

זו"ת THE PATH TO FOLLOW

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HUMILITY AND SUBMISSIVENESS ARE A HERITAGE OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL (by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)

It is written, "This shall be [zot] the law [torat] of the leper on the day of his purification: He shall be brought to the priest" (Leviticus 14:2).

We may say by allusion that the Torah is called zot (Menachot 53b), as it is written: "And this is [ve'zot] the Torah" (Deuteronomy 4:44), which also applies to the verse in our parsha. It is only through Torah – which is called zot – that the leper can purify himself for having lost time by not studying Torah, and from the pride that is within him. However this purification is still not enough; it is only complete after he offers his sacrifice, when he submits before G-d.

This constitutes a response to a current opinion which states that there are also non-Jews who submit themselves to G-d and help their fellowman (see Leviticus 19:18) with great devotion and humility. This is simply not true. Even when we see a non-Jew who is considered to be righteous by his friends – one who loves peace and seeks it with everything he has – he is only acting with humility for everyone to honor him. G-d certainly does not deprive a person of his reward, even the reward for saying a good word (Nazir 23b), and even if he said this good word just to gain honor.

True humility is only found among those who study Torah and know how to appreciate it. By the fact that they are conscious of G-d's greatness, their hearts break within them and they come to submitting themselves to Him, as the Rambam writes (Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 4:12). We also find manifestations of humility among non-Jews, for there is a concept of "the righteous of the nations." G-d probes their hearts and minds, and He knows who are truly righteous. He gives them a full and complete reward in the form of wealth and honor in this world, unless they also have a part in the World to Come, as the Sages have said (Tosefta Sanhedrin 13). However it is obvious that their humility has no real depth.

So while Nadav and Avihu, who offered a strange fire, acted with great devotion – a characteristic that does not exist among non-Jews, for it serves them no immediate practical benefit – they did so only for a love of G-d and in order to elevate themselves in coming closer to Him (see Leviticus 16:1). As Moses said to his brother Aaron, "I know that they [Nadav and Avihu] are greater than myself or you" (Vayikra Rabba 12:2; Rashi ibid.). They simply wanted to bring the Children of Israel closer to G-d, which for them represented great devotion, as we explained in Parsha Shemini.

To explain the passage, "This shall be [zot] the law [torat] of the leper," we may even say that the law of the Torah is humility. Even if this leper is great in Torah and filled with good deeds, he is brought to the priest because he should humble himself by going to someone who is greater than he in wisdom and Torah (see Bava Batra 116a) in order to learn Torah, wisdom, and proper conduct from him.

This is what we see with Naaman the leper, who went to find Elisha the prophet (see II Kings 5). The latter told him to go immerse in the Jordan River in order to purify himself of his leprosy, which is exactly what happened. Why did Elisha not instead give him a blessing or send him to the priest afterwards?

Elisha knew by Ruach Hakodesh that Naaman's leprosy originated only in his pride, as demonstrated by the fact that he became angry against the prophet before going to the threshold of his house with his battalion of soldiers. The only solution, as his servants tried to convince him, was to go and descend into the waters of the Jordan, thus abasing and humbling himself. It was only in this way that he would be purified. For the Children of Israel, water alludes to a descent into the depths of Torah, for "water always represents Torah" (Bava Kama 17a). The secret of the mikveh is that we abase ourselves in this water. This is why, in the case of Naaman, he needed to descend into the waters of the Jordan as a preparation for his conversion to Judaism, which would contribute to dissolving his pride.

The reparation of pride therefore consists of immersing oneself in Torah, and also to find the Tzaddikim of the generation to help conquer pride. This is equivalent to going to the Temple and offering a sacrifice there, which in fact is what a leper must do once he is purified: He brings a sacrifice in order not to fall back into pride. This is also what Naaman did after being cured and purified. He went back to Elisha to thank him for his help, as well as to receive instructions for the future, as it is written: "Now I know that there is no G-d in the whole world except in Israel" (II Kings 5:15). Afterwards, by his conversion to Judaism and acceptance of the Kingdom of Heaven's yoke, he achieved a more complete understanding of the Creator. Rabbi Shemuel Strashun was neither a Rav, nor an Av Beit Din, nor a Rosh Yeshiva, nor was he responsible for a community. Rather, he was only a resident of Vilna. Nevertheless, he is known throughout the world as a spiritual giant.

IN MEMORY OF THE TSADIKIM

RABBI SHEMOUEL STRASHUN - THE RASHASH

Rabbi Shemuel Strashun followed in the footsteps of the Vilna Gaon, who said that all science, as well as the observation of nature, helps us to understand true wisdom, that of the Torah. Such was the method of Rabbi Shemuel. From his writings we see that he possessed a vast knowledge of Hebrew grammar, as well as being familiar with math, geography, and history, and fluent in German and Polish. Yet above all he is known for his work entitled “The Rashash.” Rabbi Shemuel wrote commentaries on every page of every tractate of the Talmud. These are renowned for the great scholarship that they bear witness to, their subtlety of reasoning, and for the marvelous logic and straight, sharp intelligence that runs through them. The Torah greats of the generation stated, “In his book, Rabbi Shemuel literally summarized everything that deals with understanding the Talmud.”

Nevertheless, in addition to all these fine skills, Rabbi Shemuel Strashun was known for his humility and extreme modesty. Rabbi Israel of Salant recounted the following story to illustrate his humility:

One day, Rabbi Israel and Rabbi Shemuel Strashun found themselves together in the same town. A discussion began between them concerning faith in G-d, namely whether it was useful to have faith for something that was not necessary. Rabbi Israel believed that a man has the right to pray to G-d for something that he considers to be superfluous, whereas for Rabbi Shemuel, a man has no right to ask G-d for something that he does not need. To Rabbi Shemuel, a man’s prayer is only heard if it deals with things that he absolutely cannot do without.

Rabbi Israel then proposed that they test their views to see which was right. Once Rabbi Shemuel accepted, Rabbi Israel said, “From now on, I trust in G-d that He will send me a watch, which is not necessary for me because I have absolutely no need for one. We will see if He will send me it.” They warmly shook hands and departed, each waiting to see what would happen.

Six months passed, until one day Rabbi Shemuel was in his library studying Torah and heard someone knocking lightly at the door.

“Enter,” he said. “Come into the room.”

A young Christian, tall and clothed in a lieutenant’s uniform, came inside.

Rabbi Shemuel interrupted his study and asked, “How may I help you?”

“I have something to say to you,” the lieutenant began. “A Jewish soldier in my regiment just died, but beforehand he asked me to do him a favor. He had a watch – his only possession in the world – and since he had no family or close friends, he asked me to bring it to the local Jewish Rabbi.

The Jews of Vilna told me that this was you, which is why I’ve brought you his watch.”

Rabbi Shemuel took it and thanked the lieutenant for having gone to all the trouble. When he left, Rabbi Shemuel began to reflect upon this bizarre incident. He looked at the watch and thought about it long and hard. Then all of a sudden, the memory of his discussion with Rabbi Israel of Salant came to mind. Was it possible that Heaven had sent the watch to Rabbi Israel? After all, did he not say, “From now on, I trust in G-d that He will send me one”? On the other hand, perhaps it was a coincidence? These thoughts jostled in his mind and gave him no rest. He wanted to immerse himself again in his studies and forget this whole strange incident, but he couldn’t. He had in his mind the image of Rabbi Israel, and it wouldn’t leave him. He called his son Mattityahu and asked him to go and bring Rabbi Israel of Salant to see him.

Rabbi Israel arrived, and Rabbi Shemuel gave him the watch and said, “G-d has heard your prayer and sent you this watch. You have been proven to be correct from Heaven.”

When Rabbi Israel recounted this story, he always added: “It was simple for Heaven to send me a watch. When a person has faith in G-d, He responds to prayer. But for Rabbi Shemuel not to be been ashamed to recognize this, that was far from simple, and it was far greater than the first matter.” Rabbi Israel would end by saying, “Rabbi Shemuel is a Tzaddik of great humility. I am certain that his commentary on the Talmud will be welcomed by all.”

Rabbi Israel’s prediction proved correct. The Torah of the Rashash became a foundation and aid for all those who study Gemara in-depth, from young boys up to the greatest scholars. If a person notices something obscure in the way that the Gemara expresses itself – yet neither Rashi, Tosaphot, the Maharsha, the Maharam, nor the Maharshal point this out – one must go to the Rashash for help, and among his books one will find the answer to every such difficulty.

Rabbi Shemuel Strashun was born on Heshvan 18, 5554 (1794) in Zaskevich. He was the son of Rabbi Yossef, the Rav of the city.

At the age of 13 he married the daughter of Rabbi David Strashun, who was living in the village of Streszyn (commonly called Strashun). After several years, people began to call him after his father-in-law, and the name stuck.

At the home of his father-in-law, who was a wealthy man, Rabbi Shemuel Strashun was able to study Torah in tranquility. Their village was destroyed during the Napoleonic wars, however, and his father-in-law Rabbi David took his family to the large city of Vilna and purchased a house for him there. He also established a Beit Midrash and began pursuing his business ventures there, whereas his son-in-law Rabbi Shemuel continued to study Torah. In Vilna he met Rabbi

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Avraham Danzig, the author of Chayei Adam, and became his student.

Even after the death of his wealthy father-in-law, Rabbi Shemuel continued to diligently study Torah without having to worry about his sustenance. He continued to write his glosses and commentaries while his wife successfully managed their business ventures.

Some elderly Torah scholars of Vilna recounted the following story:

One of the top brass of the army, who always purchased merchandise on credit, once spoke to Rabbi Shemuel's wife and said, "I am leaving Vilna now, and I would like to pay you for what I owe. However I want your husband to certify in writing that I have repaid all my debt."

His wife went to the Beit Midrash and asked her husband to interrupt his studies for a moment to come to the store. However he refused, saying: "G-d's Torah is worth more to me than thousands in gold and silver – I cannot interrupt my studies." He added, "What would you have done if I were dead and this man had come to demand that you bring me back from the grave to certify that he had repaid his debt? Thank G-d that I am still alive and studying Torah!"

His wife returned to the store and told the army big wig everything her husband had said, word for word. He was pleased by what he heard, and he was content to pay his debt with her signature testifying to the fact.

The Rashash lived a long time, dying at the age of 78 on II Adar 11, 5632 (1872).

THE PATH OF THE JUST

HUMILITY - PART V

Humility is a ladder that allows a person to climb the rungs leading to Hashem, as it is written, "He leads the humble with justice, and teaches His way to the humble" (Psalms 25:9). Thanks to humility, a man will manage to acquire a fear of G-d, as it is written, "The result of humility is fear of the L-RD" (Proverbs 22:4). The Divine Presence rests on humble individuals, as it is written, "I abide ... with the despondent and lowly of spirit" (Isaiah 57:15). In fact, Hashem chose to ignore the high mountains and have His Presence reside on Mount Sinai, the lowest mountain among them all.

Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi said, "Observe how modest men are esteemed by G-d: At the time of the Temple, if a man brought a burnt offering, he had the merit of a burnt offering. If he brought an offering of flour, the merit of a flour offering was accounted to him. Yet for the man with a humble spirit, the verse considers him to have brought all the sacrifices, as it is written, 'The sacrifices G-d desires are a broken spirit' [Psalms 51:19]. And what's more is that his prayer is not rejected, as it is said, 'A heart broken and humbled, O G-d, You will not despise' [ibid.]" (Sotah 5:2).

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

from the Maguid of Doubno

The Midrash states: "The Sages have applied the following passage to Miriam: 'Let not your mouth bring guilt on your flesh, and do not tell the messenger that it was an error. Why should G-d be angered by your words?' [Ecclesiastes 5:5]. 'Let not your mouth bring guilt on your flesh' – do not give one of your members the permission to make your entire body sin. 'And do not tell the messenger' – this is Moses, as it is written: 'I send a messenger before you' [Exodus 23:20]. 'That it was an error' – as it is written: 'we have sinned' [Numbers 12:11]. 'Why should G-d be angered by your words?' – it was these words about which it is said, 'The wrath of the L-RD flared up against them, and He left' [Numbers 12:9]."

What does all this mean?

We must realize that there are two cases in which a person risks speaking ill of others: The first is when a person has the opportunity to say bad things about someone who is inferior to him, for perhaps he has some faults or weaknesses. However it is possible that what that person says about him is false, in which case he will have acted improperly by having lied. The second is when a person says bad things about someone who is greatly superior to him, such as a Tzaddik or a very honest man. Consequently, even before that person has checked the veracity of what he suspects – before checking if it is true or false – he has already proven his lowliness by having had the nerve to utter something against such an upright man. The difference between the two cases is that in the first, the wrong consists entirely in that the person has spoken a lie. At such a point, he may excuse himself by saying, "I was mistaken. What I said was wrong!" However in the second case, the wrong consists in having dared to think anything bad about a great man, which is even worse if that thought was a lie. At that point, the person cannot excuse himself by saying, "I was mistaken," for this in no way takes away from the fact that he dared to open his mouth against an upright man.

This is what the Holy One, blessed be He, meant by the words, "Not so is My servant Moses. In My entire house he is the trusted one ... Why did you not fear to speak against My servant Moses?" (Numbers 12:7-8). In other words, "From the beginning you tried to harm him without justification. Are you going to say that you do not realize this? And yet, you were not afraid to speak against My servant Moses."

Such is the meaning of, "and do not tell the messenger that it was an error." All that notwithstanding, "Why should G-d be angered by your words?" That is, regardless of whether a person has said the truth or not, Hashem has in any case forbidden people from speaking against a man of his stature.

THE STORY OF THE WEEK

A True Story

“May Only Goodness and Kindness Pursue Me All the Days of My Life”

The following story took place in 5683 (1923), while the Chofetz Chaim was staying with the distinguished Rav Akiva Schreiber in Vienna in order to participate in the first great convention of Agudath Israel. A great many people, motivated by a tremendous desire to see the Chofetz Chaim, gathered around Rav Akiva's house, but only a privileged few could enter inside. Rav Akiva was approached by a Rav from England who did a great deal of work for Jewish causes, and who asked him if he could be allowed to enter into the room where the Chofetz Chaim was, be it for only a few minutes, because he wanted to ask him an important question on which his entire future depended.

Rav Schreiber accepted, and since he respected both the English Rav and his important work, he seated him near the table where the Chofetz Chaim was eating, proposing to introduce him immediately after the Birkat Hamazon. In the middle of the meal, the Chofetz Chaim recited the following Psalm: “A Psalm by David. The L-RD is my shepherd, I shall not lack.” He then turned towards the English Rav (whom he had never seen before) and explained the verse as follows: “It is very curious that David, King of Israel, says that goodness and kindness should pursue him [the Hebrew word for “pursue” has a negative connotation]. Is it possible for these two great things to transform themselves into pursuers; is it not rather murder and violence that pursue a man? How can goodness and kindness be thought of in this way? The answer must be that sometimes, a man has the impression that his acts of goodness and kindness become his pursuers, preventing him from living by stealing his precious time, bothering him in his activities, and causing him losses and driving peace from his home. His evil inclination

then encourages him to forsake acts of goodness and kindness. What should he then do? Here the psalmist gives him the following advice: If you think that goodness and kindness are really pursuing you, don't abandon them for this reason. Rather, pray to G-d that ‘only goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life,’ that these should be the only type of ‘pursuers’ you have, not other, more fearsome ones. No harm will come to the righteous from being pursued by goodness and kindness, but on the contrary, in him will be accomplished the verse that states, ‘And I shall dwell in the House of the L-RD for long days.’ ”

The Chofetz Chaim had barely completed his explanation when the English Rav, tremendously moved by all this, arose and took leave of Rav Akiva.

The reason for the English Rav's astonishment was because he put great effort into trying to see the Chofetz Chaim so as to ask him an extremely important question, then all of a sudden he no longer felt that he had to ask it! The English Rav told Rav Akiva that the Chofetz Chaim had answered his question even before he had the time to ask him. The English Rav explained his situation to him: In his hometown he created a Talmud Torah and a free loan fund that he directed himself. These institutions had developed well, but the work involved in these two undertakings took enormous amounts of his time. He was forced to neglect his personal affairs, which suffered tremendously, to the point that his wife had categorically demanded that he entrust the direction of these institutions to others. He himself didn't want to abandon this opportunity to do goodness and kindness, yet to preserve peace in the home, they both concluded that they would leave this decision to the Chofetz Chaim and to go according his advice. He had now explicitly heard that even if “goodness and kindness” truly pursue a man and upset his personal affairs, this no reason to neglect them; he must continue to occupy himself with them all the same. He had received the answer to his question, and now he hurried to announce to his wife the decision of the Chofetz Chaim.