To Hear Another

To See Another

To Validate Another

by

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To be human is to err and to err is to be mortified by our weakness. Yet, it is not only the lowly who fail. The greatest *tzadik* among us falls short. Even Aaron, the *Kohen Gadol*, erred. Certainly, Aaron felt ashamed to approach the *mizbeach* after the disgrace of the Golden Calf. But Moshe reassured him, *lekach nivecharta* – you were chosen for this task. Rather than mask or whitewash Aaron’s mistake, Moshe *validated* Aaron; he acknowledged the mistake, making clear that the mistake was real but that it did not define Aaron.

In doing so, he hewed the path for all of us to address the “sinner” – in ourselves and in others.

We are indeed a prideful creation. Yet we know – from our teachings and our experience – that pride is a sure prelude to a fall. But how to step away from our pride? We can only become humble by first being honest.

A midrash describes Aaron gazing at the *mizbeiach* when it suddenly appeared to him as the Golden Calf! That image shook him to the core and caused him to tremble with such fear that he could not approach it! The scene the midrash depicts is bone chilling. Here we have the *Kohen Gadol* preparing to fulfill *Avoda* in the *Mishkan* itself and what image fills his mind? Not the fear and trembling we would presume as he approached the *sod* of all that was sacred to the Jews but rather the most profane and degrading symbol of the newly redeemed Jews, the *egel hazahav*.

What can we make of Aaron’s moment?

Certainly, if one such as the *Kohen Gadol* is plagued by such an image any one of us – constantly bombarded with images of indecency and greed – could easily find ourselves distracted *even during* prayer or study. And should we be “caught” in our daydream, what would we say, how would we feel? How could we possibly admit to the shameful images in our minds?

Yet, isn’t our distraction essentially the same as Aaron’s?

The High Priest was unable to focus on the *mizbeiach* because he was “daydreaming” of the Golden Calf! Could our thoughts be any more demeaning than the image that filled Aaron’s mind in that moment?

Our thoughts inevitably and irredeemably lead us to awkward places, just as our troubled thoughts remain in turmoil because of the awkward places we visit! Aaron could never escape the profanity of the Golden Calf. It remained with him, lurking in his thoughts. He could not resolve the sheer “badness” of that moment. And so, the darkness remained. And yet, it was *because* Aaron was unable to free himself of the image of the Golden Calf *even as he stood before the holy mizbeiach* that convinced Moshe that he was exactly the person to be the High Priest – *l’kach nivecharta*.

We ask, as Aaron undoubtedly did, “Who am I to do this sacred task…?”

Often the very thing that causes us to doubt our ability to do God’s work is viewed by Torah as being the exact prerequisite to genuine and true *Avodas HaShem*. Our rebbe, Rav Asher Freund ZT’L, always emphasized that this is what Dovid Hamelech meant when he said, “For I recognize my transgressions, and my sin is before me always.” (Tehilim 109:5)

None of us should ever fool ourselves. Our transgressions are real, and they are serious, whether we are rabbis or simple *talmidim*. None of us can be more than our humanity. We are destined to fall short but even in our failure it is our gift to see the beauty and sacredness of the world *because of* not in spite of our shortcomings. Indeed, to be able to see the world through the “spectacles of our shortcomings” is the foundation upon which real accomplishment and human excellence can be built.

But often, we *only* see our shortcomings. Rashi comments on this idea when he says, that because I am constantly aware and concerned about my sins, it seems to me that the sins are constantly before me. This is what caused Aaron to see the *egel* as he approached the *mizbeiach*; likewise, that awareness is what must color our own self-awareness.

The challenge is how to learn from our self-awareness without it weighing us down. This is the power of validation. By validating another, we *see* the flaw, but we *raise* the person.

This is what Moshe did at the consecration of the *Mishkan*. He well understood Aaron’s fear and reluctance. After all, he too had tried to turn away from his calling when he stood before the Burning Bush. “I am not the speaker for this task!” he had protested. Why would he push his brother on when he knew precisely the feelings in his brother’s heart? In truth, it was *because* he understood that he insisted that his brother act.

Moshe empathized with Aaron, acknowledging his shame and hesitancy. He did not once diminish the significance of the sin; he elevated the power *teshuva* to rebuild. Knowing that *teshuva* exists allows us to identify with the sinner – to acknowledge and validate him – and thereby guide him from sin to repentance.

Jewish wisdom is consistent with the modern understanding of validation. The Baal Shem Tov suggested that Moshe’s counsel was essential to Aaron’s role. “Why are you withdrawn, submissive and unassuming? *Lekach nivecharta*! It is precisely because you possess these qualities that you were chosen to assume the most exalted religious position.

“Humility is the prerequisite for genuine spirituality.”

Rav Dr. Abraham Twerski Z’L says it best, “It is virtually impossible to do anything wholeheartedly for a person unless you empathize with him. Empathy is not sympathy. Empathy is seeing the world as the other person sees it.”

To empathize with another is to *hear* him; it is to validate who he is as a person. Too many rabbis and teachers are quick to condemn their students when they fall prey to the myriad of our culture’s lures and distractions – its golden calves – when it would be so much better if they stopped and *listened* to the hearts of their students; if they sought to understand rather than reject or ridicule. To validate who they are even as they counsel against any wrongdoing.

R’ Mendel of Lubavitch (Tzemach Tzedek) was receiving Chassidim when he suddenly secluded himself for several hours before continuing. He explained, “When someone consults me for help in doing *teshuva*, I must find a trace of sin in myself before I can help him. The world is like a mirror, what you see in others is a reflection of yourself.

“When the last person told me of his sin, I searched within myself to find where I had a trace of it, but after a thorough soul searching, I couldn’t find any.  That meant that I had developed a blind spot to my own faults. I therefore said *Tehilim* for several hours until I could overcome my denial and find that fault in myself.”

To see through another’s eyes is to hear the cry of his heart within our own heart. By doing so, we validate that cry and make clear we care about the person and accept him *for who he is*. When we do this, the other person feels *heard* and *understood*. Humility allows us to hear and understand, to draw another near. Judgement only succeeds in pushing them away.

How do we acquire the humility to see ourselves and others? Only through experience. By mindful experience, we become aware of our profound imperfection. Yes, we are created in the image of G-d, but we are also formed from the clay of the earth. Whatever we do, wherever we turn, sin, error and failure await us.

This awareness leads us not to a single act of goodness or grace but to a way of facing the world. For humility is not a single act but a stance, an approach to life which encompasses every aspect of human thought and behavior. This stance aligns us with the Talmud which teaches that the result of humility is the “fear of sin.”

Aaron stood as the *Kohen Gadol* and yet, he would forever remain humbled by his crushing failure of the Golden Calf. *Because* of his remembrance of his dreadful sin he was most worthy to stand in the service of G-d. That remembrance inspired the humility which made him great!

Only the truly humble can be made great and only he who has sinned can know humility.

“Why are you ashamed of the golden calf?” Moshe asked his brother. *Lekach nivecharta.* “You were granted the humbling opportunity to sin, so that you would then be able to atone for all sinners.”

As Mishlei teaches, Humility raises up, while pride only serves to bring down.