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Hayom Yom: 23 Elul

ר' מֹשֶׁה, בְּנוֹ שֶׁל רַבֵּנוּ הַזָּקֵן בְּלָמְדוֹ – וְהוּא אָז כְּבֶן ח'-י"א שָׁנָה – הַסּוּגְיָא בְּשִׁבְחָן שֶׁל חֲכָמִים בְּגִּטִּין (ס"ז א), נְסְתַּפֵּק בְּמַאֲמַר רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן יוֹחָאי שָׁם: שְׁנוּ מִדּוֹתַי, שֶׁיֵשׁ בָּזֶה שְׁנֵי פֵּרוּשִׁים: לִמְדוּ תוֹרָתִי (רַשִּׁ"י) אוֹ מִדּוֹתַי בְּסְתַּפֵּק בְּמַאֲמַר רַבִּנוּ הַזָּקֵן וְאָמַר – בְּנִגּוּן, כְּדַרְכּוֹ בַּקֹדֶשׁ: תּוֹרָה שֶׁנִּתְנָה לָנוּ כּוּלָה מִדּוֹת טוֹבוֹת, אֲפִלּוּ כִּפְשׁוּטוֹ. בְּתוֹךְ כַּךְ נִכְנַס רַבֵּנוּ הַזָּקֵן וְאָמֵר – בְּנִגּוּן, כְּדַרְכּוֹ בַּקֹדֶשׁ: תּוֹרָה שֶׁנִּתְנָה לָנוּ כּוּלָה מִדּוֹת טוֹבוֹת, בְּלִי הָבְּיֹית מִדּוֹת טוֹבוֹת בְּלִי מְדּוֹת טוֹבוֹת בְּלִי מִּדּוֹת טוֹבוֹת. כְּכָל הַנִּזְכָּר לְעֵיל קָרָה גַּם לְהַצֶּמַח צֶדֶק בִּהְיוֹתוֹ בְּגִיל ח'-י"א שָׁנָה.

The Alter Rebbe's son, R. Moshe, who was between eight and eleven years old at the time, was studying the passage in Tractate Gittin (p. 67a) that praises our Sages, and was uncertain about the meaning of R. Shimon bar Yochai's statement: "Study midosai." There are two interpretations of this: "Learn my teachings" (as Rashi comments), or "Learn my character traits," according to the simple meaning of the term middos.

As he was deliberating, the Alter Rebbe entered the room and said the following words melodically, as was his holy practice: "The Torah that was given to us consists entirely of exemplary character traits. Even its punishments are really kindness and goodness. Thus the two interpretations are in fact one and interdependent. It is impossible to have exemplary character traits without Torah knowledge and it is impossible to have Torah knowledge without exemplary character traits."

The Tzemach Tzedek had an identical experience when he was the same age.1