

BY HIS ACTIONS, MAN RESEMBLES THE ALTAR (BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

The Path To Follow YITRO

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Guard Your Tongue!

Lashon Harah About a Talmid Chacham

One who speaks Lashon Harah concerning a talmid chacham, be it in his presence or not, commits an extremely grave sin. A person who disparages a talmid chacham is considered to have scorned the word of G-d, and the Gemara tells us that he has no portion in the World to Come (Sanhedrin 99a).

A talmid chacham is a person who studies Torah and can teach Halachah. If the talmid chacham holds any official position or is well-known among the people on account of his Halachic decisions, classes, and lectures, then the sin of the person who scorns him is far greater. Disparaging words may cause a talmid chacham to lose his authority and influence over his students or members of the community. Other than the future punishment that awaits the speaker of Lashon Harah, he will not escape punishment even in this world. As the Sages have said, "Beware of their glowing embers, lest you be burned, for their bite is the bite of a fox...and all their words are like fiery coals" (Perkei Avoth 2:10).

At the end of this week's parsha, on the verse, "When you make for Me an altar of stones, do not build them hewn, for you will have raised your sword over it and desecrated it," Rashi cites the Sages (Yalkut Shimoni, Yitro 206) in saying that the altar was created to extend man's life, whereas iron was created to shorten it. Rashi writes that it is therefore not fitting for that which shortens life to be raised over that which lengthens it: "The altar also makes peace between Israel and their Father in Heaven, and so that which destroys must not come upon it. The matter is a kal vachomer: If the Torah said, 'You shall not raise iron upon them' [Deuteronomy 27:5] concerning stones – which neither see, hear, nor speak – because they make peace, how much more will one who makes peace between husband and wife, between family and family, and between man and his fellow have no trouble befall him" (Rashi on Exodus 20:22).

This requires an explanation, for what exactly is the connection that the Sages established between man and the altar? According to the Ramban (Leviticus 1:9), the altar's primary purpose is for a person to offer a sacrifice upon it, which leads him to self-annulment, contrition, and returning to G-d. According to the Rambam (Guide to the Perplexed 3:46), the purpose is for a person's offerings to prove that Hashem is the One and only G-d and that nothing exists besides Him (the idols of the peoples being but animal figures). Therefore in offering a sacrifice, a person demonstrates that he is prepared to give his life to sanctify Hashem's Name. Whatever the case may be, we have two views before us, though we must keep in mind that the altar itself is of little importance. All that matters is the sacrifice. That being said, where is the kal vachomer of the Sages that allowed them to compare man to the altar?

We must also clarify something else. The Torah states that it is forbidden to raise iron upon the altar, made of stone, because it is not fitting for that which shortens man's life (the iron of the sword) to be raised over that which lengthens it (the stones of the altar). We must ask ourselves if stones can also shorten man's life. After all, Cain killed Abel with a stone, and with stones we can destroy entire cities by using catapults, much like the Romans did to Jerusalem. On the other hand, iron can also bring about peace, just as King David used it to subdue Hashem's enemies (II Samuel 5:7-25), and Joshua his enemies (Exodus 17:13). There are many other examples of this kind. That being said, why would iron be described as something that shortens man's life, and stone as something that lengthens it?

Let us try and explain as best we can. The primary objective of a person in this world is to make sacrifices. It consists of being ready to offer himself in order to serve Hashem, and to act with devotion toward others. Likewise man must be like the altar, ready to accept a sacrifice that is offered upon it, for the altar signifies self-sacrifice and humility. If a person fails to resemble an altar, he cannot give his life for others.

It is true that many people devote themselves to Hashem and others. However they do this with pride and for personal gain, or simply to show off so as to be honored by others. However a person who truly

makes an altar of himself will realize that he is nothing but dust and ashes. In fact before sinning, Adam and Eve went about naked and without shame (Genesis 2:25), but after sinning they covered their nudity, which originated from dust and ashes. Thus only one who makes an altar of himself (meaning a person who views himself as dust and ashes, and who acts in this way with others) can achieve perfection.

In fact the body of man is made for action, whereas a deed, meaning a mitzvah, is the action itself. Similarly, the altar is a made for action, and the act of offering a sacrifice is the action itself. If someone wants to sincerely serve Hashem in love and fear, and to obey all His mitzvot, then his actions – which are like the sacrifice offered on the altar – must demonstrate great humility and be devoid of all pride that leads to wrongdoing.

We can therefore understand the comparison between man and the altar, and between the body and stone. The altar is made for the act of offering sacrifices, and as such it must be treated with respect. Although stones do not possess intelligence, which man does, this is uniquely a gift from Hashem, since from a material perspective both man and the altar are but dust and ashes. Consequently, man truly resembles the altar. Now just as it is forbidden to disparage the altar, so too is it forbidden to disparage any person. The Torah therefore states, "You shall not ascend My altar on steps, so that your nakedness will not be uncovered upon it" (Exodus 20:23), since this represents a disparaging attitude. The altar must be shown as much respect as people.

According to this explanation, we can also understand the comparison between marriage and the altar. Just as man and wife were created from dust and ashes, and just as they have Hashem's Name between them, so too does the altar (made of dust and ashes) bring peace between man and G-d. This occurs when people – made of dust and ashes – look to the altar and become humble. Thus from the altar we learn to bring peace between man and wife.

Since we have explained the importance of stone, to which man is compared, we can understand how stone is superior to iron. Why is stone described as "that which prolongs life," while iron is called "that which shortens life"? Although stone alludes to man's humble origins, man has turned dust into stones that have the power to kill. This is despite the fact that stones were meant for peace, meant to remind man that he comes from dust and ashes, and that to dust and ashes he shall return. This is not the case with iron, which man was not created from, but from which he can make useful things. Whatever the case, the components of iron are something from which it is possible to fashion destructive instruments, objects that man can do terrible things with. This is why it is forbidden to raise iron over stone, for stone is more important than iron.

From here we see that there are many similarities between man and the altar, for by his actions a person may also become like the altar in terms of humility and self-sacrifice. If the altar is to be respected, then how much more is man – made in the image of the living G-d – to be respected! Whoever wrongs him is as if he disgraced the Shechinah. Hence we must all be careful to respect our fellowman, for in that case it is as if we have shown respect for the holy Shechinah.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

The Closer to Sinai, the Better

The Chatam Sofer explains the Mishnah, "There may be a new vessel filled with aged wine, or an old vessel in which there is not even new wine" (Perkei Avoth 4:20) in the following way:

Philosophers come up with new ideas every day and rattle ancient, fundamental notions. Furthermore, they disparage the opinions of the philosophers who came before them. Naturally, the same occurs in the next generation, for other philosophers will arise to contradict the "discoveries" of their predecessors. What one generation has built, the other comes and tears down. Yet we the Jewish people, believers and children of believers, consider the words of the Torah as a solid foundation. We plumb the depths of the Torah itself, as well as concepts that have already been taught, and we consolidate it in truth. The older they are, the greater their importance and influence. This is the meaning of the Mishnah's statement, "There may be a new vessel filled with aged wine," meaning a young man who is filled with ancient Torah concepts. As for philosophers, whose teachings are contradicted and discarded by new philosophers, they do not even contain new wine, for their words will be contradicted by the following generation. (It is lightheartedly said, "Every philosopher buries the words of his predecessors and prepares a coffin for the next generation.")

In his book *Bishtay Anayim*, Rabbi Moshe Sherer recounts an interesting encounter that took place between Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky Zatzal and the General Secretary of the Histadrut (Israeli Labor Federation). Meeting in a plane traveling from Israel to New York, they began to discuss subjects touching upon Judaism. During the entire trip, the Secretary General was amazed by the efforts made by Rabbi Yaakov's son to make the long flight more comfortable for him. His extraordinary respect for his father, and the effort he put into serving him, so impressed the Secretary General that when they arrived in New York and were about to part ways, he said to the Rav, "Despite all the words of wisdom that you said during our conversation, I'm still not convinced that your path is the right one. However there is one thing that I am prepared to admit, which is that you seem to have a better way of educating your children than I do. Even in my dreams, I don't expect the kind of relationship with my children that I saw you having with your son. Can you reveal your secret to me?" The Rav replied, "It's very simple. With you the history of man began with the ape, the world and humanity being viewed as constantly progressing, as it were, towards an ever-greater state. Each new generation is wiser and more important than the previous one, which is why the younger generation revolts against its predecessors. In your view of the world, a young man is not capable of respecting and appreciating a primitive generation, for it is closer to the ape. To us, however, our history began with the giving of the Torah on Sinai, and every Torah-observant Jew yearns for his deeds to attain the level of his fathers. The idea is to get as close to Sinai as possible, and the closer a generation is to Sinai, the more important it is. This is why our children respect the older generation, since it is closer to Sinai. In short, this means that some people view the previous generations as being closer to the ape, whereas those who walk in the ways of the Torah see their predecessors as closer to Sinai. That's the difference!"

Performing the Seder in Haste

It is written, "It was on the next day that Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood by Moses from morning until evening" (Exodus 18:13).

According to Rashi, what is the meaning of, "It was on the next day"? He answers: "This was the day after Yom Kippur." However the Pa'aneach Raza states that it signifies the day after the festive meal (given in honor of Jethro). Because they drank wine on the previous day, Moses did not want to teach the people, for one who drinks 120 mL of wine is forbidden to teach Halachah. It is said that Rabbi Shemuel Salant Zatzal, the Rav of Jerusalem, would end the Ma'ariv prayer on the Seder night and rush home to conduct a quick Seder, after which he would take a half-hour nap. In this way he was ready to render Halachic decisions. He rushed through the Seder so there could be a Rav in Jerusalem to make decisions regarding chametz.

One is Enough

It is written, "When they have a matter, one comes to me and I judge between a man and his fellow, and I make known the decrees of G-d and His teachings" (Exodus 18:16).

Why is it written, "When they have a matter, one comes to me"? It should have stated, "When they have a matter, they come to me."

The Malbim explains that today, to our great regret, both parties come to the Beit Midrash when they disagree over matters, meaning that both parties appear in court. However if everyone spoke the truth, they would not have to both come, for one party would be enough to recount the facts before the judges and they could render a decision. This is why Moses said, "When they have a matter, one comes to me." It is the question itself that comes, even if the two protagonists do not.

When a man slaughters an ox and there is a doubt as to whether it is kosher, he goes to a competent Rav and asks him to render a decision. If the Rav tells him that it's treif, he will discard the ox without a second thought. However when two parties appear in court, they will argue over a penny! The reason for this difference is that in the former case, someone suffers a loss that nobody else profits from, which is not so bad. In the latter case, however, someone suffers a loss that another person benefits from, which to most people is the end of the world!

Large or Difficult?

Jethro advised Moses to appoint men who would "judge the people at all times, and they shall bring every large matter to you, and every small matter they shall judge" (Exodus 18:22).

Moses translated Jethro's advice somewhat differently, for it is written: "They judged the people at all times. The difficult matter they would bring to Moses, and the small matter they themselves would judge" (v.26). Moses said "difficult" whereas Jethro had said "large." Is there a Beit Din for small matters? What is a small matter? Is there something known as "small theft"? In the viewpoint of the Torah, there is no difference between the theft of a penny and that of a hundred million. Jethro used the terms "large" and "small" in accordance with non-Jewish views. However Moses used the term "difficult" because even for matters involving a single penny, it was to be brought to him if the case was complex.

Who Will Become a Doctor?

It is written, "And now, if you hearken well to Me and observe My covenant, you shall be to Me the most beloved treasure of all peoples, for Mine is the entire world" (Exodus 19:5).

Many people ask, "If you tell everyone to go to yeshiva, who will become a doctor? Doesn't the world need doctors?" The answer is that we have been teaching people to study Torah for more than 2,000 years, yet has this prevented individuals from becoming doctors? Does the Torah education that we want to give people have no importance? We are educating people to become great Torah scholars, something that nobody else does. No one but us forms great Torah scholars. The Maharil Diskin comments on the meaning of, "For Mine is the entire world": There are all these Gentiles to do everything else, says Hashem to those who ask.

Who Did Not Make Me a Gentile

It is written, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3).

The story is told of a Jew whose house had burned down. He stood in the street and cried out, "Blessed are You...Who did not make me a Gentile." Those watching him shook their heads, thinking that he had gone mad. He therefore said to them, "If I was a Gentile, then even my god would have been burned! However as a Jew, I have a G-d Who will help me!"

The Thoughtful Thief

It is written, "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:13).

A certain Rebbe discovered that he was in possession of ten rubles on the eve of Shabbat, which for him constituted a great deal of money. He looked for a place to put it, and decided upon a Chumash. He chose to place it within

Parsha Yitro, where the Ten Commandments appear, precisely where the Torah states, "You shall not steal." After Shabbat he went to retrieve his money, but he discovered that it had been taken! He looked and looked, until finally he came across five rubles in change. It had been left in the Chumash, but moved to where the Torah states, "You shall love your fellow as yourself." Letting out a sigh, the Rebbe said, "This Jew is far better than me. I only thought of myself, but he thought of both himself and me!"

How the Mule Praises Hashem

It is written, "Honor your mother and your father, so that your days may be long on the land that the L-RD your G-d gives you" (Exodus 20:12).

The book BeAyin Yehudit cites the Perek Shirah in describing how the mule praises Hashem. The mule says, "All the kings of the earth will acknowledge You, O L-RD, because they have heard the words of Your mouth" (Psalms 138:4).

The Gemara states: "What is meant by, 'All the kings of the earth will acknowledge You, O L-RD, because they have heard the words of Your mouth'? Not 'the word of Your mouth,' but 'the words of Your mouth' is said. When the Holy One, blessed be He, proclaimed, 'I am [the L-RD your G-d]...you shall have no other,' the nations of the world said: 'He teaches merely for His own honor.' However as soon as He declared, 'Honor your father and your mother,' they recanted and acknowledged the first commandment" (Kiddushin 31a). That is, when the nations of the world heard Hashem stating, "I am the L-RD your G-d...you shall have no other," they failed to see what was so novel about this, for everyone says the same thing. However when they heard the commandment about honoring one's parents, they also acknowledged what Hashem had said at first.

When someone performs the mitzvah of honoring his aged parents, and he takes his children along with him, this comprises a desire to honor his parents. It is also advantageous to the person himself, for he is showing his children how they should treat him when he is old.

However when a person without children honors his parents, this constitutes a pure mitzvah, one that benefits others, not himself. Now a mule cannot have offspring, and so it is fitting for the mule to praise Hashem with the verse: "All the kings of the earth will acknowledge You, O L-RD, because they have heard the words of Your mouth." In fact it instinctively knows that honoring parents is a mitzvah that is included in "honoring others."

– Aish Dat

EISHET CHAYIL

Bathsheba, the Mother of King Solomon

Bathsheba was the wife of King David and the granddaughter of Achitophel, David's adviser. She was a righteous woman who placed her mark on the kingdoms of David and Solomon during difficult times. She also reprimanded her son Solomon when necessary, guiding him in Hashem's path. She once reprimanded her son on the day that he was to inaugurate the newly constructed Temple. On that occasion he slept until the third hour of the day, the time for the morning burnt-offering. The Children of Israel were upset by this, given that the offerings were not going to be made at the appointed time on the Temple's inaugural day. They pondered the situation, and in the end they asked Bathsheba to awaken the king, which she quickly did. However she was not content with just waking him, for she also reprimanded her son: "What became of my wish? Every woman in your father's house expressed her wish by saying: 'May we have a son who will be worthy to rule.' My wish, however, was different: 'May his heart be zealous, filled with Torah, and be worthy to receive prophesy.'"

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

Observing Shabbat

It is written, "The seventh day is a Sabbath to the L-RD your G-d; you shall not do any work" (Exodus 20:10).

This verse deals with the prohibition of working on Shabbat. Expounding upon the reasons for this mitzvah, the Sefer Ha-Chinuch (mitzvah 32) states that we are meant to be free from our work in honor of Shabbat. We are to infuse our souls with the confidence that Hashem renews the world, which is the foundation of our faith. This mitzvah is also meant to remind us, one day each week, that the universe was created in six separate days and that nothing was created on the seventh. This is contrary to what philosophers believe, for they hold that even if G-d does exist, everything already existed, as it were, outside of Him. Other than evoking the renewal of the world, this mitzvah contains a reminder of the exodus from Egypt, where we were slaves and could not rest when we wanted. Hashem saved us from their hands and commanded us to rest on the seventh day.

We must ask why we were commanded to have pleasure on Shabbat precisely by not working, since for many people working (lighting fires, cooking, making things, serving clients, etc.) gives them pleasure. The book Sidduro Shel Shabbat (part 2) gives a parable to illustrate the point: A king wanted to hold a celebration for his children, and he told them to come to the palace with all their household members dressed in regal attire and in good spirits. The king wanted them to experience an entire day filled with feasting, food, drink, and rest. He wanted to rejoice with them, and for them to rejoice with him. He also wanted them to forget all their worries, delighting solely in his presence.

Thus everyone went to the palace for the sake of their father the king – everyone, that is, except for one son who did not show up. When the king asked his son why he had forsaken him, he answered: "Although your intention was to make me happy, I have some different ideas about what can do that. So I went to some taverns and enjoyed myself far more than I would have in your palace." It is obvious that such a response, which is laced with insolence, will upset the king. Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, invites us for one day each week to rejoice, Him with us and us with Him. As the holy Zohar says, Shabbat is a day of joy. It is a day for the joy of higher and lower beings, a day in which all things rejoice. It fills all the worlds with blessing, and all the worlds derive their tikkun from it. Even the wicked in Gehinnom experience a reprieve on Shabbat, except for those who desecrated Shabbat in public. How can a person say, "I enjoy myself more in taverns than by going to the house of the King"? By this he demonstrates that a love for his father is not implanted in his heart.

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

Seeing Things in a New Light

It is written, “Then I said, ‘Woe is me, for I am doomed: For I am a man of impure lips... for my eyes have seen the King, the L-RD of hosts’” (Isaiah 6:5).

In the book *Kochav MiYaakov*, the Maggid of Dubno explains this verse with a parable: A Jew who lived in a small town earned his living as a waiter in the local tavern. His knowledge of the Torah was very limited, since he only studied *Tzena U’Rena* (a book written in Yiddish for the uneducated, one designed to teach the plain meaning of the Torah in a language that everyone spoke). This waiter also had some knowledge of the Jewish calendar, and people who knew very little asked him some questions on it. One day as he was in synagogue between Mincha and Ma’ariv, he heard people discussing a certain subject, but they were unsure about something. They therefore said, “Let’s ask the waiter.” As a result, the man thought that he was a wise, educated individual. However he traveled to the city one day, and there he saw great Torah figures engaged in truly skillful Halachah discussions. Upon returning home, the man said to his wife: “Woe is me, for I thought that I was an educated and important man. But now that I’ve been to the city, I realize that I’m nothing.” Likewise the prophet Isaiah, understanding that he was the prophet of the generation, considered himself to be important. However when his eyes were opened in prophesy and he saw the glory of the G-d of Israel, with the Seraphim standing above, he said: “Woe is me, for I am doomed.” In other words: I was mistaken because I am but a man of flesh and blood, a man of impure lips. I have never seen anything as lofty as this, whose existence I had never even fathomed. Only now have I begun to understand it, “For my eyes have seen the King, the L-RD of hosts.”

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Chaim David Bernhard of Piotrkow – Rebbe and Physician

In his youth, Rabbi Chaim David Bernhard was very far from Judaism, living his life much like a Polish nobleman. In fact he was the personal physician of King Wilhelm II of Prussia, and everyone knew him as Doctor Bernhard.

On account of a medical miracle that he witnessed, however, Doctor Bernhard did teshuvah. One of his patients, who suffered from an incurable disease (which the physicians of the time deemed fatal), went to see the tzaddik Rabbi David of Lelov for a blessing, after which he completely recovered. When he returned to Doctor Bernhard, he examined him and was amazed to discover that he was in perfect health. He therefore decided to go and see this rabbi from Lelov for himself. Rabbi David spoke in private with the doctor for several hours, and at the end of their conversation he said to the doctor, “When you return to Judaism, you will bring happiness to your Father in Heaven.” In fact Doctor Bernhard became another man – Rabbi Chaim David Bernhard – for he was determined on completely returning to Hashem.

When he came back home, he broke all his dishes and purchased new ones, becoming a G-d-fearing Jew. In fact he became such a chassid of Rabbi David of Lelov that he eventually became one of the tzaddikim of the generation, having many disciples of his own. Near the end of his life, the Rebbe of Radomsk, the Tiferet Shlomo, visited him and said: “The former days be void” (Numbers 6:12). To this Rabbi Chaim David replied, “When we do teshuvah out of love, deliberate sins are transformed into merits. Therefore even the ‘former days’ are mitzvot.” On Shevat 20, 5618, Rabbi Chaim David Bernhard departed from this world and was buried in the Piotrkow cemetery in Poland.

A MATTER OF EDUCATION

Fleeing Desires Makes You Upright, Not Warped

Our parsha states, “You shall not covet” (Exodus 20:14), and in Parsha Va’et-chanan we read, “Neither shall you desire” (Deuteronomy 5:18). The Rambam and Sefer HaChinuch explain this commandment according to the teachings of the Gemara: “Nether shall you desire” refers to the very desire found in the heart of a person, though he does not seek to obtain the object of that desire. However “You shall not covet” refers to a person actively seeking to obtain what he desires (see Bava Metzia 5b).

The most difficult of battles that a person faces is the one against destructive elements that are anchored in his mind through force of habit. Their presence in a person’s thoughts is the result of two fundamental things: (1) The things he sees around him, and (2) The desires of the body. The Torah helps a person in this fight by creating an alternate, spiritual vision of the world. The direction it gives enables him to counteract the power of desire. This is what the Sages meant in saying, “I created the evil inclination, but I created the Torah as its antidote” (Kiddushin 30b).

Education aimed at countering desire often results in isolating a person from everything that has to do with it, including everything beautiful or pleasant. If not accompanied by instruction for the mind, such education defines the beautiful or pleasant as being negative things. For intelligent people who do not accept such distortions, the result of this deception will be a refusal to back away from thinking about that which is beautiful or pleasant. Teaching them to flee from such things will not only be futile, it will also give them greater importance in their eyes. It is like forbidding someone to think of cats; the result will be that he won’t be able to stop thinking of them!

This is why educators must explain that they are not against what is beautiful and pleasant. They must make it clear that they are only for limiting them so they do not lead to desire, which in itself is negative. We can instill this idea in people at a fundamental level by teaching them good habits with regards to eating, namely to eat with the head rather than with the stomach. This means that a person should stop when he has eaten what he thinks is enough for good health. A little more should be added for Shabbat enjoyment or other such considerations, or to improve one’s mood, provided that it does not harm one’s health or lead to animalistic tendencies, as the Rambam writes in *Shemonah Perakim* (chapter 5), which is an introduction to *Perkei Avoth*. Besides the desire related to satisfying hunger, eating can also lead to lethargy that diminishes one’s ability to think. This is illustrated by the adage, “The more in the head, the less in the stomach. The more in the stomach, the less in the head.”

A TRUE STORY

Not Because of Personal Abilities

It is written, “You shall not ascend My altar on steps” (Exodus 20:23).

During the first General Assembly of Agudath Israel in Vienna, the rabbanim asked the Chafetz Chaim to speak in honor of the event, but he declined. However because people were insistent, he went up on stage and gave the following address: “‘You shall not ascend My altar on steps.’ This is a warning to the Kohen that when he ascends Hashem’s altar to offer a sacrifice, he must remember that he did not ascend on account of any personal abilities, nor because of any exceptional character traits. He merited this great honor only because he was the son of a Kohen. When I was asked to come up on stage and bless everyone gathered here for this holy assembly, I wondered why this great honor was being bestowed on me. When I was told that it was because of my supposed greatness in Torah, I rejected the offer with both hands, for I do not consider myself to be great in Torah. Even when I was told that it was for my supposed piety and righteousness, I refused. Only when I was told that it was because I was an elderly Kohen – it was then that I could no longer refuse. Old age is a gift from G-d, and the priesthood is a heritage from my father. Because of these two things that Hashem has given me, I now give you my blessing, the blessing of an elderly man and a Kohen!” The Chafetz Chaim then blessed all of the participants.