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Yeshiva B'nei Torah

June 24, 2024

I was asked to give a הסכמה for this Sefer, but in reality, it needs no הסכמה, it is its own הסכמה. I would say קרייתא זו היא הילולא. Each page is written with clarity of thought and methodology that emanates from Sinai ברור במיסרתא מסיני.

Torah takes pride not only in vast stores of knowledge but also in the way it conveys its ideas. The latter requires a highly intelligent and a well-trained mind in the methodology of תורה שבעל פה. Thus in transferring content, methodology is also transferred. Rabbi Elie Feder has captured this duality with clarity, beauty and concision.

This is the greatest tribute to his mother Shani A"H, a great צנועה and צדקת who faced all of her life's challenges with great courage and dignity, whose virtue permeates the pages of this book.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Yisroel Chait

Rabbi Yisroel Chait
Rosh HaYeshiva
Yeshiva B'nei Torah

The following letter of approbation was written
for the author's previous book, Gematria Refigured.

אגשור זעליג וויס

כגן 8

פעיה"ק ירושלים ת"ו

בס"ד

תאריך ל"ה ט"ז אלול

הן האוי"ם אמר ספרו היקר והמזומן על גידי זילי לבצר נ"י. דקדוק מ"ן. גלויגאריה
ומקורו. סוקו צו זממה נשמעה, גימטריא לייסו מ"ל"נו אמתא נקוה למאריה, ולמ"ן
לא סמך למעז יבול לזוז ולמ"ל"נו גמטריא באומ"ל"נו. גמטרי סמך"ה פילם נ"ח
אויב"ה מיצה סמך"ה זא, ונ"כ"ו נשמע"ה על ב"ה.

גב"ל אמתא ג"ל ונ"ג/אמתא מרובה למז גיה ד"ב. נ"ל"ן סמך"ה ז"ה
ממ"ל, ז"ל מ"ן הממ"ל קט"ו"ה ל"ה"ה ז"י ק"ב"ה ונ"ל"ן זמק"ה"ה. כ"ה"ה
ק"ה"ה ז"ב כ"ה"ה, א"ל"ה"ה זמ"ה נ"ל"ה"ה נ"ה"ה נ"ל"ה"ה.

כי"ה י"ו נ"ה"ה



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CHAPTER ONE

YOUR PLACE

I am awed by watching the miraculous order of God's nature unfolding in my backyard—you can see throughout nature, a mother's job is to give her child wings, teach them to fly, and watch them soar. Each year I watch the swans hatch ugly ducklings, teach them to hunt for food and—when strong enough—teach them to fly. Then they turn into beautiful swans and fly off to start their own lives (so it seems). Fortunately, children may leave the nest—but don't always leave the neighborhood. And I have really had the zechus to watch you all soar.

BEAUTIFUL! I can't read my mother's introduction without appreciating its elegance. The imagery. The metaphors. The emotions. The turns of phrases. It's even more beautiful if you've seen her backyard on the bay in real life, if you can envision the scene she's describing. I've seen it hundreds of times, but not like she did. To me, it was a beautiful scene. But to her, the beauty was only skin-deep. To her, it was a *meaningful* scene, a scene which spoke to her about God's wonders, which reminded her of her small place in His big world.

My mother's beautiful swan metaphor enables me to see myself differently. My siblings and I are the ugly ducklings she brought into the world. She raised us to be her beautiful swans—she gave us wings, taught us to fly, and watched us soar. Who knew that she thought like this? While she never explicitly spoke this way, her letter rang true. She embodied its perspective every day of her short life.

While I can't get enough of reading this paragraph, I can't help but ask, "What in the world does this have to do with happiness? Are the swans just her captivating introduction to her 'Thoughts on Happiness,' or do they somehow relate to the topic of her precious letter?" To answer this question, let's first consider why some people are happy and others are not. As strange as it sounds, let's start with Haman.

HAMAN'S UNHAPPINESS

Haman had everything. He had great riches, he had many sons, he was the second-most powerful person in the world, everyone in the kingdom bowed to him, and he was even invited to a private party with the king and the queen—and then to a *second* party. What more could a man dream of?

Despite it all, Haman confided to his family that it was all *worthless* to him. Every time he saw Mordechai the Jew just sitting at the king's gate, refusing to even flinch for him, he felt that it was all worthless. Worthless? Doesn't that sound extreme? Bothersome, yes. But worthless?

Just as we intuitively feel that extreme illness prevents happiness, we feel even more strongly that extreme success causes it. If so, how can it be that Haman's extreme success meant nothing to his happiness? The answer is that while Haman had a lot, he wanted even more. Though he was a mere mortal, in his fantasy, he was immortal. Though he was a man, he imagined himself a god.

Of course, this wasn't really true—he wasn't actually a god. In reality, Haman was but a small part of God's enormous universe. If so, you may ask, how could he have actually believed that the entire world revolved around him? The answer is that Haman's extreme success confirmed his illusion of greatness. After all, everyone bowed before him. But there was only one problem—it was all one big illusion. And, because Haman knew this deep down, it only took one Mordechai to burst his bubble, to remind him that he was a mere mortal. Every time Haman saw Mordechai the Jew, he was reminded of his true place in God's vast universe.

Now we can understand how Haman seeing Mordechai could render all his success *worthless* to him. Since the primary benefit of Haman's success was to confirm his fantasy of greatness, undermining this fantasy rendered

his success worthless. This explains why he needed to kill all the Jews. If only he could rid the world of Mordechai and his nation's philosophy, he could continue living at the center of his imagined world—he could once again enjoy his success and the endless confirmation of his greatness.

Haman's response to Mordechai teaches us that the greater we think we are, the more we need the world to conform to our erroneous beliefs. But it never really does. While we don't suffer from Haman's extreme megalomania and we don't face Mordechai's refusal to bow before us, we aren't entirely removed from Haman's issues. Each of us on our own level harbors fantasies—sometimes hidden—about our own importance. And we all have our own versions of Mordechai in our lives. Maybe it's our friends, enemies, or coworkers; maybe it's illness, conflict, or financial struggles. One way or another, we have countless reminders of our small place in Hashem's big universe, of the falsehood of our illusions of greatness. These reminders create significant obstacles to our happiness.

You may ask how we get around these challenges and attain happiness. Perhaps we can gain some insight from my mother's letter.

FOCUS ON YOUR PLACE IN GOD'S WORLD

Now I see why my mother started her letter on happiness with her unique perspective on her picturesque backyard. How did she view her nice house and her beautiful view? As a Haman-like confirmation of her importance in the world? Of course not! If we carefully review her letter, we will find the answer to this question and discover her first secret to happiness.

I am awed by watching the miraculous order of God's nature unfolding in my backyard—you can see throughout nature, a mother's job is to give her child wings, teach them to fly, and watch them soar. Each year I watch the swans hatch ugly ducklings, teach them to hunt for food and—when strong enough—teach them to fly. Then they turn into beautiful swans and fly off to start their own lives (so it seems). Fortunately, children may leave the nest—but don't always leave the neighborhood. And I have really had the zechus to watch you all soar.

Did you hear it? She didn't view herself as special or more important than other people. On some level, she didn't even see herself as elevated above swans. She identified herself—like the beautiful swans—as but one instance of a devoted mother whom Hashem masterfully programmed to teach her kids to soar. From this humble perspective, my mother made no assumptions; she had no illusions of her own grandeur or expectations of Divine protection. In fact, she often wondered why Hashem would help us tiny creatures in His vast and amazing universe.

You may have the impression that my mother had a depleted ego, low self-esteem, or a feeling of nothingness. This was certainly not the case. To understand why, we must recognize the important distinction between the honest recognition of your small place in Hashem's vast universe and the depressing feeling that you are absolutely nothing. Being a small part of the Creator's design is not insignificant. On the contrary—it's something quite amazing and special. But it's not what Haman, nor our fantasies of greatness, are looking for.

Because my mother truly understood this point, her recognition of her small place in Hashem's big universe wasn't depressing—it was inspirational. While she didn't overemphasize her own importance, she also didn't deny the significance that she did have. Instead, she truly appreciated and embraced her place in the Divine plan.

We can now begin to understand her happiness despite her illness. Whose happiness is threatened by illness? People whose joy comes from their success and its confirmation of their greatness. Not my mother! She found joy in living in Hashem's universe—health or illness notwithstanding. If sickness is part of His universe, then it may as well happen to her. Of course, she tried her best to overcome it. But her happiness wasn't dependent upon the success of such attempts or threatened by their failure.

The lesson of my mother's introduction is that to have any chance at attaining happiness, we must first remove the major impediment of overemphasizing our own significance. If we can humbly acknowledge our small place in Hashem's amazing world, then we can position ourselves to happily enjoy it. But if we can't, then when things don't go our way

(as is often the case), besides dealing with the practical challenges, we'll face a painful attack on our fantasy of self-importance.

HOW DID SHE KNOW?

I have one question. How did my mother know all this? Where did she get such wisdom about life and about attaining happiness? Though I never asked her this question, I think the very next part of her letter alludes to her answer.

I just have a few words of motherly advice, as you soar. (It's not Torah miSinai—that, your father and rebbeim have taught you well, and I, in turn, have learned much from you) but just some thoughts on happiness.

Torah miSinai! That's the answer! She learned her motherly advice from the Torah. Though she wasn't a Torah scholar, her father, husband, and teachers were. Though she didn't often engage in formal Torah learning, she was a superb listener. When she heard Torah ideas and values, they deeply resonated with her. She embraced them, measured them up against her own experiences, and made them her own.

Though her ideas are prevalent in the Torah, I'd like to cite a few sources that express her attitude about accurately assessing our place in Hashem's beautiful world. In *Tehillim* 104, the well-known *Barchi Nafshi*, David Hamelech beautifully describes many amazing features of Hashem's universe. These include wind, fire, water, mountains, valleys, animals, etc.

Toward the end of his magnificent depiction (verses 16–22), he turns his attention to several features of the natural world and their impact upon various animals:

The trees of Hashem are satisfied, the cedars of Lebanon which He has planted, in which the birds make their nests. As for the stork, the fir trees are her house. The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a shelter for the hares. He made the moon for seasons; the sun knows its coming. You placed the darkness, and it is night, in which all the beasts of the forest

creep. The young lions roar after their prey and seek their food from God. The sun rises; they gather and crouch in their dens.

Before culminating his exquisite description with an expression of wonder over the incredible wisdom exhibited in the manifold facets of Hashem's creation, David Hamelech turns his attention to man (verses 23–24).

Man goes forth to his work and to his labor until the evening. How plentiful are Your works, Hashem! You made them all in wisdom; the earth is full of Your creations.

The message is clear. The framework in which David Hamelech sees man and all his hard work is as but one instance of Hashem's amazing natural world. Just as "the lions roar after their prey," so, too, "man goes forth to his work." When my mother compared herself to the swans in her backyard, she embraced this framework. By signing her letter "The Tough Old Bird," she expressed her appreciation of her vital role in Hashem's remarkable world.

My mother's appreciation of her place in Hashem's universe goes far beyond alignment with a few verses in *Sefer Tehillim*. It lies at the core of the *Rambam's* description of the love and awe of Hashem. In *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 2:2, he says the following:

What is the path to love and fear of Him? When a person contemplates His actions and His wondrous creations and sees from them His wisdom that has no comparison or end, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify, yearning with a tremendous desire to know the Great Name, as David said: "My soul thirsts for the Lord, for the living God" (Tehillim 42:3).

And when he thinks about these same matters, he will immediately recoil backward and will be in a state of awe and fear, and he will know that he is a small, lowly, and dark creature, standing with his light, small wisdom before He who is of perfect knowledge, as David stated: "When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You set in place,

what is man that You have remembered him, and the son of man that You have recalled him?" (Tehillim 8:4–5).

My mother's experience of being "awed by watching the miraculous order of God's nature unfolding in my backyard" is reminiscent of the Rambam's description of awe of God. Her sense of being a small part of God's universe is reminiscent of King David's reflection, "[W]hat is man that You have remembered him, and the son of man that You have recalled him?"

While many of us have encountered these sources and ideas many times, not as many of us have internalized them as my mother did. I am hopeful that reading my mother's letter and thinking about her life can help us bring the ideas of *Torah miSinai* closer to our minds and deeper into our hearts. I am hopeful that my mother's unique perspective can live on through her swans and those whom they encounter.

PRACTICAL STEPS

These are some thoughts that can help you incorporate the lessons gleaned from my mother's letter and the Torah's eternal messages into your own life.

A major impediment to happiness: Viewing yourself as more or less important than you truly are.

Why this causes unhappiness: If you view yourself as *greater* than you are, then life's challenges will shatter your inflated sense of self. On the other hand, if you view yourself as *smaller* than you are, then you're likely to have feelings of depression or worthlessness.

How this can be avoided: By striving to gain a true sense of your small place in Hashem's big universe.

Practical steps toward gaining a true sense of your place in Hashem's world:

- Focus on various awe-inspiring aspects of Hashem's amazing creation. Some examples include incredible wildlife, breathtaking landscapes, intricate systems

in the human body, the beauty of the Torah's wisdom, and anything else in Hashem's universe that you find awesome, vast, or astonishing.

- View your own existence in contrast to these amazing facets of Hashem's creation, and recognize that you are but a small part of His big universe.
- Remember that although you are small, you are not nothing. Try to embrace the place that you occupy in Hashem's plan—as a mother or a father, a teacher or a doctor, a Jew or a human being, or any other roles that you play in His vast universe.

Why this helps you be happy: It allows you to maintain a sense of meaning in your life while simultaneously viewing your challenges in a realistic perspective (instead of attributing them to cosmic significance).