Moshe Rabeinu

To Grow, To Become Great

by

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New parents are always filled with excitement and apprehension. This new child, *their* responsibility, is an amazing disruption. Yes, *disruption*. Nothing about their lives will be as it was. What a newborn makes eminently clear, as Rav Shimon Shkop writes in his classic, *Shaarei Yosher*, is that human beings are essentially selfish. When a newborn is hungry, he does not give a whit about whether or not his mother is tired or cranky or distracted. He wants to be fed and fed he shall be no matter the hour!

A newborn baby is demanding, irritating and, only during the few hours when he is asleep, adorable.

We love our newborn children not so much for what they *are* but for what they may *become*. We love and cherish their potential. But the process from selfish, self-absorbed infant to caring adult is not a simple path to travel, nor is it a given that it will be successfully transversed.

Toddlers, young children, teenagers and young adults… their worldview remains essentially selfish. For most people, the primacy of “I” is not truly challenged until they wed, when they “become one” with another. When “I” becomes “we.”

Rav Shimon Shkop does note that there is another way that the individual grows to understand that he is not alone. Commenting on Avos 1:14, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am *only* for myself what am I…?” he observes that the “I” of a great person encompasses the Jewish community; that the “I” only concerned with itself is a small and trivial being but the “I” who walks the path of Torah and is concerned for the whole community is a person of greatness and grace.

New parents give voice to the desire that their child become such a person when they recite at a *bris*¸ “*Zeh hakatan, gadol yiheyeh*”.

Among us, there has never walked another greater than Moshe Rebbenu himself. And yet, he too was once small and selfish; he too had to “become great”. At birth, Moses was *just like you and me*! He was born from mortal *ish* and mortal *bat.* Like you and me. No better. No worse. It was only *by his gifts and strengths* and his determination that he grew, developed and matured into one with whom God could speak “mouth to mouth.”

Social scientists and biologists engage in a continual debate to determine the correct balance between “nature and nurture” when it comes to the developing person. They could save themselves a lot of angst if they only read Torah! The Torah teaches us that we become the person we are capable of being by our lives, not by the event of our births. The *Sefer Ha-Yuchsin* makes clear that Moshe’s parents are irrelevant to what he ultimately became. Each of us is born with innate gifts, attributes, qualities, and characteristics but these gifts and attributes are *mere potentiality*. Even Moses, born with the attributes to become the redeemer, had to devote his will, energy and desire to fully develop and realize his potential.

The Torah tells us only this about Moshe’s youth, “The boy grew up (*va’yigdal hayeled*) and she (Yocheved) brought him to the daughter of Pharaoh and he was a son to her. She called his name, Moshe, as she said, ‘For I drew him from the water.’ …It happened in those days that Moshe grew up (*va’yigdal Moshe*) and went out to his brethren and saw their burdens...” (Shemot 2:10-11)

These two lines define the parameters of Moses’ childhood and development! Two *pesukim*! And in both, we are told simply that he “grew up”! Not much of a commentary on Moses’ development. Yet in these two *pesukim* we can divine the meaning of what it is to become a *mensch*, to become great.

Rashi tells us that the first *va’yigdal* refers to Moshe’s physical growth. That is, the boy grew up physically into an adult. The second *va’yigdal* is more critical and more powerful for it refers to Moshe’s position of responsibility.

This second *va’yigdal* is when Moshe becomes a “*gadol*”. Rabbi Soloveitchik notes that *vayigdal* carries with it the connotation of greatness. In this regard, Moshe’s greatness is reflected in the simple fact that he no longer limited himself to his selfish, parochial concerns; he grew to be concerned about the welfare of his brothers.  That is, he was no longer self-centered. He was no longer a child. He became a *gadol*.

Too often, we reflexively associate “*gadol*” with one who is steeped in great learning and scholarship. To such a *gadol* we naturally afford the respect for which he is most certainly worthy. However, we must remember that Moshe attained this stature long before he was the Giver of the Torah. His worthiness was the result *not* of his scholarship but of his empathy.

When he witnessed the cruelty of the taskmasters toward the Jews, he felt the pain of his people.

Ask a child how he will know he is “grown up” and he is likely to point to a door jamb where pen marks note his height at various ages. He might point to the highest line, indicating an older brother’s height. “When I’m that tall,” he might say. For him, growing up is solely a matter of physical growth. If you ask a young person the same question, you will undoubtedly receive an answer that marks a change just as superficial. A new job. A new house. A car. Vacation time. Acquisitions. The accrual of things.

What you won’t hear is an assessment of how he contributes to his community, to the Jewish people.

Most often, when we talk about growing, we focus on the physical and material growth of a child to adulthood, along with the acquisition of things. We too often ignore the spiritual, psychological and emotional sense of what it means to *va’yigdal*.

Not long ago, I met a boy who was terribly anxious because he was much shorter than his peers. It was clear that his first *va’yigdal* was lacking. How he hated being shorter than his friends! Then, a very wise man comforted him. “Remember, height must be measured from the neck up, not the ground up.”

Real growth, real *va’yigdal*, is the result of what we learn, think, and feel and how much *chesed*, *mitgefiel*, kindness and comfort we extend beyond ourselves, beyond the “I”?

Anyone can be selfish. Selfishness comes naturally to us. It is the ability to grow beyond the self that is the mark of greatness. It is told that the great *Tzadik* of *Yerushalaim*, Rav Aryeh Levine once accompanied his *rebbetzin* to the doctor. The doctor, upon seeing the couple, looked at the Rav with concern. “Rebbe, what brings you here?”

The Rebbe sighed. “Our foot hurts,” he said.

He did not say *her* foot hurt but *our* foot hurt! His wife’s pain was *his* pain. What a great *gadol*! This was a man who *va’yigdal* – who grew to greatness!

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In *Hilchot Teshuva*, Rambam teaches that it is not predetermined for anyone to be born *either righteous or wicked.* Rather, free will is bestowed on every human being. If one desires to turn towards the good way and be righteous, he has the power to do so. If one wishes to turn toward the evil way, and be wicked, he is at liberty to do so.Everyone, every newborn has the potential to become a *mentsch*; special, kind, generous and sensitive. Rambam concludes that, *Every human being may become righteous like Moshe our teacher****.***

And when they do; when they become the “Moshes” they are meant to be, then their parents can rightly enjoy the pride of seeing their child grow to greatness.