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Rebbe Yechiel Michel of Zlotshov: What it Takes to Give Advice

Rebbe Yechiel Michel of Zlotshov, called "The Maggid of Zlotshov" was born in 5486 (1736) to his father, Rabbi Yitzchak of Drohovitch. Rabbi Yitzchak was initially opposed to the Ba'al Shem Tov, but subsequently became one of his admireres and sent his son, Yechiel Michel, to learn from him. Rebbe Michel composed wondrous Chassidic melodies, the most famous of which is called "Awakening Great Compassion." When the Ba'al Shem Tov passed away, he asked his disciples to sing this melody and then promised that any person – no matter where he may be - who would sing this melody with a great awakening for repentance - he, the Ba'al Shem Tov - would join him in his song and would awaken God's great compassion upon him.

Rebbe Yechiel Michel was the first of the Chassidic tzaddikim who delayed the morning prayers, saying, "Just like the tribe of Dan, which would march at the rear of the camp of Israel and gather all the lost belongings, so I gather all the misplaced prayers that were uttered without proper intention and uplift them to their source."

Most of his life, Rebbe Michel lived in great poverty, becoming wealthy only at the end of his life. He then said that wealth broadens one's consciousness to serve God. He was famous as a talented orator and was a maggid (a preacher) in the towns of Brody, Kalk, Zlotshov and Yampol. He was a maggid in Zlotshov until he passed away and was buried in Yampol on the 25th of Elul, 5546 (1786).

Rabbi Shlomo of Radomsk told this story about Rebbe Yechiel Michel of Zlotshov:¹

One time, the Ba'al Shem Tov strongly urged Rebbe Yechiel Michel of Zlotshov, who was one of his most illustrious disciples, to accept the position of Rabbi of an important town. The townspeople there had requested of the Ba'al Shem Tov to encourage Rebbe Michel to accept the position. Rebbe Michel categorically refused. The Ba'al Shem Tov seemed to become angry at him and said, "If you don't listen to me on this matter, you should know that you will lose your portion in this world and the next!"

"Even if, God forbid, I will lose both worlds," Rebbe Yechiel Michel answered him, "I will not accept the position of rabbi, which is not appropriate for me."

"May God bless you and may your reason be blessed!" the Ba'al Shem Tov responded. "You will merit your place in the Garden of Eden because your spirit and heart did not become inflated. I was just testing you, to know what is in your heart and in order for the good to be placed upon you."

¹ *Tiferet Shlomo* on the Torah portion of *Devarim*.

A simple question arises from this story: If the position of rabbi was so unthinkable to Rebbe Yechiel Michel, how did he become a rabbi and leader later in his life?

One answer is that at that time, it indeed was not appropriate for him. Afterwards, however, Rebbe Yechiel Michel felt worthy to become a leader and accepted the role. Rebbe Yechiel Michel's original refusal, however, had an inner meaning that went deeper than mere timing.

This story was passed on to us by the *Tiferet Shlomo* in order to answer a question: Why is it that when Jethro listed the characteristics of a worthy judge, he advised Moses to take people who are, "wise, understanding and well-known...." However, Moses, in his description of his search for judges relates, "And I took from amongst you...wise and well-know people." Moses omits the characteristic of understanding?

The *Tiferet Shlomo* answers: Understanding people are those who understand one thing from within another thing, and the judges did not have this characteristic. Immediately when they were offered the positions of leaders of Israel, they accepted the role without understanding that a true leader is not interested in the leadership role at all. It is only from his genuine feeling that he has to help others in need that he concludes that it is his duty to lead. That is the only way that he becomes a leader, despite his feeling that he is not worthy of the role.²

In the *Amidah* (the silent prayer) we say, "Restore our judges as of old and our advisors as at the inception." Thus, the partner of the judge is the advisor. It is very important for a feeling of equality to exist between the advisor and the person asking for advice, which motivates the advisor to refuse any official role. This is particularly true of an advisor on psychological issues, who uncovers sensitive places in the soul of the person consulting with him. If the advisor feels that he knows and understands everything, while the person asking for his advice is dependent and lacking, he will not be able to give him the advice he needs to extricate him from his troubles. To feel that he does not know everything, the advisor must have the wisdom to maintain the reason for his initial rejection of the role—his inexperience. Only then is he able to give correct advice that enters the heart.

Clearly, an important component of the rabbinic position offered to Rebbe Yechiel Michel was the role of spiritual/emotional advisor. According to the Ba'al Shem Tov, a true Rebbe rectifies the souls of his disciples and connects them to their source. With his determined refusal and willingness to sacrifice his life not to accept the role, the

² See the continuation of his sweet words about how Moses felt about the leadership role: "...And afterwards, when they came to the Children of Israel, it says there, 'And Aaron spoke all of these things that God spoke to Moses.' But Moses did not say anything due to his great humility. He had not yet found it in his heart to speak at the head of the nation and to take that crown over them. It is only to Pharaoh that they both spoke, as is written, 'And then Moses and Aaron came and they spoke to Pharaoh.' Ultimately Moses complained about this as well: "Why have You done bad for this nation, why did You send me?" In other words, 'Certainly it is due to me that Pharaoh did not listen to me, for I am not worthy of such a great mission.'

Rebbe of Zlotshov taught us how much one must beware of a patronizing approach toward others.³

It is not only an advisor or community leader who confronts the trial of an authority role. Each of us confronts this when we are asked to give advice on a certain issue, or to guide someone with less experience than we have. What is the first feeling that arises in our hearts? Do we feel uncomfortable being placed above someone else, or do we feel eminently complimented? Rabbeinu Yonah writes: “And a person must think thoughts to offer worthy and rectified advice to his friend , and this is one of the main paths of doing kindness.”⁴ A person who is asked for advice is like a person giving charity: the only motivation for both is true love for the person being helped—not a desire to lord over him.

As opposed to the humiliation felt by a person who has received patronizing advice, there is nothing that makes a person happier than his good friend’s selfless suggestion. The source of Rabbeinu Yonah’s words brought above is in the verse in Proverbs: “Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart; so does the sweetness of a man’s friend by hearty counsel.”⁵ The thought and concern invested in the advice are already enough to warm the heart and are actually more helpful than the advice itself. The sweetness of friendship is the greatest act of kindness that we can bestow on another.

³ Rebbe Uri of Sterlisk said that “A person should prefer to throw himself into a fiery furnace and not be a righteous and famous Rebbe,” which is a play on words of the similar saying of the sages, “A person should prefer to throw himself into a fiery furnace and not whiten the face of his friend in public.” This is because when a person becomes famous as a Rebbe and tzaddik, it is as if he is embarrassing (whitening the faces) of the rest of the public, who do not stand up to the lofty qualities that he displays in his leadership role.

⁴ *Sha'arei Teshuva* 3:54.

⁵ Proverbs 27:9.