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By
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In the opening pages of his book “The Upright Thinkers,” Dr. Leonard Mlodinow reports an incident in his father’s life as an inmate in a Nazi concentration camp. The elder Mlodinow was then a young Polish Jew, who had not received formal education past seventh grade. In the camp, he met an older inmate, a mathematician, and they struck up a friendship.

At some point, the mathematician posed a math problem to Mlodinow. The latter struggled to solve the problem but could not do so. He asked the mathematician for the answer. But the mathematician held back, telling the young man to keep trying. After several more days of agonizing over the problem, the young man still could not solve it; so he asked for the answer. The mathematician replied: I’ll give you the answer only if you pay me by giving me the crust of bread that is your daily sustenance. The young Mlodinov handed over his bread and was given the solution to the math problem.

In recounting this story about his father, Dr. Leonard Mlodinow cites this as a classic example of the human desire for knowledge. His father was ready to give up his meager food ration in order to learn the answer to a math problem that made no practical difference in his life. Yet, his mind—like the best human minds—seek truth and are willing to sacrifice much for the sake of attaining knowledge.

The sincere search for truth entails ongoing effort and the willingness to sacrifice much in the process. One of the perennial problems for truth seekers is the plethora of falsehoods that pervade human society. There are outright lies; crude deceptions; blatant propaganda; slick advertising…and so much more with which to cope. We would happily trade our crust of bread to be rid of the massive, ongoing lies and illusions that plague humanity.

In this week’s Torah portion, we read of incidents in the life of Moses that seem to have caused him confusion. He may have wondered: do I have truth, or do my enemies have it? Do I represent God’s word, or am I incorrect in my understanding of God and of life? When confronted with these existential crises, the Torah reports that Moses “fell upon his face” (Bemidbar 16:4); and that Moses and Aaron “fell upon their faces” (16:22).

What does it mean that Moses fell on his face? It is not likely that this was literally the case. Moses would not have gained anything by prostrating himself in the presence of his adversaries; on the contrary, he would have appeared hopelessly weak.

Some of our commentators have understood “falling on his face” to mean that Moses was despondent i.e. his face fell, his jaws dropped. Others have suggested that the phrase means that Moses prayed to the Almighty for guidance. While these are fine interpretations, perhaps there is something more at stake here.

An article in Time Magazine (June 1, 2015) reports on research dealing with “resilience,” the ability to cope with difficult challenges. Among the findings is that people can train their minds to cope better with fear and with disaster. “New research shows humans can train their brains to build and strengthen different connections that don’t reinforce the fear circuit [in the brain]. Over time, if people use this new pathway enough, it can become the new response to stress.” Individuals who receive training in “mindfulness”—in paying close attention to what they are doing—develop greater resilience. They cope better with crises, and they recover more quickly from duress.

Those who practice meditation, for example, can transform how their brain reacts to crisis. They develop quietude and resilience, helping them to decrease or overcome panic, fear or despair.

I suggest that when Moses “fell on his face,” he was attempting to separate his mind from the outside commotion, and turning inward as a means of relying on his resilience. Only by strengthening himself from within would he be strong enough to cope with the challenges he was facing. Once he had “fallen on his face” and had regained his inner composure, he was able to respond clearly and forcefully to the pressures from the outside.

Resilience is a tremendous asset in one’s confrontation with the challenges of life. It not only improves one’s ability to cope with stressful situations, it also allows one to recover more quickly from sadness and disaster.

Resilience is also a vital asset in one’s search for knowledge and for truth. One needs the inner calm and quiet to be able to think clearly, to distinguish between reality and illusion, to adhere to truth and to shun falsehood. When we are barraged by propaganda, lies and arrogant distortions of truth, we are strengthened if we “fall on our faces,” if we shut out the external static and stay mindful of our own values and truths. Once we have strengthened ourselves, we

will have the strength to meet the challenges we face.

If we sell ourselves out to the liars and the phonies, we have nothing left. If we are wise, honest and resilient, we will be willing to give even our last crust of bread in pursuit of truth. We will have won one of life’s greatest challenges.

Angel for Shabbat