Shlomo looked back at the student and said, "You think that I am only giving a shiur to four students? You are not the only ones. I am giving this class to hundreds and hundreds of students. I am teaching you, your students, your students' students, and so on!"

In order to imbue generations, the lecture must be taught in such a manner. Rav Shlomo did not speak to the present - he spoke to the future - to a generation yet unborn. When one works with the future in mind, his preparation takes on a whole new meaning. The Chafetz Chaim's son, Rav Leib, zl, once asked his father if he really thought that the future readers of his magnum opus, the Mishnah Berurah, would ever have an inkling of the indescribable effort that he had expended in producing this masterpiece. Every halachah, every Chazal, every source -- Rishon, Acharon, anywhere in Talmudic and Halachic literature -- was painstakingly checked and rechecked. The Chafetz Chaim responded that the only reason future generations would even be able to read the halachos with lucidity and accuracy is that he had expended so much time in ensuring the verity and intelligibility of the sefer. The Chafetz Chaim wrote for the future. Indeed, everything we do should be able to withstand the test of time.

And the days of tearful mourning for Moshe ended. (34:8)

In the Talmud Shabbos, 106a, Chazal say, "Whoever lets down/ weeps over the passing of an adam kasher -- upright, virtuous man -- Hashem counts his tears and puts them aside in His treasury." What is the meaning of "counting tears," and what is its significance? Olas Shlomo on Seder Kedoshim, cited by Shai LaTorah, explains that it is human nature to weep for a person who passes from this world, regardless of the level of his virtue. We are an emotional people. Therefore, when someone dies, our first reaction is to express our emotion - an emotion that may have little to do with

the individual. Perhaps he is a relative, or a friend; perhaps we simply cry because when we hear of a death, we cry. Who does not shed a tear upon reading about a tragedy that has occurred? How are we to discern between the individual who cries for an adam kasher, and one who simply cries as an expression of emotion?

The duration of the weeping determines for whom and why we are weeping. An expression of emotion does not last long, unless it is for someone whose loss has left a tremendous void, someone who has inspired others with his behavior, with his brilliance, with his virtue. Indeed, for such an individual, as time goes by, the loss becomes more pronounced. Consequently, the original expression of grief is no indication of its focus. We could be crying for anyone. Only after a substantial amount of time has passed and one is still grief-stricken, do we have a clear intimation that this is not typical weeping for an ordinary person. These tears have special meaning, and they are valued by Hashem to the point that He counts and saves them.

Perhaps we may suggest a somewhat different approach. Adam kasher is a reference to a "good" Jew - not necessarily a brilliant Torah scholar, a great Torah luminary - just a simple Jew: a man of sterling character, impeccable behavior, devout and virtuous. This person does not make any "waves." In fact, most people do not even know him. His picture is not in the paper every other week. His passing might be noted with a small obituary in the local paper. Instead of learning folios of Talmud, he recited Tehillim whenever he had the opportunity. He is what David Hamelech in Sefer Tehillim 15 describes as "one who walks in perfect innocence, does what is right, and speaks the truth from his heart. He does not slander, nor does he do evil or disgrace his fellowman." He neither takes advantage of others, nor can his integrity be compromised with special gifts. This is an adam kasher.

Regrettably, we do not often cry for such people, because in today's society they remain unnoticed. We do not realize that their loss creates an irreplaceable void in the Jewish community. When they are taken, the Shechinah feels the loss much more than we do. The Shechinah knows their contribution to Klal Yisrael, while we conveniently ignore it. When we weep over the passing of a great man, we cry over our loss. When we cry over the death of an adam kasher, we grieve over the Shechinah's loss. Hashem counts those tears, because they are altruistic; they are real.

Perhaps this is the underlying meaning of Chazal's statement when they say, "Kol ha'morid dema'os," "Anyone who lets down tears." Why did they not say, "Kol ha'bocheh," "Anyone who weeps?" I think that "bocheh" is spontaneous weeping. When we hear of a death, a sad occurrence, a tragedy - we cry. That is our first reaction as human beings. To "let down" tears, however, is an expression which denotes thought, an intelligent appreciation of a situation, a cogent understanding of who it was that has passed away, as well as his contribution to the community and the consequent loss produced by his demise. When an "ordinary" man leaves this world, it takes a "thoughtful" and caring person to express his grief. Hashem values those tears because they have special meaning.

Never again has there arisen in Yisrael a prophet like Moshe...And by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of all Yisrael. (34:11,12)

"Asher asah Moshe," "Which Moshe performed." Did Moshe perform, or did Hashem perform? In his commentary to the Hagaddah, the Gra, zl, m'Vilna writes that Hashem took us out of Egypt - not through the medium of an agent or an angel, but Hashem Himself. The revelation of Hashem during the

Exodus was apparent to all, especially since Moshe took no honor whatsoever for himself. Moshe's humility was readily manifest as he indicated to all that Hashem was acting alone without any agents. Thus, Moshe Rabbeinu's name is mentioned nowhere in the Hagaddah. Everything that occurred was through Hashem levado, alone.

Now that we have a clear statement that forbids us from associating any medium with Hashem in regard to the Exodus, why does the Torah write the words, "asher asah Moshe?" Hashem performed the redemption; why is it attributed here to Moshe? Horav Yitzchak Goldwasser, Shlita, explains that whenever one attributes an endeavor solely to Hashem and takes no credit whatsoever for himself, Hashem rewards him by crediting it to the individual. Hence, since Moshe took no credit for the Exodus, ascribing every facet of it to Hashem, he was rewarded by having the geulah, liberation, attributed to him. The purpose of the geulah was that every Jew should see clearly that "I am Hashem your G-d Who took you out of Egypt." This belief is mandatory and unequivocal. Moshe Rabbeinu downplayed his part in the Exodus so that no one would err in acknowledging the true source of our redemption. Thus, the redemption was in his merit and should, therefore, be ascribed to him.

Rav Goldwasser supplements this thought with another example. Chazal tell us that Rabbi Eliezer HaGadol was meticulous throughout his life never to say a halachah which he did not hear from his rebbeim. He did not say his own chidushim, novellae. In reward for this exemplary humility, the first Mishnah in Meseches Berachos, the opening words of the Oral Law, begins with a statement from Rabbi Eliezer. The question glares at us: If he never said anything of his own, how does the first Mishnah begin with his statement of halachah? Is it his, or is it not his?

We must say that Rabbi Eliezer demurred himself, never calling attention to himself, always attributing his Torah to his rebbeim. Therefore, Hashem rewarded him by ascribing the halachah at the beginning of Shas to him. In other words, when we defer what we have to Hashem, He rewards us by giving it back.

The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the congregation of Yaakov. (33:4)

The text of this pasuk is inconsistent. It begins by stating that the Torah has been commanded to us and ends by saying that it is the heritage of the congregation of Yaakov. Who is included in the words of "Kehillas Yaakov"? Horav Chaim Elazary, zl, suggests that the congregation of Yaakov is a reference to all Jews, even those who have not had the opportunity to study Torah and develop a proficiency in it. The am ha'aretz, so to speak illiterate Jew, who performs mitzvos is devoted to Yiddishkeit. He just does not learn, although he respects those who do. Thus he is included in the congregation of Yaakov.

Horav Elazary recounts a story which serves as an excellent analogy to emphasize this point. One Simchas Torah a simple Jew, whose level of Torah erudition was far from adept, came to the court of a great Chasidic Rebbe. He requested to dance with the Rebbe as he danced with the Torah. When the Rebbe heard this strange request, he asked the man, "Tell me, what is the source of your great joy?

Did you study so much Torah during the past year that it warrants such an expression of happiness?" The simple Jew responded, "If the Rebbe's brother would marry off his daughter, would not the Rebbe participate in the simchah as an uncle? I am sharing in my relative's simchah!" What a remarkable response. All Jews are part of one great congregation. We should participate in each other's simchos, as well as in the tragedies. We should share a personal joy with each Jew who celebrates a

milestone. The Torah is the heritage of all of Klal Yisrael. While many individuals devote their lives to its study and dissemination, this devotion is not theirs exclusively. It belongs to all of those who are a part of Kehillas Yaakov.

And Moshe, the servant of Hashem, died there...and He (Hashem) buried him." (34:5,6)

In His glory, Hashem buried Moshe Rabbeinu. The Midrash relates how it happened that Moshe merited for Hashem to personally take charge of his burial. During the final days prior to the exodus from Egypt, while everyone was occupying themselves with "relieving" the Egyptians of their money, Moshe sought to fulfill the promise made many years earlier to Yosef: that his bones would be taken out of Egypt. Moshe spent three days and nights searching throughout the country, looking everywhere in the hope that he would locate Yosef's coffin. According to one tradition, Serach bas Asher approached Moshe to ask him why he was so fatigued. Moshe explained that he had been searching for Yosef's coffin for three days. She said, "Come with me, and I will show you where he is buried." She took him to the Nile, whereupon Yosef's coffin rose from the depths. Moshe took it and personally carried it. When Hashem saw Moshe's devotion to the middah of chesed, He declared, "Moshe! You might think that you performed a simple act. By your life, the kindness that you performed was very significant. You carried Yosef's coffin while the rest of Klal Yisrael were occupied with carrying their gold and silver. For this, you will merit that I will be personally involved in your burial."

If we note the text of the Midrash, we infer that Chazal question the reason for Moshe's unique merit. Is it any wonder that Moshe was worthy of this distinction? Perhaps he did not do enough. Does not mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice, on behalf of Klal Yisrael for forty years carry its own merit? His willingness to have his name erased from the Torah, if Hashem would not forgive Klal Yisrael for their participation in the Golden Calf, should be significant. He rose to become Adon ha'Neviim, Master of All Prophets, the quintessential leader of Klal Yisrael. He became the vehicle through whom Hashem gave the Torah. This fact alone should warrant a unique relationship with, and reward from, the Almighty.

Horav Chaim Elazary, zl, feels the Midrash is emphasizing another aspect of Moshe's character and avodas Hashem, service to the Almighty. Had Moshe turned to any of the Zekeinim, Elders, or Yehoshua, Nadav, Avihu or Aharon Ha'Kohen to take care of Yosef's bones, that individual certainly would have fulfilled his request. Moshe did not delegate this mitzvah to anyone else. Moshe personally undertook to perform this final chesed for Yosef. While an agent might have performed the same task, it was a "mitzvah bo yoser m'bishlucho," a greater mitzvah if one acts personally, rather than delegate the deed to an agent. "Emptying out" Egypt was also a mitzvah. Yet, Moshe chose the mitzvah that did not accord him additional benefits. He personally searched, he alone carried the coffin, a task for which he received no benefit other than the pure mitzvah itself. This was chesed shel emes, pristine kindness of the highest order. It was pure altruism. This G-d - like activity, behaving in a manner in which only Hashem acts, earned him the reward middah k'neged middah, measure for measure. Thus, when the time would come for Moshe to pass from this world, the Almighty would personally attend to his needs.

And by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of all Yisrael. (34:12)

The Matnos Kehunah cites the Yerushalmi that states that, after Klal Yisrael had sinned with the

Golden Calf, Hashem refused to give them the Luchos. He was close to retrieving the Luchos from Moshe, when Moshe grabbed them back. This is the meaning of the yad hachazakah, strong hand, which Moshe demonstrated as he "took away" the Luchos from Hashem. Rashi applies the popular p'shat, interpretation, that yad ha'chazakah is a reference to Moshe's breaking the Luchos. Obviously, Moshe did not demonstrate greater strength than when he grabbed the Luchos. The Yerushalmi is telling us that there was a dialogue between Hashem and Moshe in which Hashem "conceded" to Moshe's taaneh, interceding, on Klal Yisrael's behalf. What really happened?

In his response to this question, Horav Baruch Sorotzkin, zl, first cites his father. In his sefer, Aznaim La'Torah, Horav Zalman Sorotzkin wonders why Moshe took the Luchos down in order to break them. After all, he knew that the people had sinned. He was aware that their iniquity would not change as he came down. He explains that while Moshe perceived their sin, he was not convinced of its extent. If this was a spiritual error in which Klal Yisrael misdirected their allegiance due to faulty spiritual perception, Moshe would have had reason to hope for their teshuvah. He would come down, explain their error to them, and inspire them to repent. When he descended the mountain, however, and observed the revelry that ensued, when he saw a complete breakdown of their moral fiber, when he saw the murder that they committed, he was convinced that this was no avairah b'hashkafah, error in spiritual perspective; rather, this was wanton lust, debauchery at its nadir. The people had gone over the moral limits.

Horav Boruch Sorotzkin takes a somewhat different approach to explaining Klal Yisrael's behavior and Moshe's reaction. Moshe took the Luchos down with the intention of breaking them. He wanted Klal Yisrael to acknowledge what they were doing wrong, so he sought to shock them into awareness. Smashing the Divinely fashioned Luchos in front of their eyes would deliver the message that what they were doing was kefirah, apostasy. The people erred in thinking that they could serve Hashem while building a Golden Calf. They deceived themselves into thinking that they could mix light with darkness, that they could call themselves a Torah nation while they still continued to act like pagans. Giving them mussar, ethical lectures, would not help; reasoning with them would leave the same impression. They had to be jolted into understanding the gravity of their sin, the travesty of the nature of their Jewish "observance."

Hashem told Moshe that as long as Klal Yisrael remained in such a state, they could not receive the Luchos. Moshe agreed; he only felt that in order for them to accede to performing teshuvah, they must realize their iniquity. This would only occur if the Luchos, the symbol of their assured "Jewishness," would be smashed in front of their eyes. Let them see what comprises Judaism devoid of observance. Let them visualize Torah without mitzvos. Let them come to their senses in order to confront the reality that they could not refer to themselves as faithful Jews as long as they embraced the Golden Calf. Hashem deferred to Moshe. Thus, the two explanations for the term "yad ha'chazakah" are congruous: Moshe "bested" Hashem so that Hashem gave him the Luchos, which he proceeded to break before Klal Yisrael's eyes.

Alternatively, we may suggest another reason for Moshe's insistence on bringing the Luchos down to Klal Yisrael. True, he was aware of their sin; Hashem had told him, "Go descend, for your people that you brought from Egypt has become corrupt," (Shemos, 32:7) Moshe was hoping, however, that the sin had been limited only to the erev rav, mixed multitude, that had come along when Klal Yisrael left Egypt. He hoped that it had not spread to the decent, observant Jew. When he descended the mountain, he beheld the revelry and blatant iniquity that had spread beyond the ranks of the erev rav. When he saw how observant Jews stood by apathetically -- even, in some instances, shamefully participating -- as a sign of unity with those that had assimilated their faith -- he realized there was no

choice. The Luchos must be broken. The message that Torah cannot be compromised for any reason was clear. Principle accompanies conviction. To believe in the Torah is to uphold it under all circumstances, regardless of external pressure and the lack of popularity that one may encounter. Moshe broke the Luchos; Hashem was in accord with his actions. Unfortunately, we have not assimilated the timelessness of this lesson.