

הַמַּתּוֹט THE PATH TO FOLLOW

**No 91
MATOT
23 TAMUZ 5765
JULY.30.2005**

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Responsible of publication Hanania Soussan

THE ROLE OF THE TRIBAL LEADERS: LEADING THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL IN PATHS OF HUMILITY AND INTROSPECTION (by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)

It is written, "And Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Children of Israel, saying: 'This is the thing that the L-RD has commanded: If a man takes a vow to the L-RD, or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not desecrate his word. According to whatever comes from his mouth, he shall do' " (Numbers 30:2-3).

There are several points that need to be clarified:

1. Why is it written, "the head of the tribes" rather than "the princes," since they were princes?

2. Why does the verse begin with the word va'yidaber ("and he spoke"), which always denotes a harsh way of speaking, and continues with leimor ("saying"), which denotes a gentle way of expressing oneself (see Shabbat 87a)?

3. Concerning the heads of the tribes, Rashi writes: "He bestowed honor on the leaders by teaching them this law first, and afterwards all the Children of Israel." Now it is difficult to see what new information this gives us, for it seems obvious that the leaders should be honored first. What is Rashi telling us by this?

Moses our teacher knew that the princes had the ability to influence, for better or for worse, the behavior of the Children of Israel. We see this with respect to the spies, who were the greatest among the people, yet exerted a negative influence on the Children of Israel, to the point that they refused to enter Eretz Israel and stayed in the desert for 40 years, where they died. We see the same thing with Korach and his followers, among them being Nachshon and Aminadav, who led a portion of the people to contest the priesthood as well as Moses' position. All this was because they sought only their own interests. The spies wanted to remain in the desert as princes, knowing that they would no longer hold such positions once they entered Eretz Israel, which is why they spoke derisively of the land (see Numbers 14:37). Korach also spoke derisively of Moses and Aaron because he wanted to take over their roles along with his 250 followers.

However if the princes, leaders of the Children of Israel, would act with humility and be self-effacing before G-d, if

they would study Torah and perform mitzvot selflessly, it is clear that they could have a beneficial influence on the people, who would thereby be encouraged to serve G-d. Naturally, this is only on condition that they not be preoccupied with their own personal honor, but rather with G-d's alone.

We may now understand the passage concerning the princes. The Torah begins with a harsh way of speaking (va'yidaber) because the text is concerned with the honor and good of the princes. Moses wanted to teach them the correct way to serve G-d so that his harsh words would be beneficial to them. Thus he spoke "to the heads of the tribes" to transmit the following information to them: To have a positive effect on the Children of Israel, you must behave with humility by abasing and disregarding yourselves. You play an important role, which is that of a tribal leader and prince, a role that involves many honors, but you must be careful to not take advantage of it and become filled with pride.

This is why he called them "the heads of the tribes," not princes, for this lesson is alluded to in the word hamatot ("the tribes"), which has the same numerical value as the words haga'avah met ("pride is death"). The word matot also teaches us that princes should conduct themselves with humility – as heads of the tribes (hamatot) by gazing downwards (lematah) and not with upraised eyes through pride – for a person must expunge and completely eradicate his pride. In fact pride only befits G-d, as it is written: "The L-RD has reigned. He has donned grandeur" (Psalms 93: 1). If they behaved as such, the Children of Israel would learn this trait from them. He also spoke harshly to them in order that they learn from their predecessors (the spies, Korach and his followers), who died for not having diminished their pride. If they would learn that lesson and behave humbly, good would result for them in this world and in the World to Come. This is what constitutes leimor, a gentle word, gentle and good, like the good to come, since it was from them that the Children of Israel would learn to come closer to G-d with humility, abasement, and self-annulment.

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To achieve the virtue of humility, however, we must study Torah; it is impossible to expunge pride without it. This is why Moses began by honoring the princes and teaching them about vows, for a vow and the Torah are related, as is evident from what the Sages stated: "He who says, 'I will rise early to study this chapter or this tractate' has vowed a great vow to the G-d of Israel" (Nedarim 8a). This is a great vow because greatness and honor stem from Torah. In fact through the intermediary of this vow, study no longer becomes an ordinary act, but rather a sacred deed before G-d. The one who vows to study Torah is protected from the evil inclination, for the Torah is its antidote (Kiddushin 30b). Torah study actually enables a person to establish limits for himself and to behave with sanctity, in the spirit of the verse: "He shall not desecrate his word. According to whatever comes from his mouth, he shall do" (Numbers 30:3). If the princes would behave

with humility, the Children of Israel would also learn to behave with humility. They would also be vigilant with everything that comes from their mouths, and G-d would carry out everything they say.

This was the advice that Moses gave to the princes: If they wanted to be leaders, they would have to behave with humility and erase their pride by making vows and studying Torah. The Children of Israel would then learn to conduct themselves in the same way, their words would no longer be mundane, and G-d would carry out everything that came from their mouths, in the spirit of the teaching: "The righteous decree and the Holy One, blessed be He, executes" (Moed Katan 16a). The Holy One, blessed be He, decrees and the righteous can annul the decree, for a righteous person has sanctified his words, and the Holy One, blessed be He, will carry them out.

THE STORY OF THE WEEK

HE SEND HIM TO GOSHEN TO BUILD A YESHIVA

The Beit Yaakov school of Brisk was located in a completely secular neighborhood, and its students came from all the surrounding towns. One non-observant family who lived nearby preferred to send their daughter there, rather than to make her travel a long way to another school that was more in line with their beliefs. The parents openly desecrated Shabbat, and the store they owned stayed open on Shabbat. The girl, who received her education at Beit Yaakov, knew just how serious this sin was, but she could not do anything against her parents' wishes.

One Friday her parents told her, "Tomorrow you'll open the store and run things for us. We have to leave for a day or two." What was she going to do – desecrate Shabbat? She knew that it was forbidden, but she could not disobey her parents. When the first client arrived, he asked the girl to sell him a small, fine-looking object that was worth about a half-zloty. "Absolutely not sir," replied the young girl. "Today this object is worth 100 zlotys, not less!"

"Have you gone mad?" the man said in astonishment when he heard the exorbitant price. However the girl did not waver. "I'm not changing what I said," she calmly replied. "The price for this object is 100 zlotys."

"Alright," said the man. "I'll give you 10 zlotys for it."

"What are you talking about? I said the price was 100 zlotys!" the young girl persisted as she sat calmly at the desk, her heart content, for she had managed to avoid doing business on Shabbat. The man left and returned half an hour later, adding 10 zlotys more

to his offer, but without success. Every so often he would return, each time adding more to his offer, but the sale never took place.

At the end of Shabbat, when business could be done, the man came back to the store with 100 zlotys and purchased the object. "You see," he explained to the young girl, "I just finished changing the furniture in my apartment, and when I saw this object in the window, it impressed me a great deal. I knew that it would complement my furniture, and so I decided to buy it regardless of the price! Now you know why I've agreed to pay such an enormous sum."

The young girl was stunned to see the hand of G-d rewarding those who kept Shabbat.

When her parents came back home and heard the details of the story, they could not believe their ears.

"We have to believe," they concluded with a contented smile, "that by the merit of Shabbat we earned 100 zlotys for an object that was only worth a half-zloty!" From then on, they began to study all the mitzvot and became Ba'alei Teshuvah.

Rabbi Yitzchak Zev recounted this story to a regular visitor to his home. He had asked Rabbi Yitzchak Zev about an opportunity to establish a Beit Yaakov school in a secular neighborhood. There the residents were sending their daughters to schools located far away, but would have preferred sending them to a nearby, religious school.

This story was the decisive answer that he received, and it was as if the rav had told him, "Don't hesitate to do this, for you will be saving lost Jewish souls!"

IN MEMORY OF THE TZADIKIM

RABBI YECHIEL MICHAEL HALEVI EPSTEIN – THE ARUCH HASHULCHAN

Our Sages have said, “A man is called by three names: One that his father and mother give him, a second that other people call him, and a third by which he is designated in the book of the generations of his creation [i.e., one that he earns by his conduct]” (Ecclesiastes Rabba 7:1:3). The best is the one that he earns himself.

The Rav of Novardok, Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, was one of the few men in the last century to have had the merit of not being called by a name that others gave him, but rather by his own work. He was known the world over by the name of his book, Aruch HaShulchan.

Who was this rav on whom the Divine Presence rested to clarify Halachah in all realms of Torah, and what were the spiritual characteristics that enabled him to merit such an enduring reputation?

Rabbi Yechiel Michael Epstein was the son of Rabbi Aaron Yitzchak, a businessman in the town of Brisk. He was born on Shevat 20, 5589 (1829), and from childhood he demonstrated exceptional talents. He had a pleasant disposition, and he diligently studied Torah day and night.

The prosperous Rabbi Yaakov Berlin (the father of the Netziv of Volozhin) heard people speaking highly of him, and so he took him as his son-in-law. Rabbi Yechiel Michael continued to study Torah selflessly after his marriage, and since he did not want to use the Torah for personal ends, he never imagined that he would become a rav. He wanted to become a businessman like his father, who had set times for Torah study.

In fact people say that several years after Rabbi Yechiel Michael's marriage, he opened a textile business that his wife ran while he studied Torah. Since the business was in his name, each time that a government official came to inspect his shop, Rabbi Yechiel Michael had to be present. One day some people saw him walking in the street looking around. When they asked him what he was searching for, he candidly replied, “I'm looking for my shop.” Naturally, this type of “businessman” did not succeed in his ventures, and after a certain time he lost all his money. Rabbi Yechiel Michael then said, “It is certain that Heaven wants me to become a rav,” and so he did.

His first position was in the small town of Novozivkov. Even though it was a chassidic town, inhabited mostly by Chabad chassidim, and to a lesser extent by Chernobyl chassidim, they chose this young Lithuanian to be the rav of their community because he was the symbol of refinement, and his dealings with people were cordial and warmhearted. It was in this small town that he published his book *Ohr LaYesharim* on Rabbeinu Tam's *Sefer Hayashar*.

From there he was appointed as the Rav of Novardok, where he remained until his passing 34 years later.

Even though Rabbi Yechiel Michael was not from a family of rabbis, nor did he receive an education as a rav, he nevertheless served as an example to others on how to be one. He was firm and strong in his convictions, and he feared nothing and nobody.

People say that during his first days in Novardok, he decreed that Shabbat be welcomed early. The elders of the city and its scholars, however, absolutely refused to give their consent to a new custom from a new rav.

On Friday the rav came to the Beit Midrash to pray, but he found it completely empty. What did he do? He assembled a minyan of adolescents, welcomed Shabbat, prayed the evening prayer, and then went home. Outside he saw the town's residents still making preparations for Shabbat. He shouted to them, “Gut Shabbos!” and they replied with a little annoyance. When he arrived home he recited Kiddush on the wine and began to eat the Shabbat meal. At the same time, the community members gathered in the Beit Midrash to pray Mincha, followed by Kabbalat Shabbat.

On the following Friday, the rav once again arrived at the Beit Midrash and found it empty. He then prayed with the boys, but at the end of the service he did not leave the building. He remained standing before the Ark, without letting anyone by. “Here,” the rav said forcefully, “I'm the head of the house, and communal prayer has already ended. Whoever is late must pray by himself.” In the end, the rav was victorious in his community. He said, “In welcoming Shabbat early, I'm certain that the last water drawer will have time to bring his horse and wagon into his shed before sunset.”

Although he was firm in his decisions and conduct as a rav, Rabbi Yechiel Michael could bend like a reed when it came to taking Halachic decisions, and he put all his expertise into being lenient rather than strict.

It is said that a woman once came to him on Passover before the Seder, asking a question concerning a mixture of food. It was a serious question that, at first glance, he would have to rule strictly on by declaring the utensils in question treif. He looked at the woman, however, and saw that she was poor. Rabbi Yechiel Michael then went into his library and began to search in his books, into the responsa of ancient and recent poskim to see if he could find a lenient opinion. Meanwhile his family waited for him. Several hours passed and the rav had still not emerged from his room. His grandson entered and said to him, “Until when, grandfather? If there's no way to permit, then you have to declare them treif.”

“What did you say, my son?” the rav replied. “How can I allow myself to sit at the table, to participate in the Seder, and to rejoice while this poor woman is plunged into misery and has no desire for the holiday?” He continued to leaf through his books, until after a long time he emerged from his office with a smile on his face, telling the woman that everything was kosher. He then returned to the table with his family and rejoiced in the holiday meal.

In his old age Rabbi Yechiel Michael used to say, “The old have less fear of G-d than the young, for they no longer have the strength to fight the evil inclination. When a man becomes weak, he leaves all that concerns him unchanged.” (The same remark is also attributed to Rabbi Israel Salanter). He passed away, advanced in years, on Adar 22, 5668 (1908).

Other than his book *Ohr LaYesharim* on Rabbeinu Tam's *Sefer Hayashar*, Rabbi Yechiel Michael wrote *Aruch HaShulchan* on the four parts of the Shulchan Aruch, and *Aruch HaShulchan HeAtid* on all the mitzvot related to Eretz Israel. Rabbi Yechiel Michael merited that his *Aruch HaShulchan* be considered, during his lifetime, as a Halachic sourcebook for rabbis and poskim

THE MORAL OF THE STORY FROM THE MAGGID OF DUBNO

It is written, “Arm men from among yourselves for the legion, that they may be against Midian to inflict the L-RD’s vengeance against Midian” (Numbers 31:3).

The Midrash states, “The Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘Take vengeance for the Children of Israel’ [v.2], yet Moses said, ‘The L-RD’s vengeance against Midian.’ The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel, ‘It is you who have an account to settle with them, for they caused Me to harm you.’ Moses replied, ‘Sovereign of the worlds! If we had been uncircumcised or idol worshippers, or had denied the binding force of the precepts, the Midianites would not have hated us. They only persecute us on account of the Torah and the precepts that You have given us! Consequently the vengeance is Yours; and so I say, ‘The L-RD’s vengeance against Midian’ ” (Bamidbar Rabba 22:2).

This concept must be explained.

Let us imagine that a man enters the store of a wine merchant and asks to be given a certain type and quantity of wine. The merchant descends into the cellar and comes back up with the type and quantity requested, and he puts it on the table in front of them. While they are talking, a drunk staggers over to them and, while trying to get away with the man’s wine, he spills it all to the floor. Furious, the merchant then takes a stick and hits the drunkard, saying to him, “You wretch! Look at what you’ve done! See how much money you’ve cost me!” This scene turned the buyer mute with shock. He wondered what could possibly be going on inside the head of the merchant that he could hit someone like this. Was it because of the financial loss that the drunkard incurred to him? In that case, the merchant was not demanding anything from the poor buyer. On the other hand, perhaps the buyer thought that he himself would still have to pay for the wine, in which case the merchant was striking the drunkard for the wrong he did to him (the buyer), as if to exercise vengeance on his behalf.

The buyer was still asking himself questions when the merchant’s son arrived in the store. The buyer said to him, “Ask your father why he’s beating this drunkard so badly.” In this way, the buyer would immediately know what the merchant had in mind. If the merchant were to tell the boy, “My son, why are you surprised? Didn’t you see what this drunkard did to me? Didn’t you notice how much I lost?” the buyer would understand that the merchant wanted nothing from him. However if the merchant were to tell the boy, “My son, don’t you see the enormous loss that he caused this buyer?” it would be a sign that the merchant had every intention of making the buyer pay for the wine, and that the beating he gave to the drunkard was only to appease him.

Moses our teacher knew that the Midianites deserved beatings and punishments, however he did not know if it was because they had made Israel sin or because they had incurred damage to the holy Torah, in which case he had to exercise Hashem’s vengeance on them. Moses was still asking himself the question when Hashem told him, “Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites,” consequently the Children of Israel had to “pay” for everything (because they had sinned by

having worshipped at Baal Peor). The need to exercise vengeance on the Midianites, since they were the cause of such a horrible loss, was only to appease the Children of Israel. It was on this point that our Sages taught: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel, ‘It is you who have an account to settle with them, for they caused Me to harm you’ ” In other words: You will have to bear the punishment for your sin, for you were the ones who were wronged. Why then do you say, “The L-RD’s vengeance”?

This fully explains the statement of the Holy One, blessed be He.

THE PATH OF THE JUST LOVE PART I

More than any other virtue, love is one that has many aspects to it. When a man unwisely uses his ability to love, it becomes more destructive than all other virtues. However, when a man uses his capacity to love for the good, it surpasses all other qualities and leads a man to the level of “you shall love the L-RD your G-d” (Deuteronomy 6:5). Now nothing is greater than serving G-d with an attitude that is dictated by a love for Him.

However love, depending on the different forms that it takes on, can also (when it blinds a man’s perception) worsen his deeds. These detrimental forms of love are as follows:

First form: The love a man feels for his children. He loves them so much that he doesn’t correct them, nor does he lead them on the right path, leaving them free to give themselves over to their destructive desires.

Second form: The love of money. A man will love money so much that to increase his wealth, he will act dishonestly, covet, deceive and steal. He is so greedy that he will be stingy and refuse to give to charity.

Third form: The love for his wife. If he is married to a woman who is mean and conceited, she will turn him away from the commandments and lead him in her own ways. His fervent love for her will prevent him from protesting, and he will listen to her advice, advice that will lead to his fall. If he is easily attracted to women, he will often stare at them, say inappropriate things, and end up becoming guilty of adultery.

Fourth form: The love for his family. This is the love a man feels for his parents, brothers and sisters, as well as other members of the family, and for his friends. This love risks leading a man to take their side in conflicts with their neighbors, without looking to see where the blame actually lies. Even if they have made mistakes, he will help and protect them. He will blindly listen to their advice, even the most destructive kind. He will also attempt to put them in positions that they are not worthy of occupying (for example, to name them directors and presidents of communities), and in this way give them authority over people. Even if they are incompetent, he will not dare abstain from making such appointments. This love that blinds and makes him deaf creates serious problems because his family and friends will encourage people to obey their desires.