Who Should Say Hello First?

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Rabbi Matya ben Harash was an important Tanna, a rabbi of the time of the Mishna, who lived in the second half of the second century of the common era. After the defeat at Bar Kokhba, Rabbi Matya ben Harash left Erets Israel, settled in Rome and founded what may have been the first Yeshiba in Rome. He was famous for his extreme dedication to fulfilling the Mitsvot, both the Mitsvot towards God and the Mitsvot towards others. Although he is mentioned in several baraytot, Rabbi Matya does not have many Mishnayot in his name. In fact, there are only two in the entire Mishnah. And one of them is what we will learn today.

Rabbi Matya says HEVE MAQDIM SHALOM LEKHOL ADAM “Always be the first to greet everyone.”

This gesture, being the first to extend a greeting to others, was considered by the sages to be a great virtue. Why?

Because in our family and social interactions we are always waiting for someone to notice our presence, to pay attention to us. And many times two people see each other and don’t say hello, simply because each one is waiting for the other to say hello first. Sure, it’s risky to be the first to say hello: what happens if the other person does not return my greeting, or does not greet me with the same intensity that I greeted him? That is why many people prefer not to be the first to say hello. They choose to wait for the other to make the first move. And sometimes that creates a vicious circle (you don’t say hello to me > I don’t say hello to you > you don’t say hello to me) which is destructive and produces unnecessary tensions.

To break this vicious circle, Rabbi Matya tells us to overcome our shyness or our vanity, and say hello first.

Thus, instead of a destructive circle, we will be generating a positive domino effect. If I say hello first, especially if I do it with a wide smile, it is very unlikely that I will be rejected. In most cases, people don’t say hello first out of shyness, not arrogance. And the good news is that when we are the first to greet, we will be giving an example of good behavior that is usually imitated by others.

The Gemara tells that one of the greatest and most important rabbis of all time, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai, always went ahead to greet others, even Gentiles he met on the street.

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“Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakai Was Never Anticipated In Greeting Him By Any Other Person, Not Even A Gentile In The Market”

I had the great zechut to meet a person who fulfilled this instruction of the Hachamim and the model of Rabban Yochanán ben Zakai to the letter. I am referring to my first teacher, Rabbi Saadiá Benzquen, z”l. Shabbat afternoon, after studying at his house, we would walk to the Piedras Street Synagogue, about five blocks from Garay Street. Normally it would take 5, 6 minutes to get to the Synagogue. But Ribbi Saadia took half an hour. Why? Because from the time he left his apartment until he arrived at the Synagogue, Rabbi Saadia greeted EVERYONE he saw, all Gentiles. The doorman, the newspaper guy, the pharmacist, the shop owner on the corner, and all the neighbors he found in those 5 blocks. He greeted everyone by name and with great affection. As Rabbi Matya ben Harash indicated and as Rabbi Yochanan did, Ribbi Saadiah never expected to be greeted. He was always the first to extend the greeting. People appreciated this gesture so much that everyone, without exception, stopped in veneration and admiration when they saw this polite, humble and generous

human being, who, following the words of Rabbi Matya, generated this great Qiddush haShem.