

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Eikev

The Talmud (Yerushalmi Kiddushin 1:7) tells us an amazing story of the extraordinary lengths Rabbi Tarfon went to honor his mother. Once when his mother's shoes tore, he placed his hands under her feet to spare her the discomfort of having to walk barefoot. Sometime later, Rabbi Tarfon fell ill and his rabbinic colleagues came to visit. When Rabbi Tarfon's mother asked them to pray for his recovery in the merit of his excessive fulfillment of the mitzva of honoring one's parents, they surprisingly responded with this statement: "Even had he done so one million times, he would not have fulfilled even half of the Biblical imperative of honoring [parents]."

How can this enigmatic response be understood? The Chofetz Chayim explains that a person can never know exactly what his unique life's assignment is. One would have assumed that Rabbi Tarfon's role as one of the generation's great disseminators of Torah was indeed his chief mission. However, Rabbi Tarfon's colleagues were not convinced. No doubt, Rabbi Tarfon, along with Rabbi Akiva and others, were tasked, through their teachings, with the awesome responsibility of passing on our sacred Mesorah. But, perhaps this was not Rabbi Tarfon's

primary role. Could it be that Rabbi Tarfon's major purpose in this world was to care for his frail mother in her old age? The visiting rabbis therefore exclaimed that their dear friend had not entirely fulfilled his assignment and as a consequence, there was still reason for him to recover and remain alive to fully complete his obligations to his mother.

Rav Soloveitchik connects this story with the opening Rashi in our Parsha (7:12). In Rashi's comments, the Torah here is warning us "not to take lightly the minor commandments that one usually tramples with his heel." Indeed, the Mishna (Avot 2:1) also cautions us to "be careful to fulfill the easy as well as the difficult mitzvot because one does not know the reward for any mitzva." (see Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Devarim pp. 68-69).

The Rav explains that for all we know, our primary role in life may not be what we naturally assume it to be. A wealthy businessman might imagine that he was placed in this world to build up a successful company and give generously to charity. Unquestionably, this assignment may be correct, but only of secondary importance. Perhaps his real and main reason for being, his existential *raison d'être*, is to make sure his son and daughter remain loyal to their ancestral faith. Precisely because we can never be quite sure, we must attend to what we may perceive as minor and treat all our responsibilities

with equal value and not neglect anyone of them.

We can extend this insight to appreciate other seemingly insignificant events in our lives which, in the last analysis, might prove to be of everlasting value. A person was invited to participate at a wedding of a close friend and assumed his reason for going was to join in the simcha of the occasion. While there, he unexpectedly met another dear friend only to discover that this friend had some significant medical issues. During a lull in the dancing, the two sat together outside the hall and talked for some time, the invited guest offering some suggestions to help his friend deal with the angst of having to confront such sudden and inexplicable health illnesses.

Now, if this person had been asked what the real reason was for his presence at the wedding, the probable response would have been to participate and share in the happiness of the event. But, in truth, while his attendance at the wedding was certainly a fulfillment of the mitzva "to make joyous the bride and groom", could it be that his primary purpose in showing up was to have this conversation with an old friend and hopefully help him cope with his distressing situation?

Do we, can we, ever really know?!

The message here is quite straightforward. A person blessed with a religious awareness never dismisses the

chance occurrence as having no meaning. He is sensitive to the minor details in life and is prepared to aver that there are no coincidences in life. He is convinced that even the small, tangential episodes in our lives which we tend to push to the margins of our attentiveness, may very well be of major significance. The warm smile to a stranger in need, the genuine expression of appreciation for some modest favor, the loving gesture of chesed, the few words of comfort - any one of these deeds and more, the "easy, minor commandments", may very well prove to be the most important thing we can do at any given moment during our day.

Let's not miss the opportunity to take seriously everything that comes our way, to see them (to use Peter Berger's felicitous phrase) as "signals of transcendence", and then to transform these occurrences into moments of sacred, precious and eternal value.