



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

Waking Up to a New World

These days, we all find ourselves living in a new and different world. It was just this past Purim that we sat together in *shul*, next to one another, listening to the reading of *Megilat Esther*. We exchanged *mishloach manot* in close physical proximity to our friends, and the phrase “social distancing” was not part of our vocabulary. We felt secure economically and were busy planning travel to distant places, especially *Eretz Yisrael*, for *Pesach* programs. Our calendars were filled with *bar mitzvah* celebrations and weddings.

How drastically has our world changed! Even as many communities have gradually “reopened,” we now realize that things may never be quite the same as they were just a short time ago.

It is thus no wonder that I have lately found myself pondering the story of a man who lived not long before the fall of the first *Beit HaMikdash*, a man named *Choni HaMaagal*. Not only have I been

pondering his story, but I have begun to identify with him.

The story is found in the Babylonian Talmud tractate *Taanit*. A slightly different version of the story is told in the Jerusalem Talmud, and a very different version appears in the writings of the historian Josephus.

As the Babylonian Talmud has it, *Choni Hamaagal* was a very pious man whose prayers were always answered. The nation turned to him to pray for rain in times of drought. One day, he passed a man planting a tree. He asked the man how long it would take for that tree to bear fruit. When the man responded that it would take many years, *Choni* asked, “Then why do you bother planting?” The man replied that he was not planting for himself but for his son, or perhaps even for his grandson, who would eventually enjoy the fruit

Soon afterwards, *Choni* lay down to rest in a nearby cave. He fell into a deep sleep and awoke. He passed by the tree and, sure enough, there was a man there plucking fruit from the tree. It soon became apparent to *Choni* that the man enjoying the fruit was indeed the grandson of the man he had earlier encountered. He eventually discovered that he had been asleep for seventy years.

Happy B-day, Sheila!!

Choni returned to the local *beit midrash*, the study hall. He was accepted there because of his evident Torah scholarship. But gradually, *Choni* realized that he couldn't relate to this new generation. The world had changed, people had changed. He could find no friend, no person with whom he could share his thoughts and feelings. He exclaimed, "*oh chavruta oh mituta*, either companionship or death".

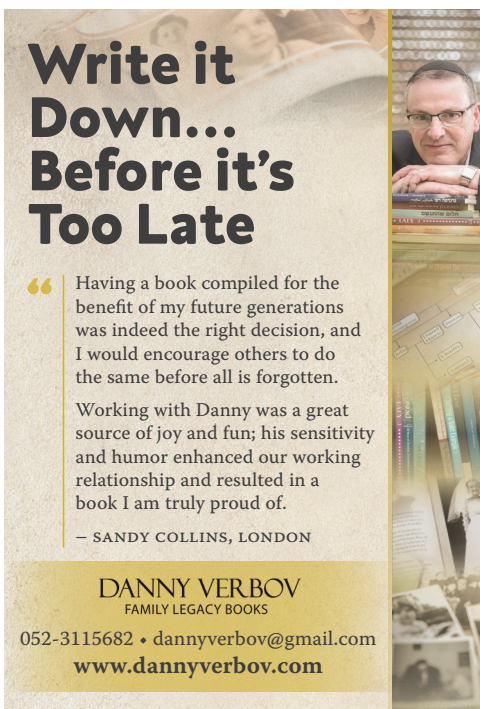
The notion of living out the rest of his years in a thoroughly changed social environment was so displeasing to *Choni* that death itself was preferable to him.

We learn that he feels responsible for finding a competent successor

In this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Pinchas* (Bamidbar 25:10-30:1) we read that Moshe, cognizant of his own imminent death, did not wish to leave his people leaderless. He thus beseeched the Almighty to designate his successor. Translated literally, his prayer reads: "May the Lord, God of the spirits for all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation who can go out before them and come in before them, so that the Lord's people not be like sheep without a shepherd." (ibid. 27:15-17)

The Lord appoints Yehoshua as Moshe's successor. Moshe "places his hands upon him," assenting to the Lord's choice.

This passage allows us a glimpse into the psyche of Moshe. We learn, for example,



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that Moshe made peace with his ultimate demise. We learn that he feels responsible for finding a competent successor. And we discover that he has no problem with the fact that it is his disciple who will one day fill his shoes.

I have recently been reading a fascinating book. It is written by Prof. Gerald J. Blidstein, of the University of Beersheba, and is entitled *Etzev Nebo*. The English title is more descriptive: *The Death of Moses: Readings in Midrash*.

The author displays a dazzling mastery of the entire Midrashic corpus. He demonstrates that the Midrash supplements the Torah's account of Moshe's final days with a variety of intriguing alternative scenarios.

I carefully followed his analysis of those passages in the Midrash that insist that Moshe did not easily surrender to his death, but instead protested to God and begged to be granted, if not immortality, then at least a significant extension of his allotted time on earth. He even offered to live on in a subsidiary role, as a disciple of Yehoshua.

One Midrashic source, *Devarim Rabba* on *Parshat Va'Etchanan*, maintains that Moshe was, in some mystical manner, granted his wish. The Midrash envisions the scene: "A heavenly voice, a *bat kol*, proclaimed, 'Study Torah under Yehoshua.' The people agreed... Yehoshua sat at the head, with Moshe at his right and the sons of Aaron at his left, and Yehoshua taught in Moshe's presence. God took the reins of wisdom from Moshe and handed

them over to Yehoshua. Moshe did not understand a word of Yehoshua's lecture. Afterwards, the people asked Moshe to review the lecture, and Moshe was forced to admit that he knew not what to say and then collapsed. He said, 'Master of the Universe, until now I begged for life, but now I am ready to give my soul over into Your hands.'"

Reading this passage, I could not help but recall the story of *Choni HaMaagal*. The world changes from one generation to the next. As the older generation ages, it becomes increasingly aware that it has no place in the new world. It is outdated, almost irrelevant, out of touch with the challenges and resources of the new reality.

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a matter of mere language.
I began to feel that I had
outlived my usefulness

Choni was not the first to prefer death to the lack of companionship. Moshe, at least according to one Midrashic approach, surrendered to every man's eventual fate only when he realized that he had no meaningful role to play in Yehoshua's new world.

As I reflect upon the story of *Choni* and the Midrash about Moshe, two anecdotes come to mind.

One was related by the late Hasidic Rebbe of Klausenburg, Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda Halberstam, a descendent of

the famed nineteenth century halachic authority, Rabbi Chaim of Zanz. The Rebbe taught that his ancestor ceased to issue halachic rulings after he reached the age of seventy. This was not because he felt that his intellect was waning. Rather, he believed firmly that he was not, and could not be, sufficiently familiar with the realities faced by a new generation. He was thus unqualified to offer it authoritative halachic guidance.

Secondly, it was the late Rabbi Walter Wurzburger who shared with me the last conversation he had with his mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Rabbi Soloveitchik told him that he struggled to be able to understand each new generation of his students sufficiently to adapt to their cultural backgrounds. He claimed that he was confronted with an entirely new generation of students every five years. For example, he decided to change the language in which he delivered his lectures from Yiddish to English. But, he lamented, “it was eventually no longer a matter of mere language. I began to feel that I had outlived my usefulness.”

Today, old and young alike, we all face circumstances which will force us to doubt our ability to cope successfully, let alone live full and meaningful Jewish lives. We must not yield to these doubts. Instead, we must draw upon our own inner strengths and upon the vast creative resources that lie within the minds and souls of others.

We must strive with all our might to make the “new normal” a spiritually and materially “greater normal.” ■



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