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BLAH BLAH

The parashah begins, "Vayeilech Moshe - And Moses went"[1] Where did Moses go? The Torah doesn't specify, but our Sages explain that he went into every Jewish heart so that the Torah might be engraved on the souls of our people for all eternity. But how did Moses accomplish that feat?

The answer to that question reveals the awesome greatness and sanctity of Moses. In the previous parashah, Nitzavim, Moses addressed the entire nation and renewed the covenant with them. In doing so, he also charged the people with a new covenant of areivus, which commanded each and every Jew to assume responsibility for his fellows. Henceforth, not only would individuals be held culpable for their own sins, but also for the sins of the nation: one nation, with one destiny, inexorably intertwined.

After Moses sealed this covenant, the people returned to their tents. Moses then did what only the greatest of men would be capable of doing. He went from tent to tent to bid them farewell, for he knew that on that day, he would return his soul to God and die. But if that be the case, we might well ask, why didn't Moses say his farewells and bless the nation when they were all gathered as one and stood before him? Visiting millions of people would be a superhuman undertaking for even a young man, and would take, not a day, but weeks or months. But Moses' love for his people was such that no undertaking was too much for him. And more, he wanted, on this last day of his life, to engrave not just faith, but also love for Torah on the heart of each and every individual. And for that, loving, personal contact was required.

Our Sages teach that Moses, our teacher, placed the Torah within the heart of every Jew for all eternity; because of that, wherever a Jew might find himself, at whatever time in history, whenever he sincerely desires to study Torah, Moses would be at his side and teach him.

When God's Face Is Hidden

And Hashem spoke to Moses: "Behold, you will lie with your forefathers, but this people will rise up and stray after the gods of the foreigners of the Land ... it will forsake Me and annul My covenant that I have sealed with it. My anger will flare against it on that day and I will forsake them; and I will conceal My Face from them ... and many evils and distresses will encounter it. It will say on that day, 'Is it not because my God is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?' But I will surely have concealed My

face on that day because of all the evil that it did, for it had turned to the god of others." [2]

Thus, God informs Moses that after his death, the nation will abandon the covenant; subsequently, God's wrath will be kindled against them and terrible suffering will befall them. And the people will realize, "God is not in our midst. It is because of this that these evils have come upon us."

One would have imagined that such an admission would be regarded as a positive step toward repentance. But strangely enough, the verse states that God would continue to hide His face from them. How do we understand this? Why doesn't Hashem accept their declaration as a true expression of repentance? The answer is simple. God never abandons us. He is our loving Father; when there is a breakdown in our relationship, it is not because He is not in our midst, but rather, because we have abandoned Him. Until such time as we realize our responsibility to return to Him with a full heart, there can be no real reconciliation.

But even under those painful circumstances, God's message is filled with hope. He does not say, "I will forsake them," but rather, "I will conceal My face from them." When someone hides, it means that he is still there; we need only find him.

Similarly, God, Who is our loving Father, never forsakes us. He is always there, watching over us, guarding us, even in our darkest moments. We are never alone ... God is in hiding, waiting for us to find Him.

There is a well-known story about a Chassidic rebbe who found a little boy crying. "Why are you crying, my son?" he asked.

"Because I am hiding, and no one is looking for me," the boy answered.

"Woe unto us!" the rebbe said. "God is hiding and we are not looking for Him. We don't even make an attempt to find Him!"

Song of the Jewish People

So now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the Children of Israel. Place it in their mouth" [3]

This is the last mitzvah that Moshe Rabbeinu imparted to us, and it is a command for every Jew to write a Torah Scroll. This, of course, does not mean that every Jew must write his own Sefer Torah; what it does mean, however, is that by writing a single letter to complete a Torah Scroll, we can fulfill this mitzvah.

Throughout the centuries, no matter how dense the darkness of our exile, how bitter our persecution, and how abject our poverty, our people fulfilled this mitzvah of writing Torah scrolls with enormous zeal, sacrifice, and love. The celebration accompanying the dedication of a new Torah is akin to that of a wedding, and the joy that it generates envelopes the entire community.

Some years ago, our Hineni organization dedicated a new Torah Scroll and we celebrated the occasion by dancing with the Torah along Park Avenue, which was closed to traffic. The Torah was carried under the chuppah, and as we made our way down the avenue, multitudes of people joined us, dancing and singing with

joy. Children waved flags, the music played, and men and women from every walk of life came to participate, their eyes brimming with tears of joy - tears that spanned the centuries, going back thousands of years to the moment when Moses proclaimed, "Write this song for yourself and teach it to the Children of Israel. Place it in their mouth"

In thousands of years, we have never forgotten Moses' commandment, and when a new Torah is dedicated, even the most secular Jew comes forth to celebrate with a full heart.

But the question that still must be asked is why the writing of a Torah Scroll is compared to writing a song.

A song is something that you can never forget. Even if you forget the lyrics, the melody remains in your heart. Yes, the Torah is the song of our people. Even for those among us who may have forgotten the holy words, the melody nevertheless remains in their hearts, and in an instant, they can relearn the lyrics.

NOTES

1. Deut. 31:1.
2. Ibid. 31:16-18.
3. Ibid. 31:19.



The Family Parsha
By Nesanel Yoel Safran
Lessons, stories and discussion questions for parents and kids

Forgiving to Others

God is forgiving and wants us to be forgiving to others. In this week's Torah portion we see that God always keeps the door of forgiveness open to those who have done wrong and want to change for the better. We can learn from here that the Torah way is to be forgiving and not hard-hearted.

Story

In our story, a kid learns the value of forgiveness.

"BEATING THE BAND"

Jack and the guys were setting up their instruments and getting ready for band practice when the phone rang.

"That was Dave," Steve said, hanging up the phone. "He says he's really sorry but his bike has a flat tire and he's gonna be late."

"I'm going to call him right back and tell him not to bother. He's out of the band!" said Jack, the band's vocalist, all angry. He grabbed the phone.

"Hey, wait a sec," said Steve, "You want to kick him out? Why?"

"Because he has some nerve being late and holding all of us up - and this isn't the first time it happened."

"But it's not his fault. He got a flat - he said he was sorry. Give the guy a break."

"Excuses, excuses. If it's not one excuse, it's another, and I'm not interested." Jack started dialing.

"Wait a minute," pleaded Steve. "Let's at least give him *one* more chance."

"All right," huffed Jack. "One more chance. But from now on there's a new rule: whoever comes late is out of the band. Okay?"

Steve reluctantly agreed and a little while later when Dave showed up and apologized, Steve and the rest of the guys were forgiving, but Jack gave him a mean look and told him the new rule.

The next day, Jack got home from school and was feeling really tired. Band practice wasn't for more than an hour, so he figured he would catch a quick nap first so he'd have more energy to play. He carefully set his alarm for a half an hour, to give him plenty of time to get there.

"Okay, I made it just on time!" said Dave as he burst in the door of the rehearsal room. "At least I'm still in the band." He looked around. Everyone else was there too - except for one of them...

Almost two hours later, Jack woke up in a cold sweat. He looked at the clock. "Oh, no!" he said aloud. "I'm late for practice." Then he remembered the new rule he had made. What was he going to do? Because of his dumb,

mean rule he was going to get kicked out of his own band!

The guys were already practicing when Jack walked in, head hanging down.

"Hey, you made it - great," smiled Steve. "We really missed your vocals. "

"Well I guess you won't need them from now on," Jack said softly.

"Why?" asked Steve.

"Because I came late, that's why. So I'm out of the band, remember?"

The guys looked at each other and then spoke quietly amongst themselves.

"Forget about it, Jack. These things can happen to anyone. We all forgive you and want you to stay in the band. Right guys?"

Everyone nodded his head. Jack felt so relieved that the guys forgave him that right then and there, not only did he cancel his rule, but decided that from then on he would be much more forgiving of Dave and others, too.

Discussion Questions

Ages 3-5

Q. How did Jack feel at first about Dave coming late?

A. He felt like he didn't want to forgive him.

Q. How did he feel in the end?

A. He saw how everybody can sometimes make mistakes - like he did by oversleeping - and that he should try to be more forgiving.

Ages 6-9

Q. What life lesson do you think Jack learned that day?

A. He had an attitude of being hard-hearted and unforgiving of other people's mistakes and weaknesses, but the experience of erring and being forgiven by his friends taught him the value of forgiveness.

Q. Do you think if Dave keeps continually coming late, the guys should keep him in the band?

A. It might reach a point where they are simply unable to keep someone in the band who doesn't show up when they need him. However, they should try first to be as tolerant and forgiving as they can and perhaps help him to become more prompt.

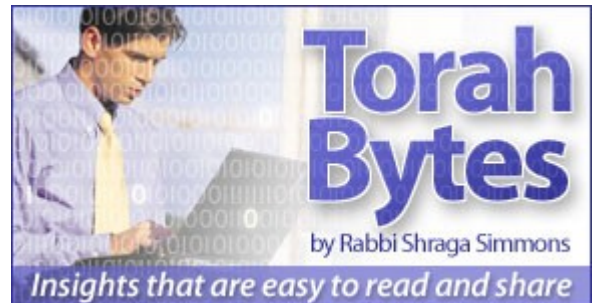
Ages 10 and Up

Q. Our sages teach that God judges us as we judge others. What do you think this means and how is it applicable to our story?

A. Our attitude toward others is the measuring stick that God uses to measure us and respond to our behavior. When we are forgiving to others even when they mess up, God views us the same way and vice-versa.

Q. Is there anything that is 'unforgivable'?

A. God is the ultimate fair judge and sees to it that everyone eventually is rewarded for his good deeds, faces the consequences of his misdeeds and is compensated for his losses. Therefore, while we certainly are ethically allowed to prevent ourselves falling victim to other's damaging behavior, we should adopt an attitude of forgiveness and leave the rest in God's capable hands.



Discovering Ourselves

The Talmud says that Moses, before his death, wrote 13 Torah scrolls - one was kept in the Holy Ark, and the remainder was distributed one to each of the 12 tribes. This was an ingenious way to safeguard the integrity of the Torah text, so that all future copies could be checked against the original scrolls written by Moses.

It's interesting that this parsha lists the final of the 613 mitzvot - that everyone is obligated to write their own copy of the Torah. Even if someone inherited a scroll, he must still write his own.

The commentators explain that, today, we fulfill this mitzvah by amassing a library of Torah books - to create an environment with the resources conducive to Torah study.

Yet there's a deeper idea here. The mitzvah to write your own Torah scroll means that we have to **internalize** the Torah. To get an emotional relationship with Torah, so that our thoughts and actions are always filtered through the prism of Torah. The Torah has always provided Jews with an approach, an outlook, on everything from business to marriage, from tragedy to celebration.

As Rabbi Emanuel Feldman writes:

"Beyond all the good, rational reasons, Torah is the mysterious bridge which connects the Jew and God, across which they interact and communicate, and by means of which God fulfills His covenant with His people to sustain them and protect them.

"When we study Torah, we are not studying an abstract and arcane text of the ancient world. We are studying the way in which God wants us to live on this earth... (We) are in fact engaged in discovering the essence of Judaism, which is to say, the essence of ourselves..."

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