

THE PATH TO FOLLOW

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THE GATES OF TESHUVAH

(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto Shlita)

It is written, "I lift my eyes to the mountain – from where will my help come? My help will come from the L-RD, Maker of heaven and earth" (Psalms 121:1-2).

When a person begins to look into his soul and realizes the seriousness of his sins before G-d, the harmful spiritual and material effects of his deeds, he will, as a result, come to realize the gravity of Hashem's anger. Naturally, he will give in to despair and ask, "from where will my help come?"

He asks from where this strength, which is so necessary to modify his deeply engrained habits, will come from. How will he thus be able to do Teshuvah? And above all, how can G-d accept Teshuvah from his part? Actually, the term "where" in Hebrew is mei'ayin. Ayin also means "nothing", for the existence of the person in question is void of meaning; he therefore cannot do Teshuvah by himself.

To this King David tells us that above all, one must not fall into despair, for despair by definition is the work of the Satan. The gates of Teshuvah are never closed before one of the Children of Israel, even if he is a sinner.

To illustrate this measure of Divine clemency, we may take the example of King Manasseh. Even though he introduced idolatry into the Beit Hamikdash, as soon as he did Teshuvah, G-d accepted him.

This leads to the second part of our phrase: "My help will come from the L-RD." In other words, instead of succumbing to despair and thus remaining lethargic, on the contrary a person

must wake up and recognize his sins and their destructive consequences. G-d will then accept his Teshuvah.

However our passage does not end there, for it specifies, "My help will come from the L-RD, Maker of heaven and earth." Here we can clearly ask why King David specified that G-d is the Creator of the universe. Don't we know this? Obviously we do.

Nevertheless, this fact is meant to bring another truth closer, which is the following: Because of our sins, heaven and earth undergo changes that continually threaten their existence. For its continued existence, the universe strictly depends on the study of Torah and the performance of mitzvot and good deeds. Now, in the same way that Hashem continually renews the universe, He also helps us to "renew" ourselves through Teshuvah.

Teshuvah itself is to be the fruit of our soul-searching. In reality, by his essence a human being does not want to sin. A person's negative deeds are the result of his Yetzer Hara (evil inclination), which also tries with all its power to prevent him from making a spiritual "accounting" and in this way to come closer to G-d. King David says, "The L-RD is your Guardian; the L-RD is your protective Shade at your right hand. ... The L-RD will protect you from every evil" (Psalms 121:5,7). Actually, when a person sins, he distances himself from his Creator, but as soon as he does Teshuvah, he is once again connected to Him, and He then protects him from everything.

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Our father Jacob provides us a concrete example. When Abraham's servant Eliezer went in search of Rebecca, he brought many gifts with him: Ten camels, a gold ring, two gold bracelets, and so on. On the other hand, when our father Jacob went to look for a wife among the same family, he brought nothing with him. Nevertheless, the Midrash states that Jacob did not lose hope, knowing that "my help will come from the L-RD, Maker of heaven and earth."

Notwithstanding, Jacob felt hopeless for two reasons:

First, in his opinion Eliezer had succeeded in his mission thanks to the extravagant gifts that he gave, thus demonstrating the great wealth of his master Abraham. On the other hand, Jacob had arrived with the same intention (meaning, to marry one of Laban's relatives) yet without bringing any gifts. How was he going to achieve his desire?

Second, Jacob thought of himself as inferior not only to his ancestors, but also to Abraham's servant Eliezer. Proof of this is that when Laban tried to kill Eliezer, the latter disappeared by pronouncing the Ineffable Name. Thus Eliezer saved himself all while obtaining the reverence and fear of Laban, and he even freed him from idolatry. It was not the same for Jacob. When he was attacked by Eliphaz (Esau's son), he was completely stripped of all his goods. Knowing that he was venerable, from then on Laban had no reason to fear, and he could even murder him. Hence Jacob's increasing awareness that his merit was inferior to Eliezer's.

In relating these events to our original passage, when our father Jacob said, "I lift my eyes to the mountain...", it was a specific reference to his ancestors, since it was their merit that saved Eliezer and completely freed him from Laban. "Why then," Jacob asked himself, "didn't this merit also protect me?" The question, "from where will my help come?" becomes even more relevant after Jacob's dream in Beth El, since Hashem clearly told him, "I will be with you, and I will protect you everywhere you go." Are we in a position to infer that Jacob doubted this promise?

We return here to the vital subject of soul-searching that we mentioned earlier. When a per-

son experiences suffering, he must first examine his actions to look for the source of his troubles. Like Eliezer, our father Jacob could pronounce the Ineffable Name and thus save himself from Eliphaz. Yet he didn't do so because his primary concern was not to save himself, but to first understand the origin of these troubles – to find out why Eliphaz had attacked and stripped him of all his goods – since the occurrence of this event itself demonstrates spiritual weakness.

Even though Jacob could protect himself in the same way that Eliezer had done (by pronouncing the Ineffable Name), he did not do so. Actually, he wanted to prepare a path free of all obstacles for his descendants. For that to happen, instead of yielding to despair, on the contrary a person must undertake a spiritual self-evaluation.

In the phrase, "From where will my help come?" the expression "from where," as we have already mentioned, can also mean "nothing". This is due to the fact that we become aware of our vanity in noting our distance from G-d as compared to our ancestors. At the same time, the expression mei'ayin ("from the void") consists of the same letters that form the word mei'ani ("from myself"). In bringing these two meanings together, we reason that from myself, help is nothing. More specifically, the help that I can give myself is nothing, which is the reason that I should rely on G-d's help.

Our father Jacob, despite being destitute, was able to marry Laban's daughters even though Laban greatly cherished wealth. In the same way, a destitute person who wants to get married, yet is lacking the financial means to do so, should have faith in G-d, Who will know how to come to his rescue.

Eliezer was saved by pronouncing the Ineffable Name, while our father Jacob was saved from physical harm even without pronouncing it. It's true that Eliphaz completely despoiled him, but contrary to the will of his father Esau, he left him alive, which is the essential thing.

It sometimes happens that G-d takes away a person's material possessions in order to save his soul, for as the saying goes, "Charity saves from death."

IN MEMORY OF THE TSADIKIM

RABBI SHABTAI HACHOEN - THE SHACH

In the year in which our revered teacher Rabbi David Halevi (the Rosh Yeshiva of Lvov, who at the time was already advanced in age) completed writing his book *Turei Zahav* (Taz) on the *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yore Deah*, another important book was also being written. In Vilna, a young man of 24 years of age wrote *Siftei Cohen* (Shach), which was also on the *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yore Deah*. The most surprising thing about the work of the young Rav was that it was very well received. Up to our day, *Siftei Cohen* is a Halachic source for all that concerns the laws of Kashrut.

One day this young Rav, Rabbi Shabtai (known by the name of his work, the Shach) and the elderly Rabbi David, author of the Taz, met one another. Rabbi Shabtai asked Rabbi David, "Please explain to me how you proceed. When exactly do you study and when do you write your commentaries?" The Taz replied, "I normally study during the night and formulate my thoughts then. The next day in yeshiva, I expound on my ideas with my students and write them down."

"I do everything completely differently," replied the Shach. "During the day I study and develop my commentaries, and at night I write them down. The next day I carefully go over what I wrote the night before, erasing quite a few things. I end up keeping only the best and most true."

The Taz got up, kissed him on the head, and said, "I am certain that your book, *Siftei Cohen*, will be used to render Halachic decisions."

Rabbi Shabtai was born in 1621 in Vilna, where his father Rabbi Meir was Rav. His father began to teach him Torah while still young, and from his earliest years he surprised all who knew by with his sharp mind. One story goes that at around the age of five (while he was a cheder with other little boys of his age) his class was reviewing the parsha of the week, *Chayei Sarah*, with Rashi's commentary. The boys came to the story of Abraham's servant Eliezer, who was telling Rebecca's parents, "I came today to the spring" (Genesis 24:42). They repeated to their Rav what Rashi said on this passage: "Today I left and today I arrived, which teaches us that the route was shortened in a miraculous way." One child got up and asked, "How could Eliezer recount such a strange story to Rebecca's parents? Maybe they wouldn't believe it?"

The instructor didn't know what to say. Then the little Shabtai stood up and answered, "Some verses further on, what Eliezer told them is mentioned: 'Sarah, my master's wife, bore my master a son after she had grown old, and he gave him all that he possesses' [v.36], and Rashi says that Eliezer showed them a document proving that Abraham had allotted him these things. By means of this document, which was written on the same day that Eliezer left, he proved that he had actually arrived in a miraculous way."

Even before adolescence, he had acquired a deep understanding of the Talmud and the commentators. His father sent him to Tiktin, Poland to study with the author of *Meginei Shlomo*, and after that he also studied at the great yeshiva of Rav Heschel of

Krakow. In Vilna, Rabbi Wolf (the grandson of the Rema) took him as his son-in-law and provided for all his material needs. Rabbi Shabtai then settled in Vilna to devote himself entirely to Torah. During his twenties, he joined the Beit Din of Rabbi Moshe Lima, author of *Chelkat Mechokek*, and it was at that time, at the age of 24, that he wrote his immense *Siftei Cohen* on the *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yore Deah*.

In the introduction of his book, he wrote: "Honestly, for years I have invested a great amount of work ... without leaving place for sleep. ... I examined each case from every side, not once or twice, but rather a hundred and one times."

Eighteen of the greatest rabbanim of the generation gave their approbations for the printing of his book. He also wrote a second volume of *Siftei Cohen* on the *Shulchan Aruch*, *Choshen Mishpat*.

His works made a great impression throughout the world, and the rabbanim very quickly began to use them to render Halachic decisions, thus fulfilling the words of the passage: "For the lips of the priest [*siftei cohen*] should safeguard knowledge, and people should seek teaching from his mouth" (Malachi 2:7).

An interesting story concerning Rabbi Shabtai goes as follows:

Rabbi Shabtai once had a financial dispute with one of Vilna's prominent men. They both agreed to present their arguments to one of the greatest rabbanim of the generation, someone who lived far from Vilna and didn't know Rabbi Shabtai. They agreed on the Rav of Novardok, who was known for his scholarship and honesty. Before leaving to appear before him, Rabbi Shabtai, author of the Shach, reviewed all the relevant passages of the Talmud and the commentators, arriving at the conclusion that he was in the right. When they reached Novardok and presented their case to the Rav, he decided that Rabbi Shabtai was in fact wrong, thus agreeing with the other person. Rabbi Shabtai was stunned by this decision, for in his opinion it was not in agreement with Halachah. He therefore asked the Rav to explain his reasoning to him.

The Rav went towards his library and took out the book *Siftei Cohen* on *Choshen Mishpat*, which had just come out the year before, and he showed Rabbi Shabtai that he had based his decision on the opinion expressed in this new book. Rabbi Shabtai then revealed himself as the author of the book and said, "How great are the words of the Sages. A man never thinks that he is wrong!"

Many legends surround the character of the Shach, testifying to the great admiration that people had for him. According to one of these, one day he was taking a walk, completely immersed in his ideas and filled with Torah thoughts. During this time he didn't notice that he was approaching the edge of a steep slope, and that a deep chasm stretched before him, there being nothing but a hair between him and death. At the exact moment that he arrived at the edge of the precipice and continued onwards, a miracle occurred and the mountain in front of him approached, allowing the Shach to pass by without mishap.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

BETWEEN ROSH HASHANAH AND YOM KIPPUR

FROM THE MAGGID OF DUBNO

It is written, "You will return unto the L-RD your G-d and listen to His voice" (Deuteronomy 30:2).

The prophet says, "O complacent women, rise up and hear my voice! O confident daughters, give ear to my speech. Days upon years the confident women will shudder; when the vintage is finished, the harvest does not come in" (Isaiah 32:9-10). Again, let us cite what the Midrash says at the beginning of Lamentations: "If you had been meritorious, you would have read, 'For on this day he shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you' [Leviticus 16:30]. Since you have not merited it, you read, 'Her impurity is on her hems, she was heedless of her end' [Lamentations 1:9]."

There are two passages that call out to us during the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the time devoted to soul-searching and returning to G-d. (Note that Parsha Nitzavim is always read on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah). One passage is, "Seek the L-RD when He can be found; call upon Him when He is near" (Isaiah 55:6), concerning which our Sages have said, "This refers to the 10 days of Teshuvah." Alternatively, the other passage is, "Happy is one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered over" (Psalms 32:1). The difference between these passages lies in the two distinct aspects of this period. The days that separate Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the beginning of a new year for which we prepare all that is necessary for us, whereas the days of Elul are themselves the end of a period, a time when we complete all that we have done in the year that has just past.

Let us illustrate this with an example:

It happened that two people were stuck by the same illness. One was under the care of a foolish doctor who only managed to sustain him by making him take medications that were horrifyingly bitter. The other person was lucky enough to find a bright doctor who relieved him with medication that was pleasant and easy to take. In fact, it was going quite well for him! In addition, in his wisdom this doctor refused to heal him until he committed himself to listen to his directives and from then on avoid all harmful foods that could aggravate his condition.

These precious days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur have the power to purify a man of all his sins, as Rabbi Akiva said: "Happy are you Israel! Before Whom do you purify yourselves, and Who purifies you? Your father in Heaven!" G-d is a skillful physician and worthy of trust, especially when it comes to dealing with His own children. What fool would refuse such healing? So how is it that a great number of Yom Kippurs have passed without us being purified yet? The reason is that, long from abandoning

our ways, we have stayed attached to the impurity of our desires. This is why the psalmist cries, "Who can stand before You when You are wrathful?" (Psalms 76:8). The psalmist seems to be pointing to the future that awaits us after death, when the contents of all the days of our lives will be laid out before G-d, with nothing missing. At that moment, the one who will not have repented in this world will definitely have to descend into Gehinnom. Hence the advantage of repenting now is that, when a man seeks out austerity of his own free will, his fall will become the cause of his recovery. It is therefore because of Hashem's great mercy that "From Heaven He caused you to hear His voice" (Deuteronomy 4:36), the result being that "the earth trembled and roared" (Psalms 77:19), a process that in the end led to the earth being "appeased".

THE STORY OF THE WEEK

An Eye That Sees Us

The following occurred to a man who was harvesting in a field. After the harvest, he allowed himself to steal some sheaves of grain. To do this, he called to his daughter, who was only 6 years old at the time, and said to her, "Stay here and look out for someone who can see me."

When he began to take the sheaves, the child began shouting, "Daddy, daddy! Someone is watching you!"

The harvester immediately stopped and looked in all directions. Seeing no one, he returned to what he was doing.

Once again, the little girl cried out, "Daddy, you're being watched!" The harvester quickly got up and looked for people, but didn't find anyone. He put his glasses on and continued to scan the surroundings, not seeing anyone other than his child. He then got angry with his daughter.

"Who then is watching me?"

"What daddy? Isn't He in front of us, above my head and yours? He's the Master of the world, Who sees what happens from one end of it to the next," she told him.

When the harvester heard what this child was saying, a little girl who was only 6 years old, he was taken with great shame and stopped stealing.

(Penei Chaoul)