

הדרך THE PATH TO FOLLOW

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GREAT IS TESHUVA, WHICH ASCEND UNTO THE THRONE OF GLORY *(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)*

Concerning Resh Lakish, the Gemara (Bava Metzia 84a) recounts that when he saw Rabbi Yochanan bathing in the Jordan River, he dived into the water and swam after him. Rabbi Yochanan then said to him, "Your strength should be used for the Torah" (that is, he had the strength necessary to support the yolk of Torah). He added, "If you repent [for he was the head of a group of armed robbers] I will give you my sister in marriage." Resh Lakish accepted to repent, and from that moment on, he found it impossible to swim in the Jordan River against the current. Later, he began to study with Rabbi Yochanan. One day, they came upon a question concerning when, in the manufacturing process, swords and knives become susceptible to impurity. Needless to say, they disagreed on the answer. Contrary to Rabbi Yochanan, Resh Lakish believed it to be from the point at which "they have been dipped in water." Rabbi Yochanan told him, "It is true that you were a robber, You should therefore be familiar with all the instruments of robbery!" To this Resh Lakish replied, "How have you benefited me? There I was called 'Master' and here I am called 'Master'!" Rabbi Yochanan responded: "What good have I done you? I have brought you under the wings of the Shechinah!"

I read a book that asked many questions on this passage, ones that were in fact very surprising and difficult to understand. At first glance, it is impossible to conceive that a tongue as holy as the one of Resh Lakish could utter the words, "There I was called 'Master' and here I am called 'Master'," exactly as if there was no difference between the two situations! Rashi's explanation (in which he states that "I was called 'Master'" refers to when Resh Lakish was a leader of armed robbers) does not diminish our astonishment. Is there no difference between being the leader of armed robbers and a Rav in Israel? This question concerns not only the word "Master" by itself, but by what it refers to: First of all, he was a murderer, then he became a great Rav! Rabbeinu Tam explains that beforehand, Resh Lakish knew a great many things, but that he had rejected the yolk of mitzvot to the point that he stopped studying anything and eventually devoted himself to crime. From this perspective, "There I was called 'Master'" refers to the time *before* he became a criminal, to when he had diligently studied. Yet the difficulty of the

story remains. The Maharsha explains that Resh Lakish's response to Rabbi Yochanan indicates that the latter had offended him by saying that he (Resh Lakish) should know about the weapons that armed robbers use, and Resh Lakish responded by saying that even before he was a criminal, he knew that dipping swords or knives in water completed their manufacturing process (hence rendering them susceptible to impurity from that point on). Rashi also believes that Resh Lakish was hurt by Rabbi Yochanan referring to him as an armed robber. Consequently, even according to the opinion of Tosaphot, we find this difficult to understand. For in admitting that Resh Lakish had known many things before becoming an armed robber, it still remains that he had abandoned everything and that Rabbi Yochanan had brought him back to Torah and placed him under the wings of the Shechinah, which indeed greatly benefited him. What, therefore, does "there I was called 'Master'" mean?

In my humble opinion, we can explain this by the following. We begin by examining the verse that states, "And a man's holy things shall be his. What a man gives to the priest shall be his" (Numbers 5:10). We know that man was created with great strength in order to serve his Creator, for he possesses 248 members and 365 tendons that together correspond to the 613 mitzvot (Makkot 23a). The more a person invests himself in Torah, the more light he merits, which allows him to conquer his desires. However, if he unfortunately transgresses and falls into sin, this causes a Kelipah to come and envelope his body, surrounding him in great darkness (Zohar II:243a). Therefore, if he completely returns to G-d with all his heart and takes upon himself the yolk of Torah and the kingdom of Heaven, he will rid himself of the Kelipah that envelopes his 248 members and 365 tendons.

Since, in fact, it is written, "And a man's holy things shall be his," and not simply "A man's holy things shall be his," the letter ו ("and", having a numerical value of 6) teaches us that we are speaking of the type of man created on the sixth day (Genesis 1:27), a man in a state of holiness and purity, like fine flour, whom G-d touched with His mouth, as it is written, "And he breathed into his nostrils the breath

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of life” (Genesis 2:7). And since “the breath of a person comes from his innermost being,” G-d breathed into man His own breath in order to make him holy and pure so that all his 248 members and 365 tendons spiritually correspond to the 613 mitzvot. In this situation, those holy things which a man possesses belong to himself. However if he lowers himself to the level of a man, simply, and he sins, he can thereafter give all this holiness over to the priest, who symbolizes G-d (meaning that after the man sinned, he completely repented), and it henceforth belongs to the priest. G-d gives it back to him, accepts his repentance, and erases all sins, a process that calls to mind the verse that states, “If your sins are like scarlet, they will become white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18).

We see from here the power of Teshuvah, which stems from the effort that we put into studying Torah and into purifying and sanctifying our entire body. It is as if there had been a rebirth, as if we had never sinned. Resh Lakish said, “Great is Teshuvah, thanks to which deliberate sins become merits” (Yoma 86b). Thus the body returns to the initial state of holiness that it possessed when it was created on the sixth day.

All this will allow us to perfectly understand the discussion between Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan. When the former saw the latter in the river, he mistook him for a woman and immediately jumped into the water. Yet when he noticed that it was really a man, he then had the opportunity to rob him, for Resh Lakish was a leader of thieves. Instead of this, he preferred to begin a conversation with him, which means that, having recognized his sin, Resh Lakish understood just to what levels he had stooped in chasing after a man that he had mistaken for a woman, which led him to consider repentance. Perceiving his thoughts, Rabbi Yochanan took advantage of the situation to bring him back to Torah study and repentance. This is what the discussion between them was about.

Resh Lakish believed that the thoughts he had of doing Teshuvah – in noting just how low he had sunk – had emanated from him, even before Rabbi Yochanan had spoken to him. Proof of them stems from the fact that no one has ever seen a leader of armed robbers radically change his life after just a single conversation. This is why he told Rabbi Yochanan, “There I was called ‘Master’ and here I am called ‘Master’,” meaning that even if he was the leader of a band of armed robbers when he met him, from the moment he considered repenting, *Heaven* called him “Master”. This is because it is possible to acquire the world to come in an instant (Avodah Zarah 10b). Consequently, when he took upon himself the yolk of the Torah and repentance, and had also sanctified himself, he was no longer able to swim in the Jordan River against the current, for Torah exhausts the strength of a man (Sanhedrin 26b). From Heaven he was called “Master” even when he was still a thief, because he had taken upon himself to study Torah without any self-interest involved. However when Rabbi Yochanan proposed that he marry his sister as a reward for studying, this constituted a great test for him, that of studying Torah out of self-interest! What

service, then, did Rabbi Yochanan do for him? How was that useful for him? It wasn’t because of Rabbi Yochanan that Resh Lakish had returned to G-d. Therefore he owed him absolutely nothing.

However, Rabbi Yochanan believed that Resh Lakish had repented because of him, since Rabbi Yochanan was the reason that he chased after him (since Resh Lakish thought he was a woman), and it was that event which led him to consider Teshuvah. Consequently, this changed nothing if he had been called “Master”, since in the end it was Rabbi Yochanan who was the source of Resh Lakish’s about-face. And as Rabbi Yochanan had, for the remainder of his life, believed that he was the one responsible for bringing Resh Lakish back to Torah, when he later heard in the course of their discussion that it wasn’t because of him that Resh Lakish had repented – that Resh Lakish had taken this step beforehand – he also understood that Resh Lakish was angry that he (Rabbi Yochanan) had introduced into his Teshuvah an element of self-interest, and he bore a grudge at Resh Lakish because the latter was angry at him. And it was this grudge that led to Resh Lakish’s death.

Actually, the Gemara says that at the moment when Resh Lakish fell ill, his wife (Rabbi Yochanan’s sister) came to find him in order to ask that he have pity on her husband. Rabbi Yochanan responded to her by quoting the verse that states, “Leave your orphans; I will sustain [them]” (Jeremiah 49:11), thus refusing to intercede on behalf of his brother-in-law (Bava Metzia 84a). In effect, the wife of Resh Lakish also thought that he had repented and taken upon himself to study Torah in a selfless way, and not because he wanted marry her, for she knew that he exemplified the verse that teaches, “And a man’s holy things shall be his,” meaning that his entire Teshuvah was done solely with the goal of sanctifying his 248 members and 365 tendons, and to become pleasing to his Creator (“What a man gives to the priest shall be his”).

It is also told that Rabbi Yochanan greatly suffered after Resh Lakish’s death, for he could find no disciple that was like him. He was sent Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedat, and whatever Rabbi Yochanan told him, he would bring a proof to support that view. Rabbi Yochanan told him, “Do you want to be like [Resh] Lakish? He would ask me 24 questions and I would give him 24 answers, but not you.” In the end, Rabbi Yochanan lost his mind, and so the Sages implored G-d for mercy on his behalf and he left this world. He had thus suffered enormously for the loss of Resh Lakish, for he had understood that his entire Teshuvah had been done without any ulterior motive, not because he had wanted to marry Rabbi Yochanan’s sister. Rabbi Yochanan knew that Resh Lakish was the living embodiment of the principle: “And a man’s holy things shall be his,” in purity and holiness. (Incidentally, this alludes to the fact that, on the numerical level, the value of the words in “And a man’s holy things shall be his,” added to the number of words in that expression, is equal to the numerical value of “Rabban Shimon ben Lakish”). Great is Teshuvah, for it ascends unto the Throne of Glory.

IN MEMORY OF THE TZADIKIM

RABBI YESHUA BESSIS

Rabbi Yeshua Bessis occupies a special place among the great men of Tunis. Numerous extraordinary stories have circulated about him that reveal the miracles and wonders that he performed. He knew Torah perfectly and had also mastered Kabbalah. With tremendous kindness and great purity, he brought healing to all ills and helped his people when they found themselves in difficulty. In the year 5533 (1773), he became famous in the Jewish world.

The Jews of Tunis had the custom of covering their Sukkahs with fragrant myrtle leaves that filled the air with their sweet scent. Each year the non-Jewish merchants took note of the festival of Sukkot and filled their carts with myrtle leaves for sale. However, one year they decided to teach a lesson to the Jews, whom they hated. In the course of a meeting, they agreed to increase the price of the myrtle, deciding to boost the price of a single branch by seven times and up.

The morning of the festival, the Jews of the city arrived very early at the market to purchase the myrtle in order to finish their Sukkahs. Imagine their surprise when the merchants displayed their prices. They went from one merchant to another, but everywhere the price had been increased by at least seven times. The Jews were not ready to accept this outlandish price increase, and so they began to confer with one another. However the merchants had all agreed among themselves on the new prices, and none was willing to lower it. After discussing the matter at length, the Jews decided to go to see Rabbi Yeshua Bessis. They immediately chose representatives who hurried towards the home of the Rav.

When Rabbi Yeshua Bessis was told of the exorbitant price increase, he left for the market. When he himself approached one of the merchants, he chose a branch and paid the required price. He asked the merchant to deliver the branch to his home and to bring it up to the loft. The Arab gladly agreed to the Rav's request. While the Arab was approaching

his home, Rabbi Yeshua was softly reciting the words of a prayer. His lips were still whispering its words when the Arab brought the myrtle branch up to the loft. When he delayed in coming down, everyone wondered as to the reason why, and to their great surprise they saw in the sky the silhouette of a man carrying a branch on his shoulder, a silhouette that was getting further and further away from them, to the point that it became as small as a bird.

The news of the silhouette in the sky spread in a few minutes to the king's palace. King Albai, who recognized the power of the Jews' Rav, immediately sent his most important ministers to the him, as well as a horse-drawn coach so that the Rav could come to the palace.

Out of respect for the royalty, Rabbi Yeshua accepted the invitation without delay. The king told him, "My friend, I know that all this commotion has come from you. Tell me why you have so wronged that man." The Rav replied that he had simply asked the man to go up and bring his merchandise to the loft, and that this merchant did go up ... and up into the air.

"Don't hide anything from me," the king declared. "No harm will come to you."

Rabbi Yeshua saw that the king was sincere and that he wanted to help him. He began by recounting the Jews' misfortune in the city because the merchants had decided to increase their prices, and that no member of the community could afford it.

"Here is that man who is coming down towards you," the Rav added. "He will confirm what I have said."

And thus the myrtle merchant, with the branch still on his shoulder, began descending little by little each of the rungs of the heavenly ladder. Completely terrified, the court attendants fell face down to the ground.

Thus the king ordered all his servants to reset the price of myrtle, that it should be the same as in the previous year.

This was the deliverance wrought by Rabbi Yeshua Bessis, the worker of miracles.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

A HIDDEN BLESSING

A teaching of the Maguid of Dubno

The L-RD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: So shall you bless the Children of Israel, saying to them, “May the L-RD bless you and safeguard you”’ (Numbers 6:22-24).

The words “saying to them” seem completely superfluous. Moreover, the verb form of the Hebrew word *emor* is in the infinitive rather than the imperative, yet “May the L-RD bless you” is a request. Why, in addition, must the priests stand facing the people? It would seem more appropriate that they stand facing the Sanctuary to ask G-d to bless the people of Israel.

We will illustrate this with the following story.

Someone had thoroughly had enough of all the dirty tricks that his son had done to him. He ended by totally breaking off with him. The young man found himself destitute and completely bitter. He went to a neighbor and asked him to intercede on his behalf to his father in order that he could give him some clothes to wear. He agreed, and went to ask the father to have pity on his son because of the way he was dressed, given that it was cold outside.

“It’s me that you’re asking to give my son clothes?” the father asked.

The neighbor, taken aback by this statement, didn’t understand.

“Fool! You’ve come to ask me to have pity on my son, and to tell me what to do for my own offspring. Don’t you have the heart to understand that I’m a father, and that I myself don’t wish anything other than good for him? If I show myself to be strict, it’s because of the seriousness of his behavior. You want me to do good to this boy by showing myself to be generous with him? Why are you speaking with me? It’s with him that you should speak! Convince him to take to the right path and improve himself and everything will be all right. As for me, I’m always ready to do good for him!”

How could the priest ask Hashem to bless His own people, since He already continually wishes to do nothing but good for them? This is why the verse states, “So shall you bless the Children of Israel, saying to them, ‘May the L-RD bless you ...’”

They were to encourage them and promote them to maintain proper values in such a way that they could receive blessing and good. “Saying to them” – and not to G-d. Our Sages expressed the same idea when they said that Hashem told Moses, “Before giving Me orders on how to conduct Myself with My children, give them orders on how to conduct themselves with Me!”

The Gemara adds the following: The verse that states, “So shall you bless the Children of Israel” teaches us that the blessing for the Children of Israel comes through the priests. However, it does not tell us how the priests themselves are blessed. There are two opinions with regards to this, one by Rabbi Akiva and the other by Rabbi Ishmael. The latter, who was a priest, thought that the priests were blessed by being included in Israel, whom they gave their blessing to. For Rabbi Akiva, however, the priests were blessed by virtue of the principle expressed by the statement, “I will bless those that bless you” (see Chullin 49:1).

EISHET CHAYIL

THE OBLIGATION TO BEHAVE WITH MODESTY

1. Short skirts or short dresses are strictly forbidden. It is proper to wear skirts or dresses that extend to below the knee. Similarly, it is forbidden to wear dresses or shirts without sleeves or with short sleeves. This is a prohibition that is extremely important and considered to be a serious sin if transgressed.

2. According to Halachah, women have the right to uncover the portion of their arm between the elbow and the hand, the elbow remaining covered.

3. According to Halachah, married women are obligated to cover their head and do not have the right to go out into the public domain with their head uncovered.

4. A man is not allowed to have his hair cut by a woman, nor is a woman allowed to have her hair cut by a man.