

Life on the Inside

By: Rabbi Yanki Tauber

Ever watch a young couple of newlyweds setting up shop in their new apartment? Reminds you of all those life stations at which we tell ourselves, "Ok, now it begins. Now it's for real."

When we'll graduate High School -- that's when life begins. Then we realize that, no, first we have to get our degree, first we need to get married, but then our married friends smile and say, "This is nothing, this is just playing house, wait till your first child is born, then you'll understand what life is about." But we're still working to get our career off the ground, and when that's achieved we realize that the really serious plans will have to wait until the kids are grown up and on their own, and then it's just a matter of getting through those years left till retirement so that we can get down to business.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe once held a *farbrengen* (chassidic gathering) in honor of a group of Chassidim who were returning that night to their homes in Israel. As the evening progressed, so did the frequency at which some of the attendees were glancing at the clock on the wall. Their plane was due to take off in a few hours, and they still had to pack and take care of other last minute business. Noticing their anxiety, the Rebbe smiled and told the following story:

It was in the mid 1920's, in the darkest days of the Communists' attempt to uproot the Jewish faith in Soviet Russia. The Rebbe's father-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, who headed the underground network devoted to keeping Yiddishkeit alive, was being watched constantly by the *Yevsektzia* and NKVD and followed wherever he went. Everyone knew that it was only a matter of time before they would [pounce on their prey](#).

"Late one night," the Rebbe related, "I entered my father-in-law's study in his Leningrad apartment. For several hours, he had been receiving people in *yechidut* (private audience held between Rebbe and chassid) -- a physically and spiritually draining task for a Rebbe. In another half-hour or so, he was scheduled to leave for the train station, where he was going to catch a train to Moscow for a meeting with a foreign businessman for the purpose of acquiring funds to support his work. Needless to say, to meet with a foreign citizen, a 'capitalist' at that, and especially for the above purposes, was extremely dangerous; in those days, many forfeited their lives for far lesser 'crimes'.

"To my great surprise, I found my father-in-law working calmly at his desk, arranging his papers, as if it were the middle of an ordinary workday. There was no sign of the strain of several hours of listening to peoples' most personal and painful dilemmas, and no sign of the fact that in another half-hour he would be leaving for the station on his dangerous mission.

"I could not contain myself and asked him: 'I know that Chabad Chassidism is predicated on the principle that "the mind rules the heart". I know what sort of education you received and how you were trained in self-sacrifice for Jews and Judaism. But to such an extent? That you could sit at your desk at a time like this, as if there were nothing else on your schedule?'"

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In reply, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak said to his son-in-law: "We cannot make our days longer, nor can we add additional hours to our nights. But we can maximize our usage of time by regarding each segment of time as a world of its own. When we devote a portion of time -- whether it is an hour, a day or a minute -- to a certain task, we should be totally invested in what we are doing, as if there exists nothing else in the world."

Chabad-Chassidic teaching devotes much discussion to the quality of *penimiyut*. Amongst Chassidim, the greatest compliment one can pay a person is to say that he is a *penimi* -- one who possesses the trait of *penimiyut*. The greatest insult is to call someone a *chitzon*, which is to say that he lacks *penimiyut*.

What is *penimiyut*? The closest equivalent word in the English language is "innerness". *Penimiyut* means integrity, thoroughness and consistency. It is the opposite of superficiality and equivocation. In the *penimi*, knowledge cannot be divorced from experience, and knowledge and experience cannot be divorced from deed. You will never encounter only parts of the *penimi* -- his brain, his heart, his actions; rather, you will always find the complete person there. The *penimi* doesn't merely think a thought, experience a feeling, do an action -- he lives them.

When the *penimi* devotes a portion of time -- whether it is an hour, a day or a minute -- to a certain task, he is totally invested in what he is doing, as if there exists nothing else in the world.

This is not to say that the *penimi* lives indiscriminately. On the contrary, indiscrimination is the ultimate mark of the *chitzon*. The *penimi* is deeply aware -- aware of the differences between important things and things of lesser importance, between means and ends, between journeys and destinations. But in whatever he is involved, he is fully there. He's never just "getting it done" or "getting it over with". When he's on the way to something, he's fully invested in being on the way to something.

This week's Torah reading includes Moses' record of the Israelites' 42 "journeys" through the desert -- forty-two journeys which, according to rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, are replayed in every individual's personal journey through life.

The 42 journeys are, of course, phases and stages in a greater Journey -- the progress from the confines to Egypt to the Promised Land. But each is also an entity unto itself -- the Torah calls them "journeys" (*massaot*), not "stations". We're not here to get through life, the Torah is telling us; we're here to live it.

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