

EIKEV (DEUTERONOMY 7:11-11:25)

Heels and Smiles

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

The past week has been one of great awareness and sensitivity. As I mentioned last week, my teacher and mentor, Rabbi Moshe Chait, of Blessed Memory, passed away on the eve of Tisha B'Av. The past week has given me the opportunity to reflect upon many memories. Many of my fellow students have written tributes to our Rebbe. (Click [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).)

What stands out is his *Chessed*, his kindness. He was a genius in knowing exactly how to make someone feel loved and appreciated. He was a man who paid attention to all the little details.

This week's Torah Portion promises blessings. These blessings will come due to our emphasis on the "small stuff":

*EIKEV tishm'un -- BECAUSE OF THE FACT that you listen to these laws, and your ob**serving and performing them, G-d will safeguard for you the Covenant . . . He will love you, He will bless you, He will multiply you . . . (Deuteronomy (7:12-13)*

Our Sages observe that the Hebrew word "*Eikev*" -- "*Because*" is spelled the same as "*Akaiv*"-- *Heel*" The double meaning is that there a special blessing for those who observe the Mitzvahs that most people consider unimportant; they trample on those Mitzvahs with their heels like a worthless piece of litter.

Everyone knows that every Jew is required to observe the Sabbath and keep kosher. Everyone knows about fasting on Yom Kippur and circumcising 8-day-old boys. Unfortunately, there are some Mitzvahs that fall by the wayside. These are the "Heel Mitzvahs."

Don't be a gossip. Don't say insulting things. Show respect to people. Always act in a way that brings honor to Torah and those who study it. These are Mitzvahs that we tend to overlook.

My Rebbe was a man who overlooked nothing. He knew how to see what others ignored. He was completely in tune with the world around him.

I remember one evening, toward the conclusion of one of his weekly Torah ethical discussions ("*Shmuessen*") he asked us to shut off our tape recorders. (That always meant we were going to get it!) He proceeded to express his disappointment over the fact that some of the fellows were using the Yeshiva's coffee cups (heavy plastic-- reusable) as ashtrays. The issue was not the expense to the

Yeshiva. He told us that it was beneath the dignity of a Yeshiva student to demonstrate such careless disdain for Yeshiva property. Why, he asked, should Wajji, the middle-aged Arab custodian, have to bring him coffee cups with cigarette burns in them and say, “Rabbi, this not good!”?

(It is interesting that Rebbe never spoke about smoking per se. At one point in my life, for a year or so, I too engaged in that stupidity. While I never smoked in front of him, we spent enough time in close proximity, that between the bulge in my shirt pocket and the stench that surrounded me, he surely knew. Perhaps he recognized that I would outgrow that idiocy on my own.)

Now Rebbe could have simply told us off. He could have screamed: “What’s the matter with you guys? How dare you put out your cigarettes in our cups?! Don’t you see you’re costing us money?!! How careless could you be! What are you guys thinking?!”

But that wasn’t Rebbe’s way. Rather than speaking down to us, he spoke up to us. We were B’nai Torah – Students of Torah! We were the elite! We were royalty! We were required to live a life that shows the world how uplifting Torah is. Such behavior was inappropriate for people who could accomplish as much as we could! We got the message. The guilty parties understood that they had done something wrong without having been dragged through the mud.

(Another time Rebbe spoke about the importance of keeping the toilets in the dormitory clean; more concern for Wajji! Nothing is too mundane to escape the attention of a true Ben Torah.)

Rebbe’s appearance was a lesson in discreet nobility. His suits were impeccably tailored and his beard was perfectly trimmed. To do otherwise might cause others to look with disdain at Torah personalities.

Today, many Yeshivas maintain Kollels, paid fellowship programs for married students. In Rebbe’s day, it was unheard of. The Chofetz Chaim Yeshiva opened the first Kollel in America. Rabbi Chait and his young bride did not receive a stipend from the Yeshiva; they subsisted on next to nothing. Yet, his suit was always well-tailored and freshly pressed. He was always flawlessly groomed. “The world,” he reasoned, “doesn’t know whether or not a Ben Torah has food to put on the table. All they know is whether or not he looks unkempt.” And that would be unthinkable for a “*Tzelem Elokim*”, someone created in the Image of G-d.

His attention to his appearance was not about materialism. Rather, it was about human dignity. He used to quote his Rebbe, Rav Dovid Leibowitz. The Talmud observes that it is a grave sin for a Torah scholar to have a stain on his clothes. “*Vos iz azoy Frum*, what is as devout,” asked Rav Dovid rhetorically, “as a stain?!” After all, if a person is focusing his attention on the sublime, if he is delving deeply into Talmudic logic and law, why should one bother with the inconsequential issue of whether his shirt is fully tucked into his pants? (Case in point -- did you ever see a picture of Einstein with his hair combed?)

Rather, said my Rebbe, quoting his Rebbe, G-d put a divine spirit into every human being. One's body and one's clothes serve as a container and cover for that divine spirit. As such, they need to be adorned appropriately.

When one dresses like an Image of G-d, he feels like an Image of G-d. One who feels like an Image of G-d ACTS like an Image of G-d.

This little factor of appearance is one of those "Heel Mitzvahs." It is something that all too many of us pay all too little attention to.

While Rebbe dressed well, he didn't wear the "Rosh Yeshiva" garb. In many circles, it is customary for deans of Yeshivas to wear long black coats and big round hats, and to sport long beards. That was not Rebbe's way. He wore conservative, well-tailored suits, and a regular, fedora hat. He looked more like a businessman than a Rosh Yeshiva. In fact, in my early years in the Yeshiva, he didn't have a beard at all. One of my friends in the Yeshiva observed that if the Alter from Slabodka (See last week's article) had been an American, he would have looked like Rebbe. (I have never decided for sure whether or not I agree with that supposition.)

A fellow from Brooklyn wanted to convince a friend to come to the Chofetz Chaim Yeshiva. Rabbi Chait was to be a guest speaker in a local synagogue one Friday night. "Come to the Shul this Friday night," he told his friend. "The Rosh Yeshiva from Chofetz Chaim in Israel will be speaking."

His friend came, but he arrived late. He missed the shul rabbi's introduction of Rabbi Chait. By the time he arrived, Rebbe was already speaking. After the speech, his friend wanted to know what he thought of it. "You know," he replied, "it's a good thing the Rosh Yeshiva from Israel didn't make it. That guy Chait was great!"

Another item that many of us trample upon is prayer. Yes, we must pray to G-d three times a day. The words are the same every day. Many of the words are the same three times a day. It is easy to get into a rut. Open the prayer book, blurt out the words, and get on to your next activity.

Rebbe told us that if we complete the recitation of a prayer, and we haven't been changed by that prayer, then we haven't prayed adequately. (The Hebrew word "to pray" – "*L'hitpallel*" – literally means "to judge oneself." I don't recall where I heard that explanation; it may or may not have been from Rebbe.)

It was a worthwhile experience to watch Rebbe pray. No wild gyrations or rocking back and forth. He stood like a soldier, softly uttering words of praise to our Father in Heaven. Rebbe was constantly aware of his obligation to recognize G-d as the source of all kindness. He recognized that our health and well-

being come from G-d, and realized that he needed, at all times, to be in intimate contact with his Creator.

Do you notice every person whose path crosses with yours? Do you acknowledge him? Does he acknowledge you? Is this another “Heel Mitzvah” that we tend to trample on?

Jacob blessed his son Judah by saying, in part, “*His eyes are more sparkling than wine, his teeth whiter than milk...*” (Genesis, 49:12)

“... *his teeth whiter than milk...*” The Commentaries offer various explanations to this cryptic verse. Rabbi Yochanan, quoted in the Talmud, (Kesubos 111b) in a little play on words, reads the verse as meaning, *whitening of teeth rather than milk*. Now what does THAT mean? “It is better to show the whiteness of one’s teeth, (i.e., to smile) to someone, than to give him a drink of milk.”

Rebbe, in his own unique and inimitable way, expanded upon the Alter’s explanation of Rabbi Yochanan’s interpretation: “Imagine,” said Rebbe, ‘it’s the hottest day of the year. You’re tired and thirsty. Your throat is parched. You must have something to drink. Suddenly someone offers you a tall, ice-cold glass of milk. How much would you appreciate what that person did for you? No doubt, you would be overflowing with appreciation for his kindness.”

That, said Rebbe, is what you do for a person when you light up his life with a fresh, friendly smile.



A person can be depressed. He can be down in the dumps. But that “show of white teeth,” that encouraging smile, can tell him, “Cheer up! It’s ok. We’re all here and we’re in this together!”

How refreshing! How inspiring! That one genuine, sincere smile may be the only encouragement some people get all day. You can change a person’s life! Dare we trample on this great “Heel Mitzvah” and relegate it to the list of “social niceties” that are considered by the masses to be not all that important?

I have tried over the course of this past week to remind myself of the various lessons Rebbe taught us. I had gotten, I’m sorry to say, a bit lax in daily study of *Mussar*, ethical development. (Rebbe said that one of the reasons he always managed to maintain “*Shalom Bayis*” domestic tranquility, is that studying

Mussar makes you into a *mentch*. If you constantly remind yourself of the obligation to be a *mentch*, you'll always make sure to treat your family members with the *mentchlichkeit*, the respect, that they deserve.) So I've started working on that.

I've tried to slow down my Davening. I've tried to focus in on the words of my prayers. It's what Rebbe tried to teach us.

I've tried to be more thorough in my learning. One thing Rebbe abhorred was superficiality.

The other day I was walking down a flight of stairs outside of the building where I work. A complete stranger was sitting on the concrete steps smoking a cigarette. (No plastic cups in sight!) I thought of Rebbe as I walked by. "Good afternoon," I said with a big smile. "How are you doing today?"

He did a double-take. Who talks to strangers like that? Then he smiled back at me. Who knows? Maybe, in Rebbe's merit, I showed a gentile that religious Jews actually care about people, rather than ignoring them and trampling on them as they run on down the stairs.

I lack my Rebbe's wisdom and scholarship. I don't have his humility and I don't have his nobility. I can't speak as well as he could, and I certainly can't pray as well as he could. I don't have his discerning eye that enabled him to see all the small stuff and keep his heels free from trampling on what only appears to be small. I can't sing like he could, and I certainly can't smile like he could.

But that doesn't exempt me from my obligation to try.

I love you, Rebbe.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

© 2009 Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz. Reprint permitted for non-commercial use with attribution to torahtalk.org.