



RABBI JUDAH

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Baderech

Reb Yitzchak Meir Alter, the first Gerrer Rebbe, also known by the title of his writings, *Chiddushei haRi”m*, was a *talmid* of Reb Simcha Bunim of Peshischa and a brother-in-law of the Kotzker Rebbe. He took the Chasidic emphasis of *avodah* and turned it toward *limud haTorah* — coming close to Hashem through passionate study of Gemara and *Nigleh* (‘exoteric’ *sefarim*). As the beloved founder of the Gerrer Chasidus, he built and lead the largest group of *Talmidei haBaal Shem Tov*, ‘Students of the Besh’t’, in Pre-War Poland, with dozens of *chadarim*, *Yeshivos* and *shtiblach*. In those days, outside the more concentrated populated areas there were far less opportunities for learning. Therefore, families with means who sought serious Torah education would hire a *melamed*, a teacher who would often travel from town to town tutoring children.

A Yid once hired such a *melamed* for his son. This gentle and sweet child struggled to understand and retain learning. Day after day they toiled, and he just couldn’t seem to ‘get’ or remember any of the ideas they studied together. After a few months, the boy’s father excitedly announced that he would be taking his son on a *nesiya*, a special trip to visit his Rebbe, the *Chidushei haRi”m*. Bursting with pride, he told

everyone that he looked forward to the Rebbe *farhering* his son, testing him on the material he’d learned.

Knowing that the boy lacked the skills and ability to ‘speak in *learning*’ or repeat and explain anything they had studied together, the *melamed* became more and more anxious in the days prior to the meeting with the Rebbe. He volunteered extra hours and tried to cram as much information into the child as possible. When the father and son finally departed for their trip, the *melamed* was crestfallen, certain that he would be held accountable for the child’s ‘inability’ to learn anything whatsoever.

When the father and son returned from the trip, the *melamed’s* jaw dropped in shock when he heard how proud the father was of his talented young scholar. His son had performed beautifully, and the Rebbe had showered him with compliments!

Months later, the *melamed* had an opportunity to meet with the *Chidushei haRim* and asked, “How could it be that the Rebbe was so successful with my *talmid*? I learn with him every day, and he can barely read or understand anything...”

“Ah, my friend,” answered the Rebbe, his face turning serious, “the only way we measure ‘success’ in Torah and one’s ‘level’ in *Yiddishkeit* is in relation to the student’s *ratzon*, their desire to learn. It doesn’t

matter if they are studying *aleph beis* or the most complex *sugya* in Shas — as long as they are doing their best, they are on the right *derech*....”

Then, after a moment of reflection, Reb Yitzchok Meir, one of the most respected *geonim* of his generation, quietly concluded: “*Ur Mir kennen den* — and in any case, what do *we* really know?”

.....
לֹא תִרְאֶה אֶת־חֲמוֹר אָחִיךָ אוֹ שׂוֹר וְנָפְלִים בְּדַרְךְ
וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ מֵהֶם; הֲקִים תְּקִים עִמּוֹ

You should not see your brother’s donkey or his ox falling on the *derech* [under its load] and ignore them. Rather, you shall surely lift up the load with him.” (*Devarim*, 22:4)

Rashi clarifies the meaning of the phrase זֹו טְעִינָה, “you shall surely lift”: הֲקִים תְּקִים, “This refers to [our obligation of] טְעִינָה, “loading,” i.e., *reloading* the burden that has fallen off the animal.”

By contrast, the mitzvah of *prika* is “unloading” a burden that is too heavy for the animal. This mitzvah appears earlier in the Torah:

כִּי תִרְאֶה חֲמוֹר שֹׁנֵאךָ רֹבֵץ תַּחַת מִשְׂאוֹ וְהִדְלָתָּ
מֵעֶזֶב לוֹ עֶזֶב תַּעֲזֹב עִמּוֹ

“When you see the donkey of your enemy lying beneath its burden and you would refrain from raising it, you shall surely raise it with him.” (*Shemos*, 23:5)

Students of the Baal Shem Tov developed an expansive understanding of this *sugya*. The verses teach us how to relate to a Yid who is either ‘falling’ or ‘lying collapsed’ under his load — meaning under *עול מלכות שמים*, the ‘yoke’ of his Divine service.

It takes sensitive *chochmas chayim* to know when one or the other of these two mitzvos is required of us, and how to fulfill it.

Rebbe Yaakov Leiner, the Beis Yaakov of Izhbitz teaches that the mitzvah of *te’ina*, ‘loading’, implies helping a Jew who feels lacking or empty. Perhaps he or she has faltered in their ability or desire to uphold and carry מצוות, *עול*, the yoke of mitzvah observance. *Te’ina* here is the opportunity to assist in picking up their load again, and strengthening them to shoulder their obligations and efforts in Yiddishkeit.

On the other hand, there are times on life’s path when the privilege of carrying Torah and Mitzvos can be so challenging and exhausting for a person that they are *רֹבֵץ תַּחַת מִשְׂאוֹ*, ‘crushed under their load’. Perhaps they are collapsed beneath the weight of the expectations of parents, teachers, community and institutional standards. Perhaps they are immobilized beneath the fear of disappointing such authorities, or even disappointing God Himself. This, explains the Beis Yaakov, calls for the mitzvah of *perika*, ‘lifting’, not in the sense of reloading, but in the sense of lightening their load. We sometimes need to help a person *lessen* the spiritual and emotional baggage that can accumulate in our lives of religious striving. Each person needs to find a balanced way to hold oneself up and carry the *zechus* of being a Jew, and this is not always so simple.

Thus, the Chasam Sofer says the phrase *noflim baderech*, “fallen on the path” refers to a brother or sister struggling with a spiritual load they can’t currently carry alone.

The responsibility to strengthen such a person is upon every one of us and we are forbidden הַתְּעַלְמֵת מֵהֵם, 'to look away' and ignore their experience. Rather, הִקְיָם תְּקִיָּם עִמּוֹ "pick them up" or uplift them. If someone is off the *derech*, it means they need a wider concept of the path, or a little help or *chizuk*, to protect them from the danger of falling.

Yiddishkeit can be challenging, and many of us find it difficult to find *hatzlacha* in learning and *avodas Hashem*. Our *sedra* invites us to reconsider the metrics by which we measure growth, and reframe what it means to carry our own responsibilities and be 'successful' as *ovdei Hashem*. So many among us are struggling to carry great pressures, often while still hurting from stinging criticism or heavy labels

laid upon us in our formative years. If we were told as children that we are unable to succeed, we might strain precariously under the weight of this baggage for several decades.

No matter the challenges, may we know how to pick ourselves up — and to lift someone else up, lighten their burdens and be *mechazeik* them with a good word or compliment along the way.

And in any case, when it comes to one's 'level' in the *derech* of Yiddishkeit... what do we really know? ■

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