NITZOTZOS
Keeping Our Spark Alive

PARSHAS NOACH / PERSONAL GROWTH

Who's Holding You Up?

Learning to Trust the Person You're Becoming

WRITTEN BY

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One of the more difficult parts of growing up is learning to trust yourself. We spend so much of our lives looking to other people to tell us who we are. From the time we are little, we look to our parents for approval. As we get older, our friends become increasingly important. We want to know that we are accepted, that our decisions make sense, that the people who matter to us think well of us.

There is nothing inherently wrong with wanting approval. We are created to live in relationships with other people, and their opinions naturally matter to us. But sometimes we become so dependent on what other people think that we begin to lose confidence in our own judgment.

Consider how often we know what we want until someone else expresses a different opinion. We feel good about a decision until someone questions it. We enjoy a certain activity until a friend makes a comment. Sometimes we are so accustomed to consulting other people that we have difficulty identifying what we actually think.

There is a fascinating Rashi in this week's Parsha that speaks to this process of development.

The Torah describes Noach as an איש צדיק who walked with Hashem:

אֵת הָאֱלֹקִים הִתְהַלֶּךְ נֹחַ

Rashi points out that when Avraham Avinu describes his relationship with Hashem, he uses slightly different language. Avraham says, אֲשֶׁר הִתְהַלַּכְתִּי לְפָנָיו that he walked before Hashem.

Rashi explains:

נֹחַ הָיָה צָרִיךְ סַעַד לְתָמְכוֹ, אֲבָל אַבְרָהָם הָיָה מִתְחַזֵּק וּמִתְהַלֵּךְ בִּצְדָקָתוֹ מֵאֲלָיו.

Noach required support to sustain him, whereas Avraham strengthened himself and walked in his righteousness on his own.

At first glance, this seems like a criticism of Noach. But Noach was a tzaddik (from his kepeleh to his feetsalach). Perhaps Rashi is describing something about the way a person develops inner strength. Noach needed support to continue walking, while Avraham had developed the ability to strengthen himself.

When a child is young, she is largely dependent on her parents to help her understand herself. A child cannot always make sense of her own emotional experiences. If she becomes frightened, she needs someone to reassure her. If she becomes frustrated, she needs someone to help her calm down. Over time, the child begins to internalize the emotional support she has received.

The reassuring voice of her parents gradually becomes a voice she can access within herself. She becomes capable of tolerating disappointment without immediately falling apart. She learns to recognize her own accomplishments without constantly needing someone else to validate them. Eventually, she becomes capable of making decisions based on her own understanding of what is right, even when other people disagree.

A child develops this independence through years of being supported by her parents. When someone believes in us, we gradually learn to believe in ourselves. The emotional support we receive also teaches us how to manage difficult feelings on our own. There is a stage in our development when we need someone else to hold us up, and the support we receive during that stage helps us develop the strength to stand on our own.

I am reminded of the extraordinary relationship between Helen Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan.

Helen Keller lost her sight and hearing as a young child. When Anne Sullivan began teaching her in 1887, Helen had no meaningful understanding of language. Sullivan patiently spelled words into Helen's hand, helping her discover that the objects and experiences around her could be understood and communicated.

The breakthrough came when Sullivan placed Helen's hand under running water while spelling the word water into her other hand. Helen suddenly understood the relationship between words and the world around her.

Sullivan continued teaching Helen, who eventually learned to communicate, read, write and pursue an education.

Years later, while studying at Radcliffe College, Helen wrote a remarkable letter to her professor, Charles Townsend Copeland.

She explained that she had spent much of her life trying to be like everybody else. She had been so concerned with measuring herself against the experiences of other people that she had

neglected the value of her own perspective.

She then wrote:

> *"Henceforth I am resolved to be myself, to live my own life and write my own thoughts."*

Helen Keller could only write those words because someone had spent years helping her discover what she was capable of. Anne Sullivan had given her the tools to understand the world. Eventually, Helen was able to trust her own understanding of it.

She was no longer simply trying to understand the world through the perspectives of others. She was beginning to trust that her own perspective had value.

As we grow older, we begin making decisions that increasingly shape our lives. We develop our own relationships with Hashem. We make choices about our friendships, our values and eventually the kinds of homes we want to build.

Of course, we need guidance. We need parents, teachers, rabbeim and friends whose opinions we respect. But part of becoming an adult is developing the ability to listen to that guidance without losing our own voice in the process.

Sometimes we ask people for advice because we genuinely value their wisdom. Other times, we're simply frightened to trust ourselves.

Two people might ask exactly the same question, but their internal experiences can be very different. One person is trying to gain perspective before making a decision. The other is hoping someone will relieve her of the responsibility of making the decision altogether.

Avraham was מִתְחַזֵּק וּמַהֵלֵךְ בְּצִדְקוֹ מֵאָלָיו. He had developed the capacity to strengthen himself.

But notice that Avraham describes himself as walking לפניו, before Hashem. Avraham's independence did not mean that he was walking away from Hashem. He was still living in relationship with Him, but he had developed the capacity to take responsibility for his own growth. He didn't need to be constantly supported in order to continue moving forward.

As we mature, we need to ask ourselves whether the support we seek is helping us become stronger or whether we're becoming afraid to take the next step without it. Even the most

emotionally healthy people need support, but that support should also help us develop confidence in our own ability to make decisions.

We also need to think about what happens when someone else turns to us for support.

When someone we care about is struggling, our instinct is often to solve the problem for them. We want to give them the answer, make the decision or remove whatever is causing their discomfort.

Sometimes that is exactly what they need. But at other times, the greatest kindness we can offer someone is to help them discover that they possess more strength and wisdom than they realize.

We can believe in someone before she fully believes in herself. We can offer her the reassurance she needs while still communicating our confidence in her ability to make her own decisions.

Noach needed support to continue walking. Avraham had developed the strength to walk on his own.

As we grow older, we begin to appreciate how much the people who believed in us have shaped the way we see ourselves. Their belief in us eventually becomes part of our own ability to trust ourselves, even when they're no longer there to reassure us.