



FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHERS - AVOS 3.12

YAAKOV'S LADDER WAS NOT EASY TO CLIMB

Harav Y. Reuven Rubin Shlita

He had long ceased being called Jay; he was now Yaakov*, fully integrated into the Torah life-style, yet carrying a hole so deep that it subconsciously burned continuously. The time was the late fifties and our hero was amongst the very first wave of what is now commonly called the Baal Teshuvah movement. Although he wouldn't see himself as different, the fact was that his parents were secular Jews, and his had been a huge battle. It was won at great cost because as he became older, he realised that he was living in a no-man's land. He had left his family and old friends behind, yet in his new life there was this wall that others had built, a wall that kept him slightly apart from where he dreamed to be. The loneliness was there in his heart, and it gnawed at his self-confidence daily. (Seems it gnawed at more than his emotions; he ended up in hospital with ulcers at age fifteen) How could he feel attached to this new life style when those he looked up to kept him at arm's length? Sure, he was invited for Shabbos meals and many offered to learn with him. Yet, where it really counted, in that place where life was really lived to the fullest, he was a stranger. There was a sort of suspicion on the part of others, he had to keep proving himself. Was this going to be his lot in life, always looked upon as a foreigner in the one place he craved to belong?

Well, Hashem cares for His children and allows them to find support when most needed. Our young fellow happened to find himself in the home of a special Yied who gave him the ability to realise the key to living that is called "belonging." Many times, we live a life that is lacking the adhesive that keeps everything together. Torah life needs connections with others and when this is absent everything else becomes fragile. This special Yied was a natural Jew, a commodity that is often unappreciated. With his natural goodness he gave

בס"ד



Adass Aish Kodesh

Harav Y. R. Rubin Shlita

36 Bury Old Road

Prestwich – Manchester

M25 0FT



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Yaakov the courage to feel good within himself.

Our Mishna states: “Rabbi Yishmael says, be yielding to a superior, pleasant to the young, and receive every person cheerfully.”

Having the humility to accept that others are superior in knowledge or spirituality means that one must relinquish one’s own control over how he sees the world around him. One way to do this is to be close to young souls that are seeking. Through their eyes you can realise how much you yourself need to learn, and you can stretch yourself further in your own personal voyage through life. However, it is in the last few words Of our Mishnah that one finds a theme that ties everything else together. The Rebbe, Reb Bunim, says that receiving every person cheerfully, kol ho’odom besimchah, means receiving not only others, but, perhaps more vitally, your own self with joy. Many go through life not liking who they are, and never accepting their true worth. Here the Mishna is telling us that if you can embrace your inner self with affection, then the glow of inner warmth will radiate onto others. What that Jew gave young Yaakov was more than Halachic knowledge, more than a pshat in a Gemoro; he gave him the ability to respect his inner being, and in so doing Yaakov could face his future.

I knew this Rav well and I was amazed by his ability to give so much warmth to so many. His was not an easy life; he had witnessed the hell of Hitler’s plans for our nation, and came to America with a suitcase full of tragic memories. Yet his eyes smiled from within, and anyone coming into his sphere was uplifted. Yaakov was unique, a pioneer, a Baal Teshuvah in the early days when there was no infrastructure for such exotic sorts. Yet this Rabbi reached out and allowed him to be cheerful about whom he was. Instead of feeling inferior, he was enabled to have strength and with this the ability to create his own home with positive understanding of what a Torah life entails.

Learning to be accepting of your inner self may seem a simple enough matter, but in truth it is one of life’s greatest difficulties. Perhaps we should begin from the beginning... knowing and accepting who we are. Hashem creates us each with a unique mission, one only we can fulfill. Knowing this and grasping it is not easy. If we learn to be accepting in this knowledge, then we can grow. In this current moment of our golus, where some of our most susceptible souls are in grave danger, we should give them this knowledge. By reaching out to the young, by accepting our Sages and their holy words, we can lift up each other and give every one the knowledge that will bring true joy.

I can hear you asking, ‘So what became of Yaakov?’ It would be churlish of me not to tell you how he faired. He went on to lead a Yeshiva and has allowed his warmth to be transmitted into the hearts of several generations till this very day.

*his real name has been changed