

A KIND WORD FOR THE LIVING

Just about two weeks ago, on a Sunday, I was present at three gatherings, each of which was a tribute to a very dear friend.

During the early afternoon, I participated in a dinner given by the leaders of the Jewish community in honor of Mr. & Mrs. Max Stern, marking the twentieth anniversary of Stern College for Women at Yeshiva University. Later that afternoon, I was present here at The Jewish Center, when almost a thousand people gathered at the funeral of a young Israeli diplomat, the late Shlomo Levin, of blessed memory, who passed away suddenly in his 44th year. The mixture of profound grief and genuine, tender love, was almost tangible. In the evening, I was present at Yeshiva University, where students and alumni of the James Striar School gathered to honor a very revered teacher and director of the school, Rabbi Morris Besdin, marking the 18th anniversary of his work.

The thought occurred to me that day: all three events were so authentic in the expression of friendship and admiration and appreciation. The praise and the encomia were heaped so lavishly and so magnanimously. They were **דברים היפים** **השבח**, words that came straight from the heart, and therefore entered the heart of all who were present. I was pleased that in the first and the third of these three events that so incongruously came on the same day, people were wise enough to honor a man when he was alive and well. Is it not always better to do so? Is it not wiser to give honor and tribute to a man when he can still appreciate and enjoy it? Is it not nobler to tell a man about your love and respect for him when he can savour it? Is not a compliment better than a eulogy...?

We are gathered here for Yizkor. The words that we shall recite are rather simple words in which we ask God to remember the souls of dearly beloved relatives. Accompanying these words, there will take place in our hearts and minds a review of those we love -- and though we shall remember the ambivalencies and perhaps even the resentments, we shall focus on the love and the longing and the honor. Perhaps now, then, is a time we should make this transition, and after reciting our tribute to the dead, prepare for kind words for the living. When we leave this synagogue, let us resolve to offer a smile, a compliment, a word of encouragement, even a word of praise for someone who deserves it.

The need for praise is almost universal. Very few people are so secure, so saintly, that they can get along without any approbation at all. A kind word, if merited, is a feedback that makes a man feel and know that he is on the right track. Even if a person is fishing for a compliment, if his bait is virtuous or beneficial or constructive in any way -- bite at it! Give him the compliment he seeks!

In that beautiful and charming short book we read on Shavuot, the Book of Ruth, we learned of how Ruth, a Moabite woman, who was widowed early in life, followed her mother-in-law Naomi to the Land of Israel, abandoning her own family out of loyalty to this woman. She was reduced to abject poverty, and had to follow other beggars in gathering the gleanings from the field of the wealthy Boaz. When Boaz learns that she is gathering the remnants of his field, he instructs his foremen to allow this young stranger to stay in his field and not to bother going elsewhere. When Ruth, in her genuine humility, thanks him for it, Boaz goes off into what is an uncharacteristically long speech of tribute

to her. It is so different in its length, so unlike the usual Biblical economy of words, its parsimony of verbiage.

And Boaz answered and said unto her, "it has fully been told to me all that you have done unto your mother-in-law since the death of your husband; and how you have left your father and your mother and the land of your nativity, and have come unto a people that you did not know heretofore. The Lord recompense your work, and may your reward be complete from the Lord the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge" (Ruth II: 11, 12).

This is the generosity of a Boaz, who appreciates the value of a kind word for the living. He will not allow Ruth's loyalty to go unacknowledged.

Unfortunately, not everyone is so benevolently disposed. I know husbands and wives who, even if they mean well towards each other, find themselves unable to offer a sincere compliment. Brothers and sisters are often incapable of saying a kind, warm word to each other. I have had men in their mature years who, in my study, would break down crying and say of a father or mother that he or she "never had a good word to say to me all my life!" How often, unfortunately, we find employers who are reluctant to offer a compliment to their employees, or colleagues who cannot offer a decent word of praise.

Why is that so? Perhaps the answer is envy, or perhaps some people are so insecure that they feel threatened by a competing ego whom praise may strengthen. Sometimes people have just not been trained or habituated to expressing admiration. But this is not the way of a Boaz.

Of course this theme is not without its problems. Praise can be extravagant, and therefore hypocritical and phony. Overdo praise and it becomes meaningless. "Praise," said Dr. Samuel Johnson, "like gold and diamonds, owes its value to its scarcity." By the same token, Dr. Johnson tells us, "he who praises everybody, praises nobody."

Often, praise degenerates into simple flattery, and is hence false and merely manipulative. Thus the Rabbis were weary of official eulogizers, and they said כִּשְׁם שֶׁנִּפְרָצִין מִן הַמֵּיתִים כֵּךְ נִפְרָצִין מִן הַלְּבָדִים (Ber. 62a): just as the dead will have to stand in judgment before the Divine Judge, so those who eulogize them -- will have to answer for their extravagancies.

A compliment, to be effective, must be well chosen. It must fit the person and the place and the time. It must speak to his soul and his heart, to his fears and anxieties and insecurities.

Perhaps because of the danger of overstatement and misstatement, our tradition warned against excess in this regard: אֵין אוֹמְרִים בְּפִי אָדָם אֶלָּא מִקְצַת שְׁבָחוֹ, one must not express, in front of a person, more than a portion of the praise due to him. Too much praise, too full a compliment, can become fulsome, it can become repulsive and abhorrent. And the מִקְצַת שְׁבָחוֹ, the partial praise itself, has to be the right מִקְצַת, appropriate and fitting.

What is the value of proper praise? What does a kind word for the living accomplish?

My distinguished and revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soleveitchik, שליט"א, once introduced the great contemporary sage, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, שליט"א,

and referred to the dictum we have just mentioned: *אין אומרים גפני אדם*, that we are to mention no more than part of the praise in the presence of a man whom we so honor. Rabbi Soleveitchik says of this statement that it is not only a *היתר* (dispensation) permitting us to praise and therefore risk the possibility of *הינ'פה* (flattery), it is also a *חייב*, an obligation. People of accomplishment are often lonely, they are frequently tortured by self-doubt and deeply disheartened. Hence, we are to offer *התנחלות*, at least some praise as a form of encouragement, we must strengthen the spirit of those who are creative and those who achieve and those who do something for others. Just praise is a debt that the rest of us must pay to one who has earned it.

The second element, after encouragement, is that a compliment, if at all possible, should be creative. It should open doors for the one who is praised, expand his horizons, point up to new possibilities. The Aramaic translator of Boaz's speech mentioned above tells us of an interesting halakhic debate that took place in that generation. As we know, the Torah forbids us to accept Ammonites and Moabites as proselytes. Some leading Jews of that day insisted that this prohibition covers all Ammonites and Moabites, men and women. But others maintain that the prohibition is limited exclusively to males, but female members of these nations may become converted to Judaism and be fully accepted. Ruth, you will recall, was a Moabite, and therefore when she followed her mother-in-law, there was a great danger that she would forever remain a stranger and not be accepted into the Jewish fold. But when Boaz told her *ישלם ה' פענך ויהי משכרתך שלמה מעם ה' אלקי ישראל*, "The Lord recompense your work, and may your reward be complete from the Lord the God of Israel," what he was really saying was *נתיחדשה הלכה: מואבי ולא מואבית*, that my court (Boaz was a leader of the Sanhedrin) has decided that female Moabites are fully acceptable as converts to Judaism! No wonder that Ruth's response was *נרחמתני*, "you have comforted me." The kind of praise Boaz offered Ruth was more than mere words, it was a new world. He opened up for her infinite possibilities, which she exploited, as she ultimately became the ancestor of King David and the Messiah-to-come.

Not every compliment can conclude in such an enormous climax; but an authentic encomium should always hint at new actions, new goals, new directions.

Conversely, true praise should never mislead. For praise wrongly articulated can be devastating. If undeserved, it can lead to a swelled head instead of an enlarged heart. If there are wrong emphases, the praise can mislead a person to a wrong assessment of his own talents, and thereby to a mistaken course of action. If you overpraise a young man's painting, you may be responsible for taking what could have been a successful accountant or prosperous physician and making of him a merely mediocre artist. I wonder how many people have wasted precious years in futile pursuits because they were encouraged by misplaced although well-intentioned praise!

The use of praise is therefore a key tool in pedagogy, and its misuse can well be tragic.

Permit me to recall for you an incident where two well-chosen words proved to be the proper praise for directing a person into greatness.

The Talmud tells the story of the greatest of all Palestinian Amoraim, the great R. Yohanan, who flourished during the third century of this era in



Paelstine. R. Yohanan, who was a very fair-skinned man, was bathing in a pool. The area was then terrorized by a gang of robbers, headed by a legendary thief called Simeon bar Lakisha. It so happened that this bar Lakisha noticed the bather from afar, and thought it was a woman, whereupon he jumped with superhuman power, and in one leap landed beside R. Yohanan. Each one was amazed at the encounter. R. Yohanan turned to him and said the following two words: *כח'ך כג' אור'ך*, "such strength should be used for Torah!"

He unabashedly complimented bar Lakisha on his enormous power. But he added one word, and that was his advice that this power be redirected to a more sublime goal: such power for the use of Torah!

The rest of the story is well-known. Bar Lakisha decided to take up R. Yohanan's challenge. He studied under him, married his sister, and eventually rose to be his equal or almost equal. In hundreds upon hundreds of passages throughout both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, we find the two of them linked forever as controversialists on basic issues of Halakhah.

A well-chosen praise had its desired effect! *כח'ך כג' אור'ך*-- perhaps this is the origin and source of the well-known Hebrew greeting *כח'ך*, "may your strenght be straight."

The third point is that *מקצת שבח*, the proper compliment, does as much or more for the donor of the praise than for the recipient. Proof of this is: prayer. So much of prayer consists of *שבח*, praise, for Almighty God. This idea of praise for God has often posed a philosophical problem, both for the Rabbis of the Talmud and philosophers such as Maimonides, who were troubled because they thought that any praise of God automatically implies limitation of His infinite virtues.

But there is a more fundamental question: does God need praise? Is He fishing for compliments? Doe He need our reassurance?

Of course He does not. God does not need our compliments. But we do! When you praise God, you are in effect declaring that He, not you, are the center of the universe. You are stating your own dependency, your creatureliness, your mortality, your genuine humility.

Similarly, when you praise your fellow man, that praise bequeaths to you added sensitivity, a lesson in generosity and magnanimity, a sense of shared humanity. It helps rid you of the illusion of your total autonomy and absolute independence from others. It moves you away from self-centeredness, and punctures the myth of omnipotence.

Proper praise, therefore, serves as an encouragement for one who deserves it; at its best, it is creative; and it benefits the one who gives it.

A kind word for the living augments the sense of human loving. Praise, if deserved, makes a person like himself just a little bit better. Is this not too a fulfillment of *ואהבת לרעך כמוך*, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself?" Does that verse not imply, too, that you should help your neighbor like himself a bit better?

And who should know these teachings about praise better than we Jews, on this festival of the giving of the Torah. For what is *תורתנו*, the giving of the Torah, if not the greatest compliment that the Deity ever paid to any people? *אשר בחר בנו מכל העמים ונתן לנו את תורתו*, God chose us

from amongst all peoples -- what a compliment! -- by giving us the Torah.

Such a divine compliment deserves our thanks: ברוך אתה יהוה

התורה / ברוך , Blessed art Thou our Lord who gives the Torah.