

# הַמַּדְרָג THE PATH TO FOLLOW

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## THE INFLUENCE OF MAN'S PROFOUND CHARACTER

*(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)*

**I**t is written, "Come, let us deal wisely toward them, lest they multiply, and it comes to pass that when a war occurs they will also join themselves with our enemies and fight against us and go up from the land. ... And the Egyptians made the Children of Israel serve befarech [with rigor]. And they made their lives bitter" (Exodus 1:10,13-14).

These verses raise at least two questions.

1. What exactly did the Egyptians fear? Did they not see that the Children of Israel had already been assimilated among them (they were seen everywhere, in the theaters, at the circus, etc. – Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 1), to the point that they no longer studied Torah? Why then this fear? The Egyptians should have waited a little longer and they would have been completely assimilated.

2. Some of our Sages, such as Rabbi Elazar, interpret the word befarech as meaning befeh rach ("with gentle speech" – Sotah 11b). How could it be that the Egyptians made the Children of Israel serve with gentle speech?

The answer to the first question is that the Egyptians feared the hidden, deep sentiments of the Children of Israel. Certainly they had shown visible signs of being corrupted, but the Egyptians feared that they were fundamentally upright and capable of returning to G-d at any time. The phrase "that when a war occurs" refers to an internal war, meaning a battle against the inner holiness of the Jews. Such a battle would have an effect on their external makeup, an effect evoked by the verse that states, "I was asleep but my heart was awake" (Song of Songs 5:2). The phrase "they will also join themselves with our enemies" means that they will join themselves to ever-increasing holiness, and "go up from the land" signifies that they will correct the sparks of holiness.

We therefore see that if a man is basically good, he will end up being delivered. As for the issue of befeh rach, our Sages teach that "all the good of the wicked is bad

for the righteous" (Yebamot 103a). The gentle speech of non-Jews represents the most dangerous weapon for the Jewish people. We see this in Moses, who did not want to interfere with G-d's honor and refused to liberate the Children of Israel by himself. Moses knew that "His mercy extends to all His creatures," that "He ponders thoughts so that no one be banished from Him" (II Sam 14:14). Moses said to G-d, "I am not a man of words ... shelach na beyad [send, please, by Your hand]" (Exodus 4:10,13), or in other words, "Liberate them by Your powerful hand and Your outstretched arm, that we may know that it is You Who has brought the Children of Israel out of Egypt."

Such was the virtue of Moses, a man who in no way wanted to appropriate honors for himself, and who jealously watched over the glory of G-d alone. The Holy One, blessed be He, loathes those who seek to honor Him outwardly while simultaneously elevating themselves. People in this way help the forces of evil to seize the attribute of Hod (glory, majesty) which has a numerical value of 15, a value equal to that of ga'avah (pride). As the Sages instructed us, " 'For the hand is on the throne of G-d.' The Name of the Eternal [numerical value: 15] and His throne will only be complete when Amalek is wiped out." Amalek's pride (ga'avah – numerical value: 15) prevents the revelation of G-d in the world. In fact, those who take consideration for their own honor associate themselves with Israel's greatest enemy. On the other hand, that which Moses sought with the greatest sincerity was the glory of G-d. This is why he was chosen to liberate the Jews, for the one who is careful to increase the glory of G-d will see himself showered with honors (Bamidbar Rabba 4:21), and G-d loves him for it. He also shares, as it were, in the glory given to G-d, as it is written, "They had faith in the L-RD and in Moses His servant" (Exodus 14:31).

What the Egyptians feared, therefore, was that the Children of Israel become filled with zeal for G-d, and that as such they rectify and elevate all the sparks of

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holiness in Egypt. The Egyptians also made them suffer and pushed them to commit sins, the most notorious of which was gossip. Our Sages, commenting on this subject with respect to Moses' statement ("Surely the thing is known" [Exodus 2:14]), teach that the Children of Israel were not worthy of being redeemed because of their tendency for gossip (Shemot Rabba 1:30).

Besides this, we may ask ourselves why the Children of Israel had in actuality fallen so low, having reached the forty-ninth gate of impurity and running the risk of staying in Egypt forever (Zohar Chadash Yitro 39a).

This was because, aside from the tribe of Levi, they had delivered themselves over to gossiping more than to Torah (Bamidbar Rabba 3:4).

Even a Tzaddik can reach the forty-ninth degree of impurity if he is without Torah. That which saved the Children of Israel from reaching the fatal fiftieth degree was Ve'eileh Shemot Bnei Israel ("And these are the names of the Children of Israel" – Exodus 1:1). The first letters of Eileh Shemot form the Hebrew word for fire, and the vav of Ve'eileh (which has a numerical value of six) alludes to Adam, who was created on the sixth day. This is to teach us that a man should adhere to the Torah, which is the same as fire, as it is written, "from His right hand He presented the fiery Torah to them" (Deuteronomy 33:2).

The power of Torah is extraordinary. Just like a name ("these are the names"), the Torah reveals the identity, the essence of man. It is just like the letter vav that is added to the aforementioned (Shemot Rabba 1:2), for a man has the possibility to extend his study of Torah. The name of our Patriarch Jacob already held great secrets, as it is written, "After that, his brother emerged with his hand grasping onto the heel of Esau; so he called his name Jacob" (Genesis 25:26).

It was therefore the holy names that the Children of Israel carried which prevented them from descending into hell and sinking to the fiftieth gate of impurity. Even though they did not study Torah, they were liberated from Egypt because they did not change their language, nor did they change their style of dress, nor their names, and furthermore they were fundamentally good, even in a detestable land (Vayikra Rabba 32:5).

Our Sages have on several occasions warned us against the catastrophic results of gossiping. Gossip creates an inordinate amount of accusers against man, his sexual immorality increases (he can have keris, or nocturnal emissions), and he is reincarnated in the body of a dog and begins to bark like one (Zohar III:85a). Nevertheless, the Children of Israel corrected this sin: "But against the Children of Israel, lo yehcheratz kelev leshono [no dog shall whet its tongue]" (Exodus 11:7). Note the similarity between the numerical value of yehcheratz (plus 1 for the word itself) and keris.

After the rectification of the sin, even the peh rach ("gentle speech") of the Egyptians did not succeed in harming the very essence of the Children of Israel. On the contrary, such gentle language turned itself into harsh and oppressive work, work that they had to perform in Egypt so as not to succumb to the filth of that land.

We can therefore better understand the statement of Elisha ben Avuyah (or Acher, "the other") that is brought by the Talmud (Hagigah 15a). His father, Avuyah, had invited the great men of Israel to his Brit Milah, among them being Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua. On that occasion, when these men were deeply involved in Torah study, a fire descended from the sky and encircled them.

"Is it to burn down my house that you came?" asked Avuyah.

"We were only studying Torah, which was given on Mount Sinai by fire," they responded.

"If the Torah is endowed with such greatness ... I will devote my son to the Torah," Avuyah replied.

Two questions arise as to this account:

1. Why did Avuyah fear that his house would be burned? He could clearly see that such was not going to happen. Why then did he begin to shout?

2. Why did he not promise to devote his newborn son upon seeing the fire? Why did this apparently upright man not devote his son to Torah until such time as he understood its power?

The reason for this is because Avuyah allowed himself to be deceived by the outward appearance of the great of the generation; he did not grasp their profound holiness. He thought that they resembled him – empty on the inside and full on the outside. When he saw the fire, he perceived only its external aspect, one that could burn things down. He did not grasp the internal aspect of the fire or its sublime holiness. And even when the Tzaddikim explained to Avuyah that it was there that lay the power of Torah, and that this fire could not cause harm, he still only saw its external aspect, and therefore decided to devote his son to Torah only when he understood its power. It was this grave sin of not examining things more deeply, and only seeing the external aspect of things, that Avuyah transmitted to his son Elisha, a man whom the Sages accused of reading profane books that only treated subjects superficially and "on the outside" (Hagigah 15b).

G-d only looks at the heart (Sanhedrin 106b). He reads the thoughts of man, thought that when pure and upright can greatly influence a man's external makeup. He can in this way come closer to G-d.

## THE MORAL OF THE STORY

### *From the Maggid of Dubno*

**I**t is written, “And G-d remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And G-d saw the Children of Israel, and G-d knew” (Exodus 2: 24-25).

The Midrash states: “And G-d saw” – He saw that they had no good deeds to their credit that could merit their deliverance. This is precisely what Ezekiel stated: “I made you as numerous as the plants of the field ... breasts developed and your hair sprouted, but you were naked and bare” (Ezekiel 16:7). It should have first said, “your hair sprouted” and only afterwards, “breasts developed” because signs of puberty manifest themselves first below, then above. “Breasts developed” – these are Moses and Aaron, who were ready to save Israel; “your hair sprouted” – this means that the time for deliverance had come; “but you were naked and bare” – you were devoid of all good deeds. This is why it is written, “G-d saw” – He saw that the Children of Israel had to their credit no good deeds that could have helped free them.

We must understand what this text wants to teach us, as well as what the Sages meant by the answer they gave to their own quandary: “It should have first said ... because signs of puberty manifest themselves first below, then above.” They were probably bothered by the order of the words in the verse. It would have seemed more accurate for the verses in Exodus to first state, “G-d saw the Children of Israel” and then, “G-d remembered His covenant.” This would have apparently better transmitted the idea that it was the manifestation of Israel’s sins that moved Him to recall in their favor His covenant with the Patriarchs. This is why the Midrash shows us the great kindness of Hashem through the imagery of Ezekiel. The affirmation “‘breasts developed’ – these are Moses and Aaron” answers the question concerning the order in which the appearance of the signs of puberty occurred.

A parable will enable us to better understand this.

Two young women were to be married. One lived in the home of her father, who was very rich, while the other was an orphan who had only distant relatives to provide for her needs. The parents of the first girl prepared for her, as was the custom, a trousseau tailored to her needs. It consisted of regular clothes for the week, plus clothes for Shabbat

and Yom Tov, and finally her wedding dress. The second girl, however, feared that her family did not have the means to give her the same thing. She therefore began with the essentials, meaning a wedding dress and funds for the wedding. Only afterwards did she begin to purchase other clothes, and only in accordance with her family’s ability to pay for them. In such a case, that which was most necessary for the wedding was incontestably of greatest importance.

This is the idea brought across by the verse that states, “I made you as numerous as the plants of the field” (Ezekiel 16:7). It is as if G-d were saying, “This extraordinary growth comes solely from My generosity, your merits having nothing to do with it.” The best proof for this is that even before the Children of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, Hashem had prepared their deliverers. What better sign of Hashem’s love could there be other than His having prepared the remedy even before the blow was struck and our merit fallen?

This is the meaning of the Midrash. The phrase “And G-d saw the Children of Israel” (Exodus 2: 24) means that He noted that they had no good deeds to their credit that could have merited their deliverance, a remark that is followed by a citation from the prophet Ezekiel. Should he not have first said, “your hair sprouted”? No, because “breasts developed” refers to Moses and Aaron, who were ready to save Israel. All this is alluded to in our verse in question, namely “And G-d heard their groaning, and G-d remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” (ibid.). Perhaps it was because of their groaning that Hashem remembered the covenant with the Patriarchs and decided to deliver them? No, because the verse adds, “And G-d saw the Children of Israel” (ibid.) – He saw in advance that He would have to save them even though they did not merit it and even before they began to groan. The best proof of this is that the redeemers, Moses and Aaron, were ready before their voice was heard. This is why the text is immediately followed by the statement, “And Moses haya [was] keeping the flock of Jethro” (Exodus 3:1). In the Midrash, the word haya indicates that everything was already prepared, for Hashem knew that He would have to deliver the Children of Israel for the glory of His Name.

# IN MEMORY OF THE TSADIKIM RABBI MATZLIAH MAZUZ

**R**abbi Matzliah Mazuz, a descendant of a prestigious family, was born on the 26th of Heshvan 5672 on the isle of Jerba.

From his earliest age, people discerned in him a sharp and curious mind. Barely 11 years old, he was admitted into the yeshiva of Rabbi Rahamim Hai Hawita Hacoen. Rabbi Matzliah consecrated the majority of his time to the study of Talmud and all its sources. His keen interest did not delay in bearing fruit. He began at that time to write hundreds of responses to all questions concerning the Shulchan Aruch. His novel interpretations filled his teachers with joy, and they acknowledged him as a Talmid Chacham.

After his marriage, he went and settled in Tunis and became the director of the Hevrat Talmud Yeshiva. For 13 years, he educated numerous disciples and managed to develop a program for the study of Torah. He always saw to his own sustenance and forced himself to never depend on others. When the Hevrat Talmud Yeshiva was in financial difficulty and could not pay its teachers, he took up the craft of clock-making in order to earn a living. During all the years in which he was involved in business, he never failed to devote his afternoons to the study of Talmud and the reading of the Torah. So as not to be disturbed, he would enclose himself in his room and forget about the worries of the material world. His hours of mediation and contemplation were quite fruitful, for they allowed him to maintain a rich correspondence with various rabbis on numerous subjects in Torah.

A few years later, he was named Dayan of the Rabbinic Court of Tunis and his renown as an expert in matters of divorce and financial litigation quickly spread. His great intelligence, sense of comprehension, and sharp mind allowed him to make Halachic decisions that everyone adhered to.

In 5723, the prestigious Kisseh Rahamim Yeshiva was founded, a yeshiva in which many eminent scholars studied. The descendants of these rabbis later created the same yeshiva in Bnei Brak. Rabbi Matzliah Mazuz's teaching methods, specifically adopted by this institution, conferred upon him a great reputation.

Rabbi Matzliah Mazuz began to publish his book *Ish Matzliah*, but to our great sorrow this endeavor was never completed. On the 21st of Tevet 5731, while he was returning from the morning prayer service and still covered with Tallit and Tefillin, he was savagely

attacked and murdered. This horrendous news struck all Jews with shock. Yet faithful to Hashem, they knew that one day the Eternal would claim vengeance for his spilled blood.

Rabbi Matzliah Mazuz had the privilege of being buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. May his merit protect us all. Amen.

## THE PATH OF THE JUST PRIDE – PART V

A man could say, "Since pride is such a terrible trait, I want to distance myself from it as much as possible. I will no longer eat meat or drink wine, and I will not get married. I will not live in a pleasant home and not wear neat clothes. I will wear sackcloth and coarse wool, torn and dirty clothes. I will eat from dirty and repulsive dishes and not wash my hands or feet."

Now such a person will end up becoming more repulsive than other men – all this because he wanted to distance himself as much as possible from pride. The one who follows such a path is called a sinner. In fact, concerning a Nazir that deprives himself of wine, it is said that "he shall provide him atonement for having sinned regarding the person" (Numbers 6:11). Our Sages comment as follows: "If a man who has only deprived himself of wine is called a sinner, how much more is one who deprives himself of everything" (Ta'anith 11:1), and "Is that which the Torah has forbidden not enough for you, that you have to forbid more things to yourself?" (Yerushalmi Nedarim 9:1). Concerning this subject, King Solomon said, "Do not be overly righteous or excessively wise. Why be left desolate?" (Ecclesiastes 7:16).

The path that a man should follow is to be clean in everything, for cleanliness is a guarantee for good deeds. How should a person act? He should wear clothes of medium value – neither too affluent (which attracts the attention of everyone), nor too poor (which will humiliate him). He should wear regular clothes, ones that are correct and proper, each person in accordance with his means. It is forbidden to wear torn and stained clothing, or to wear clothes resembling those worn by base individuals.

Food should also be clean, but it is not advised to eat things that are too rich or sophisticated. Food as well as drink should be ordinary, in accordance with each person's means. One should not eat from unclean dishes, lest a person transgress the prohibition against making oneself abominable (Leviticus 11:43). Everything that concerns us should be clean. Tables and beds should also be clean, as well as everything that surrounds us. The body should be kept clean, not repulsive. One should be careful to often wash the face, hands, feet, as well as the entire body. We learn that one day the disciples of Hillel asked him where he was going, and he replied, "To perform a mitzvah." They asked him, "What mitzvah is that?" and he replied, "I am going to wash myself at the baths." They responded, "Is that a mitzvah?" to which he replied, "Absolutely! If the statues of kings that are found in theaters and circuses are scrubbed and cleaned by a worker, one who is paid and well-regarded for such a task, should I – made in the image of G-d [Genesis 9:6] – have less respect for my body?" (Vayikra Rabba 34:3).