

הַמִּצְוֹת 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

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THE ZEAL OF PINCHAS REPAIRS THE SIN COMMITTED IN MIDIAN

(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)

It is written, "The L-RD spoke to Moses, saying: Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the Priest.... Therefore say: 'Behold! I give him My covenant of peace' (Numbers 25:10-12). There are several things to understand in these verses.

1. We know that throughout the Torah, when G-d wants to communicate something to the Children of Israel through Moses, He says, "Speak to the Children of Israel," or "Command the Children of Israel," and other such expressions. Consequently, here too it should have been stated, "Speak to Pinchas and tell him that I give him...." Why does the verse immediately refer to what Pinchas the son of Elazar did?

2. Why is the letter vav in the word shalom ("peace") broken (see Kiddushin 66b)?

3. Above all, we must explain why the verse connects Pinchas to Aaron. Rashi says in the name of the Sages that since the tribes scorned Pinchas because he was a descendant of Jethro (who had been an idolater), the verse highlights that he descended from Aaron (Sanhedrin 82b). Now this is very surprising. Pinchas removed the threat of annihilation that weighed heavily upon the Children of Israel because they had strayed after wicked ways (Sanhedrin 93a; 106a), which rendered them liable to death. The Torah explicitly says, "I did not consume the Children of Israel in My vengeance" (Numbers 25:11). As a result, how could they get the idea of scorning the man who had saved them from certain death?

We shall attempt to explain all this. One should realize that the temptation to get involved in forbidden relationships is incredibly powerful, to the point that the Sages regarded it as necessary to surround the prohibition with numerous protective injunctions. For example, in the area of speech the Sages have said, "Do not indulge excessively in conversation with the woman" (Perkei Avoth 1:5), because in this way a person risks harming himself: Excessive talk leads to

looking, then to more serious things. As the Sages have said, "The eye sees, the heart desires, and the body commits the act."

There is an enormous difference between this desire and all others, for with all others a man is limited. Even if he has a great amount of money, the desire for more does not go beyond a certain level; money can't be eaten, it can only be kept. In reality, there is not much difference between the rich and the poor, other than one having money and the other not, one possessing businesses and homes and the other not; the fact remains that they both have food to eat. It is different with desires connected to forbidden relationships, which are very difficult to conquer. This is, moreover, why the Torah warned us about it so much, and why the Sages established fences that prevent us from even coming close to a woman in niddah or being alone with a woman. It is in order that we avoid the risk of sinning.

What follows is a story that illustrates to what point it is appropriate to impose prohibitions on oneself. One day a certain Jew, who had returned to the Torah and become a G-d fearing Talmid Chacham, came to see me in tears. He had failed to keep himself from being dragged into this grave sin at his office with a non-Jewish woman (who was married to a non-Jew). They had begun by joking around with each other, until they had almost committed this sin. Yet the power of Torah had sustained him; he fled from his office, and now he was crying before me. He asked, "How did I get to this point, since I studied Torah and carefully observed all the mitzvot? How is this possible?"

I replied, "First of all, you don't have to cry or feel hopeless. The evil inclination wants nothing more than to bring a man to deep despair by telling him, 'You clearly see that you don't have the strength to repent of your sins.' You should therefore take heart and realize that you did a great mitzvah and an act of valor, since far from actually committing the sin, you fled at the last minute, which will be considered as a great merit on your account. Yet all

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this is on condition that you never place yourself in such a situation, for who knows if you will again manage to be victorious!

“As for the question of knowing how this could happen to you since you study Torah, know that it came as a result of your transgressing the prohibition against being alone with a woman. You were alone with this woman in your office, and following that you began to speak with her of this and that, until finally the situation got to the point that you wouldn’t have been saved without the merit of the Torah.”

This terrible story occurred during the week of Parsha Balak. Concerning this fact, I explained to him that we read this parsha during vacation time, for it is a time when the streets are filled with lewdness, to the point that Balaam’s advice on how to make a Jew sin takes on its full strength once again. Yet G-d created a balance in the world (Ecclesiastes 7:14), and it is precisely during the week of Parsha Balak, during a time when debauchery prevails, that we read of the deed of Pinchas, who demonstrated his zeal for the L-RD of Hosts and thus awakened the power to conquer this particular temptation.

Everything that we have explained allows us to understand why Pinchas is called “son of Elazar, son of Aaron the Priest.” Actually, he prevented an epidemic from breaking out in Israel, and consequently he should have immediately received his reward from G-d. Now if G-d had said, “Speak to Pinchas...”, the reward would have been delayed by a slight instant, which would have been an imperfection. This is why He immediately said, “Pinchas, son of Elazar...” It was to give him his reward immediately, without having to wait an instant. This is also why the letter vav is broken: It teaches us that everything which Pinchas did was perfect, for the word shalom (“peace”) with a broken vav can also be read as shaleim (“perfect”, “complete”). He therefore acted to perfection – without any personal concerns – solely for the honor of G-d, and with the totality of his 248 members and 365 tendons. The upper part of the vav points upwards, for everything was done for the love of Heaven, and the lower part alludes to the resoluteness of Pinchas, who remained as perfect as before, without any sin.

And yet when we examine Pinchas’ action, our surprise and questions increase. First, he apparently did not have the right to act in this way without the permission of the Beit Din. Second, he deliberately put his life at risk. Third, he taught Halachah before his teacher Moses, who did not remember that those who are inflamed with zeal can strike one who has relations with an Aramean (Tanhuma Balak 20). Finally, the offending party could have died by Pinchas’ hand, yet he was a priest and it was forbidden for him to become impure through contact with the dead. He could not have known that a miracle was going to be performed for him at that instant.

To answer these questions, we must say that Pinchas felt that this sin was, so to speak, tormenting G-d. Now a man should at all cost avoid any actions that arouse this type of suffering. For Pinchas, it was urgent to put an end to it, be it by infringing upon the laws of the Torah for G-d’s sake (see Psalms 119:126). It was to the extent that Pinchas did not address himself to any Beit Din, neglected danger, and ignored his teacher Moses and the Sanhedrin. Pinchas only considered the glory of G-d, which was being profaned at that moment. Yet not everyone is able to arrive at such a perfect state of godly fervor. This requires extreme vigilance, for there is a great risk of profaning G-d’s Name, through pride – through a sense of one’s own honor – by wanting to have the same zeal for the glory of G-d as did Pinchas. Yet here, the Holy One, blessed be He, testified concerning Pinchas that all his zeal was for the love of Heaven (“when he zealously avenged Me”), which is why He gave him His covenant of peace.

Since we are mentioning this, I thought to add that Pinchas’ deed was marked by a love of Heaven to the point that even if the spectacle of what Zimri did made Pinchas recall the Halachah (Sanhedrin 82a), it still remains that it is said concerning him: “He stood up amid the assembly” (Numbers 25:7). This means that he still felt himself to be an integral member of the community, not superior to it. He was free of all pride, which is the meaning of “when he zealously avenged Me among them” – not in any way above them.

If Pinchas’ behavior had contained the slightest trace of personal interest, this could have put the community in danger. This is why it is written, “He stood up amid the assembly.” This means that even when he acted, he remained in the midst of the community, without any pride or sense of vanity. This is what brought about a perfect response, pleasing to G-d and true. This idea is also behind the scorn of the Children of Israel: It was difficult for them to imagine that Pinchas could have acted for the love of Heaven. In fact, if that had been permitted, wouldn’t Moses – the head of the people – have done so himself? They therefore concluded that Pinchas wanted to embarrass Moses for not having known the Halachah in such a case, which is why they scorned him, for they couldn’t see into his heart. When a person does something good, everyone regrets not having done the same, and they ask themselves what merit permitted that person to do so. Yet at the same time they mock and scorn him in order to downplay the importance of his deed. This is why the verse highlights that Pinchas descended from Aaron the Priest. It is a way to assert that he only acted for the love of Heaven, as did his grandfather, and that the Jewish people were saved by his merit.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY FROM THE MAGID OF DUBNO

It is written, “You loved evil more than good, falsehood more than speaking righteously, Selah. ... Likewise, G-d will shatter you for eternity ... and uproot you from the land of life, Selah” (Psalms 52:5,7).

The word **וּשְׁרַטְךָ** (“and uproot you”) can designate something and its opposite at the same time. The root of the word, **שָׂרַט**, clearly indicates the act of planting (to strike root), but it is often understood by commentators as meaning “to uproot”, which is the meaning dictated by the context of our passage (i.e., to uproot from the land of life). Nevertheless, it must be explained how a word that means “to strike root” has come to be understood as “to uproot”.

A thief caught sight of a young man who was carrying some bags full of money from the house of a wealthy man to the store of a well-known merchant. All day long the thief saw him transferring money. Looking for a way to steal these valuable bags from him, he noticed a store along the path that the servant took in coming and going, a store that sold expensive clothes. The thief went into the store and said to the merchant: “My friend, a famous man from the city of [such and such] sent me to your store to buy some clothes for him. He is ready to pay a hefty price for them, but only on condition that they fit perfectly, as is appropriate for a man of his stature.”

The merchant replied, “But how can I know his measurements, since he’s not here?”

The thief responded, “We’ll both stand outside the door of your store, and perhaps we’ll see someone passing by who is exactly his size.”

As soon as the young man carrying a bag of money passed in front of them, the thief cried out, “Look! This boy passing before us is exactly like my master. He is exactly the same size!” The merchant called to him and said, “Come here for a minute. Undress yourself and slip on these beautiful clothes so that I can see if they fit. I’ll compensate you for it!” The boy agreed, set down the bag that he had on his shoulder, and took off his clothes. He then put on the elegant clothes and began to pose in order to show how regal he looked all dressed up. Meanwhile, the thief snatched the bag and fled. The servant wanted to jump in full pursuit, but the merchant grabbed him by his clothes and said, “First take off all these clothes!” By the time he got undressed and put on his own clothes, the thief had already managed to disappear and get back to his hiding place.

Man is composed of a body that comes from below and a dignified soul that comes from above. The soul is attached to the body like a flame to a candle. It impatiently waits for the body to be completely used up so that it can escape to its home, like a flame at the moment when a candle extinguishes. What does the Satan do when he sees the soul of the wicked and desires to separate it from its root in the celestial realm, so that it may never again ascend? He clothes it with all the desires of this world, until it creates a bond with these desires which is so great that it can never leave them. At the moment that it must separate itself from the body, it strives to ascend, but the angels

in charge of desires hold it back and say, “Remove the stained clothes that you wore, then you can ascend!” Thus, by the very fact that the wicked is rooted below, he finds himself uprooted above. This is the significance of “You loved evil more than good,” which we can understand as “You loved evil because of good,” meaning the fact that you desired the good of this world made you obtain evil, for you chose “falsehood more than speaking righteously.” The grammarians have quite rightly observed that this is a word that reverses the action. In reality it means striking root below, but often (as here) it designates an uprooting from the source. We can therefore understand it in its proper sense: “He will strike root in this world, to be uprooted from the land of the living.”

THE STORY OF THE WEEK

WISDOM ACCOMPANIES DISCRETION

The Chida recounts the following story:

“I heard from an old Rav that he was told, during the time of Rabbi Shlomo Luria (the Maharshal), that there was a fruit and vegetable store located above his Beit Midrash. The owner of the store was called Reb Avraham, a discrete and quiet man who had no quarrels with anyone. The store also served as his living quarters. It happened that on one night, while getting up, the Maharshal heard that Reb Avraham was studying a very difficult subject, which he explained in all its facets. From that moment on, he understood that the discrete Reb Avraham was a great man. He sent someone to ask him a complicated question on the Gemara, and when the envoy arrived, Reb Avraham replied that he was an ignorant person and did not understand what the Sages said.

“The Maharshal did not give up, and so he sent another person. After great insistence on the part of the Rav, Reb Avraham finally opened his mouth and uttered words that shined by their sheer wisdom and the competency that they implied. For his part, Reb Avraham simply laid down the condition that the Maharshal should keep this a secret, and that he would not reveal his scholarship to anyone. Since that time, the Maharshal regularly discussed the depths of Torah secrets with Reb Avraham, without anyone suspecting a thing.

“In 5333 [1573], when the Maharshal was close to passing away from this world, he ordered that Reb Avraham, the vegetable merchant, be named as Rav of his town of Lublin, for no one was as great as he! The will of the Maharshal was only carried out after numerous appeals and insistence.”

The Chida finished this story by saying, “Whoever is gifted with sensibility will understand to what point discretion and modesty are the means by which to arrive at a knowledge of Torah for itself and wisdom, for his Torah proclaims his greatness and G-d does not refuse good for those who walk in righteousness.”

– Taken from La’Anavim Iten Chen

IN MEMORY OF THE TZADIKIM

RABBAN GAMLIEL

Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua were in a boat. Rabban Gamliel had some bread and Rabbi Yehoshua had some semolina. When Rabban Gamliel used up his bread, he began to eat Rabbi Yehoshua's semolina, saying to him, "How did you guess that we would be so delayed that you brought semolina?" (Semolina lasts longer than bread). He replied, "There exists a star that appears once every 70 years and fools the captain of boats. I told myself that it might appear and cause us to go astray." Rabban Gamliel then asked him, "If you are so knowledgeable, why do you roam the seas to earn a living?" Rabbi Yehoshua replied, "Before being surprised at me, be surprised at two students that you have at yeshiva, Rabbi Eliezer ben Chisma and Rabbi Yochanan ben Gudgeda. They know how many drops of water there are in the sea, yet have no bread to eat or clothes to wear."

Rabban Gamliel noted it well, wanting to place them at the head of the yeshiva so they could earn a living from such a position. When he arrived at the yeshiva he had them summoned, but they did not present themselves because they fled from honor. Once again he had them summoned, and this time they came. He told them, "Do you think that I am giving you honor? I am bestowing servitude upon you, as it is written, 'If today you become a servant to this people' [I Kings 12:7]."

One time, Rabban Gamliel was in the middle of teaching the following lesson: "In the future, a woman will give birth every day, as it is written, 'the pregnant and the birthing together' [Jeremiah 31:8]." A student began to mock him and said, "There is nothing new under the sun." Rabban Gamliel responded, "I will show you an example in this world." They went outside and he showed him a hen.

Again, Rabban Gamliel taught: "In the future, the trees will yield their fruit every day, as it is written, 'to produce branches and bear fruit' [Ezekiel 17:8]." This same student mocked him again and said, "There is nothing new under the sun." He replied, "I will show you an example in this world." They went outside and he showed him a caper plant, which bears fruit many times a year.

Again, Rabbi Gamliel taught: "In the future, Eretz Israel will make loaves of bread and clothes of pure and clean wool come out of the ground, as it is writ-

ten, 'May there be abundant ?? [grain] on the earth' [Psalms 72:16]." (Note: The word ?? designates food, as in the story of Joseph. It also evokes the idea of cleanliness and purity, as in the expression *bara ka'chama* ["pure as the sun"- Song of Songs 6:10]). The same student mocked him once more, saying, "There is nothing new under the sun." Yet again he replied, "I will show you an example in this world." They went outside and he showed him some truffles and mushrooms, which appeared as is overnight, and which were large and round like loaves of bread. Concerning woolen clothes, he showed him the fibers that were growing around a palm tree, which look similar to clothes (Shabbat 30a; Rashi ibid; Avoth HaOlam).

THE PATH OF THE JUST

IMPUDENCE - PART II

It is for this reason that we say, during Vidui (confession of sins), "For we are not so impudent and obdurate as to declare before You, L-RD our G-d and G-d of our fathers, that we are righteous and have not sinned." It is a very bad attitude for the sinner to say, "I haven't sinned." In that case Hashem judges him without pity, as it is written, "For all these [I condemn you]: That you say, 'No, I am pure' " (Jeremiah 2:35) and also, "He who confesses and forsakes [his sins] will be granted mercy" (Proverbs 28:13). Now the impudent person is far from repentance.

This trait is extremely inappropriate, for it leads a man to humiliate people, in particular the poor, as it is written, "A pauper utters supplications, but a rich one responds with brazen words" (ibid 18:23). All the more so is it bad to shame one's teachers and behave impudently with them by refusing their reprimands. This tendency, which risks separating a person from the world, should be excluded from everyone's character.

Nevertheless, this trait is very much appreciated when it is used in the service of the Torah and the commandments, as when a person faces the wicked and disregards their words, doesn't accept their lies or wicked deeds, and doesn't flatter them. A certain measure of boldness must also be used in the performance of the commandments, even if one must suffer the mockery of others. One must also be bold towards one's teachers in order to ask them what one doesn't understand (Perkei Avoth 3:5). One must also be bold to reprimand others and reveal a fellow's sins to him.

A man should control this trait, eliminating it when it is untimely and dominating it according to his abilities. It is very difficult to escape from shortcomings if a person doesn't use all his strength as much to conquer this trait (and distance himself from it when it leads to sin), as to instilling it within himself and using it when it will earn merit.