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WICKED THOUGHTS LEAD TO SIN

(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)

Our Parsha recounts that the Children of Israel complained about the manna by saying: "We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free of charge; and the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions.... But now, our life is parched, there is nothing; we have nothing to anticipate but the manna!" (Numbers 11:5-6). At that moment, they fell into sin.

It is necessary to understand what is happening here. How is it possible that the Children of Israel complained because of the fish, cucumbers, and melons that they ate in Egypt, while in the desert they weren't given such food? How did they come to expressing such demands? Another difficulty: How is it possible that the generation of the desert, which we call the Dor Deah (Generation of Knowledge – Vayikra Rabba 9:1), made up of great Tzaddikim, had had enough of the manna to the point of saying, "But now, our life is parched" and only desired material food, whereas they knew that the Torah could only be explained by those who ate the manna (Mechilta and Tanhuma Beshalach 17)? How did they fall to the point of longing for nothing other than material sustenance?

We begin our explanation by citing what the Sages have said on the verse, "It tasted like the taste of dough kneaded with oil" (Numbers 11:8): In the manna, each person found several tastes, much like a baby finds different tastes in his mother's breast milk (Yoma 75a). The Sages also said that G-d made the manna come down with all the flavors they wanted (Shemot Rabba 25:3). If someone felt like having meat, that is what he tasted, without even asking for it; it was simply enough to think about a flavor in order to obtain it. The manna was actually "the bread of the mighty" (Psalms 78:25), the bread of the ministering angels (Yoma 75a). G-d therefore demonstrated great kindness towards the Children of Israel by giving them all the tastes they desired through the manna. This was in order that they might spiritually elevate all foods, each one having a different taste.

Yet instead of using the manna to their advantage in achieving this goal, the Children of Israel tried to taste what they had known in Egypt ("we remember the fish..."), for in reality it was the material taste that they were interested in, to the extent that they caused themselves to spiritually plummet. This is an indication that they weren't sufficiently attached to the Torah. Actually, someone who is entirely immersed in the holy Torah completely forgets what he has eaten the day before. If he re-

members, this shows that his principle interest is not in Torah, but rather in food, and he is in very great danger.

We learn from this that someone who continually remembers his past behavior and his sins in their least detail easily risks falling into despair. This is why the evil inclination tries without stop to make a man recall his sins and the fact that he is a sinner. Certainly, one must be conscious of his sins and repent of them, but should not concentrate on their details. As King David said, "For I recognize my transgressions, and my sin is before me always" (Psalms 51:5). It is only in this way that one can repent completely.

We also note that after the sin of the golden calf, once the evil inclination returned, it didn't stop trying to make the Children of Israel transgress. This was in order to make them fall into despair, which was also the case as regards the manna. The evil inclination saw all the kindnesses that G-d had bestowed on us (by giving us the bread of angels in order to sanctify and purify us) and it knew that the manna allowed a person to explain the Torah. The evil inclination also observed all the other good things that were bestowed on the Children of Israel, as it is written, "Your garment did not wear out upon you and your feet did not swell" (Deuteronomy 8:4), and it immediately tried to make all sorts of doubts and wicked thoughts enter into their heart. It wanted to confuse them concerning the difference between the manna (spiritual food that was holy) and what they ate in Egypt (material food, savory and nourishing). The Children of Israel then concluded that they also wanted the food of Egypt.

Even so, they should have understood that all this stemmed from their evil inclination, which looked for ways to make them sin. In fact, what did it matter what the Egyptians ate at other times – wasn't the main thing to rejoice at present over spiritual food such as the manna? Yet they didn't reflect upon this, and they dropped considerably in their spiritual level. This teaches us that if a man doesn't sufficiently reflect upon things, and doesn't pay enough attention to his wicked thoughts, his spiritual state can suffer greatly.

Recalling sin can be dangerous, to the point of destroying the desire to repent. One should therefore always ask G-d to "remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellions" (Psalms 25:7). The Gemara contains two instructions on this point. The first (Kiddushin 40a) is that the Holy One, blessed be He, does not ascribe a wicked thought to the deed, as it is written, "Had

Continuation page 2

I perceived iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened” (Psalms 66:18). The Sages’ second instruction, however, is that imagining sin is worse than actually committing it (Yoma 29a). What difference is there, therefore, between thought and imagination?

A wicked thought is not actually considered an act, for an actual act has not been committed just by thinking about it, and if it has been, it still remains possible to correct it through repentance. But imagining a sin, dreaming about it, affects the heart and has an influence on the entire body. Now a man doesn’t consider it necessary to repent of an imperfection of the heart, which is what makes it so serious. He takes joy in his daydreams, which brings about a great spiritual fall. One must therefore avoid such fantasies and remedy them immediately. In the desert, the Children of Israel recalled what they had eaten in Egypt, enjoying these impure foods in their imagination so much that their hearts and thoughts were affected, resulting in their stern protests against Moses.

Each person should therefore purify his thoughts, which will allow him to be elevated. This is what we observe at the end of the account concerning Tziporah: “Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses regarding the Cushite woman he had married” (Numbers 12:1). Tziporah was called a “Cushite woman” (eminently beautiful) because everyone recognized her beauty, which alludes to her beauty both in appearance and deeds (Tanhuma 96:13). How were her deeds beautiful? Apparently, she could have protested against her husband Moses because he had separated himself from her for the sake of the community (a decision that G-d had approved – Shabbat 87a), and she probably would have wished to continue living with him. However, she didn’t at all complain, and she kept herself from all harmful imaginations and wicked thoughts concerning her husband, which is why she was called beautiful both in appearance and deed. In fact, wicked thoughts bring about sin, whereas holy thoughts elevate a man.

THE STORY OF THE WEEK

A CHILD’S LIBERATION

It is written, “One who kidnaps a man and sells him ... shall surely be put to death” (Exodus 21:16).

When Nicolas I ascended to the throne of Russia, the situation began to deteriorate for the Jews, against whom numerous decrees were enacted. Particularly cruel was the “conscription” law, which incited Russians to take Jewish children away from their parents and place them with the authorities so that they could serve in the army for many long years.

In the region of the town of Salant, it was decreed that a child was to be sent into the army. The leaders of the community turned their gaze towards the poor, as was their habit in such cases. During that time there was a poor widow living in Salant, a woman who earned her living by playing a crank-organ. She usually had her young son with her, and he would pick up the coins that passing Jews threw her. The community delegates took this boy from his mother, assigned him the name of one of the local boys, and prepared to send him into the army to fulfill their “duty” towards the state. The cries of this poor widow ascended all the way to Heaven, and having become half-crazed she unsuccessfully went from house to house, knocking on the doors of the town’s Gabaim. At the same time, Rabbi Israel came to spend Shabbat in Salant. Seeing before her a person of noble appearance, this woman fell to his feet and begged him to save her son. Rabbi Israel listened to her story, calmed her down, and asked her to return after Shabbat.

On Friday night and Shabbat afternoon, Rabbi Israel went to pray at the synagogue and didn’t say a word of this matter to anyone. After the morning prayers, all the prominent men of the area came over to him to hear Kid-dush. After reciting it, all of a sudden Rabbi Israel got up from his seat and became incredibly angry. He began to insult those present by treating them like murderers and kidnappers. Since he knew the leaders of the community,

he addressed himself to each and every one of them personally. To one he said, “You are a Tzaddik – on Shabbat you attach a handkerchief around your neck so as not carry, even when there is an Eruv – but it hardly matters to you if you transgress the command: ‘One who kidnaps a man and sells him ... shall surely be put to death!’” To another: “You eat only shmurah matzah and use only a particularly beautiful etrog, yet you don’t at all fear transgressing the commandment, ‘You shall not cause pain to any widow or orphan,’ which brings about a punishment of death from Heaven!” And in this way Rabbi Israel spoke to a third, then to a fourth and so on, and nobody could find a way to answer him. In the end, Rabbi Israel jumped from out of his seat as if a serpent had bitten him, cried bitterly that it was forbidden to be in the company of the wicked, and left the city in the middle of Shabbat!

Rumors of what had happened spread from house to house. The terrible wrath of Rabbi Israel (the Gaon and Tzaddik of his generation), and his sudden departure from the city, struck its inhabitants to the depths of their souls. Even the leaders of the community, those who were responsible for having taken the child, recognized their sin and decided to liberate him to appease Rabbi Israel. Yet nobody in the entire town had the courage to present himself to him, until Rabbi Eliyahu of Karatinga, who was there at the time, took the matter in hand. After much searching, he found Rabbi Israel deep in thought, walking about on the mountains within the permitted Shabbat distance. When Rabbi Eliyahu told him that the decision had been made to liberate the child, Rabbi Israel accepted to return to town.

They say that when the conscription law was rescinded, Rabbi Israel was so overjoyed that he scolded his disciples for not having recited the blessing of HaTov Ve’HaMetiv (“Blessed ... Who is good and does good”) in its entirety, without omitting the Name of G-d.

IN MEMORY OF THE TSADIKIM

RABBI EPHRAIM ENKAOUA

To this day the Jews of Morocco evoke with awe and veneration the name of the holy Tzaddik, Rabbi Ephraim Enkaoua, may his merit protect us. Rabbi Ephraim was born in 5114 (1354) in Toledo, Spain.

From his youth he distinguished himself by his exceptional abilities, intelligence, and extraordinary memory. All those who knew him felt respect and admiration for him. During his early years, he studied Torah with his father, who was a great Tzaddik. Thanks to his great intelligence and lively mind, he quickly acquired a broad knowledge of Shas and the Poskim. At the age of 13, his father sent him to Girondi, where he attended the famous yeshiva of the venerated Gaon Rabbeinu Nissim, one of the great Sages of Spain.

During this time the Jews of Spain experienced a period a peace and tranquility that lasted until 5150 (1390), when King Alfonso died. At that point the inquisition began, and the Jewish communities of Seville, then of Cordova and Toledo, experienced the worst of tragedies. Some were forced to convert to Christianity, but the great majority of Jews, confronted by the cruel choice of dying or converting, chose death. It was with courage and pride that they went to their deaths in sanctifying the Name of G-d, among them being the grandson of Rosh, Rabbeinu Asher.

With his own eyes Rabbi Ephraim Enkaoua saw his father die as a martyr, yet he himself, 37 years old at the time, managed to escape death. In the middle of the night he fled to the city of Malaga in the south of Spain, and two weeks later he arrived in Morocco.

During this time, Jewry in North Africa was in a very poor state, both religiously and economically. Jewish communities lived in great ignorance and even ended up adopting certain irrational Berber customs.

Rabbi Ephraim Enkaoua settled in the town of Marakech and immediately began to organize community life there. He founded schools for young children, as well as a yeshiva for adolescents, and taught them Torah and Mussar. In but a short time the Jewish community was transformed; in the synagogues, merchants and craftsmen came to hear Torah discourses, and once again the voice of Torah resounded.

Rabbi Ephraim Enkaoua had the reputation of being a “master of miracles.” He traveled to the villages of Morocco with the goal of strengthening Torah study and the observance of mitzvot. During this time the city of

Tlemcen was forbidden to Jews. Following a series of events, however, the king of Morocco gave the authorization for Jews to once again live in Tlemcen, and he named Rabbi Ephraim Enkaoua as Rabbi of the city. The king gladly agreed and honored all his requests.

Rabbi Ephraim Enkaoua founded a yeshiva in Tlemcen that quickly became one of the main centers of Judaism in Morocco. He was known not only for his knowledge of Torah, but also for the miracles that he performed. One of the most spectacular involved a lion and a snake.

To the south of Tlemcen lay an immense forest populated with wild beasts. One day, a fearsome lion ventured out of the forest and killed several inhabitants of the city. This event occurred several times, and everyone in the city was panic stricken. As soon as Rabbi Ephraim Enkaoua learned of what had happened, he enveloped himself in his Tallit, donned his Tefillin, and majestically went into the forest unarmed. After a brief moment, a raging lion leaped in front of the Tzaddik. Without losing his composure, Rabbi Ephraim Enkaoua recited a verse of Psalms: “Upon the lion and the viper you will tread; you will trample the young lion and the serpent” (Psalms 91: 13). Suddenly changed, the lion approached the Tzaddik, crouched down before him, and lay at his feet. All of a sudden, a long snake came closer to them and coiled itself near the Tzaddik. Rabbi Ephraim grabbed it, climbed onto the back of the lion, and then wrapped the serpent around the lion’s head like a bridle and headed for the city. The Rabbi rode throughout Tlemcen on the back of the lion while using the serpent as a bridle. All the inhabitants of the city were shocked – their eyes wide open at what they saw. When he arrived at the Jewish quarter he assembled everyone around and said the following: “Look and you will understand. It is not the lion, nor the serpent that kills, but rather it is sin that gives wild beasts the power to harm.”

Rabbi Ephraim Enkaoua descended from the lion, then he let the serpent go from his hands and it vanished from sight. Wild beasts no longer entered into Tlemcen from that moment on, and all the inhabitants of the city, both Jews and Muslims, thereafter viewed Rabbi Ephraim Enkaoua with more respect and fear than ever, seeing in him a holy man.

Rabbi Ephraim enjoyed his latter years, dying in Tlemcen in 5202 (1442) at the age of 88. Since his death, the Jews of Morocco regularly come to pray at his grave on the day of his Hilloula, Lag BaOmer.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY FROM THE MAGGID OF DUBNO

It is written, “Aaron did so; towards the face of the Menorah he kindled its lamps” (Numbers 8:3).

The Sifri states: “This verse is written in honor of Aaron, to show that he didn’t change anything [of G-d’s instructions].”

It is written, “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me” (Ecclesiastes 7:23). King Solomon carried out an investigation into the matter, he reflected upon the entire Torah, and he found a reason for all the mitzvot. Yet when he came to the section of the Red Heifer, he said, “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me.”

The commentators explain that there are no grounds to look for the reasons behind Hashem’s mitzvot. We must demonstrate only unwavering confidence in Him, as the verse states: “I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I have placed Your ordinances [before me]” (Psalms 119:30). This means that even concerning those statutes that I legitimately have the right to question, I will treat them like all other mitzvot, meaning only with absolute fidelity.

We may take the example of a merchant who had entrusted some funds to someone to purchase merchandise for him. While one route the man engages in some business with the money that he has been charged with, and he makes a profit out of it. Next, he purchases the merchandise that he was responsible for buying, and the merchant pays him generously for his services. Why then did he need to look for extra ways to become rich?

In the same way, if someone performs the mitzvah of not stealing because of the benefit that this entails for society, he makes a profit with the Divine “funds” entrusted to him, even though Hashem reward a man greatly in the world to come!

This is why King David asks for forgiveness: “Teach me good reasoning and knowledge, for I have been faithful to Your commandments” (Psalms 119:66) – I am worthy that You teach them to me, because of the faithfulness that I have shown to Your commandments.

THE PATH OF THE JUST SHAME - PART V

A man who possesses modesty as a virtue will not allow his fellow to experience shame because of him. Concerning this, a Sage once said, “Befriend a man who claims that he cannot get by without your help, whereas in reality it is you who needs him more. Also, befriend a man who, if you injure him, will forgive you by asserting that it was he who was at fault. Finally, befriend a man who asks you for things that he doesn’t need in order that you will not be embarrassed to ask him for things that you need.”

The one who desires to become accustomed to modesty should stay in the company of those before whom he feels shame. He should not lose his dignity by constantly asking others for favors, for if he loses his dignity, it will be difficult to find someone willing to give it back to him.

Some people shame others not because of hate, but rather to justify their own feelings of shame. For example, they will act in a disgraceful way and say, “What did I do that was so bad? Didn’t [so and so] do the same?” It’s in this way that they relieve themselves of their own feelings of shame. Such behavior is very detrimental because, first of all, people who do this shame others for their own benefit. In addition, they close the doors of repentance by thinking, “What I did wasn’t so bad, for [so and so] did the same.” Moreover, they lead others to transgress, for this sin will have lost its shameful character and will appear insignificant in the eyes of others. And if such individuals slander people in order to suppress their own feelings of shame, their punishment will be harsh indeed, for they will have harmed honest people and ensured that many other evils will follow.

Some men shy away from guarding themselves from sin if, for example, their peers are used to committing certain sins (for example, staring at women) and shame others who abstain from sinning. In such a case, one must courageously tolerate this shame and avoid sin, even if one suffers insult as a result.