

THE PATH TO FOLLOW



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TEMPORARY RESIDENCE (FROM RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA)

Let us examine Abraham's conduct at the time when he buried Sarah. Abraham said to the sons of Heth, "I am an alien and a resident among you. Grant me an estate for a burial site" (Genesis 23:4). Concerning this passage, the Maggid of Dubno notes that the verse contains a contradiction: If he was an alien, then he could not have been a resident, and if he was a resident, then he could not have been an alien. What did Abraham mean by saying, "an alien and a resident"? Rashi explains: "I am an alien from another land and I have settled among you."

It seems that Abraham wanted to convey to the sons of Heth (note that the word heth in Hebrew means "sinner") that all those who commit sins without any regret will die without repenting. They sin without remorse solely because they believe that they will inhabit this world forever. They do not give thought to the fact that one day they will die, nor do not see themselves as temporary residents who live in this world for only a set period of time. If they felt that they were temporary residents, that each day of their life could be their last, it is certain that they would want to vigorously correct their behavior and repent of their sins. That is the meaning of toshav (resident), which also entails the notion of teshuvah (repentance). Abraham said to the sons of Heth: "I am but an alien, a resident among you, and do you know why Sarah was always virtuous, even among the wicked in Haran? It was because she never considered this world as an eternal dwelling place, but rather as a temporary residence. Sarah only saw herself as an alien in this world, which afforded her protection from the sins of the land." The verse alludes to this by its brief expression, for the words ger vetoshav imachem (an alien and a resident among you) have the same numerical value, including the number of words and letters in the expression itself, as the words Sarah tzaddeket (Sarah is righteous).

Each person must not view himself as a resident. This will allow him to more easily conquer the evil inclination, for it always bothers those who settle down somewhere. Such was the case with Jacob, who planned on settling "in the land of his father's sojournings" (Genesis 37:1) and on living in complete tranquility. In other words, he wanted to feel like a resident in a land where Isaac was but an alien. In order to save him from this mistaken belief and to make him realize that his father was in fact but an alien, Jacob was struck by the tragedy of Joseph.

On the other hand, people who are still in exile and travel from one place to another already live a difficult life. G-d does not overwhelm them with troubles that they are incapable of tolerating.

This is what Abraham conveyed to the sons of Heth: "Even though I am a resident of this land, since G-d gave it to me, I live my life as an alien and I have learned nothing from you, sons of Heth." Without a doubt, it requires exceptional determination to live as an alien in a place that belongs to you! Moreover, Abraham asked the sons of Heth for a burial place for Sarah, as he said to them: "Grant me an estate for a burial site" (Genesis 23:4). Abraham reprimanded them and persuaded them to repent, as was his custom, by showing them just how they behaved. The sons of Heth lived in a land that was not theirs (since it belonged to Abraham). They were foreign aliens, yet they considered themselves as full-fledged residents, something that was audacious on their part. Abraham could

have rightly chased them from his land, yet he only conveyed this to them in words. He behaved according to the characteristics of the righteous, for they say: "What is mine is yours, and what is yours is yours" (Perkei Avoth 5:10). As we know, kindness was Abraham's essential characteristic (Zohar III:302a), and he renounced his rights to a portion of the land, to the point of telling Ephron: "If everything belongs to you, I want to pay you for the burial chamber."

We can now understand why "each of the Patriarchs contributed something new to the world" (Bava Metzia 87a). Abraham asked that man be given signs of aging, which up to that time did not exist, as it is written: "Now Abraham was old, well on in years" (Genesis 24:1). That was something new. Isaac brought to the world atonement for sins through suffering (Bereshith Rabba 65:4). Jacob brought sickness: "Up to the time of Jacob, no one was ill, as it is written, 'Someone said to Joseph, 'Behold, your father is ill' ' [Genesis 18:1]" (Bava Metzia 87a). Because of old age, suffering, and sickness, it is possible to rectify the world. How?

Abraham introduced signs of aging into the world. As everyone knows, a man can die at any time when he reaches an advanced age. Hence he inevitably feels like an alien in this world, and it is in this way (when he sees that he is old and that death approaches) that he comes to repent. This is the meaning of ger toshav, an alien who repents.

Isaac introduced the phenomenon of suffering into the world. Even though a man may not yet be old, if he is overcome by suffering, he may remember that he is but an alien living in this world and thus repent. As the Sages said, "The one overtaken by suffering should examine his behavior" (Berachot 5a). He should not wait until he is old before mending his ways, for regrettably he may die before his time. Thus suffering also makes a man recall that he is but an alien in this world, and suffering makes him take to the right path, as the Sages have said: "Only by suffering does Israel take to the right path" (Menachot 53b).

Jacob introduced sickness into the world, for a man may become accustomed to suffering much like a poor person accepts his poverty and the fact that such is his lot in this world. Yet whereas poverty may lead a man to steal or lose his dignity, becoming sick will lead a man to remember that he is but an alien in this world and thus encourage him to return to G-d. The Sages expressly laid out the path to repentance so that people do not remain stuck in their sins, but instead understand what they have to do at all times. King Hezekiah hid his books that dealt with healing, a deed the Sages praised (Pesachim 56). Up to that point, those who were sick would consult these books and be healed of their illness. Hence they did not have to do the essential thing, which is repenting. Our Sages have further said: "All a man's suffering is for his own good" (Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Rabba 13), which is to say that suffering and illness are beneficial for man when they make him remember that he is but an alien making his way through this world. Such a man with then pray and return to G-d with all his heart, and it is in such a way that he corrects his erroneous impression that he is a permanent resident in the world, that he will not die, or that life has no meaning.

The Patriarchs introduced old age, suffering, and illness into the world in order to teach us that we are but temporary residents here below.

IN MEMORY OF THE TZADDIKIM RABBI YAAKOV EMDEN - THE YAVETZ

Many great Rabbanim have been known primarily for their works of Halachah. Themselves fleeing from honor and fame, it is only their books on Halachah or Aggadah that have brought them to people's attention and assured them of universal recognition. Among these was Rabbi Yaakov Emden, known by most for the siddur that he wrote. At the age of 28, he created a prayer book for every day of the year, with all corresponding practices. Commonly called "Rabbi Yaakov Emden's Siddur," it spread widely and earned him great renown.

Who exactly was this great Jew, and why did he choose the name "Yavetz"?

The son of the Chacham Tzvi, Rabbi Yaakov Emden was born in Altona in 5457 (1697). During his youth he lived in Galicia and Mehrin, and he studied Torah with his father and father-in-law.

The following is an account that Rabbi Yaakov gave of himself: "When I was still a young boy with my father, the Gaon and pious Rabbi Tzvi, the glory of Israel, I asked him why he signed his name simply as 'Tzvi', without mentioning his father. He answered me, 'These are the initials of Tzvi ben Yaakov. When you, my son, will have become a man of Torah and will have written books and words of wisdom, sign your name as 'Yavetz', meaning the initials of Yaakov ben Tzvi.'"

Only once in his life did he accept the position of community Rabbi, in Emden, Germany. Yet because he was by nature a man of truth and fervently desired not to depend on anyone's advice, he resigned after a few years and recited the blessing, "Blessed are You, Who did not make me an eved [Av Beit Din]," a play on the words of the morning blessing: "Blessed are You, Who did not make me an eved [slave]."

He then returned to his hometown of Altona and opened a Hebrew printing shop. He printed books and distributed them to everyone for free, all while earning a living from a business in jewels and precious stones.

Because his primary concern was Torah study, his business was always secondary to him. From his youth to his old age, he remained immersed in it, making Torah study, as well as the writing of his books, his constant delight. Even though he was frail by nature, it was his habit to go to the Beit Midrash every day, even during winter, to give courses in Gemara.

The story goes that one particularly harsh winter day, it was so cold that his students did not make it to the Beit Midrash in the early morning to hear his lecture. They arrived in the afternoon and found the Rav sitting down, covered in this Tallit and wearing his Tefillin, with his head in his book as he studied.

He interrupted his study and asked them, "Why didn't you come this morning for the Gemara lecture?"

"Teacher," they replied, "it was terribly cold and difficult to walk outside. We were afraid of catching a cold."

Rabbi Yaakov wanted to lift up his head, but he realized that he couldn't because his beard was frozen to the table. He sighed and said, "Apparently it is very cold," and then added: "It is written, 'Guard your foot when you go to the House of G-d' [Ecclesiastes 4:17]." And the Messora underlines that the letter yud in the word raglecha [your foot] is superfluous. This yud makes us recall the 10 laws [10 being the numerical value of yud] involving feet that the Jew should observe. They are as follows: (1) Do not leave on a trip without praying beforehand; (2) Do not visit someone early in the morning before having prayed; (3) Do not pray before making sure that your body is clean; (4) It is a mitzvah to run to synagogue or to the Beit Midrash; (5) When in synagogue, step forward a little before praying; (6) Do not go barefoot in synagogue; (7) One must travel up to four kilometers to find water to wash one's hands before praying; (8) It is forbidden to walk behind a synagogue when the community is praying; (9) One must not stand on an elevated place to pray; and (10) One must keep one's feet pointed straight ahead when praying. (Note that all these Halachot are found in the Rambam).

With a smile, Rabbi Yaakov ended with the following: "Here are thus 10 things that we are warned about in the verse that states, 'Guard your foot when you go to the House of G-d.' Yet we have not been warned about guarding our feet from going to synagogue because we can catch a cold. However this is what my father taught me: The verse states, 'In the House of G-d we would walk in company' [Psalms 55:15]. The word beragesh [in company] is formed by the initials of barad [hail], geshem [rain], and sheleg [snow], for even on days such as these, we must make it to synagogue."

Rabbi Yaakov Emden studied all fields of Torah and wisdom in depth, and he wrote more than 60 books during his lifetime. He wanted to live in peace, but he was constantly besieged by conflict, sadness, and pain. The wife of his youth died while he was still young, and his dear son Tzvi was taken from him while in the prime of his life.

Rabbi Yaakov died at 80 years of age, having lived through his share of pain. He left three sons behind: Rabbi Meshulam Zalman (the Rav of the Hamburg Synagogue in London), Rabbi Meir (the Rav of Constantinople), and Rabbi Aryeh Yehudah.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY FROM THE MAGGID OF DUBNO

Scripture states, “Abraham weighed out to Ephron the price which he had mentioned in the hearing of the children of Heth” (Genesis 23:16).

The Midrash says: “Thus it is written, ‘One overeager for wealth has an evil eye; he does not know that want may befall him’ [Proverbs 28:22], for the Torah removed a vav from Ephron’s name.”

Let us examine the nature of this alleged want. What could this have done to Ephron? How could this have affected him? To understand, let us examine all the characteristics that Scripture attributes to Betzalel the son of Uri. It states, “I have filled him with a godly spirit, with wisdom, insight and knowledge, and with every craft” (Exodus 31:3). The reason for this is that Betzalel had the merit of undertaking the construction of the Temple. His hands built a sanctuary with all its accessories for Hashem in order for the Divine Presence to rest there. Hence whenever the memory of this sanctuary is brought before Hashem, the memory of Betzalel will also be presented. This also applies to Hiram the King of Tyre, concerning whom the Sages have said that if he had not wronged his soul by having made an idol of himself, he would have lived a very long time. This is because he stood by King Solomon to help him build the House of G-d by sending him cedar, cypress, and other types of wood. This made him worthy of having a “place of honor and renown” (Isaiah 56:5) in Hashem’s Sanctuary.

For the same reason, Ephron could have merited that we recall him favorably, since it was in his field that the ancients of the world were buried, individuals whose memory will never be extinguished. However his greed brought him harm, and by selling the field instead of giving it away, he lost that opportunity. Henceforth that place would never carry his name, for Abraham acquired it fully legally, as it is written: “Thus the field with the cave that was in it was confirmed as Abraham’s as an estate for a burial site” (Genesis 23:20).

That being said, Hiram also accepted many gifts and lavish donations from King Solomon (his memory is not perpetually remembered only because he made an idol of himself). In what way, therefore, was Ephron worse than Hiram? To answer this question, let us first try to understand the following Mishnah: “Do not be like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward, but rather be like servants who serve their master without the intention of receiving a reward” (Perkei Avot 1:3).

To understand this, let us examine the following parable:

A prominent individual visited someone and spent the night there. A place for all his things, servants, and entourage was made, following which he was served a choice meal and ate with great pleasure. The next morning he inquired about the price for all this hospitality, and the master of the house replied that it was worth a certain amount, which the man paid. He then left and forgot all about his host. Certainly the latter had done his best to serve him, yet since it was only out of personal interest that he did so, no one owed the other anything once the bill had been paid. However on another occasion, this prominent individual visited someone else, a host who received him with all the honor due his position. The host did this with the intention that it was for free, since he was very happy to have the man stay with him and felt that his presence itself was priceless. Before leaving, the guest called to his host and asked him for his price. The host replied, “My lord, you cannot understand how happy I am that you stayed under my roof and that I had the honor of serving you! How can I ask you for anything more?” In hearing these words, he began to feel love for this man and beseeched him to accept precious gifts from him, presents that were worth many times more than the services rendered by the host. From that day on,

the memory of his host remained engraved in his mind, and he showered him with presents – both to him and his family – for his entire life.

These constitute the two types of servants that the Mishnah speaks of. The one who serves Hashem because he counts on a reward is compared to a salaried worker. His work is satisfactory, but he acquires nothing other than his salary. On the other hand, the faithful servant who rejoices in having the merit of serving our Holy King and glorifies in this, without any ulterior thought of reward, will end up being eternally showered with rewards that are infinitely more precious.

Such was the case with Hiram the King of Tyre, and this is what could have earned him an eternal reward if he had not made an idol of himself. It is true that King Solomon showered him with presents, but he did not pay much attention to these because he acted only out of generosity. His memory would therefore have been worthy of being favorably remembered. As for Ephron, he sought wealth and demanded an exorbitant price for his field. His heart was therefore not as elevated as Hiram’s. In his foolishness, he did not realize that in this way he had deprived himself of a great eternal reward.

We now understand the Midrash. “One overeager for wealth has an evil eye; he does not know that want may befall him” (Proverbs 28:22) – this is Ephron, who hastened to get his price for the field because he was driven by greed. “He does not know that want may befall him” (ibid.) – he is not aware of the loss that this means for him. Solely through fault of his own, he is deprived of Hashem’s goodness, which he could have acquired for eternity. The missing vav in Ephron’s name therefore alludes to this lack, and it represents the depth of his wickedness.

THE STORY OF THE WEEK BY THE MERIT OF THE RAV’S WISDOM

An honorable woman of Romania’s Yassi community once came to see Rabbi Israel Gutman, the Rav of the town. Her face was filled with such bitterness that it could also be heard in her voice as she exclaimed, “Rabbi, I can’t tolerate the suffering that my husband inflicts upon me any longer. I’m not leaving here before the Rav promises that he will obtain a get for me. I want a divorce!”

“I am ready to obtain a divorce for you,” the Rabbi gently replied, “but only if you follow my instructions.”

“What instructions?” the woman said, as if gasping for air.

“Every Friday night for a month, you must go to the homes of the poor in our town and distribute bread and meat in honor of Shabbat to those that live there. At the end of a month, I will obtain a divorce for you.”

The woman committed herself to this task, and then she left the Rav’s home.

After a month, since the woman did not return to the Rav to demand her get, the Rav sent for her. “Why didn’t you return at the end of a month?” he asked. She replied, “Every Friday when I went to the homes of the poor, I saw true misery. I realized that some people suffer much more than I, and so I’ve decided that it’s better not to get a divorce.”

In her heart the woman added, “It was only by the merit of the Rav’s wisdom that I saw the truth and made my decision.”