

Rosh Hashanah 5784/2023 Rabbi Mark Wildes, MJE
Spiritual ROI
(Second Day, Rosh Hashanah)

It was August 16, 1923 in Vienna, Austria, Rabbi Meir Shapiro sat at the first World Congress of the Agudath Israel, the largest and most distinguished rabbinic association at the time. Rabbi Shapiro was the youngest rabbi present at the conference, in his 30's at the time, but already a well-respected as a leader in Polish Jewry, a genius who mastered the entire Talmud and other parts of the Torah. Approximately 600 delegates attended the conference including the greatest rabbinic leaders of European Jewry such as the famed Chafetz Chaim, Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan. The distinguished group came together to discuss how to unite world Jewry and how to elevate the status of Torah and religious observance which had fallen into decline. Anti-Semitism and poverty weighed heavily on many Eastern European Jews, while others were being swept away by the new popular movements of Communism and Socialism. Rabbi Shapiro rose at the meeting to propose a program he named *Daf Hayomi* or "a page a day" – a program to encourage Jews all over the world to study the same page of Talmud each day. Besides strengthening the people's knowledge base, Rabbi Shapiro said it would help unite world Jewry because a Jew in Vienna, a Jew in Paris, a Jew in Jerusalem and a Jew in New York would all be studying the same Jewish wisdom. "When two Jews from different towns, or even different countries meet, the knowledge they share on the Gemara currently being studied will help them form a deep bond of friendship" declared Rabbi Shapiro. Since there are 2711 pages in the Talmud, it would take seven years for each person to complete the cycle. Although there was some initial opposition to the idea, Rabbi Shapiro's Daf Yomi proposal was ultimately accepted by the rest of the rabbis.

This Rosh Hashanah is the 100th year anniversary of the first cycle of the Daf Yomi which commenced on the first day of Rosh Hashanah 5684 –1923. Today is 5784 - 2023 – a hundred years ago yesterday, this ambitious program was launched with a modest following, and by the time Rav Meir Shapiro passed away at the very young age of 46, the numbers of followers started to pick up and slowly, over the decades, the numbers grew, year after year, seven-year cycle after seven-year cycle. The program spread and by the time the Siyum, the celebration of the 12th Cycle took place in August 2012, the 90,000 seat Met Life Stadium in the Meadowlands was filled to capacity, with tens of thousands more participating on-line in Israel and around the world. The Siyum for the last cycle, the one in which I merited to complete, took place in January 2020 and drew even larger numbers. And thanks to a dear friend and supporter to Mr. Saul Bellows, of blessed memory (my friend Moshe Bellow's father) we were able to bring a group from MJE. I will never forget that day - being with Moshe and his father and a whole group of MJEers sitting in the freezing cold with over 100,000 people plus with tens of thousands more on-line all over the world - all of these people who made such a long-term commitment, to study Talmud every day for 7 years.

But why was such a long-term commitment necessary? Why couldn't Rabbi Shapiro have proposed something more modest, like my 40 Day Challenge which only requires people to read a small chapter for five minutes every day for 40 days? The Daf Yomi took me like an hour, every day a day for seven years! It's two sides of a page of Talmud, front and back, seven days a week for seven years, with no breaks even when you go away on vacation. Its constant and the material is often difficult to understand. I've been studying Talmud since 6th grade, since I was ten, and it's still not easy, it's something I love but can be challenging even for people studying it their whole lives. Why did Rabbi Shapiro feel that such a strenuous challenge, something that requires such effort and long-term commitment was necessary to reconnect people with their Judaism and with each other?

Just a few weeks ago we read about the famous mitzvah of Bikurim - the mitzvah of the first fruits. The Jewish farmer living in Israel, before being able to enjoy the first fruits of his labor, is commanded to take some of those fruits, bring them to Jerusalem, to the Cohen in the Temple, tie a ribbon around them and recite this whole declaration expressing gratitude to God.

The Mishna in the tractate of Bikurim (chapter 3) specifies this be done with only certain fruits: *How does one perform the mitzvah of Bikurim? A person goes down to his field and when he sees a fig, a cluster of grapes and a pomegranate he should tie a ribbon to them and say: 'these are my Bikurim (first fruits).'*

But why specifically these fruits? Rav Menachem Zemba, a great scholar in the Warsaw ghetto – who lost his life in the famous Warsaw Ghetto uprising, wrote that the Mishna's selection of these fruits for the Bikkurim ceremony was not random. Our sages carefully chose the fig, the pomegranate, and the *Eshkol* – a cluster of grapes to make a point. Where else do we see these specific fruits mentioned? Back in Parshat Shelach, when the spies were dispatched to scout out the land of Israel, they were handed their marching orders and told to take samples of the fruits of the land and these three species were singled out: *And they arrived at Nachal Eshkol and they cut a vine with a cluster of grapes and placed them on a double pole and also from the pomegranates and figs* (Numbers, 13: 23).

Rabbi Zemba suggests that our Sages chose these specific fruits to teach us that the mitzvah of Bikurim, was designed as a *kaparah* - as an atonement for the sin of the spies. But how is this? What does the negative report the spies gave about Israel have to do with the mitzvah for the Jewish farmer to bring his first fruits?

One way of understanding what went wrong with the spies was their impatience and their fear of having to invest so much time and energy into something unknown. The Jewish people, after they were freed from Egypt, were living in the wilderness completely taken care of by Hashem. The Manna fell each day from the heavens giving them food, their clothing never withered and anytime they were attacked God protected them. Going into Israel was scary. In Israel they would have to work the land to earn their sustenance. In Israel they would have to fight the nations who lived there. 'Let's just stay here in the wilderness' - they said to themselves, 'here we can get what we want now, without having to wait, without having to invest in something long term'. Life in Israel required work and it also involved being weaned off all these miracles. They would have to plow the ground for their food and defend themselves to stay alive. They would need patience and hard work over a long period of time, which is precisely what the mitzvah of Bikurim was designed to teach.

Bikurim are the products of years of painstaking effort and preparation. It begins with a farmer planting a seed, waiting for a tree to grow and then finally yield some fruit. And even after the farmer finally sees their fruits of their labor, the Torah then tells the farmer he cannot touch them for three years! That is three years of growth cycles all potentially interrupted by weather fluctuations, drought, pestilence and pilfering by neighbors. Finally, the farmer takes hold of his long-awaited fruit and just as he is about to take that first bite he is asked to abstain once more. He is told to bring the fruits to Jerusalem, tie a bow around them, give them to the Cohen, and dedicate them to Hashem So much pent-up energy and emotion has been building. Keep in mind, this is an agrarian society, and this man is a farmer. He's not a day trader or real estate mogul with a big savings account. This is all he's got! Just these little fruits.

Bikkurim, just like the land of Israel itself, could only be brought about through a long-term commitment, investment, and sacrifice. The spies had no patience, and so the Bikurim could help repair that. The most important things in life require patience. The most important relationships in our lives, with

our parents, spouses, significant others, and our closest friends require long term investment and patience. The relationship we are trying to forge with Hashem today on Rosh Hashanah require patience and steady investments over a lifetime, small deposits we make every day with our mitzvot, a bracha (blessing) here, some tzedakah (charity) there, it won't happen overnight – not for the important things in life. Personal/spiritual growth cannot be attained quickly and that's hard because the exciting age of technology in which we live which has made us so much more efficient has also made us so much more impatient and distracted.

A report issued by Microsoft in 2015 indicated that the average American attention span is now shorter than that of a *goldfish* and marketing is catering to this new reality. Commercials which used to be 30 seconds long are now 6 seconds. How annoyed do we get when we have to sit through a full six seconds of ads that you cannot skip before being able to watch the YouTube video we want?

The shortening of the American attention span and the continued pressure we still have in our society to succeed, has led to a dramatic increase in Ritalin and Adderall prescriptions, particularly for young boys, whose rambunctious nature often interferes with concentration and may be misdiagnosed as an attention deficit disorder. Some experts are arguing that while sometimes those drugs are necessary, in many cases, these prescriptions are unwarranted, or prescribed in unhealthy doses. Either way, we are distracted or drugged, and we lack focus. And if this is a challenge in our daily lives, it is especially challenging in our spiritual lives because spiritual success requires us to stay at something long enough for our souls to be impacted. All the tricks we pull to get quick results in other parts of our lives, don't really work for developing our souls. The soul needs time, patience, and a long-term commitment to certain spiritual practices, what we call mitzvot. To have a true sense of Hashem in our lives, and to feel a spiritual connection we need to put ourselves in the right environment, and we need to stretch ourselves. This helps explain why Rabbi Shapiro suggested such an ambitious Daf Yomi idea, precisely because it entailed a serious commitment - because he understood that doing much less will just not produce the same results.

This is an issue we often struggle with here at MJE: how much should we encourage our students and participants to stretch themselves? If we push our participants too much, to come every night for classes, to sit through too long of a prayer service, people will see it as too onerous or too time consuming. But if things are too light, or if we dumb things down too much, there's just not enough substance there to make a difference. As the Sages famous remarked: *l'fum tzara agra* which means "according to the stress is the reward": the more we put extend ourselves, the more we sacrifice and put ourselves in the right environment more we will reap the rewards.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, when he spoke at MJE shared he was producing a documentary on the state of family in Britain for the BBC. He brought Britain's leading childcare expert Penelope Leach to a Jewish kindergarten in London. It happened to be a Friday morning, and they walked in class of 5-year old's having one of those mock pre-Shabbat meals. One little boy was dressed as the *Abba* (daddy) wearing a white shirt and a tie and there was a little girl on the other side of the table dressed like the *Ima* (mommy). There was a five-year old Bubby and a five-year old Zadie. Penelope Leach turned to a random five-year old boy and asked him: "what do you like about the Sabbath and what don't you like?" The little boy immediately yelled back: "On Shabbos I can't watch TV. It's terrible!" "OK", Penelope responded, "and what do you like?" The little boy answered: "I like Shabbos because it's the only time Daddy doesn't have to rush off".

The little boy was upset because he couldn't watch TV on Shabbat. But look what he got instead – a better relationship with his father! If presented with that kind of choice, we would all opt for what's more important in the long-term. The problem is we get wrapped up in the here and now, in what is

right before us. Stamford University ran what has become famously known as the Marshmallow Test: Researchers laced one marshmallow before children ages 4-6 and told them they could eat the marshmallow now, or if they wait fifteen minutes, they could get two. The study, which spanned many years, concluded that the kids who waited, who were able to display “delayed gratification”, turned out to be significantly better suited for success in the world.

Holding off always puts us in a better position. Continuing with the example of Shabbat, at MJE we like to emphasize the positive aspects of Shabbat - the candle lighting, the Kiddush, the singing, time with community and friends, but it's also the holding off, the discipline of what we *don't do* that makes Shabbat special. It's the *melachot*, the 39 activities from which we refrain that create the *kedushat hayom*, the special sanctity of the day. By putting the iPhone down, by restricting ourselves from what we do all weeklong we create a certain peace and tranquility. We stop manipulating the world. We stop exercising our dominion over the world trying to harness its energies for our own benefit (something we are commanded to do all week) and in doing so we create a vacuum, a space. We then fill that space with Shabbat candles, with Kiddush with singing and with community.

We can do all those positive things without the space, without all that discipline and sacrifice, without pulling back from *melachot* (and we certainly encourage people to start with the positives) but it's not the same. Because we need the vacuum. The Kiddush and double portion of bread are just not the same when the craziness of the week prevails. I remember watching a skit runs by the High School kids who were “playing a family” at the Shabbat table. The father was making Kiddush but while he was doing so his son was playing a video game on his phone, his daughter was texting a friend and his wife was answering an email. The kids were trying to show how sacrificing and investing in something beyond themselves is necessary to create the space to appreciate the positive aspects of Shabbat.

My friend, Rabbi Yosie Levine went on cruise to Alaska w/ his family this summer. He said although it wasn't a Jewish cruise, he said that at one point on the ship deck off to the left he saw parents playing ping pong and mini golf with their kids, some elderly people sitting around a card table, and teenagers participating in a trivia contest that one of the cruise directors was hosting ... people were truly relating to each other. He said it felt like Shabbos because there was no internet on the Boat. It only happens though when we put ourselves in the right environment, and we restrict ourselves in some kind of way.

In a romantic relationship or marriage, it's restricting oneself from others that makes the relationship special. Infidelity is not just unethical - it robs the relationship of the exclusive bond between the two people. When someone else is in the mix, the intimacy is broken. The restriction and commitment to something higher is what makes the relationship what it is.

But it requires discipline. It demands that at times we say no and restrict ourselves in some way. If we say yes to everything, we're saying no to something else, often more important in the long run.

If we say yes to bar hopping with friends on a Friday night, we're saying no to a Shabbat Dinner. And if we say no to enough Shabbat Dinners, to enough Shabbat services, to enough Kiddushes, we're eventually saying no to Shabbat altogether. Many people tell me: “rabbi when I get married and I have a family, that's when I want to start doing the Shabbos thing.” That's possible. I've seen that happen on occasion, but it's rare. It usually doesn't happen because generally we end up connecting with someone based on who we are today, not tomorrow.

If we say yes to dating someone not of the faith, we're saying no to a Jewish family. Again, there are exceptions but statistically that's the result.

If we say yes to spending another night watching Netflix, we're saying no to a Torah class at MJE.

If we say yes to another expensive dinner, depending on our means, we're saying no or giving less to charity, to people or organizations who really need it.

If we say yes to that "I need more sleep" thought in our minds on a Saturday morning, we're saying no to coming on time for prayer services.

By saying no sometimes, we're saying yes to something greater.

That little boy in England was upset because he couldn't watch TV on Shabbat. But look what he got instead - a relationship with his father.

We know that spending more time with our community and family in the coming year, observing Shabbat more diligently, giving charity, studying more Torah, and doing more *chesed*/acts of kindness for others – we know these are all great things for the long term but our jobs and our need for instant gratification take over. We're just trying to get through the day, pay our bills and have a little fun on the weekends. Nothing wrong with that, but let's make this the year we stay focused on something more long term. The year we hold off on that marshmallow so we can have something better down the road. The year we take on some of the restrictions of Shabbat so we can have that spiritual space in our lives. The year to embark on a spiritual project long enough for it to truly impact us - studying with us Wednesday nights or maybe even studying a page of Talmud a day (the Artscroll and Koren translations make it doable for anyone!) Perhaps picking a Chesed/Kindness project (MJE will be hosting Blood Drive and Food packaging Fair on Nov 12) or giving Tzedaka (charity) in a way that stretches us so we feel like we've really given something.

In doing all or some of this we will not only create a tremendous *zechut*, a spiritual merit for ourselves and our family, but it will result in a more fulfilled and meaningful life. The Spanish Talmudist Rav Yitzchak Abohav writes that we pray with our feet together to show that, like angels, we will not abandon our assignment mid-course. May Hashem bless us this year with the strength to make that long term commitment, and in doing so be blessed with a new year of good health and blessing.