



STRIVING FOR Greatness

I still don't know how he made it into the Infantry Officer's training, but I do know how difficult it was for him. Overweight, and far from being an athlete, the physical challenges he would have to overcome seemed insurmountable. How would he run up a 3km mountain wearing a gas mask, and in the time allotted? How would he pass the Bar-Or 2km run test? How would he manage the morning runs for what seemed endless miles? And most of all, how would he get through Wingate and the "freak of nature" run and obstacle course?

Two-thirds of the way through the obstacle course, I stopped wondering about him and started worrying how on earth I would make it through myself. Every time we practiced it, after coming up soaked out of the river I could not seem to get up the six-meter rope fast enough; between the extra weight from the water and my slippery hands and boots, I just didn't get it. So one night I went down to the course on my own to practice, and there he was running through his paces. He simply refused to give in.

Turned out he was in an artillery unit, and his commanding officer had convinced him to apply for the officer's course – and had subsequently advocated for him to be accepted – and he did not want to let this officer down. In the end, by the thinnest of margins (finishing the course with barely five seconds to spare), he passed.

There is a fascinating suggestion in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 16b): "Rav Kruspedai says in the name of Rav

Yochanan, "Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah: the righteous are written into the book of the righteous and granted life, the wicked are written into the book of the wicked and decreed to die, and the intermediates are written into the book of the intermediates whose judgment is withheld until Yom Kippur; if they merit they are then inscribed in the book of life, and if not..."

What exactly is the book of intermediates?

Rav Hutner, in Pachad Yitzchak, suggests that this intermediacy is not a status but a character trait. A person who is happy with mediocrity, who does not seek to excel or overcome, to achieve or to advance. Such a person just wants to get by, to be comfortable.

Many years ago, upon returning for my second year of study in yeshiva, I remember the disappointment I experienced upon discovering I had been switched into a different *shiur* with a different *Rebbe*. Having spent a year under the tutelage of Rav Ezra Bick, I was excited to come back after a summer break and hit the books, feeling I finally understood what was going on and what was expected of me. Hoping to convince Rav Bick to allow me to stay in his *shiur*, I went to speak with him and he listened attentively to what I had to say until I mentioned I felt I had finally gotten comfortable in his class.

"Comfortable?! The last thing you should be if you want to grow is 'comfortable' — you should feel challenged!" And that was the end of the discussion!

We live in a world where it is easy to be comfortable — but do we challenge ourselves to be better than we were last year? Do we plan for another year of the same routine, because it is so... comfortable? Or do we become part of making the world a better place in the coming year?

The Rambam, apparently based on this Talmudic dictum, rules accordingly (Hilchot Teshuvah 1:2-3), suggesting it's the person whose merits and transgressions are balanced who has the chance to do *teshuva* between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This week we have the chance to be better, to rise to the challenge of how much better we can be. Just like that officer's course cadet who refused to accept mediocrity late in the night on a lonely obstacle course.

This year, on the night of Yom Kippur, as we recite the *Kol Nidre* prayers exhorting us to live up to the *nedarim* (promises) we made to ourselves this past year, let us resolve to rise this year far above and beyond mediocrity, let us aspire to excellence — excellence in who we can be, and excellence in how we care for each other.

Rabbi Binny Friedman is the Rosh Yeshiva of Orayta.