

# THE PATH TO FOLLOW

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## “GO, DESCEND” – THE GOAL OF ALL DESCENTS IS ASCENSION

*(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto Shlita)*

**I**n Parsha Ki Tisa we read, “Go, descend – for your people that you brought up from the land of Egypt has become corrupt” (Exodus 32:7). Most commentators have asked why the verse states both “Go” and “descend” at the same time. Would a single commandment not have been sufficient for Moses? As we have seen, Rashi cites the Talmud (Berachot 32:22) and explains as follows: “Descend from your exalted position. I did not give you your high position except for their sake.”

Despite this explanation, a certain number of questions remain:

1. As the head of the prophets (Esther Rabba, Introduction 10) and the undisputed leader of the Jewish people (whose outlook and state of mind he was perfectly familiar with), Moses knew very well that they would commit the sin of the golden calf. Yet if that were the case, why did he then descend from the mountain with the Tablets of the Law in his hands? Was he unaware that they were not ready to receive them, having been completely distanced from G-d by the sin of the golden calf?

2. Why did G-d make Moses descend from the mountain (i.e., from his greatness)? If the Children of Israel sinned, what wrong had Moses done?

3. Why did Moses break the Tablets? Although it is true that afterwards G-d told him, “You did well!” (Shabbat 87a), nevertheless He had not given him the order to break them.

King David said concerning Moses: “You ascended on high, you have taken captives” (Psalms 68:19). In other words, you triumphed over all the angels by your holiness and wisdom (see Shemot Rabba 28:1). He even succeeded in studying Torah with the Holy One, blessed be He (Berachot 63b) and took hold of the Celestial Throne to respond to the angels who opposed the giving of the Torah (Shabbat 88b). As a result, when G-d informed Moses that the Children of Israel had sinned, he found it difficult to leave the delights of the spiritual world that he was in. G-d therefore had to give him an express order to descend from there: “You only belong to the world below now. Therefore descend and see what My children have done.”

However Moses was very apprehensive about this descent, for he feared the influence of the wrongdoers who had fashioned the golden calf. G-d then ordered him to descend from his greatness, for as He explained to him: “It was of your own free will – yours,

not Mine – that you brought the mixed multitude out of Egypt, as it is written: ‘Your people [not ‘My people’] ... has become corrupt’ [Exodus 32:7]. Therefore descend and save the Children of Israel from this mixed multitude. All the honors that you enjoy are yours only because of the Children of Israel.”

As the Talmud teaches (Makot 7b), the goal of every descent is to elevate a man. Moses had certainly made it to such sublime spiritual levels that he was unaware of the Children of Israel’s sin. However G-d objected to his stay in the celestial heights and ordered him to descend (in order to better ascend the next time).

A man experiences many trials and failures in this lower world, but he can only lift himself back up by the diligent study of Torah.

The Tzaddik who departs from this world is completely unaware of trivial matters, for he enjoys the splendor of the Shechinah in the upper realms (Berachot 17a). How can we call upon the Tzaddik’s merit with G-d so as to help us in the material realm? Let us first light candles in his memory, then ask him to have pity on us, to intercede with G-d in our behalf to help us become greater in our Torah study. It is only after doing these things that we should ask G-d (by the merit of the Tzaddik) to help us gain our sustenance, to raise our children in the path of truth and righteousness, and so on. This is because the material realm constitutes the aspect of failure, of descent, yet since its only goal is a greater ascension in the spiritual realm, the Tzaddik will have our prayers answered by calling upon G-d’s mercy in our behalf.

It is forbidden for the Tzaddik to enclose himself at home, without watching over his fellow. It is vital that others benefit from his Torah and exemplary behavior. If he fails to do so, he brings about the deterioration of his generation, as was the case with King Saul (see I Samuel 10:22). G-d tells such a Tzaddik, “Come out from your hiding place and teach the Torah to the Children of Israel.”

The verse that states, “For it is a time to act for the L-RD. They have voided your Torah” (Psalms 119:126) can be interpreted in the following way: The Tzaddik/Moses wants to act in the Name of G-d, which is to say that he wants to study Torah. It follows that his brothers find nobody to teach them mitzvot, and so they transgress them. “Go, descend,” Hashem told Moses. “It is time that you make souls for the Holy One, blessed be He. Stop study-

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ing alone. Make your fellowman benefit from your knowledge. Be assured, you will not be abstaining from studying Torah by doing so. Know that you are elevated not only by Torah study, but also – and above all – by helping the Jewish people. The Mishnah teaches to this effect: ‘Prepare yourself for the study of Torah, for it does not come to you through inheritance’ [Perkei Avoth 2:12]. It is not only a heritage for you, but for all the Jewish people.” Furthermore it is written, “The Torah that Moses commanded us is the heritage of the Congregation of Jacob” (Deuteronomy 33:4), and “If you have learned much Torah, do not claim special credit for yourself” (Perkei Avoth 2:8), so teach it to the Children of Israel. “Go, descend – for your people ... has become corrupt.” They are distancing themselves from the Torah. Therefore bring them back to it.

Thus the only goal of Moses’ descent was to elevate the souls of the Children of Israel, to bring them closer to G-d. If Moses descended from the mountain holding the two Tablets of the Law in his hands, it was in order to show them what they had lost, namely the “Tablets of the Testimony, stone tablets inscribed by the finger of G-d” (Exodus 31:18). Even though broken, they retained all their holiness. With respect to this, the Talmud teaches: “The Tablets and the fragments of the Tablets were placed in the Holy Ark” (Bava Batra 14b), and if the Children of Israel had not committed the sin of the golden calf, the Tablets would not have been broken and Israel’s strength would have been even greater.

Despite the fact that they were broken, the Tablets were “whole” because they served to bring about a spiritual elevation. Here too we see the concept of “a descent for an ascent.” According to the Talmud, sufferings purge a man of his sins, allowing him to spiritually elevate himself (Berachot 5a). Let us not act like those who stomp upon “easy” mitzvot with their heels and are only careful about major mitzvot, who neglect the fragments of the Tablets in order to seize the whole Tablets (Tanhuma Eikev 1). Commenting on the verse that states, “Pesol lecha [Carve for yourself] two stone Tablets like the first” (Exodus 34:1), our Sages explain this to mean: “Take possession of their fragments” (Nedarim 38a). What exactly did they mean by this? That even starting from “fragments” (i.e., minor mitzvot), we may elevate ourselves. This descent can elevate and help you to elevate others. Is that not, in the final analysis, the mission incumbent upon every Jew?

It is written, “Moses would take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp, far from the camp ... whoever sought the L-RD would go out to the Tent of Meeting, which was outside the camp” (Exodus 33:7). How is it possible that Moses, who was the most humble man on the face of the earth, did not strive to go and teach the Torah to the Children of Israel? Why did he wait for them to come to him? Why did he not follow the example of our Patriarch Abraham, who went throughout the land to teach G-d’s ways to all (see Rambam, Hilchot Akum 1:3)?

That was also what the prophet Samuel did, as it is written: “He would travel year after year, circling to Beth-el, Gilgal, and Mizpah, and judging Israel in all these places” (I Samuel 7:16). The Midrash states, “Consider the difference between Moses and Samuel: Moses would freely go in to see the Holy One, blessed be He, whereas it was the Holy One, blessed be He, Who appeared to Samuel, as it is written: ‘The L-RD came and appeared’ [I Samuel 3:10]” (Shemot Rabba 16:4). Why this difference? It is because,

as our Sages explained, Moses waited for the Children of Israel to come and be judged before him, as it is written: “Moses sat to judge the people” (Exodus 18:3), whereas Samuel traveled throughout the land to judge the people. Hashem said, “Moses will therefore present himself before Me in a regular way, but I Myself will go and see Samuel,” as it is written: “A scale and just balances are the L-RD’s” (Proverbs 16:11).

Why then did Moses not act like Samuel? It is because where we see Moses’ humility, there we also see his greatness. It was not because of laziness (G-d forbid) that he refrained from traveling to the people, but because he knew that the Shechinah was with the Children of Israel in the desert and that they lacked nothing. No enemy pursued them, and they were completely surrounded by the Cloud of Glory. Suddenly, following the sin of the golden calf, the defilement of the serpent came and took up residence within them and made them stumble spiritually, causing their Torah study to greatly diminish. If in the desert, where they had no worries, they acted in this way and ended up making a golden calf, what would happen to them when they would descend into exile and experience all sorts of difficulties?

Hence if Moses placed the Tent of Meeting outside the camp, it was to teach the Children of Israel that they must search for the Divine path rather than wait until someone comes and shows them it. In this way they would learn Torah with fervor, and in this sense it would be their efforts that would help them, as it is written: “Still, my wisdom stood with me” (Ecclesiastes 2:9) – it was the Torah that I learned in toil that supported me (Kohelet Rabba 2:12).

Nevertheless, in Samuel’s generation the situation was completely different, for at that time the Children of Israel lacked faith. The destruction of the Sanctuary at Shiloh was like that of the holy Temple. The Philistines captured the Ark of G-d (I Samuel 5:1), and so Samuel did not expect the Children of Israel to come to him. Rather, he went to the most remote villages to make them return to their Father in Heaven. If he had not acted in this way, the Jewish people would not have recovered. (Yalkut Me’am Loez, *ibid.*). Such is what our forefather Abraham did before him. He went to all those who denied G-d to show them the path to follow and to make His holy Name reign over them.

The people of the generation of knowledge, who witnessed so many miracles yet had nevertheless sinned, were to go to Moses, who would descend from his greatness to meet them. If he placed the Tent of Meeting outside the camp, it was in order to instill in them a love of Torah – his Torah – for which he had devoted himself entirely, as it is written: “Remember the Torah of Moses My servant” (Malachi 3:22). It was in order to lavish them with extremely sound advice. The Talmud teaches to this effect that the Holy One, blessed be He, told Moses: “Because you descended from your greatness, the Torah will carry your name” (Shabbat 89a). If Moses placed his tent outside the camp, it was to teach us that it is proper to seek out a place, even if it is distant, where G-d’s laws are taught (Perkei Avoth 4:18[14]). It teaches us to establish yeshivot outside a city and its commotion in order that we may better concentrate in our Torah study and come even closer to G-d.

May we have the merit to study Torah in tranquility and to elevate ourselves to lofty spiritual levels. This is what our Father in Heaven seeks, and it is the very goal of Jews in this world. Amen.

## IN MEMORY OF THE TSADIKIM RABBI MATZLIAH MAZUZ

**T**he great Kabbalist Rabbi Ovadia Hadaya Zatzal was at his desk, immersed in his thoughts. A letter from abroad had just been brought to him, and as was his habit he studied its contents attentively. Nobody dared to break the silence that ensued, and only the Jerusalem breeze made a slight sound as it blew in the room, like a cool wind from the mountains that crown the eternal city.

It was obvious that this long letter was different from others. Rabbi Ovadia was in the habit of receiving mail, including from abroad, which requested his advice on uncertain cases. However the particular language of this letter drew the Gaon's attention. With exquisite writing, the author laid out a treatise on a very complex subject, analyzing the problem at hand in a sharp and profound way, widely and exhaustively, and by citing the Sages of the Talmud and the Poskim. The author dealt with a problem that, in the end, he solved through "the power to rule leniently."

Reading this left no doubt in the mind of the Gaon that what he held in his hand was a letter from an exceptional man, a sage among sages – perhaps even the Rav of the community. He hurried to send a long and detailed response to the author (who lived in Tunisia), and at the end of his response he asked the author if he could kindly lend his support to his Kabbalist yeshiva in Jerusalem, Yeshiva Bet E-I, where he taught. "I would be very grateful if you could collect funds for our yeshiva in Jerusalem," he wrote at the end of his response.

The author, who lived beyond the sea, did not delay in giving a surprising answer to this request: "Your request is impossible for me to perform because I am too young. I study in a yeshiva and I do not have enough experience to go from one person to another collecting funds. Furthermore, I do not know how this is normally done."

That was not the only Halachic writing of the young man, who had celebrated his Bar Mitzvah only three years earlier. He also wrote Halachic responses that astonished readers when he was only 14 years old. Everyone saw in him a person destined for greatness. His name, our holy Rav Rabbi Matzliah Mazuz, was later known in the most remote regions of the world.

Some 20 years have passed since an accursed Arab, possessed by a spirit of violence and protected by our enemies, attacked our holy Rav and sent his soul to Heaven. To us, however, it seems that only a few days have passed, and nobody seeks to be consoled over their loss. We remember him always, and his memory remains forever engraved on our hearts. However his riches – spiritual treasures – are here to encourage and comfort us. The precious books that the holy Gaon left behind spread like a dew of light on his cherished shadow, and they cause the wind of resurrection to blow upon a desert of profound grief. Everyone knows that his lamp has not been extinguished and that his light has not grown dim.

Some three after the passing of our teacher, the first volume of his enormous Halachic work *Ish Matzliah* (Responsum on *Arbaah Turim*) was published, marking a very important day. On the night of Passover, Tunisian Jews have the custom of studying the work of Rabbi Matzliah Mazuz, that great Posek, the last of the Gaonim of Tunisia, and the Rav of all Jews in exile. At the end of that same year, the second volume of his work appeared, but it had to be divided into two parts because it was so large. The first part was on *Orach Chaim* and

*Yore Deah*, and the second part dealt with *Even Ha'ezer* and *Choshen Mishpat*. Together these two parts comprise 178 paragraphs, which is the numerical value of his name, Matzliah. Several years later the work was republished.

In the year 5750 (1990), devotees of Torah and wisdom marked the third anniversary of the appearance of the second part of *Ish Matzliah*. One never tires of consulting this book, which can be leafed through with amazement, for great riches hide within his responses – from Halachah to philosophical writings, hidden wisdom to exacting language. The style of his long responsum charms the reader, for they combine Halachic investigation with tremendous knowledge, youthful insight, and mature wisdom. One remains wonderstruck before the author's power to plumb the depths of the Talmud, penetrating its abyss to bring up an abundance of pearls and hidden treasures originating from Poskim both ancient and recent. These he inserts into his writings to yield a teaching that is clear and thoroughly inspected with a fine-tooth comb. No secret is hidden to him, and the melody of his words sings in the reader's ears.

One response that the author wrote when he was only 14 years old (a response that stretches over several pages at the beginning of the section on *Yore Deah*) deals with an actual question having serious implications:

When the hands of a Shochet tremble, yet he wants to continue practicing his livelihood and states that his hands carry out their task as directed, should he be permitted to do so? Or perhaps, on the contrary, he should be told to stop because what he is saying is not reliable. In the latter instance, is the meat that he already slaughtered permitted to eat, given that he maintains that he did not tremble during the slaughter? In analyzing this question from every angle, the young author arrived at the conclusion that the animals he slaughters are forbidden, even the ones he slaughtered before he was told to stop.

This response was examined by the greatest scholars of Israel, and it received the total and unconditional approval of the Av Beit Din of Tunisia at that time, the Gaon Rabbi Moshe Shetrug Zatzal. At Purim, when Rabbi Matzliah Mazuz's friends were immersed in celebrations, he enclosed himself at home to rewrite every word of this response in his notebook, which was a sign of things to come.

Sometimes Rabbi Matzliah Mazuz accompanied his Halachic responses with remarks that surpassed the realm of Halachah, remarks by which he revealed himself to be a great teacher and educator.

The sons of the Gaon undertook a vast project that combined craftsmanship and scholarship to produce his books. These were published by the Rav Matzliah Institute, in the name of our holy Rav, Rabbi Matzliah Mazuz, and by the Kisse Rahamim yeshiva in Bnei Brak. This yeshiva had originally been established by the Rav in Tunis, and in accordance with his desires his sons transferred it to Israel after his death. His position as Rosh Yeshiva was assumed by the Gaon Rabbeinu Meir Mazuz Shlita, and his brothers Rabbi Tzemah Shlita and Rabbi Rahamim Shlita taught at the yeshiva and participated in its administration. Since they all worked for the yeshiva, the Torah blossomed under the guidance of a straightforward and pure education, and the responsum of the renowned Gaon were expounded from one end of the land to the other.

## THE STORY OF THE WEEK

### THE POWER OF SIGHT BY THE MERIT OF TORAH

The commentary entitled Shaarei Chaim on Shaarei Teshuvah cites the words of Samag (38:13), who says that even a very old man does not have the right to forgo the study of Torah (Shaarei Chaim 3:28). This book recounts that when Rabbi Shemuel Huminer Zatzal showed these words of Samag to Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer, the latter said, “Let me tell you a terrible story that happened when I was in Slutsk. One day a blind Talmid Chacham came by my home. He brought two books that he had written, and then he showed me a certain passage and said, ‘this was my last commentary.’”

“I asked him what he meant by this, and he answered by relating the following story: ‘With G-d’s help, I put tremendous effort into the study of Torah and invested great energy to discover novel interpretations. However this became more difficult as I began to get older, and when I finished my last commentary, which was later published in my book, I told myself that from then on I would not push myself so hard. Rather, I was planning on studying more tranquilly. Then, all of a sudden, I could no longer see. I went to a renowned doctor, and after examining me for a long time he declared, “We cannot give you back your sight. However I’m very surprised that you’ve managed to see up to now. After the examination we performed, it appears that you should have lost your sight about ten years ago. It’s a big mystery as to how you’ve been able to see up to now.”’”

“The old man concluded: ‘The doctor did not know what had happened to me, but I knew. As long as I diligently strived to study Torah, I continued to retain my sight, to study, and to find novel interpretations. However when I decided to stop pushing myself so hard, my eyes lost their sight.’”

This teaches us just to what extent a man should strive to put all his energy into the study of Torah and the observance of mitzvot and good deeds, even in his old age.

## THE MORAL OF THE STORY

### FROM THE MAGGID OF DUBNO

It is written, “The L-RD said to Moses, ‘Go, descend – for your people ... has become corrupt” (Exodus 32:7).

The Midrash states: “ ‘Go, descend’ – They need to be subjugated.”

This is surprising. Must the word “descend” be completely removed from its usual meaning for there to be an allusion to the blows they deserved by being subjugated?

A parable will help to better explain this:

When a father wants to provide his son with a teacher, not only must he be aware of the child’s scholastic level, but also of his behavior. If he is a good boy who loves Torah and studies diligently, his father will try to find him a teacher with a sharp mind who delights in study. However if the boy is only thinking of amusing himself and lingering in the street, he will need someone who is strong-willed, in good health and energetic, one who will be able to control him, even strike him, to make him feel the weight of his anger. It is very difficult to find both sets of characteristics in a single person, for ordinarily a man of Torah is gentle, calm, and does not vent his anger, whereas a man who is energetic is very often less scholarly. Therefore when it becomes necessary, the father must choose the lesser evil and give up on the teacher who has brilliant intellectual abilities in favor of the other, even if he is less gifted, for at least he will be able to correct any harm by instilling fear in the child.

When the Children of Israel found themselves at an elevated spiritual level and desired to study the Torah with fervor – in particular when they approached Mount Sinai and went to the point of saying, “Everything that the L-RD has spoken we shall do” (Exodus 19:8) – Hashem saw that Moses would be the best teacher possible for them. As our Sages have said, “One will come who is good, and he will receive the absolute good from the One Who is supremely good, to transmit it to people who are good.” This refers to one like Moses, to one who is good and teaches students who are filled with a love for G-d and His Torah, but who only lack knowledge. Following that, however, the Children of Israel pursued their fantasies and were seized by a spirit of destruction. They built a golden god for themselves, and so the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: “Descend” – I no longer consider you to be an adequate teacher. Why? “They need to be subjugated.” They now need someone who is capable of taming them, a leader harsher than yourself.