

The Torah We Have Yet to Learn

Simchas Torah 5787 | Ne'ilas HaChag - Motzaei Shabbos, October 3

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On Simchas Torah we finish the Torah, and immediately we begin again. **We have reached the end of the reading, but we have certainly not reached the end of what there is to learn.** Every familiar parsha contains understanding we have not yet acquired. Every year offers opportunities to become people we have not yet become.

That can leave a person with a question. If there is so much I still do not understand, and so much work I still have to do, what exactly am I celebrating? Am I entitled to dance when I know how far I am from where I should be?

Two stories give us a beautiful answer. One involves two great tzaddikim, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk and Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Baal HaTanya. The other involves the early chassidim of the Chiddushei HaRim of Ger. Together they teach us how to look honestly at the distance ahead, and still dance with our whole heart.

The first story is called Ha'ikar Yatzanu MeihaRefresh - 'The Main Thing Is That We Have Gotten Out of the Mud.' The second is Hakafah Al He'asid - 'A Hakafah for the Future.' Listen to the details, because the lesson emerges from the entire story.

1. The Rebbe Who Could Not Begin

Before Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk moved to Eretz Yisrael, the Baal HaTanya travelled to him with his entire household to spend the holy month of Tishrei in his presence.

Simchas Torah arrived. The chassidim waited eagerly for their Rebbe to emerge from his room and open the hakafos with Atah Hareisa. But he did not come out.

A considerable amount of time passed. The chassidim realized that something unusual was happening. They entered his holy room and pleaded with him to come out and say Atah Hareisa.

The Rebbe explained that **he was not yet ready to say Atah Hareisa**. A hundred explanations of Atah Hareisa had been revealed to him, and he had not yet reached their understanding in his avodah. Until he reached that understanding and those levels in his service of Hashem, he was not yet ready to begin Atah Hareisa.

The chassidim continued to wait. About an hour later they went back and asked again. The Rebbe again answered that he still could not say it.

All this time, the Baal HaTanya was standing in a corner, immersed in his deveikus. He was not aware of what was taking place around him. The chassidim approached him, told him what their Rebbe had said, and asked for his advice.

The Baal HaTanya instructed them to enter their Rebbe's room a third time and ask him to begin the hakafos. If he continued to refuse, they were to tell him that, since they had accepted him as their Rebbe, he was obligated to conduct himself according to the customs of the chassidim. They would therefore summon him to a din Torah before the Baal HaTanya. If he did not wish to come, the Baal HaTanya would come to him and render the judgment.

The chassidim approached once more, with great reverence. They presented their argument, and when the Rebbe continued to refuse, they told him that they were summoning him to a din Torah before Rabbi Zalman. Rabbi Menachem Mendel answered that he wished to stand before Rabbi Zalman for the judgment.

2. The Judgment and the Mountain

The two sides stood before the Baal HaTanya. The chassidim argued that they had accepted Rabbi Menachem Mendel as their Rebbe, and that this obligated him to observe the customary practices of the chassidim. Rabbi Menachem Mendel argued that, until he reached the hundred explanations revealed to him concerning Atah Hareisa, he could not open the hakafos with those holy verses.

The Baal HaTanya ruled that Rabbi Menachem Mendel had lost the case. He gave two reasons: one based on reasoning, and one illustrated by an incident.

His reasoning was this: even in ordinary physical life, whenever a person reaches a place, he discovers something further away. He will never arrive at a position from which nothing more distant can be seen. The same is true in spiritual life. If the Rebbe reached the level of those hundred explanations, he would then see a distance greater still. **There is no end to it.**

Then he told the following story. In a certain town, a husband and wife lived at the edge of the town, at the foot of a high mountain. The sewage and other waste that came down from the mountain collected around their home. So much had accumulated that their house stood amid mud and filth, and they were disgusted with their lives.

They sat together and discussed their distress many times. Finally, they reached a decision. They would try climbing a little way up the mountain so that the streams of water would no longer reach their house.

They climbed a little higher, and then a little higher again. With each ascent, the water could no longer hold them back in their home; it continued flowing down the mountainside.

One day the husband looked upward and saw the summit. It was so very far away that his eyes could barely make it out. He burst into bitter tears.

His wife asked him why he was crying. He answered: 'Don't you see how far the mountaintop is from us? Even if we climb a little more every day, we will not reach that height throughout all our lives!'

3. We Have Gotten Out of the Mud

His wife was astonished. 'Is that what you are crying about?' she asked. **'You have already gotten out of the mud and filth.'** What are you still crying for?

The Baal HaTanya concluded that the same reasoning applied to the dispute before him. They had already left the mud behind. They had come through Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, baruch Hashem. What did it matter that the Rebbe had not yet reached the summit?

Rabbi Menachem Mendel accepted the judgment. He immediately opened the hakafof with Atah Hareisa.

We need to hear both parts of that answer. The mountain is still there. The summit is still far away. The Baal HaTanya did not deny the distance, and he did not tell the Rebbe that those higher levels were unimportant. He explained that reaching them would open his eyes to still greater heights. **Growth itself reveals more possibilities for growth.**

But the wife in the mashal remembered something her husband had stopped seeing. They had made real progress. Their lives had changed. They were no longer trapped in the mud that had made their home unbearable.

A person can become so focused on what he has not yet achieved that he loses all appreciation for what Hashem has helped him achieve. 'I still lose my patience. I still do not understand enough. I still have so many things to correct.' All of that may be true. But perhaps he now catches himself sooner. Perhaps he apologizes more readily. Perhaps he is learning regularly where he once learned only occasionally. That progress matters.

And sometimes, the fact that I see more of what I am missing is itself evidence that I have grown. A person who knows very little may imagine that he knows a great deal. A person who learns begins to discover the vastness of Torah. The view from higher up the mountain is wider.

Simchas Torah gives us the chance to thank Hashem for bringing us this far, and to begin the next ascent with joy. **We can dance while there is still a mountain ahead.**

4. A Hakafah for the Future

The second story is told about the early chassidim of the Chiddushei HaRim of Ger. On Simchas Torah they danced and rejoiced with extraordinary intensity. One of the chassidim exerted himself tremendously, dancing with all his strength and without stopping.

After Simchas Torah, he explained why he had pushed himself so hard. There was a great difference, he said, between himself and his friend.

His friend was an outstanding talmid chacham and a person of spiritual stature. He had toiled in Torah throughout the preceding year. He nevertheless could identify a measure of the Torah he had learned: its amount and its clarity. When he danced in honour of the Torah he had already learned, his dancing corresponded to that measure.

The younger chassid said that he had not merited to learn properly during the previous year. **He was therefore dancing in honour of the Torah he still hoped, with Hashem's help, to learn.**

The Torah he had already learned could be measured. But the Torah he was going to learn had no defined limit. For that reason, he explained, it was fitting for him to dance without letting up.

That is such a striking way to approach Simchas Torah. This young man acknowledged the failure of his past year plainly. He did not pretend to have learned what he had not learned. Yet he also refused to treat last year's failure as a prediction of next year's possibilities.

His explanation directs us toward a future that remains open. There were sefarim he had not opened, ideas he had not understood, and depths he had not explored. With Hashem's help, those could become part of his life.

The story reports his explanation for his dancing. It does not give us a report of what he subsequently learned. Its lesson for us is to turn that joyful anticipation into an actual commitment, so that the Torah we dance for can become the Torah we learn.

5. Dancing on Credit - and Beginning Again

The source connects this idea to a teaching cited in Beis Aharon in the name of Rabbi Asher of Stolin: Simchas Torah is a hakafah for the future. Who would have the boldness to claim that his celebration adequately reflects the Torah he has already learned? **We celebrate in anticipation of what we will learn.**

The source also suggests a connection to the Maor VaShemesh. After the preceding holy days have brought correction and purification, a person can feel the light of Torah in his heart. That light itself makes him aware of how much Torah he has not yet learned and how much remains beyond his present understanding. His joy turns toward the Torah he will learn in the future. And after learning more, he can also rejoice on a subsequent Simchas Torah over the learning that his earlier celebration anticipated.

There is a deeper dimension as well. Torah sustains the world. The source recalls Nedarim 32a and the verse in Yirmiyahu 33:25: if not for Hashem's covenant day and night, the established order of heaven and earth would not endure. Joy over future Torah learning expresses our desire for the continued life of the world through Torah. That gives this joy a reach beyond a measurable quantity of completed learning.

The word hakafah also suggests buying on credit. Pirkei Avos 3:16 says, 'The shopkeeper extends credit.' In that spirit, we rejoice now in anticipation of the Torah still to come. We circle the bimah with the sifrei Torah and rejoice, expressing the desire that our future learning will sustain the world and bring light to it. The source associates this with the future language of the verse said at the conclusion of the hakafos: 'Nagil venasis bezos haTorah, ki hi lanu oz ve'orah' - we will rejoice and be glad in this Torah, for it is our strength and light.

Put the two stories together. The Baal HaTanya teaches us not to allow the endless distance ahead to erase the progress already made. The young chassid teaches us to look at that same distance with excitement. **There is so much more Torah waiting for us. There is so much more room to grow.**

For a mature person, this is a particularly precious message. After decades of Yom Tovim and years of hearing the same parshiyos, we can begin to feel that we already know what there is to know. But another year can bring an understanding we never had before. Another encounter with a familiar source can change the way we speak, the way we daven, or the way we respond to another person.

Let each of us give this year's dancing something concrete to anticipate: a fixed time for learning, a class we will attend, a sefer we will work through, or a subject we will finally make the effort to understand. Choose something we can actually carry into the week after Yom Tov.

We have not reached the summit. Baruch Hashem, we have moved beyond where we were. And there is still so much Torah ahead. **Let us dance for it now, and then begin to learn it.**

Sources and attribution

Story 1: Otzar Peninei HaChassidus, Sukkos / Shemini Atzeres, Ma'asei Tzaddikim, printed pages 582-583 (the supplied Otzar HaChochmah images are pages 658-659), Ha'ikar Yatzanu MeihaRefesh. The collection attributes the story to Migdal Oz.

Story 2 and its accompanying explanation: the same collection, Sapir VeYahalom, Sisu VeSimchu BeSimchas HaTorah, printed page 709 (the supplied Otzar HaChochmah image is page 785), Hakafah Al He'asid. The story is attributed there to Sefer HaZikaron LeRabbi Yitzchak Hutner. The page also cites Beis Aharon, Hoshana Rabba 117a, in the name of Rabbi Asher of Stolin, and proposes the connection to Maor VaShemesh.

The stories above are detailed English retellings of the supplied Hebrew text. Dialogue is translated rather than presented as an independently verified verbatim quotation. The practical applications and the connection between the two stories are developed for this class.