

Just Between Us

The Singular Pleasure of Struggle and Success

By Rabbi Yonason Goldson

I was attending a community *shalom zachor* when a neighborhood teenager, a student in a day school, leaned back in his chair and unintentionally bumped the “play” button on the CD player behind him, flooding the room with music. The student was mortified, but everyone saw it had been an accident, and the hosts laughed it off. “Don’t worry about it,” they said graciously.

Moments later the student turned around in his chair and punched the “off” button. “What did you do?” the adult sitting next to him exclaimed. “I was too embarrassed,” he replied.

The incident took me back to my own first observant Shabbos and reminded me of a lesson I had learned then, one I continue to find relevant as I raise my own children and teach my own students. I had been traveling through Israel, on my way from Crete to Kenya, with no intention of staying long and certainly no intention of attending *yeshivah*. But it was November, when agricultural work is scarce and *kibbutzim* don’t need volunteers. So when I happened upon an institution that would provide room and board, together with a degree of intellectual stimulation, it seemed a remarkable stroke of good fortune, one that would provide a cheap and pleasant distraction for a couple of months. I miscalculated — by nine years.

It didn’t take me long to recognize the wisdom that permeated the walls of the *beis hamidrash* and to appreciate ancient traditions that guided the Torah community. Committing myself to a

foreign way of life, however, was an entirely different matter. I had arrived not knowing *aleph-beis*, never having heard of Shavuot or Sukkot or Tisha B’Av, never having seen a lulav or heard a shofar. The Gemara was intriguing, the philosophy insightful, but I hadn’t come looking to upend my life or rethink my world view, and gave no serious consideration to doing either.

The turning point came about three weeks after my arrival. The Rosh Yeshivah, Rav Nota Schiller, stood before the assembly of students one afternoon and addressed us concerning I don’t remember what. But I do remember one idea from that talk, a simple concept that changed my life.

“There is an experiential dimension to Torah,” Rabbi Schiller said, “such that a person can master the total knowledge of Torah and yet remain wholly unfamiliar with the essence of Torah because he has never practiced it.” The rav’s argument made perfect sense. And although I had no intention of committing my life to Torah, I did feel an ethical obligation to dismiss Torah observance for rational reasons rather than emotional ones. Therefore, in order to defend my eventual rejection of *Yiddishkeit* as sincere, I would have to give the Torah every chance of proving itself; after that, I could walk away from it without recriminations. And so I decided on the spot that I would keep the next Shabbos, not out of religious conviction, but merely as a practical exercise in the observance of Torah Law.

I enjoyed the Friday night meal as I had on previous Shabbosos, but upon returning to my room, I made a most unwelcome discovery: the overhead light had been left on. Today, laboring to meet

the demands of three jobs and four children, I can fall asleep under just about any condition. But back then, I was considerably less resilient than I am now, and a hundred watts streaming down onto my face would disrupt my sleep as effectively as Chinese water torture.

The solution should have been simple — turn off the light. I wasn’t *shomer Shabbos*; I wasn’t *shomer* anything. But I had made a commitment to keep that Shabbos. Of course, I hadn’t expected it to be this inconvenient, but I had made the commitment nevertheless. How, in good conscience, could I break my agreement with myself?

I tried to position myself so that the light was behind me, but nothing seemed to help. I lay on my bed, tossing and squirming, feeling like a fool.

Why was I subjecting myself to this? What was extinguishing a light to me? And even to them, to those rabbis who claimed to be the keepers of the word of God, how could the flicking of a switch possibly qualify as “work”?

Eventually, after what may have been hours, I did drop off to sleep. I awoke Shabbos morning feeling more tired than when I had gone to bed and feeling resentful toward this system of arcane, irrational laws that had deprived me of a good night’s sleep. But I woke up feeling something else as well: a profound sense of satisfaction at having followed through on my commitment. As I contemplated that peculiar night over the next days and weeks, I couldn’t remember *ever* having put myself out to such an extent for no reason other than to keep my word.

I never did get to see Kenya. Nor did I get to see Botswana, Nepal, Thailand, or Australia. What I got instead was a sense of the rewards of accomplishment, of grappling with and

Rabbi Goldson teaches at Block Yeshiva High School and Yeshivat Aish HaTorah in St. Louis.

subduing the *yeitzer hara*, of struggling to master my impulses, to learn *aleph-beis*, to understand the Gemara, to *daven* from the *omud*, to eventually become a *rebbe* myself and guide my own students in discovering the raw pleasure of struggle and reward.

Unfortunately, as a teacher, I come head-to-head every day with this generation's aversion to struggle. It's easy to understand why: today's children have instant food, oven-ready and microwave safe; they have predigested information on the internet and from English *seforim*; and they have multi-media entertainment that the mind absorbs with as little effort as a lifeless body sustained by intravenous drip. Many of them aren't even expected to throw away their own trash or clean up their own messes.

So little is demanded of this generation that they demand next-to-nothing from themselves. In school, they are often taught to merely regurgitate information without thinking or processing, and the inflated grades they receive confirm their impression that mental effort is a waste of time and energy. They have rarely been called upon to challenge themselves and, tragically, have never tasted the sweet flavor of success.

I suppose the boy who clicked off the CD player that Shabbos evening had never learned of Rav Amram, the *tanna* who explained to his *talmidim* (*mesechta Kiddushin*) that he would rather suffer embarrassment for a few seconds in this world than for all eternity in the World to Come. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that self-discipline and the occasional need to endure a few minutes of discomfort are notions foreign to a typical teen. But what should our reaction be when a religious boy from an observant family in a Orthodox day school can be so casually *mechallel Shabbos*?

In his book, *My Child, My Disciple*, Rav Noach Orlowick observes that the word discipline derives from the word disciple: only when parents and teachers demonstrate what it means to live according to standards and discipline will

children acquire a commitment to living disciplined lives themselves. Many of us may remember a particular *rebbe* or *morah* who inspired us to learn, to achieve, to struggle to become like him or like her. Such teachers only succeeded in motivating us because they communicated their confidence in our ability to meet their expectations. What's more, they established credibility and earned our loyalty by living as examples of the kind of people they taught us to emulate.

But high standards require hard work, and we only live up to our responsibilities as parents and teachers when we cultivate our children's palates to savor the taste of a job well done. Movies and adventure novels might have us believe that glorious conquests lie waiting around every corner, but real life offers far more pedestrian challenges: comporting ourselves with reverence during davening from beginning to end, making time to learn Torah at the end of an exhausting day, and taking the trouble to return a lost object are decisions that indeed wait for us at any turn. And every one of these affords us a priceless opportunity to show our children, through example, that the most demanding obligations of a committed Torah life yield the most precious rewards.

None of us would think for a moment to weigh the importance of Shabbos against a light in our eyes or a few minutes of recorded music. But our children will face much more subtle temptations in seemingly harmless pleasures that will tickle their imaginations and beguile their hearts. By living as models of Torah values, by teaching our children through example how to reject quick fixes and convenient rationalizations, we bequeath to them the only enduring pleasure this world has to offer: the satisfaction that comes from working hard and doing well. In this way we can hope to raise children from whom both we and Hashem will have *nachas*. What's more, our children will have *nachas* from themselves – from their own effort, their own struggle, and their own success. **JA**