

THE PATH TO FOLLOW

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FERVOR AND REBUKES OPEN THE WAY TO TESHUVAH

(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto Shlita)

It is written, “Tzav [Command] Aaron and his sons, saying: ‘This is the law of the burnt-offering: It is a burnt-offering [that stays] on the flame, on the altar’” (Leviticus 6:2).

According to Torat Kohanim, the word tzav is meant to encourage fervor, both now and in every generation (Torat Kohanim 6: 1). According to Rabbi Shimon, Scripture viewed this encouragement as necessary in cases whereby a loss or a lack occurs. In the case before us, the Kohen responsible for carrying out the burnt-offering is also the person who cleans the ashes, purifies the surroundings, and does all the work necessary for the offerings. He is therefore liable to develop great pride, especially in the case of Aaron, who also changed his priestly garments on Yom Kippur in order to enter the Holy of Holies. As a result, the Torah warns him not to let himself get enticed by any wrongful thoughts.

He can only avoid this trap and continue to elevate himself by demonstrating extreme fervor in serving G-d. This is why the Torah insists on stating, “the fire of the altar should be kept aflame on it” (Leviticus 6:2). To continue progressing, he should continuously invest all his fervor and enthusiasm (“the fire of the altar”) into serving G-d.

We find this characteristic with Joseph, who in the incident with Potiphar’s wife was preserved from sin by the merit of the enthusiasm that dwelled within him. This is confirmed by the passage, “He left his garment in her hand, and he fled” (Genesis 39:12). If he had not acted quickly, he would have been unable to conquer the power of his desire and may have sinned.

On the same subject, Jacob also hastened to send his son Judah to Egypt, as it is written: “He sent Judah before him ... to show the way before him to Goshen” (Genesis 46:28). Why did he do this? It was in order to set up a Beit Midrash from which Torah would be taught (Bereshith Rabba 95:3). This rapid action was due to the fact that Jacob and his entire family were accustomed to bathing in the holiness of Eretz Israel, and so the descent into Egypt risked creating a profound sense of lack in them, one that would result in a weakening of their service of G-d, for Egypt was the source par excellence of impurity (Zohar I:81b). True, Hashem had promised our father Jacob, “I shall descend with you to Egypt, and I shall also surely bring you up” (Genesis 46:4), but

Jacob wanted to take steps on his own without relying exclusively on this promise. Therefore he immediately sent Judah to prepare a place for Torah so that in Egypt, too, his descendants could breathe the essence of the holy Torah and feel a sense of holiness comparable to that of Eretz Israel.

This subject is also dealt with in the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 459:2) concerning the cooking of matzah eaten at the Seder meal. Lest the matzah ferment, everything should be done with great haste, a teaching that we learn from the passage: “You shall safeguard the matzot” (Exodus 12:17). Now the words mitzvot and matzot are written in the same way, to the extent that matzah alludes to a mitzvah, as emerges from the Sages’ teaching on the verse in question: A mitzvah that comes within your reach, do not give it time to “ferment”; do not let it become ruined (see Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 1:1). A man will in this way avoid developing pride when he accomplishes a mitzvah. However by itself, fervor is not enough to elevate a person and return him to G-d. From our original verse (“This is the law of the burnt-offering: It is a burnt-offering”), we also learn the importance of listening to rebukes and nullifying ourselves before Hashem when we want to come closer to Him.

The Gemara recounts the story of Elazar ben Durdaya, who had relations with every prostitute he could find. He finally traveled to one prostitute who lived beyond the seas, and afterwards she said to him, “In the same way that the breath never returns from where it came, Elazar ben Durdaya’s repentance will never be accepted.” Hearing this, he went to ask the mountains and hills to intercede on his behalf, but they told him, “Before interceding for you, we will first ask that mercy be granted to us, as it is written: ‘For the mountains may be moved and the hills may falter’ [Isaiah 54:10].” The heavens and the earth told him, “We will first ask that mercy be granted to us, as it is written: ‘The heavens will dissipate like smoke and the earth will wear out like a garment’ [ibid. 51:6].” The sun and the moon told him, “We will first ask that mercy be granted to us, as it is written: ‘The moon will be humiliated and the sun will be shamed’ [ibid. 24:23].” The stars and the planets told him, “We will first ask that mercy be granted

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to us, as it is written: ‘All the host of the heavens will dissolve’ [Isaiah 34:4].” He then thought to himself, “The matter depends on me alone.” He placed his head between his knees and began to weep so violently that his soul departed. A Heavenly voice was then heard exclaiming, “Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya is destined for life in the World to Come.”

This story is quite difficult to understand. We know very well that what comes from the heart of the speaker penetrates straight into the heart of the listener (see Berachot 6b; Rav Moshe Ibn Ezra’s Shirat Israel, p. 156), and it is conceivable that repentance may follow because such words stem from a fire within. On the other hand, it is difficult to see how this prostitute, whose words certainly did not come “from the heart” could have succeeded in having such a profound effect on Elazar ben Durdaya.

It seems that there is another path that a man may pursue to transcend his nature and perform Teshuvah. It consists of self-effacement and humility in combination with heeding words of rebuke, even if they stem from the wicked. When we adopt this attitude, these words may have a beneficial effect on us. Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya teaches us a new path to Teshuvah by having paid heed to the rebuke of a woman of ill-repute, and it was he himself who used the immense energy within him (an energy that, up to that point, had filled him with impure desires) to transform her words into a blessing. He then completely nullified himself in the depths of his repentance. Every man can choose between good and evil, as it is written: “You shall choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19), and he also has the power to change evil into good. If he pays heed to rebuke, even to that of an ungodly person, he has the power to transform himself, to make – through his very own effort – the words he has heard penetrate his heart and thus give new direction to his life. He should do this rather than waiting for these words to penetrate his heart on their own.

This is what happened to Nebuzaradan (Gittin 57b), the Babylonian general who conquered Jerusalem at the time of the destruction of the first Temple. He saw blood seething on the floor of the Temple, and the Children of Israel did not want to tell him whose blood it was. In the end they admitted that it was the blood of the prophet Zechariah, whom they killed for having rebuked them. Nebuzaradan then had all the members of the Great and Minor Sanhedrin killed, along with hordes of men, women, and children, more than 94,000 in all. However the blood did not stop seething, and Nebuzaradan said: “Zechariah, Zechariah, I have killed thousands of your people. Do you want me to kill them all?” Only then did the blood stop seething, and at that instant Nebuzaradan repented. He told himself that if the death of a single man was so difficult to atone for, how crushing would his own sin be after having killed so many people! Now his repentance and eventual conversion were due to the wickedness with which he killed such a great number of people. Similarly, Elazar ben Durdaya arrived at repentance through the rebuke of a woman of ill-repute from beyond the seas.

Everything that has been stated up to now allows us to understand the repetition of the verse: “This is the law of the burnt-offering: It is a burnt-offering.” There are two paths that enable a person to be awakened to Teshuvah (hence two instances of the word “burnt-offering”). In the first, a man hears the rebuke of a

righteous person, which helps him to elevate himself (oleh, from the same root as the word olah [burnt-offering]). The second path is more difficult. It consists of paying heed to words of rebuke emanating from the wicked, words that should normally not penetrate the heart of the listener, but which the listener himself can penetrate into his heart. He does so by using his own free will to completely nullify himself before G-d. This is what constitutes “This is the law of the olah [burnt-offering]: It is a olah [a burnt-offering].” The word olah occurs twice: Ascending toward G-d by means of a Tzaddik’s rebuke, and ascending toward G-d by means of a rasha’s rebuke. This is why the word mokdah (“flame”) is written with a small mem, for it alludes to one’s complete submission to G-d.

The Midrash (Mechilta Yitro) recounts that Jethro practiced every possible form of idolatry, yet despite this he managed to awaken himself and say, “Now I know that the L-RD is greater than all the gods” (Exodus 18:11). He merited being called Reuel (“friend of G-d”), as well as receiving the name Yitro (“abundance”), a name that brings modesty and self-effacement to mind (Shemot Rabba 27:8). It was precisely through idolatry that he arrived at that point, which shows us that each and everyone can submit himself and grow spiritually by yielding to G-d and paying heed to rebuke, thus coming closer to Him in the process.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY FROM THE MAGGID OF DUBNO

It is written, “Then will they declare among the nations, ‘The L-RD has done greatly with these.’ The L-RD has done greatly with us; we were gladdened” (Psalms 126:2-3).

Let us illustrate this with a parable:

There were two wealthy men living in a certain city, one of whom had a son with such tremendous character traits that he became a rabbi. When he expounded the Torah in public, his parents and entire family were overjoyed, even radiant. All the inhabitants of the city blessed their sons by saying, “May you become like him!” The son of the other wealthy man, however, only thought about enjoying himself. He even committed serious crimes, to the point that he ended up being condemned to death. However as the time for his execution drew closer, the sentence was commuted and he went home a free man. His family and everyone in his father’s house gathered together to celebrate this miracle with him. Nevertheless, it was not as if people were blessing their children by saying, “May you experience such joy!”

Concerning the destruction of the Temple it is written: “Whoever is [destined] for death, to death; whoever for the sword, to the sword; whoever for famine, to famine; and whoever for captivity, to captivity” (Jeremiah 15:2). True, we were saved from this, but nobody wishes that their neighbor should experience such “joy”. This is why Scripture felt the need to speak of a future triumph, one so great that a person will speak to others of the wonders that he has witnessed: “The L-RD has done greatly with these” (Psalms 126:2) and to also tell us: “The L-RD has done greatly with us” (v.3), so much so that “we were gladdened.”

IN MEMORY OF THE TSADIKIM RABBI MESSAOUD RAPHAEL ELFASSY

Rabbi Messaoud had a great desire to imbue himself with the wisdom of the Torah greats of Tunis. After having taken leave of his community and family in Fez, he and his faithful servant journeyed with a caravan of traveling merchants.

Despite the rigors of travel, Rabbi Messaoud and his servant pursued their Torah studies in order to avoid having such a long journey proceed without the light of Torah.

After a certain time, Rabbi Messaoud began to worry because Shabbat was fast approaching. The desert sun was beating on their heads and the journey was long. There was only wasteland and desolation in every direction, without the slightest trace of vegetation or habitation, without the slightest drop of water to give life to the thirsty. Only the sound of birds of prey and terrifying wild beasts testified to the existence of life in this immense desert.

Friday was about to give way to the repose of Shabbat, and Rabbi Messaoud and his servant did not want to continue traveling with the caravan. Therefore they decided to spend Shabbat in the desert, alone with the Creator of heaven and earth.

The head of the caravan began to mock their foolhardiness and said, "You're going to turn into a heap of bones! There are wild animals around here!" However a Tzaddik like Rabbi Messaoud does not risk transgressing Shabbat. He signaled the caravan riders to continue on their way while he and his servant settled on the ground.

Rabbi Messaoud took out his pouch of wine for Kiddush and a challah for the meal. He spread out a towel at his feet and lit the candles that he had brought for Shabbat.

The radiant atmosphere of Shabbat filled their hearts as they raised their hands in prayer and supplication.

Suddenly they heard a terrifying roar. They turned to look in the direction of the sound, and they saw a fearsome lion approaching them. Rabbi Messaoud did

not move as he continued with his prayers, and the lion, as if obeying some order given by an invisible hand, crouched to the ground some distance from the two men.

The Tzaddik's faithful servant could not believe his eyes. Hashem had sent the king of the animals to protect them in the desert so that nothing would disturb their Shabbat rest.

Rabbi Messaoud finished his evening prayer and recited Kiddush. After the meal, they immersed themselves in the Talmud and forgot about everything around them. They had placed their faith in Hashem and were convinced that He was protecting them from all harm. They spent all of Shabbat in the joy of study and spiritual growth, while the lion watched them with the tranquil look of a friend.

As soon as Shabbat ended and they had recited Havdalah, the lion got up and approached Rabbi Messaoud. It lowered its head and gave him a sign that it was ready to carry him on its back. Rabbi Messaoud told his servant to also climb up on the lion. Then, after both of them took a deep breath, they suddenly felt themselves flying. The lion ran like the wind and raced without stopping. They covered great distances at tremendous speed, all while chasing away every animal in their path by the lion's roar. Not long afterwards, the caravan of traveling merchants came into sight.

The lion continued to race toward the caravan, and Rabbi Messaoud saw his former travel companions on their knees trembling in fear.

The head of the caravan shook as he approached Rabbi Messaoud. He then kissed his hand and said, "Rabbi, You are a holy man."

After the death of Rabbi Messaoud in 5535 (1775), his sons followed in his footsteps and became great Torah scholars. To this very day, their book Mishcha Deravuta (which contains the initials of Rabbi Messaoud and his sons Shlomo and Chaim) clarifies issues for us by its enticing chiddushim.

THE STORY OF THE WEEK

BLESSED IS THE MAN WHO TRUSTS IN G-D

Moshe was a poor Jewish tailor. During the week, he went through the streets going from house to house asking if anyone needed some needlework done. On Fridays he would go home and empty the box containing his earnings for that week, putting aside a tenth of it to give to Tzeddakah. He then gave his wife the rest to care for the needs of the house.

Winter arrived, a harsh winter that brought tremendous amounts of snow and was particularly difficult, and it became impossible for Moshe to contemplate going out. He was thus forced to stay at home, without work or money.

Meanwhile the holiday of Passover was fast approaching, yet Moshe was penniless. How was he going to buy everything necessary for the holiday? How was he going to obtain wine for the four glasses, or even matzah? As things now stood, his children were going about barefoot and in patched-up clothes.

Moshe could no longer stay at home. With tremendous faith in G-d's help, he took his toolkit and once again went through the snow-filled streets.

He had barely started making his rounds when the carriage of the local Baron stopped in front of him. The Baron had just finished celebrating and was completely drunk. Not only that, but he wanted to amuse himself at the expense of "his" Jew.

"Come here Moshke," he shouted to him, a hunting rifle in his hand. "We're going to have a little fun, you and I. You're going to run all the way to the other side of that field, and I'm going to try and catch you like a bird!" he said with a laugh.

"I beg you, honorable Baron..." Moshe implored.

"Quiet!" the Baron interrupted. "If you don't move, I'll shoot you on the spot."

The poor tailor experienced great difficulty on his legs. He walked slowly, with his lips whispering a final confession as he thought of the fate of his wife and children.

"Now run on all fours!" the Baron thundered at him. "I'm going to shoot you!"

"Shema Israel!" exclaimed Moshe.

An explosion ripped through the air, and Moshe remained stretched out on the ground, motionless.

The Baron's wife, sitting in the carriage next to him, had pity on the poor Jew. "It's enough that you scared him to death," she said to her husband. "Now make it up to him!"

"Come, let's go Moshke. Jump into the carriage," the Baron called to him. Moshe had not yet fully realized that he was still alive. Whispering a prayer of thanks to G-d for having saved him from certain death, he approached the carriage and climbed in.

The Baron was so drunk that he quickly fell asleep, and his wife began to chat with the Jew, who was sitting behind her. He answered all her questions and spoke of his family and meager earnings. "Come home with us," she invited him. "I'll give you some work." After he worked the rest of the day at her home, she gave him his wages. At that point his eyes almost popped out of their sockets at what he saw: In a single day of working at her home, he had earned more than a month's wages working elsewhere! He had the impression that the wheel of fortune had turned, and at this rate he would be able to celebrate Passover as he never before dreamed possible in his life!

Several weeks before Passover, Moshe once again came to the Baron's home, his heart content. However this time the Baroness was not at home, and Moshe found himself face to face with the Baron himself.

"Hello Moshke! You're still alive?" he asked him.

"Yes, thank G-d," Moshe replied.

"And your earnings?" the Baron continued.

"Thank G-d. He gives food to all!" Moses said.

"You thank your G-d too much, Moshke," the Baron said angrily. "I've heard that it's my wife who provides you with your livelihood."

"May G-d reward her," Moshe responded.

"Again you mention G-d?" the Baron exploded. "And where will you get your money for Passover if my wife doesn't give you your salary?"

"G-d will help me," Moshe innocently replied.

At that point the Baron became hysterical. "Get out of here!" he screamed. "You'll never step foot in my house again! Let G-d provide you with your earnings!" The poor tailor made a bolt for it.

The night of searching for chametz arrived, and Moshe's home was immersed in grief. There was certainly no chametz in the house, but there wasn't any matzah either. A prayer escaped his lips: "Master of the world, what's going to happen?"

All of a sudden the door opened and a large, heavy bag was thrown into the room. It spread a horrible stench in the air, like that of a rotting carcass. "It's a plot against the Jews!" Moshe cried out. "There's not a moment to lose!"

His wife worked up the courage to open the bag. "Look Moshe, it's an ape!" she exclaimed. "There's a dead ape in the bag!"

Moshe began to breathe again. The danger had passed. He took hold of the bag to throw it outside, when all of a sudden he heard the sound of metal. A coin fell from the bag – a gold coin! He hurried to open up the ape's body, and in its stomach he found a treasure trove of gold coins!

The Passover Seder at Moshe's home that year was fit for a king, with old wine, shmurah matzah, and holiday dishes gracing his table. Guests were seated all around, the eyes of his children glittered, and the joy of the holiday was visible everywhere.

Then all of a sudden, in the middle of the Seder, the door opened wide and revealed no less than the Baron and his wife. Since the Baron had chased him from his house, he and his wife had arrived expecting to see him in a somber home that was devoid of everything.

The Baron was shocked. "Where did you get the money to have such a meal?" he asked in amazement. Moshe quickly recounted had G-d had sent him a treasure that was hidden in the stomach of a dead ape.

At that point, the Baron was completely thrown into disarray. The ape had been the Baron's pet, and when it suddenly died he ordered that its carcass be thrown into Moshe's house as a Passover "gift" for his Jew.

The Baron then realized what had happened: The ape had seen him counting his gold coins and checking their quality with his teeth, and like all apes it imitated its owner. In so doing it ate a great number of coins and died as a result.

"Your G-d truly helped you," the Baron acknowledged. "After the holiday, you can return and work for us," the Baron's wife added.