

## Parshas Yisro 5762

1. The world of Torah has known many different schools of thought and of commentary, and each one has bequeathed us a different way of looking at the text, a different type of insight.

2. I want to share with you this morning what in Yeshiva we would call a *mussardike daher*. What is a *mussardike daher*? It's an insight into some teaching of חז"ל that is based on human psychology and introspection, in which our own experience sheds light on the words of our rabbis and is, in turn, illuminated by those words.

And it is perhaps particularly appropriate to share such an insight today since this Thursday will mark the *yahrtzeit* of R' Yisroel Salanter. The vort I am going to tell you is not his; but it belongs to that vein of thought that was first mined by R' Yisroel.

3. On the pasuk: *ועתה אם שמוע תשמעו בקולי ושמרתם את בריתי* Rashi - quoting חז"ל - says as follows: *אם עתה תקבלו עליכם יערב לכם מכאן ואילך, שכל התחלות קשות*.

Let's read this carefully: If you resolve something, then afterwards it is easy and pleasant; because always the beginning - the first resolution - is the hardest part.

4. Is this born out by our experience? We often make resolutions: To lose weight; to excersize more; *lehavdil* to come to daven more regularly; to attend a shiur; to learn the daf yomi. Resolutions, in our experience, are easy; its keeping to them over the long term that is difficult.

So Rashi's comment seems to fly directly in the face of experience!

5. Imagine two people: We'll call them Reuven & Shimon. Neigher has been especially careful about coming to shacharis each morning. But one Shabbos the rabbi gives an especially inspiring drosho and they resolve that from now on they will be in shul each morning.

The next morning Reuven gets out of bed as soon as his alarm rings, and sets off to shul with alacrity. And each morning after he's out of bed like clockwork. But Shimon has a hard time with his resolution; his attendance is sporadic, and pretty soon he's back to where he was at the beginning.

We might say that Reuven has more will power than Shimon. But that's just a word.

The real difference between Reuven and Shimon is this: Reuven made his decision once and for all. The next morning he doesn't rethink the decision. He doesn't revisit it. He was past the deciding stage.

But Shimon is still deciding - each morning he thinks his decision over again. Should I, or shouldn't I. On the one hand... on the other hand... He's stuck in the decision stage.

If you're anything like me you'll have no trouble understanding and sympathizing with Shimon. And I imagine that Shimon will have this same trouble in other areas; it's a pattern that can repeat itself in all kind of different areas.

And here is the answer to the question with which we began: If כל התחלות קשות, if the resolution is hard, but afterward its easy - then why do we find it so hard to stick to our resolutions?

But the problem is that sometimes we never get past the התחלה. And so long as we are still deciding, we're stuck in כל התחלות קשות.

Mark Twain once said: It's very easy to quit smoking - I've done so hundreds of times.

But we understand that that's exactly what makes it so hard. To decide once is hard enough - but if you have to decide over and over again - it's impossible. You can just remain stuck in the התחלה forever.

Yiddishkeit demands of us a great deal of stick-to-itness. To daven - hopefully with כונה - every day. To learn Torah - every day. To engage and to refrain from all sorts of activities - every day. Nor are we supposed to remain static. Each level of observance, of spiritual attainment, brings into our sight another, higher level, towards which to aspire. And none of this is easy. But the secret - the Torah tells us - lies in the התחלה. At each stage, with each מצוה, the great thing is the first resolution. If the resolution is strong, then the execution will follow naturally, and so we can move on, מחיל אל חיל, ever upward towards that great goal : והייתם לי סגולה מכל העמים כי לי כל הארץ.