

Crossing Bridges

"Don't look down."

"Why not?"

"It's a long drop. Just keep your eyes ahead and keep moving."

"We have such a long way to go. Will we ever cross this bridge and get to the other side?"

"*B'ezras Hashem* (with Hashem's help)."

Life's challenges are often compared to bridges. Learning an entire *mesechta* (tractate of the Talmud) is a big bridge to cross. Finding a *parnossa* (livelihood) may take some work. Finding a suitable marriage partner, buying a home, settling in a foreign country – these can all seem like impossible goals. They are bridges that are too long to cross. What can we do? We pray to Hashem for *Siyata Dishmaya* (Heavenly Assistance) and then we set foot onto the bridge. Step by step, we receive His help as we navigate our way across the bridge. If we merit, we find ourselves on the other side, having successfully met the challenge.

"Every (firstborn) that opens the womb is Mine" (Shemos 34:19). This verse refers to the holiness of the *bechor* (firstborn son). We have a mitzvah of *pidyon ha'ben* (redeeming the firstborn son). The Sefer HaChinuch comments that this mitzvah is a remembrance of the great miracle that Hashem performed in Mitzraim. He killed the *bechoros* of the Mitzrim, and saved our firstborn sons. This mitzvah is an expression of our gratitude to Him.

Three times a day we stand before Hashem in prayer. Blessing number eighteen thanks Hashem for all of the good that He has done for us. "For our lives which are in Your hands, and for our souls . . . and for Your miracles which we experience every day, and for Your wonders and Your good deeds which are always with us" (excerpt from the blessing). We thank Hashem for His daily *chasodim* (acts of kindness). We can also take this opportunity to thank Him for those *chasodim* which He has done in the past. All of those bridges which seemed impossible to cross. He picked us up and carried us over.

Kinderlach . . .
Your whole life is ahead of you. A life which will include many challenges and many bridges to cross – some easier; some more difficult. *B'ezras Hashem* you will meet those challenges. You will cross those bridges. Always remember how you felt when you were standing before the bridge. It seemed impossible to cross. Afterward you realized that Hashem pulled you to the other side. Remember those bridges, *kinderlach*. Express your gratitude to Hashem.

Truly Free

"That's it! We're free!"

"Can you believe it? After such a long struggle, we have finally made it."

"Let me savor this moment. Freedom is oh so sweet."

"We can't forget the past, however. Our captivity was truly horrible. We were at the mercy of someone who sole aim was to destroy us. He got the better of us so many times."

"Oy do I remember. He was so overwhelming that did we not even realize that we had any free will left. There was almost no hope of ever escaping his clutches."

"That's right. Until someone showed us the secret escape route."

"I remember that day well. It was a ray of hope in the darkness."

"Slowly we began our escape. It was not easy at first. We encountered many challenges along the way."

"Yes, but Boruch Hashem there were people to guide us. We soon realized that we were not the first ones to take this route. Many had escaped before us."

"Yes. They were waiting with open arms to welcome us when we finally reached freedom."

"Yes, and here they are now, sitting with us in the Beis HaMedrash *shtetling* away (learning Torah with great intensity)."

"We're all free. Free of the *yetzer hora* (evil inclination). That sinister one who wants to destroy our souls."

"It was learning Torah that saved us."

"The tablets were Hashem's handiwork, and the writing was Hashem's writing, *chorus* (engraved) on the tablets" (Shemos 32:16). "Do not read the word '*chorus*' (engraved), rather read it '*cheirus*' (freedom). For the only truly free person is one who immerses himself in Torah learning" (Pirkei Avos 6:2). As the Gemora (Kiddushin 30b) states, "I created the *yetzer hora* and I created the antidote: Torah. If you toil in Torah, you will not be given over into his hands." If you want to be truly and completely free of the *yetzer hora*, there is only one escape route. Learn Torah.

Kinderlach . . .
Who wants to have that *yetzer hora* push him around? Not me. Not you either. He will ruin your life. You will not be able to control your anger, your desires for food, money, and other material things. You will say whatever comes to mind, even *loshon hora*. Your friendships will fall apart as well as your relationship with Hashem. If you let the *yetzer hora* control you, you will be a totally miserable person. So learn Torah and liberate yourself from his evil grip. Enjoy the taste of true freedom.

Mercy

Moshe pleaded. But Hashem was adamant. The people had committed a grievous sin. Hashem would not go up with them into the Land of Milk and Honey. He would send an angel instead. If He accompanied them and they sinned again, He would have to annihilate them.

"Hashem, Hashem, G-d, Compassionate, and Gracious . . ." (Shemos 34:6). Hashem instructed Moshe to say these words of prayer. The Gemora (Rosh Hashanah 17b) states, "Whenever the Nation of Israel sins, let them pray this prayer and I shall forgive them." What is so special about this prayer? The words describe Hashem's Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. He is Compassionate and Merciful in every way possible. We appeal to His Mercy, and He in turn is merciful upon us. That seems simple. However, it is not the whole story. Rav Leib Chasman zt"l notes that the prayer alone will not help unless we do *tshuva* (repentance). We must correct our mistakes. We are asking Hashem to have mercy upon us. We can arouse His compassion by being merciful to others. This is the area of *tshuva* that brings Heavenly Mercy. As the Gemora (Shabbos 151b) states, "All who have mercy upon Hashem's creatures, receive Mercy from Heaven." The Yalkut Shemoni on Parshas Eikev instructs us to act with kindness toward everyone.

Kinderlach . . .
Every person that you see is an opportunity for *chesed*. Do you see someone in a hurry? Move aside to let him pass. Is your sister sad? Smile at her to cheer her up. Is Imma overwhelmed with housework? Wash a few dishes. Is someone speaking to you? Pay close attention to him. Does your *chavrusa* (study partner) have difficulty understanding the material? Explain it again. And again. Say thank you to Imma for preparing lunch for you. These acts of kindness are like diamonds. They seem small, but they are so precious. They can arouse Hashem's Mercy and save the Jewish people.

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P.O.B. 5338, Jlm, Israel 91052

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