

# THE PATH TO FOLLOW



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בס"ד  
**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](http://www.hevratpinto.org)

## DILIGENCE IN TORAH STUDY ENABLES PERSONAL GROWTH

(FROM RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA)

**I**t is written, "And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set earthward and its top reached heavenward. And behold, angels of G-d were ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12). The Midrash comments on this verse as follows: "Rabbi Berachiah said in the name of Rabbi Meir, 'This teaches us that G-d showed Jacob the ministering angel of Babylon ascending and descending, the one of Media ascending and descending, the one of Greece ascending and descending, and the one of Edom ascending. ... Jacob was then overtaken with fear and asked, "Just as they have fallen, will I fall?" G-d told him, "Do not fear, Israel. If you ascend, you will not fall." But he did not have faith and he did not ascend. ... G-d then told him, "If you had had faith and ascended, you would not have fallen. However, since you did not have faith and you did not ascend, your children will be enslaved in this world to these four kingdoms" ' ' (Bereshith Rabba 68:21).

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler of blessed memory, author of the book *Michtav Me-Eliyahu*, asked the following question: "How is it possible that Jacob, raised among the Patriarchs, did not have faith in G-d's word? For in the end G-d Himself guaranteed Jacob that if he would ascend he would not fall, and that he would not be like the other nations of the world that ascended and fell. Why did Jacob not have faith in G-d and in His word?"

Another question must be raised. Concerning the verse that states, "And Jacob settled in the land of his father's sojournings" (Genesis 37:1), Rashi cites the Midrash as follows: "Jacob wanted to live in peace, and this is why the tragedy of Joseph was brought upon him. G-d said, 'Is the reward reserved for the righteous in the World to Come not enough

for them, that they also demand to live in peace in this world?' " (Bereshith Rabba 84a). In fact, "Jacob suffered all the days of his life, and barely had the suffering caused by Dinah abated, that the tragedy concerning Joseph occurred, and then that of Shimon. ... Jacob endured great suffering" (Tanhuma Mikeitz 10). Why was he struck by the tragedy of Joseph? Why did G-d not allow Jacob to live in peace for a short time in this world? Why overwhelm him with the loss of Joseph?

If G-d did not want Jacob to experience tranquility, why did He make him suffer a tragedy like that of Joseph as opposed to another one, for finally G-d has many means available to Him. Hence why choose that one in particular? What is the meaning of this?

We must understand that G-d had His reasons for preventing Jacob from living in peace in this world.

Concerning the verse that states, "If you follow My decrees..." (Leviticus 26:3), the Sages say that this refers to Torah study (Torat Kohanim ad loc.), and concerning the verse that states, "The working spirit works for itself" (Proverbs 16:26), the Sages say: "He works on one hand, and the Torah works for him on the other" (Sanhedrin 99b). In other words, a man should strive to understand Torah, and this will allow him to advance in the attainment of the most sublime traits. It will also prevent him from forgetting what he has learned, as it is written, "The one who studies but does not review what he has learned is like one who sows but does not reap" (ibid. 99a); that is, he forgets what he has learned. G-d knew that Jacob yearned for a little tranquility in this world in order to study Torah in peace, without effort. He did not

allow this to happen because Torah is only retained if one diligently strives to learn it, not if it is easily acquired. Hence Jacob was struck with the tragic loss of Joseph, and because of the tragedies and losses that he suffered, he reflected upon his own ways, as the Sages have said: "If a person cannot attribute the cause of his misfortune to his deeds, let him attribute them to his neglect of Torah study" (Berachot 5a).

Thus Jacob reflected upon his ways and, having found no fault therein, he attributed his suffering to a neglect of Torah study, meaning an absence of diligence in study. Far be it from us, however, to suggest that an actual lack of diligence was found with Jacob – he whom the Torah testifies was "a wholesome man, abiding in tents" (Genesis 25:27) – and who never in his life abandoned Torah. Yet given his greatness, if he studied it in ease, it is as if he acquired nothing, for "G-d is very demanding with those close to Him" (Yebamot 121b). This is the reason why G-d struck him with the tragic loss of Joseph, and it explains why G-d did not want Jacob to live in tranquility in this world (which answers our second question).

When G-d invited Jacob to ascend the ladder, He assured him that he would not fall if he climbed up. Jacob understood that G-d would help him and give him the strength to continually progress, but this also meant that he would not be climbing on his own. This is because Jacob took after his grandfather Abraham, concerning whom it is said, "Walk before me and be perfect" (Genesis 17:1). This means that Abraham progressed on his own, contrary to Noah, of whom it is said: "Noah walked with G-d" (Genesis 6:9).

The Sages explain this to mean that "Noah needed help, encouragement, and support, but Abraham progressed by himself, with his own strength" (Bereshith Rabba 30:10). This is because a man's primary efforts should be devoted to advancing by his own means, without counting on G-d's help. Similarly, the Vilna Gaon refused to learn Torah with Elijah the prophet, preferring instead to learn by himself.

This is also what Jacob thought. He wanted to ascend the ladder on his own. And G-d, seeing that Jacob refused His help in order to bring his own strength into play, said to him, "Your descendants will be enslaved to four kingdoms." They would be exiled,

for it is in exile that one is pursued, and it is then that a person must learn to overcome all obstacles and elevate himself through his own strength, without G-d's help. This explains the question raised by Rav Dessler of blessed memory. We see that Jacob in fact strived to study Torah throughout his life despite the fact that he was constantly pursued.

We can now answer our third question. Why was Jacob struck by the tragedy of Joseph, rather than by another misfortune? It was precisely because G-d said to Jacob, "You have chosen to advance by means of your own effort, without My help? In that case, what do you need with a life of tranquility? Joseph's disappearance will mark the beginning of the exile. The exile will begin right now, and henceforth you can serve G-d with your own strength, just as you desired."

We find a confirmation of the need to advance by means of our own effort with Joshua, the servant of Moses our teacher. It is stated, "Three thousand paragraphs of the law were forgotten during the time of mourning for Moses" (Temurah 15b, 16a). Why did this occur? It was because Joshua wanted G-d's help. He yearned to receive the abilities of his teacher Moses, and he did not seek to elevate himself on his own.

We also find the following in the Midrash: "When Moses passed away, Joshua mourned excessively and cried bitterly. G-d told him, 'Why are you mourning? It is I Who should mourn. As for you, go and lead the people in the way of Torah' " (Yalkut Me'am Loez, Devarim 34:5). Although it is necessary to mourn for the righteous who have passed away, we know that prolonged mourning can potentially make us lose hope in G-d. On the contrary, immediately after seven days of mourning, a person should arm himself with courage and pursue the study of Torah. The one who mourns for too long loses more than he gains, as was the case with Joshua, who forgot 3,000 paragraphs of the law.

Mourning must not be carried on for too long. Neither should one rely on the support of upright men who are like guides and Divine helpers, for each person should advance by himself and elevate himself through his own effort and practice. It is in this way that one will merit all good things, in this world and in the World to Come.

## IN MEMORY OF THE TZADDIKIM

### RABBI YONATAN EIBESHUTZ, AUTHOR OF YAAROT DVASH

Rabbi Yonatan Eibeshutz was born about the year 5450 (1690) in Krakow, Poland. He was from a family of rabbis that went back to Rabbi Natan Shapira (author of Megaleh Amukot) and to the Arizal.

At the age of 3, his father, Rabbi Natan Neta, Rav of the city of Eibeshutz, put him into cheder. On his first day there, as the teacher taught his class the alphabet, he came to the letter peh and asked the students, "What do we call this letter when there is a tzereh below it?"

All the students answered in unison: Peh.

"Have you no questions to ask me, dear children?" the teacher added.

The children kept quiet. Only little Yonatan jumped to his feet and shouted, "Yes! Why is a tzereh needed under the peh? Even without it, we still call it peh."

The teacher looked at Yonatan with satisfaction and said, "Shame on you all. You all deserve to be punished. This little darling, who just arrived in cheder today, knows more than all of you."

Yonatan, who had not yet learned to respect his teacher, continued with he smiled: "As for punishment, the Rabbi deserves one too."

"Why?" the teacher asked him with a smile.

"Because he could have asked this question before, when we learned the letter hei," the child responded with a grin.

Rabbi Yonatan lost his mother as a boy, and his father passed away before his Bar Mitzvah. From that moment on, he began to wander from place to place, sometimes under the roof of Torah greats. A teacher such as Rabbi Meir Eisenstadt, author of Panim Meiros, let him stay with him in Prusnitz for several years, and his close relative, Rabbi Eliezer Ettinger, admitted him into his yeshiva in Holleschau.

Besides his great abilities, Rabbi Yonatan was recognized for his boundless diligence. With the same fervor that he put into the study of the Gemara and its Poskim, he also studied the Zohar and the writings of the Arizal to the point that he knew them by heart. He also had an understanding of philosophy, astronomy, the natural sciences and medicine, and he knew several languages.

He was already known as a Gaon by the age of 18, and he was offered the position of Rav in the Jewish community of Yonvontslo in Bohemia. After staying there for three years, he left and settled in Prague.

In 5510 (1750), Rabbi Yonatan was chosen to head the Jewish communities of Altona, Hamburg, and Vedsbeck, a position that was considered as one of the most important and prestigious in Germany. There he remained until his final day, Elul 21, 5524 (1764).

Far from staying enclosed in the tent of Torah study, Rabbi Yonatan was involved in public life and troubled himself for the good of the community. He had friendly relations with political figures and discussed matters with bishops and priests. Because

of his influence, the Talmud (which up to then the popes had forbidden) was allowed to be printed.

We have many stories and legends concerning Rabbi Yonatan's wisdom in his discussions with all kinds of enemies of the Jew people, ones whose mouths he shut by his lively retorts.

Rabbi Yonatan was a great scholar with an extremely sharp mind. The king had heard of him, and he often called him to the palace to chat with him and delight in his wisdom. The king's ministers, however, hated the Jewish people and were jealous of him. They constantly looked for ways to lower the Rav in the eyes of the king, yet he always found a way to answer them by reducing their words to nothing.

One day, Rabbi Yonatan left his home to go pray in synagogue. At that moment the king's coach was passing in the street and the king ordered his driver to stop. He asked the Rav to come over, and he approached, bowed before the king and said, "Long live the king!"

The king then asked, "Where are you going, honored Rabbi?"

"I do not know, your majesty," replied Rabbi Yonatan.

"You don't know?" the king repeated, quite angry. "How can a person not know where he is going?"

"Such is the case, your majesty. I do not know."

This reply greatly infuriated the king, who thought that this Jew was mocking him. He called for a guard and ordered him to take the Rabbi into prison. The guard did so, and the king continued on his way.

Several hours later, the king ordered one of his servants to go and remove the Rav from prison and bring him to him.

When Rabbi Yonatan came before the king, he asked him, "How could you dare lie to me? Did you really not know where you were going?"

"I was careful not to lie, your majesty," Rabbi Yonatan replied. "I said only the truth. If the king had asked me where I was planning to go, I would have told him that I wanted to go to synagogue. But he asked me where I was going – and truthfully, that I did not know. The proof is that I thought I was going to synagogue, and in the end I was taken into prison."

Stories of this type, concerning Rabbi Yonatan's wisdom and intelligence, have been transmitted from father to son over the generations. However, it is because of his books that Rabbi Yonatan is known as a Gaon.

He wrote several works of Halachah and Aggadah, the best known being Urim VeTumim on the Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat; Kereti U'Feleti on the Tur, Yore Deah (which contains lessons that he gave on Shabbat and holidays); and many other works.

## THE MORAL OF THE STORY FROM THE MAGGID OF DUBNO

It is written, “And behold, angels of G-d were ascending and descending on it” (Genesis 28:12).

The Yalkut states: “But as for you, do not fear, My servant Jacob, the word of the L-RD, and do not be afraid, Israel” (Jeremiah 30:10). This refers to Jacob himself, as it is written, “And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set earthward and its top reached heavenward” (Genesis 28:12). These were the nations’ guardian angels. This verse teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed our father Jacob the angel of Babylon, who climbed 70 rungs of the ladder and then descended. The angel of Media climbed 52 of them and descended, and the angel of Greece climbed 80 and descended. The angel of Edom climbed up, but Jacob did not know how many rungs he ascended. At that moment, he was overtaken with fear and asked why the angel did not descend. The Holy One, blessed be He, answered him, “Do not be afraid, Israel.” As it is written concerning Edom, “Even if you raise your nest like an eagle or if you place your nest among the stars, I will bring you down from there – the word of the L-RD” (Obadiah 1:4).

Why did Hashem not show Jacob how many rungs of the ladder the ministering angel of Esau had climbed? The answer to this question is given by several Midrashim. First of all, the Midrash on Parsha Beshalach deals with a passage from the prophet Isaiah that predicts, “Your eyes will behold the King in His splendor” (Isaiah 33:17), and then continues: “Master of the world, we do not behold Your face. You have not delivered us from the hands of Edom!” G-d responds to the Children of Israel: “Do not fear, for in the future it is you who will ask Me where they are (‘You will no longer see bold people’ [Isaiah 33:19]) and you will witness Zion’s joy (‘Behold Zion, the city of our festivals’ [v.20]).”

Let us proceed to the Midrash on Parsha Acharei Mot: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to the wicked, ‘The righteous have not known joy in My world, and you – you wish to rejoice?’” Israel did not know joy in My world, for it is not written, ‘Israel exults in its Maker,’ but rather ‘Let Israel exult in its Maker’ [Psalms 149:2] – in the future. Furthermore, it is not written, ‘The L-RD rejoices in His works,’ but rather ‘Let the L-RD rejoice in His works’ [Psalms 104:31].” Our Sages wanted to make us understand by this why Hashem delays in granting His people the peace that others already enjoy.

This is exactly like an innkeeper who was inundated with many guests at the same time, to the extent that he did not have enough food to serve them all. What did he do? He first served the one who was passing by – the one who was most pressed for time – since the innkeeper knew that the others could wait.

Edom has settled down on earth, hence his portion must be given to him in a hurry because soon he will no longer be here. Jacob, whose renown will grow evident to all, and whose descendants will be established forever, can afford to wait. That which is due him, Hashem will defer until later.

In this light, we can better understand the words of the Midrash: “In the future it is you who will ask Me where they are.” Since they will be the first to disappear, they must be satisfied with worldly goods, which are their sole desire.

## THE STORY OF THE WEEK HE LOWERS THE PROUD AND UPLIFTS THE HUMBLE

A poor man in Babylon complained about one of the city’s wealthy men who had wronged him. He decided to have him summoned to a Beit Din, and so he went to the court of the Rav (who was the greatest of his generation) and murmured in dismay: “I want to issue a summons to a Din Torah for Mr. [so and so], who has wronged me.”

The Rav’s representative went to find the wealthy man to summon him to court. He told him, “Sir, you are being called to the Rav’s court in a Din Torah with [so and so] the poor person.” The wealthy man could not believe his ears. “What do I have to do with him?” he asked. “Will I go before a judge with that beggar? No, that won’t happen. I’m as rich as Korach – is it honorable for me to go to court with a miserable wretch such as him? No, I will not go!”

The representative returned and informed the Rav of the wealthy man’s answer. The Rav shook his head in astonishment and said, “Why does this man pride himself over what does not belong to him? If Heaven punishes him, he will lose all his wealth in an instant!” He had barely uttered these words when a disaster suddenly swooped down upon the wealthy man. He was still scoffing at the poor person who had dared to bring him to court when another envoy (this time from the King of Babylon himself) arrived and said to him: “The king has decreed that all your wealth has been confiscated and that you will be a slave for the rest of your life!” The man understood right away why this great catastrophe had come upon him.

Pale as a ghost, the man ran to the Rav: “I beg you, pardon my words. I’ve committed an enormous sin through pride, and now I no longer have any money. I no longer have anything at all – even my freedom has been taken away! I’m to be made a slave from now until I die! For pity’s sake, pray that at least my soul is saved! The poor person I didn’t want to appear with in court is a prince and an honorable person compared to me. I very much would like that he agree to appear with me still!”

The Rav understood that he had repented and would never again revert to his former attitude. He therefore began to pray to G-d to have pity on him. His prayer was accepted, and when the man went back home, broken from tears and pain, he saw the king’s envoy awaiting him at the door of his house. The envoy said to him, “In his great generosity, the king had modified his directive. He has freed you from slavery, and he grants you back your possessions as a gift.” Thus, in a small moment of time, the rich man learned that wealth and poverty come from G-d, and that all the silver and gold in the world can disappear in the blink of an eye!

– From the Jerusalem Talmud: Tractate Nedarim, Chapter 9, Halachah 4.