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### THE POWER OF TORAH

**T**ORAH STUDY MEANS LITERACY, INFORMATION, INSTRUCTION, HISTORY, TRANSFORMATION - what was that last word? Transformation? I understand that Torah study means many good things, but how does 'transformation' fit in? What kind of transformation do you mean?

Well, let's start with transforming the way one sees something. The teachings of the Sages of the Torah present many different perspectives, many differing points of view. When a person starts considering these, one realises that things are not quite so simple. They are not black or white. For instance, something may seem negative, but the Sages present a positive way to look at it.

There is an example in this week's Sedra<sup>1</sup>. First we hear the account of the Spies: how they went to the Holy Land, spent forty days exploring it and then came back with a very bad report. The Jewish people began weeping and argued that they should go back to Egypt. As a result the entire nation was condemned to wander in the desert for forty years, rather than enter the Holy Land immediately.

Shortly after this there is another event: a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath<sup>2</sup>. He was publicly breaking the laws of Shabbat in front of everyone. Yet we find that the Sages present an alternative way of looking at him. They tell us that his intention was for the sake of Heaven. He was actually trying to do something positive<sup>3</sup>.

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You see, after the nation had been condemned to stay in the desert, many people gave up hope completely. They assumed that this meant that all the laws and teachings they had been given at Mount Sinai had been cancelled. One of these is the law to keep Shabbat. They felt now it would make no difference what they did. To keep Shabbat, or not keep it - nothing matters, they felt.

This person saw what was happening. He wanted to show that all the laws still apply, that everything is significant, that what you do matters. He deliberately did something which would look as if he were breaking the Sabbath in public, which resulted in his being punished, simply in order to show people that the laws of the Sabbath and every other law were still important and applied in full force.

*But if he really cared about the Sabbath, how could he break the Sabbath Law?*

Well, a famous Rabbi points out that if his intention in gathering sticks was to have a pile of sticks to use for cooking, then he has indeed broken the Sabbath. But if his intention was only to demonstrate that the Sabbath laws apply, his action in gathering sticks has no significance in itself. He did not need the sticks at all. In that case, he actually did not break the Sabbath law. He did not really do anything wrong<sup>4</sup>.

*I can see why Jews make good lawyers!*

More important, this shows how careful you have to be in judging anyone. Ethics of the Fathers tells us: 'Judge everyone in the scale of merit'<sup>5</sup>. Try to see something good in what they are doing, even if it seems the opposite. You do not know what is in another person's heart and mind. Try always to see the good side - and the Torah will be there to help you do that!

1. Numbers chs. 13-15. 2. Num. 15:32-37. 3. Bava Batra 119b, Tosafot. See the discussion in the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot*, vol.28, pp. 93-97, and in J. Korf, *Likkutei Biurim beSefer HaTanya*, p.197. 4. Rabbi Shmuel Edels (Maharsha) to Bava Batra 119a. 5. Ethics 1:6.

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SEDRA SHELACH

**IF OR HOW**

Back and forth, back and forth, shaking like a nervous wreck, he walked up and down his room. Michael had been assigned to give a presentation to the School Assembly on the Sedra of the week, and what one can learn from it, and he was very worried. The thought of the whole school and the teachers looking at him, all focusing on him alone, scared him. Give him a football pitch and he was all in, but public speaking was not his thing. "I can't do it, I can't do it," he kept repeating to himself. "I'm going to make a total fool of myself! I must get out of this somehow!"

Not realizing that his sister Leah was watching from the doorway, Michael kept walking back and forth, mumbling under his breath. Finally, no longer able to keep quiet, Leah strode into his room. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Are you stressed or something?"

"No. I'm fine," he said. He pursed his lips and went back to his pacing. "No you're not!" said Leah. "You're stressed. Go on, share it with me."

Resigning himself to the fact that she was very determined and would eventually get it out of him, Michael told her about the presentation due on Friday in front of the whole school, and how he doesn't want to do it and wants a way to get out of it..."

“Well,” she said, once he had finished, “I think I can help you. I can give you an idea what to say, and it just might help you have more confidence as well.”

“Okay... so what’s your idea?”

Michael was visibly doubtful, but Leah went on anyway. “Basically, in this week’s Sedra, called Shelach, the Jews were afraid. They were afraid of going to the Holy land of Israel because of the unknown. So G-d told Moses that they could send spies to find out what would be the best way to approach it and how to conquer it.

“So the spies went, and returned. However, rather than giving suggestions about how to approach the Land, they said they thought it wasn’t a good idea to try. They said the people there are very powerful, and they should just give up. Only two spies – Caleb and Joshua – who had faith in G-d, said there’s no problem, let’s just go ahead. But the people all began weeping and it was terrible...”

“...and then G-d said they should stay in the desert for forty years....” Michael murmured. “But what do we learn from that, and anyway, how does that help me speak in front of the whole school? You would do a great job, but I can’t do this kind of thing...”

“The point is that G-d wanted the spies to find out *how* to enter the land, but they began worrying *if* they should try to enter it or not. It’s the same thing in life, when there’s a challenge, don’t worry about deciding *if* you can do it, juts go ahead and work out *how* to do it. And that applies to you too, dear brother mine, you *can* give the presentation, now just go work on how to do it, instead of trying to find a way to get out of it...!”

Next day, after the Assembly, someone said: “You were awesome Michael! You really spoke well. How did you do it?”

Michael laughed. “Well, I took a lesson from the Sedra. Instead of worrying *if* I should give the talk, I began just working out *how* to do it. And it worked!”

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