

הַמִּתְקַן וְהַמִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה THE PATH TO FOLLOW

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RECOGNIZING TRUTH IS A GREAT VIRTUE

(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)

It is written, "Moses inquired insistently about the he-goat of the sin-offering, for behold, it had been burned! And he was wrathful with Elazar and Ithamar. ... Moses heard and he approved" (Leviticus 10:16,20).

Concerning "he approved," the Sages have said that instead of claiming that he did not hear what the law was, Moses was not ashamed to say that he had indeed heard, but had forgotten it (Zebachim 101b). This statement is extremely surprising. On one hand, it never would have entered our minds to suspect Moses our teacher of lying and imagining that he could have denied hearing that which he had in fact heard. On the other hand, how is it that Moses, whom G-d delegated to teach the entire Torah to the Children of Israel, could have forgotten a Halachah? Yet if we say that G-d had decided to make him forget it, how should we understand this decision, insofar as it risked being a stumbling block for the Children of Israel? The risk lay in the possibility of them telling themselves that if Moses had forgot this particular point, he could have also forgotten others, to the extent that they would no longer have any confidence in him, which would have created controversies.

To explain this, let us recall that the Torah is acquired through 48 qualities (Perkei Avoth 6:5[6]), the most difficult of which to attain is humility. This is particularly difficult for the great Rabbanim, for they generally tend to try and preserve their personal honor by hurrying to answer questions asked of them. Even those who are above the fear of losing their credibility in public worry about the honor of the Torah, for if they are recognized as having erred and people no longer listen to them (lest they commit another mistake), this would constitute a desecration of the Divine Name.

This is why the Torah testifies here that the greatest compliment to give someone is to say that he does not fear recognizing the truth. On the contrary, when someone says, "I've heard and I've forgotten," it is this that constitutes true honor of Torah. Moses our teacher owed his intellectual honesty to his perfection in humility (see Numbers 12:3). His forgetfulness was destined to teach his sons and future teachers that in no case should we distance ourselves from the truth, and that greatness consists in recognizing this. That is why G-d did not help Moses in remembering.

There is a teaching which states that on three occasions Moses became angry and erred (Sifri Matot 157). It seems, therefore, that his error was only provoked by anger, which demonstrates to all generations that when a person loses his temper, even the greatest are deprived of G-d's help. Before growing impatient, we

must therefore carefully weigh whether such a reaction is truly necessary, or whether it is really the advice of the evil inclination, which tries to distance us from the knowledge of Torah. It is possible that Moses' punishment was presented in the form of forgetting the Halachah (the law) precisely because anger represents a small defect in humility, one of the 48 qualities by which the Torah is acquired.

Yet it is precisely this that shows us his greatness, for he recognized that he had forgotten the Halachah because of his fit of anger, to the extent that G-d didn't help him to remember. His humility pushed him to recognize his error in public as soon as he noticed it, and he even had it proclaimed in the camp that he had erred (Vayikra Rabba 13:1), thus putting truth before everything.

From this we should draw the lesson that the leader of the generation shouldn't fear that, if he admits having made a mistake, people will think that this can happen to him again and so they will not trust his decisions. If everyone concludes that he has the necessary stature to value truth above his own honor, then they will have even more confidence in his Torah, for the Torah is called Truth (Tikkunei Zohar 50), as it is written, "Purchase the truth, do not sell it" (Proverbs 23:23). Moreover, whoever is sincere recognizes the truth immediately.

We know that statements which are true and well-founded enter the heart of the one who hears them, as it is written in the Gemara, "Whoever fears Heaven, his words are heard" (Berachot 6b). This is why, when the Torah was given, it is stated, "The entire people saw the thunder [Hebrew: voices]" (Exodus 20:16). They saw what we hear, which is impossible under other circumstances (Mechilta d'Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai ibid.), for the words of the Living G-d, having emanated directly from the mouth of the G-d of Truth, entered into the hearts of those who heard them, exactly as if they had seen them with their very eyes. This signifies a level of comprehension more profound than the simple act of hearing, and this is the same imagery as that of the letters of the Torah escaping into the air (Avodah Zarah 18a). The same thing applies to the righteous person who demonstrates his sincerity.

Nevertheless, It remains for us to understand how Moses, who had learned the entire Torah from the mouth of G-d on Mount Sinai (Eruvin 54b), managed to get angry, which then led him to forget the Halachah. In fact, Aaron had acted correctly and Moses still remembered the Halachah; it was only afterwards that he became angry, although we still don't understand why. In addition, when Elazar came to announce to the members of the army, "This is

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the decree of the Torah which the L-RD commanded” (Numbers 31:21), Moses again became angry (see Sifri ibid. 48). Why? He had, after all, known from his previous experience that this type of behavior puts him at risk of sinning, and furthermore this was indeed what happened!

Yet as we know, everything is alluded to in the Torah (Taanith 9a), hence Moses’ forgetfulness is also included so as to teach us that if even the great of the generation become angry, they will end up committing an error in Halachah, for the Torah is not in Heaven (Bava Metzia 59b), and men are dealt with exactly as they themselves behave (Megillah 12b). The mitzvah that was related to Aaron (“You shall not drink wine or strong drink” – Leviticus 10:9) had already been given to Moses before on Mount Sinai, but in his great humility (which we also find alluded to by the small letter aleph of the word vayikra, as if he were saying, “Who am I that G-d should call me?”) he did not remind him of it. And yet this same humility did not prevent him from suffering because his brother Aaron entered into the Holy of Holies. Regretting this fit of anger, he wanted that this parsha be told to Aaron directly by the Eternal, since it was he who was to be careful when entering into the Holy of Holies.

The same applies for Moses’ anger towards Elazar and the people in the army. His anger was definitely not based on the fact that it

was Elazar who spoke to the army and not him, for it was certainly a great joy for Moses that Elazar, the son of Aaron, taught them the Halachah. However Moses became angry at that moment because he thought that the Halachah was different. His greatness consisted of recognizing that his anger had led him in error.

In reality, we have no idea what the meaning of Moses’ anger was, for it was certainly motivated by the love of Heaven, not by jealousy or hatred. In fact the Torah testifies that he was the most humble man on earth (Numbers 12:3), and humility and anger do not go together. In reality, this happened to him so that all the generations could draw the lesson that even the greatest of men, if they become angry, are punished by forgetting Halachah. Nevertheless, if they don’t fear acknowledging the truth, this sin becomes rectified, and not only do they find their honor once again, but they also become greater in G-d’s eyes and in the eyes of the people. This was the greatness of Moses, and it evokes for us the passage in the Gemara that states, “Happy is the generation in which the great listen to the lesser” (Rosh Hashanah 25b). For when the great recognize the truth, they in turn are heard. This is what the honor of Torah consists of.

THE STORY OF THE WEEK

The Merit of Hospitality

Rabbi Chaim of Kassov had the custom of teaching the importance of love for others, hospitality, and giving alms with a joyful heart. When friends came to see him, he was concerned and would ask, “Where did you sleep last night? Where did you eat?” and so on. When he learned that someone in his entourage behaved greedily and neglected hospitality, he harshly rebuked him.

A certain innkeeper lived quietly and trouble-free in a village. One day a group of people were passing through the village on their way to see the Rabbi of Kassov. It was rainy winter night, and they went to the innkeeper and knocked on the door. They asked him if they could spend the night, but he didn’t want to take them in. An incessant rain was falling on their heads, and since they didn’t have a choice they were forced to continue their journey. In the morning they arrived in Kassov. They entered the Rav’s place, and as usual he took an interest in their journey. They told him about the innkeeper’s malice, and the Rabbi promised, “He will end up needing a Kohen.” He was alluding to the teaching of Rashi: “If you do not give the Kohen his due, you will end up needing him” (Rashi on Numbers 5:12).

Before long, this innkeeper came in a dejected state to see Rabbi Chaim. He told him that the nobleman of the village had ordered him to leave within three months, and that all his supplications had been to no avail. The Rabbi told him, “I have always found it hard to understand

how an innkeeper could live in a village so far from any Jewish center, how he could pray alone – not being able to respond either “Amen” or to Kedusha or to Barechu – without hearing the reading of the Torah. How can he therefore fulfill his duty as a Jew?”

The Rabbi continued, “If nevertheless this is allowed, it is essentially because ‘It is more important to welcome guests than to receive the Shechinah,’ and that the mitzvah of hospitality is quite necessary in villages. This is what makes up for everything you lack. Consequently, as long as you correctly observed this mitzvah, the merit of hospitality protected you, and no harm could be done to you. Yet now that some people came to you during a driving rain and you had the spite to not take them in with you, what remains in this village for you to do? Return to the city with your Jewish brothers, pray at the synagogue day and night, and give your children a Jewish education.”

The innkeeper burst out in tears. “But how will I live?”

Rabbi Chaim responded, “Take it upon yourself that beginning now, your house will be wide open. Then G-d will give you back your previous position intact.”

The innkeeper made this promise, and G-d moved the heart of the nobleman of the village. The innkeeper was thus able to retain his position.

IN MEMORY OF THE TSADIKIM SHIMON HATZADDIK

Shimon HaTzaddik was one of the last members of the Great Assembly, as well as one of its youngest members. There is great uncertainty concerning which era he lived in. According to our tradition, there was but a brief interval, about 40 years, between the return of the captives from Babylon and the destruction of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great, whereas secular history states that there were 200 years that elapsed between these two events. The Talmud states that Shimon HaTzaddik the High Priest led a group of priests that came on horseback to meet the conquering Macedonian, and that he made such a great impression on him that this enemy of the Jews henceforth become their protector.

In any case, an ancient Jewish poet, Joshua son of Sira, depicted the importance that Shimon HaTzaddik held in the eyes of his people. He compared Shimon HaTzaddik to the great men of Israel, from Abraham to Nehemiah: "The leader of his brethren and the pride of his people was Shimon the High Priest, son of Onias, who in his life repaired the House [of G-d], and in his time fortified the Temple. He laid the foundations for the high double walls, the high retaining walls for the Temple enclosure. In his days a cistern for water was quarried out, a reservoir like the sea in circumference. He considered how to save his people from ruin, and fortified the city to withstand a siege. How glorious he was when the people gathered around him as he came out of the inner sanctuary! Like the morning star among the clouds, like the moon when it is full; like the sun shining upon the Temple of the Most High, and like the rainbow gleaming in glorious clouds; like roses in the days of the first fruits, like lilies by a spring of water, like a green shoot of Lebanon on a summer day" (Sirach 50:1-8).

The Talmud as well tells us great and beautiful things concerning Shimon HaTzaddik (Yoma 39a). During the 40 years that he exercised his duties as High Priest, people witnessed numerous wonders in the Temple. When lots were drawn on Yom Kippur, he always picked the lot designated for G-d with his right hand, whereas other High Priests picked it sometimes with their right hand, sometimes with their left hand. In the same way, when the scapegoat was sent to Azazel, a red string was attached to the door of the Temple. Now as long as Shimon HaTzaddik was High Priest, the string turned white at the exact moment that the scapegoat was thrown from a cliff, as it is written, "If your sins as scarlet, they will become white as snow; if they have become red as crimson, they will become [white] as wool" (Isaiah 1:18). After Shimon's time the string sometimes, but not always, turned white.

As long as Shimon HaTzaddik performed his service, a miracle occurred with the western lamp of the holy Menorah. It did not receive more oil than any of the other lamps, yet whereas the other lamps went out as soon as morning arrived, the western lamp burned from evening to evening. As long

as Shimon HaTzaddik was High Priest, the fire on the Altar burned by itself, and to maintain the fire the priests supplied it with but two small logs near the evening, as prescribed. After Shimon's time they had to maintain the fire during the entire day. Thanks to Shimon HaTzaddik, the Omer on the second day of Passover and the two loaves of bread for the festival of Shavuot were the recipients of miracles: When they were being distributed, each priest received a piece the size of an olive, yet this piece was nevertheless sufficient to completely satisfy them.

That a man such as Shimon HaTzaddik had a favorite saying, which by itself was enough to immortalize his name, is what we will attempt to show next (see Perkei Avoth in this bulletin).

THE PATH OF THE JUST HUMILITY - PART III

A man reveals his humility in six different ways:

1. By the intensity of his anger. For example, if a man possesses extreme humility in speech or deeds, even if he is in a situation where he can take revenge, he will control himself and forgive because he cares about abiding by Hashem's will. This is a sign of humility. It goes without saying that it is sometimes forbidden to forgive. A Torah sage who is humiliated in public should not forgive the offence before the guilty party has asked for forgiveness.

2. If a man suffers a tremendous loss – if he loses his children or someone dear to him – and he recognizes Divine justice and accepts his suffering with love, as it is written with regards to the High Priest ("Aaron remained silent" [Leviticus 10:3]), this constitutes a clear example of humility.

3. If a man hears that people are praising him for his wisdom and good deeds, yet he does not rejoice inside and thinks that, on the contrary, his good deeds represent but an insignificant part of what he should really accomplish, this is proof of his humility.

If negative but true information is related concerning him, he will not try to alter the truth to exonerate himself. He should not try to contradict the person who is criticizing him, nor hate that person for having revealed the truth. He will submit himself before the Creator, Who wanted that part of the truth to be known in order to correct and reprimand him so that he would repent. In a case in which the gossip is false, he will not humiliate the slanderer or flare up against him, for on the day of judgment many people will have good deeds which they did not perform accredited to them. These people will exclaim, "But we did not do these things," and they will be told, "The authors of these good deeds were those who heaped slander upon you. We have taken their merit and given it to you." Similarly, we will show the wicked sins that they did not commit, and when they will try to defend themselves they will be told, "These sins were committed by those whom you slandered. We took them from their account and added them to yours."

The man who suffers insult without responding clearly demonstrates his humility. The Midrash instructs, "Only the one who does not respond to insult is humble. Concerning the humble who do not react to insult, the verse teaches, 'And let those who love Him be like the powerfully rising sun' [Judges 5:31]" (Shabbat 88b).

PERKEI AVOTH

The Balance of the World

It is written, “Shimon HaTzaddik was one of the last of the Men of the Great Assembly. He used to say: ‘The world stands on three things – on Torah, the service [of G-d], and deeds of kindness’ ” (Perkei Avoth 1:2).

The adage that Shimon HaTzaddik had constantly on his lips is a universal saying. It seems that no man has ever uttered a saying more profound or that carries more weight. The origin, final goal, and existence of the world are all contained in this utterance.

If we take the term “world” in its usual sense, that is, the whole of humanity (i.e., everyone), then the meaning of his saying is simple. But if by the term “world” we understand the universe (i.e., all of creation), the words of the Sage become enlightening. And it appears that he shares the opinion of those who teach that G-d created the world only because of man.

There are three types of worlds: The first is the one of the spirits – angels; the second is the world of celestial bodies; and the third is the world below, the one in which man reigns.

The world of spirits corresponds to the Torah; the world of celestial bodies to Avodah; and this world, the one of human society, is preserved by Gemiluth Chesed.

Man’s first duty is towards himself; it is to perfect his own mind. At birth, a man’s intelligence is mediocre and limited, yet by dint of careful attention and application, there is nothing, elevated though it be, that he cannot master. “The heavens are high,” says an ancient Jewish poet, Rabbi Yedayah Hapenini, “and deep is the earth, but unfathomable is all that the mind of a rational man can gather. See, it is there that, by the grace of his Creator, man’s role lies, a role that He gave him in the world. As G-d Alm-ghty is among the celestial beings, so is man among terrestrial beings. He aspires to godliness, searching for eternal truths recorded in Divine wisdom, and he pushes himself to live according to the great sayings written therein” (Behinot Olam Ch. 1).

The fundamental duty of man towards himself is the study of Divine wisdom that Hashem, utterly good, gave us in His great goodness. It was for the Torah that Hashem created the world, as it is written, “Thus said the L-RD, ‘If not for My covenant [the Torah], I would not have appointed days and nights, the decrees of heaven and earth’ ” (Jeremiah 33:25).

The Torah is the spiritual world. It is the most profound source of knowledge, and it allows one to penetrate the mysteries of creation.

The second category of duties concerns those which we

have towards G-d. They are all contained in the word “Avodah”, which means Divine service. This is what our Sages teach us, namely, “Man was only created for serving G-d” (Tractate Kiddushin). When the Temple still existed, the service that was practiced there was the visible expression of the worship of G-d, which is why the Sages teach that it was for this service that the universe was created (Taanith 27b; also compare with Megillah 31b). Since the holy Temple was destroyed, it is our prayers that have replaced the service of the sacrifices.

The third category of our duties includes those with respect to our neighbor. It expresses itself perfectly by the performance of charity. According to the Talmud’s conception of things, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) is the foundation of all Divine teaching. The one who loves his neighbor will not steal from him, will not lie to him, will not cheat him, and will not despoil him. Naturally, justice and the faithful observance of the law must come before acts of charity. Does not all of creation go according to the Creator’s will to shower others with love? As it is said, “The heavens, You establish Your faithfulness in them” (Psalms 89:3).

The performance of charity does not simply consist of giving alms. Our Sages teach that Gemiluth Chesed is more important than giving alms for three reasons. To give alms, it is enough to have money, whereas an act of chesed (love) can very well be the giving of money as well as the giving of oneself. Alms can only be done for the poor, whereas an act of chesed can just as easily be directed at wealthy people. Finally, alms are aimed only at the living, whereas an act of chesed or charity can also be performed as much for the living as for the dead.

In the Midrash our Sages say that when G-d took counsel from the angels concerning Creation, the angles of peace and the angels of truth advised against the creation of man. However the angel of love presented itself before the throne of the Alm-ghty and said, “Create him, G-d of goodness, for he will practice charity on earth.” And so G-d created man, in order that the work of charity should be accomplished by him.

The three principles of Rabbi Shimon HaTzaddik’s saying are placed in our Mishnah in the order that a man will practice them in his life. From his youth, a child should begin to study Torah. At the end of his thirteenth year, he should begin to serve G-d. But it is only at a more advanced age that a man arrives at practicing charity, when he attains an independent position in life.