

הנהגות THE PATH TO FOLLOW

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HEVRAT PINTO
Under Aegis of

Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א
11, rue du plateau - 75019 PARIS
Tel: (331) 48 03 53 89 • Fax (331) 42 08 50 85
8 Morris Road - Spring Valley NY 10977
Tel: 1-845 426 1276 • Fax: 1-845 426 1149

www.hevratpinto.org
Responsible of publication Hanania Soussan

REFLECTING ON G-D'S MIRACLES LEADS TO HOLINESS

(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)

If we consider the ten plagues of Egypt, we note that during the first five it was Pharaoh himself who hardened his heart (Exodus 7:22; 8:11,15,18; 9:7), while for the last five it was the Eternal Who hardened his heart (Exodus 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:1). Concerning this, our Sages have said that even if Pharaoh had wanted to repent, the Eternal hardened his heart to punish him (Shemot Rabba 11:7).

A few clarifications are very much needed here.

1. Why did Pharaoh harden his heart so much and stand up to G-d if he realized that everything was caused by the "finger of G-d" (Exodus 8:15)? Why would he expose himself, his people, and his country to such great danger? Was he ready to let his country be destroyed for the poor Jews that worked for him for free? We could say that Pharaoh knew that the Children of Israel found themselves deeply mired in the 49 degrees of impurity (Zohar Chadash Yitro 39a), and that consequently all the Divine precepts that they performed joined with the forces of evil that Pharaoh led, and from which he drew all his strength. However, as we have seen several times before, in spite of the fact that they worshipped idols in Egypt (Shemot Rabba 16:2), the Children of Israel did not change their names, their language, or their customs, and they guarded themselves against adultery (Vayikra Rabba 32:5). This prevented them from sinking into the Kelipah (lit. "husk" or "shell") and allowed them to liberate themselves from slavery. The question, however, still remains.

2. Why are we called to remember, throughout the entire year as well as for all the generations, the wonders performed by the Eternal in Egypt, whereas we are called to remember that which He did for our ancestors on Purim, Hanukah, etc. only on the date of those actual holidays?

3. Why did our Sages teach us that "in every generation each person should consider himself as having personally left Egypt" (Pesachim 116b)?

4. Why did the Eternal have to personally execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt (Exodus 12:12), and not by the intermediary of an angel (Yalkut Exodus ad loc.)?

It is because when a man sinks into impurity, he has consideration for neither his country, nor his people, nor himself. Pharaoh lived in impurity, and during his entire life he veered from it neither to the left nor to the right, he who considered himself as a god (Shemot Rabba 9:7). And even though he had proclaimed, "The L-RD is the righteous one, and I and my people are the wicked ones" (Exodus 9:27), it was difficult for him to escape from impurity. This is what we see with sinners – that although they believe in G-d, they continue to perform their misdeeds, for it is difficult for them to flee from evil. "I will sin and then return to G-d," they constantly tell themselves (Yoma 88b). In fact, if Pharaoh and sinners in general were to reflect a little, they would be able to repent and take to the right path, for this is the only way to perform Teshuvah. It is written, "Regarding this the poets would say, 'Come to Heshbon'" (Numbers 21:27), which the Talmud explains as referring to those who govern and overcome their inclinations and begin taking an account (heshbon) of the situation in the world. Let us not forget that at the beginning, Abraham worshipped idols (Rambam, Hilchot Akum 1:3). It was following numerous reflections on his life that he realized and attained a knowledge of the Creator.

Let us not forget that G-d warned the Egyptians over and over again before inflicting new plagues on them. He gave them entire weeks in order to reflect a little and take to the right path (He waited one week after a plague, and for three consecutive weeks afterwards He warned them – Shemot Rabba 9:12). If Pharaoh had thought things through, be it ever so little, he would have understood why he was being punished. It is also conceivable that he believed that the Children of Israel had worked only 200 years in Egypt, this being only half the time mentioned to Abraham by the Eternal (Genesis 15:13). Yet what he did not understand

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was that the Children of Israel had even labored at night, which doubled the amount of time that they worked. Consequently, they merited being freed now.

In fact, we can say that as long as Pharaoh did not recognize G-d, he hardened his heart and refused to let the Children of Israel leave because he wanted to enslave them. Yet when he recognized G-d and admitted that he and his people were wicked, it was G-d that hardened his heart by allowing him to think that they had served only half of the allotted time of their slavery. Pharaoh finally understood that the 400 years of servitude had in fact expired when the plague of the firstborn struck them. He then went to get Moses and Aaron during the night (Yalkut Shimoni Bo 208) and said to them, "Rise up, go out from among my people" (Exodus 12:31). It was then that the verse affirmed that "the habitation of the Children of Israel during which they dwelled in Egypt was 430 years" (v.40). The nights therefore also counted. And how did Pharaoh come to this realization? It was by seeing that the Eternal had saved him from the last plague even though he himself was a firstborn. The Midrash states that he had, moreover, asked Moses and Aaron to pray for him (Shemot Rabba 20:2). Pharaoh therefore understood that just as the Eternal distinguished between a drop of semen that becomes a firstborn and one that does not (Bava Metzia 61b), He also knew how to accurately foresee the liberation date of the Children of Israel from Egypt. Up to that point, Pharaoh had refused to reflect upon his actions and had experienced terrible suffering.

In conclusion, a man should learn to contemplate in order to arrive at a knowledge of G-d, and for as long as he confines himself in impurity and looks for all sorts of pretexts not to change, he will be severely punished. We have personally known people who perform many mitzvot yet slander their neighbor. And when tragedy strikes them, they ask why G-d acts in such a way. This is due to their lack of discernment. They do not know that one should rid oneself of all traces of evil, and this whether one acknowledges the Eternal or not. Otherwise, one suffers the worst punishments. G-d hardens the heart of the one that does not acknowledge Him, and punishes him until such time as he recognizes Him. He then uproots the evil that defiles the heart of the sinner.

Consequently, every day we should recall the miracles that the Holy One, blessed be He, performed for our ancestors in Egypt. Perhaps they did not merit redemption, but they respected the Divine precepts and refused to assimilate. Why? Because G-d helped them in order to prevent the Kelipah from drawing its strength from these mitzvot. Such was the miracle that the Eternal performed. Without Him, we would be slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt – we, our children, and our grandchildren. And without the miracles of Egypt, the Children of Israel would have not merited other miracles (since the miracles of Egypt constituted the very foundation of all others), a fact that we

should recall every day (Deuteronomy 16:4). Moreover, the redemption began at night, an allusion to the Kelipah that operates at night (Zohar III:113a). That very night, the Children of Israel conquered even the forces of evil. From then on, Pharaoh knew that the Kelipah could no longer do anything against them, for the Eternal had accomplished wonders in their favor.

We can now understand why G-d "passed alone" through the land of Egypt when He inflicted the blows to the firstborn thereof. In fact, the departure from Egypt essentially aimed at sanctifying the Children of Israel before they received the Torah (see Sefer Emet: Bo, Beshalach). Even while sunk in the 49 degrees of impurity, they had observed certain mitzvot, and they had accepted the yolk of Divine kingship upon themselves. And just as "G-d helps the one who seeks to purify himself" (Shabbat 104a; Yoma 38b), He made it such that they were quickly made ready to serve Him. In this way they were henceforth worthy of direct Divine assistance and of being liberated exclusively by Him (Tanhuma Bo 7).

Besides this, it was G-d Himself in all His glory that appeared to the Children of Israel. He did this in order to strengthen their faith in the Eternal and in the righteous, so that they would push themselves to properly understand and apply the difficult precepts of the Torah that they prepared themselves to receive. In seeing His omnipotence, they would never doubt His Torah.

This is why the Children of Israel immediately proclaimed, "We will do and we will understand" (Exodus 24:7). "Well said," the Eternal told them, Who added, "I am the L-RD your G-d, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 20:2). In other words, "I am the only One Who can change the laws of nature, and of Me it is said, 'He raises the needy from the dust; from the trash heaps He lifts the destitute, to seat them with nobles, with the nobles of His people' [Psalms 113:7]. I am the Eternal, Who watched over the mitzvot that you performed in Egypt so that – despite your schemes that could have led you to the fiftieth gate of impurity – the Kelipah could not nourish itself off of them. It was I Who distinguished between your homes from those of the Egyptians [Exodus 12:27]. I made you leave Egypt by night, when the Kelipah reigns [Bava Kama 60b], to show you that you can only eliminate it by means of the Torah, for the Torah purifies, and impurity cannot attach itself to it" (Berachot 22a). As soon as one accepts the yolk of Torah study, little by little it begins to purify. All this was accomplished thanks to the departure from Egypt, which was achieved by the merit of our Father Abraham.

All this shows us that the wicked person, one who does not think about his behavior and does not look for the truth (always finding excuses to justify himself), sinks even further into his perversity. It is by sound reasoning that one achieves holiness.

IN MEMORY OF THE TSADIKIM RABBI TSEMAH TSARFATI

Rabbi Tsemah Tsarfati was the leader of the Rabbanim of Tunis. He founded a great spiritual center and taught Torah to numerous students that came to imbue themselves with his wisdom. Rabbi Tsarfati renewed the study of the Gemara with the Tosafists and implanted in his students a love of study for various commentators.

On the eve of every holiday and Shabbat, he would pass by the shops and pressed merchants to close their businesses in order to tranquilly welcome Shabbat. Rabbi Tsarfati united in his person astonishing wisdom with purity and holiness. His courteousness and nobleness were well-known, to the point that even non-Jews respected and esteemed him well.

Rabbi Tsemah devoted his days and nights to the study of Torah. Yet every night, when he prepared himself to study quietly, the problem of lighting confronted him. It was difficult for him to obtain a new tallow candle or a little oil for a wick each time that he needed it.

One night, Rabbi Tsemah did not have a way to light his candle. Yet he was not about to forsake a long night of study. He went outside in the darkness, headed to the nearest bakery, and asked the baker's assistant to help him light his candle. The assistant joyfully did so, and Rabbi Tsemah began to feel reassured: Hashem had come to his aid and he had not lost hours of study in vain!

While he was walking back, the candle blew out. Rabbi Tsemah returned to see the employee and, excusing himself for bothering him, asked him to kindly light the candle once again. The candle blew out several times while on route, and each time the employee relit it. Eventually, sadness began to take hold of Rabbi Tsemah's heart. Perceiving that such was the case, the employee took the candle and brought it himself to the Rav's home in order that it not get blown out while on route. "For a commandment is a lamp and the Torah is light," and the tiny flame warmed Rabbi Tsemah's heart. He placed his hands on the head of the employee and uttered a blessing, wishing him great wealth.

One day, while Rabbi Tsemah was traveling through Istanbul on his way to Eretz Israel, Hashem placed an extremely wealthy Jew on his path – none other than the baker's assistant! In his generosity he gave the Tzaddik a donation, a sizeable amount in fact, so that he could settle peacefully in Eretz Israel and study Torah.

One year, a trying epidemic struck Tunis, producing numerous victims. Cries of distress rang out from every home. There was not one house that was not touched by illness.

Rabbi Tsemah, who could no longer tolerate seeing the suffering of his people, invited the Angel of Death to come to his Beit Midrash. His students were stunned when he signaled to them with his hand that the angel had arrived. Rabbi Tsemah rebuked the angel in front of everyone, and while holding a bag of beans in his hand, he ordered him to immediately leave the city and its inhabitants alone for as many years as there were beans in the bag.

Pushed by curiosity, one of the students dared to ask the Rav for the bag in order to count the number of beans inside. Eighty were found.

That same day, the epidemic ceased and the inhabitants of Tunis breathed easier. They had seen with their very eyes that "the Tzaddik decrees and G-d executes."

And in fact, eighty years later the epidemic once again struck the city, but Rabbi Tsemah was already in the world where only goodness reigns.

Near the end of his life, Rabbi Tsemah fell gravely ill. He suffered terribly for two years, without any remedy for his ills being found. The Jewish community implored Hashem, Who heals the sick, and begged Him to have pity on their Rav.

Rabbi Tsemah himself related that during those difficult times, the Prophet Elijah appeared to him and gave him the remedy to his sickness: If he studied Gemara and the Poskim on the eve of a Brit Milah in the home of the baby's mother, he would be healed.

Rabbi Tsemah agreed to do this, and he was quickly healed. From that day on, he wandered near the doors of the Jews of his city and was invited into each home in which a boy was born. There he prepared himself to study Torah until daybreak.

Since that time, the custom among the Jews of Tunis has been to gather a minyan of Chachamim in the home of the baby and to study until daybreak.

To the great regret of all those that loved him, Rabbi Tsemah Tsarfati passed away in Jerusalem in 5477 (1717), receiving at his death all the honors due a Tzaddik.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

From the Maggid of Dubno

It is written, “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as E-l Sh-ddai, but with My Name HASHEM I did not make Myself known to them” (Exodus 6:3). It could be that this was an answer to the question, “Why have You done evil to this people?” (Exodus 5:22), which Moses had asked.

Concerning our verse, the Midrash states: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, ‘You want to know My Name? I carry a different name according to My actions: Sometimes E-l, sometimes “Alm-ghty”, sometimes “G-d of armies,” sometimes “L-rd”, sometimes “HASHEM”. When I suspend the sin of a man, I call Myself E-l Sh-ddai; when I have pity on the world, I call Myself HASHEM.’”

In this way, Hashem revealed to Moses that this deliverance was not the final salvation, the one after which there would never be another exile. For the time being, it resulted essentially from the intense pressure that the Children of Israel were undergoing, pressure that did not allow them to complete to the finish the slavery foretold to Abraham. It was therefore necessary for Hashem to bring them out quickly, but for a limited time. He had never promised Abraham that He would completely renounce it, and He would not do it: “But with My Name HASHEM I did not make Myself known to them.” Hashem, this is G-d who is patient, but without giving in completely. They should, all the same, discharge the servitude that remained during the exile that would follow.

Let us clarify this idea by means of a parable.

A man owed a large sum of money to his friend, but since he had no immediate way to pay off the entire amount, the friend willingly accepted what he could pay back now. As for the balance, each one had something in mind as to how it should be paid off. The man’s friend thought to himself, “He’s giving me what he can now, and as for the rest, he’ll pay me back later.” However, the man himself was under the impression that the amount that he had already paid covered all his debt. The practical difference between these views, of course, was that from the man’s standpoint, it would have been better to have made his initial payment (which he thought covered his entire debt) as small as possible. In that way he would have cleared off his debt for the least cost. Yet if he had understood the lender’s position, he would have, on the contrary, pushed himself to pay off the maximum amount first in order to pay the smallest amount afterwards.

Moses believed that the people were headed for complete deliverance. Therefore when he saw that Hashem sought to reduce the exile’s duration and to hasten the deliverance because He had pity on the people’s great suffering, he found it strange that his mission wound up increasing the burden of slavery: “Why have You done evil to this people? Why have you sent me? From the time that I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he did evil to this people” (Exodus 5:22-23).

This is the sense of the answer that the Midrash has Hashem giving: “This is not exactly the case. I did not grant them complete favor, and this is simply because I am waiting for them to

be in a position whereby they can complete the allotted time of their slavery in another era.” It was therefore better for them to suffer at that time all that they could tolerate so as to minimize the debt that they still owed. This is the meaning of our verse, “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as E-l Sh-ddai, but with My Name HASHEM I did not make Myself known to them” (Exodus 6:3), as well as what the Midrash states: “When I suspend the sin of a man, I call Myself E-l Sh-ddai,” meaning, “I carry it forward to later.” It is therefore completely to the advantage of their descendants that the maximum amount of this debt be paid back as soon as possible.

THE PATH OF THE JUST PRIDE – PART VI

It is written, “The L-RD made everything for His sake” (Proverbs 16:4). Even though these actions can seem born of futility, all those who are careful to follow these proposals with the aim of obeying the commandments (not to boast or to make himself look better) will obtain merit because his intentions are pure.

The pride that one derives from wisdom or good deeds can be divided into two categories, one good, the other bad. The negative aspect consists of scorning others as much implicitly as explicitly, considering them as lowly and insignificant, and to boast about one’s wisdom. Because of this, and for as long as a man remains proud, he will never recognize the truth. He will always consider his wisdom, his advice, his words, and his own deeds as superior to those of others. He will constantly brag of his wisdom and deeds in order to receive the praise and approval of others. Now concerning this, King Solomon advises, “Let others praise you, not your own mouth” (Proverbs 27:2). The haughty man, always thinking that he has done enough, will never push himself to study Torah, for he does not concern himself with G-d’s honor. He only seeks to be praised by men for his kindness and wisdom. He always rejoices over the faults of others and over their lack of knowledge, and he prides himself at the expense of others. Now this is one of the 24 factors that prevent repentance (Yerushalmi Hagigah 3:1). A man whose actions are commendable, but who boasts in order to receive honor, is similar to fine food, flavored with the best of species, but which remains over the fire for too long and emits a strong burnt odor, rendering it inedible. Thus the man who boasts of his deeds compromises himself, and the praise that he gives himself emits a bad odor.