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BLESSED BE G-D, WHO HAS GIVEN US THE MONTH OF ELUL

(BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

Today we find ourselves entering the month of Elul, the month of mercy and forgiveness. During this time every Jew increases his repentance, mitzvot, and good deeds in order to arrive at the day of judgment cleansed and purified of all sin. When we look into this more closely, however, we discover that an important task awaits us at this time, the task of nourishing our souls. True, the body must also be fed. However our primary task pertains to the soul.

What is the purpose of the soul? The soul comes into this world seeking spiritual sustenance, as it received in the supernal world. To obtain such nourishment, it is aided by Torah study and mitzvot performance. Yet in this world it is greeted with material nourishment. That being the case, what must the soul do?

Simply put, the goal of the soul is to transform the material into the spiritual by observing Hashem's mitzvot. Otherwise, what purpose would be served by man's creation? Did the Holy One, blessed be He, go to the trouble of creating this world only for man to eat, drink, and enjoy all the vanities of this world? Was it simply to anger Him, only to be punished for having troubled the Creator of the universe? Was that the purpose of man's creation? We must open our eyes and see that we did not come into the world for that! We were not created to profit from materiality and upset the Creator by not nourishing ourselves with spirituality, which Hashem placed in Creation for us.

The Holy One, blessed be He, gave man Torah and mitzvot to guard and observe so his soul may be nourished uniquely from the spiritual. In this way it can transform the body, made of physical matter, into an object of holiness. In fact the soul can transform the body to such a degree that it becomes pure and remains untouched in the grave after a long life. Now just as the body can be transformed into a spiritual object, so too can every area of man's life.

What can this be compared to? It is like a car, the purpose of which is to make traveling easier and faster than by foot. As for the goal of an airplane, it is to help man get to his destination even faster. However nobody asks why a car, airplane, or any other means of transportation was invented, for it is clearly understood that such things are meant to quickly bring people to their destination.

The same applies to man. Although Hashem created man, He gave the Torah to the Children of Israel so that people could quickly discover their purpose in this world and not lose too much time by slowly discovering it on their own. In the Torah man can discover the secrets of life that are hidden in Creation, and he can achieve a true understanding of the Creator and the purpose of this world. The more a person puts an effort into studying the Torah, the more quickly he will understand what Hashem expects of him and what his duties are in this world.

To truly perfect himself, a person must repent. When he wholeheartedly repents of his sins and betters himself, Hashem will accept his repentance. At that point he will

quickly and easily become G-d's servant once again, for he has obeyed G-d's will by striving to achieve his true goal in life, namely spirituality. Here the well-known question arises: How can a material being conquer the evil inclination? This is why we must thank Hashem for having given us days such as these, days of mercy and benevolence, ones in which we engage in soul-searching, repentance, and improving our deeds.

To rid our hearts of every doubt that we harbored during the year, and to strengthen ourselves as of now, we must cleave solely to Torah, mitzvot, and good deeds. In this way we can return to our Father in Heaven, believe in Him, and ask to be forgiven, for "I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine" (Song of Songs 6:3).

However each person must take the first step of "I am my Beloved's." At that point the Holy One, blessed be He, will approach him and connect to him, which will constitute: "My Beloved is mine." As the Sages said, "Make for Me an opening as narrow as the eye of a needle, and I will open it as wide as a hall" (Shir Hashirim Rabba 5:2). A person must begin, and then the Holy One, blessed be He, will come to his aid, for "one who desires to purify himself is given help" (Yoma 38b).

Our duty is to transform the evil inclination into something that is very good. We must transform the material into the spiritual through Torah, for it is the antidote to the evil inclination, which tries to make us transgress in impure and pure places. We must conquer it and completely remove all doubts from our hearts. We have the power to do all this, for we can wholeheartedly repent, especially during these days, days of mercy and benevolence, when Hashem is close at hand and knocks at the door of our hearts. If we improve our deeds, the covenant will not be annulled.

Hence we must awaken ourselves as much as possible throughout the year, especially during these days, of which it is said: "Rouse yourselves from your slumber, you who sleep. Awaken yourselves, you who have fallen asleep." These are days that are particularly suited for repentance. If they pass without action on our part, we will have a great deal to answer for, yet with no answer to give before the Heavenly court. In fact during these days, days of spiritual awakening, Heaven is knocking at the door of every Jew's heart. This is "the sound of my Beloved knocking" (Song of Songs 5:2), and Hashem's voice is heard saying: "Open to Me, My sister, My love" (ibid.). The Sages said that on these days the Holy One, blessed be He, is extremely close to those who call upon Him in truth (Rosh Hashanah 18a). He is ready to receive our repentance, for He is standing at the door of our hearts and knocking. He says to every Jew, "My child, repent. Repent completely! Strengthen yourself in Torah and mitzvot, and you will experience good in this world and in the World to Come."

GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

Silence and its Reward

When someone finds himself among people who are engaged in prohibited conversations, yet he cannot leave, he is forbidden to join in, even if he feels extremely uncomfortable being the only person not speaking. Although this is not easy to do, a person must remember what our Sages said, namely that it is better to be considered foolish for one's entire life by man, than to be considered wicked for even a single instant by Hashem (Eduyot 5:6). He should be consoled by the fact that Hashem will reward him in proportion to the discomfort and suffering he endures by remaining silent, as the Sages have said: "Commensurate with the effort is the reward" (Perkei Avoth 5: 21). Insofar as such situations are concerned, the Sages also said that for every second a person remains silent, he will merit a hidden light that no angel or created being can comprehend.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

They Forgot the Main Thing

It is written, “The officers shall continue speaking to the people and say, ‘Who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house.’” (Deuteronomy 20:8).

On Purim a group of unbelievers were depicted as going off to war for the Jewish people. As this huge army, composed of tens of thousands of soldiers, was about to leave for battle, the Kohen stood up and proclaimed: “Who is the man who has built a new house and has not inaugurated it? Let him go and return to his house.” At that point thousands of soldiers got up and left. The Kohen continued: “Who is the man who has betrothed a woman and not married her? Let him go and return to his house.” Several thousands more left the camp. Once again the Kohen proclaimed: “Who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house.” At that point all the soldiers left, leaving only the Sha’agat Aryeh, Noda B’Yehuda, Pnei Yehoshua, and Vilna Gaon.

When this story was told to the gaon Rabbi Chaim of Brisk, he said: “They forgot the main thing, meaning that these Torah giants won the war and none of them were even touched.” When going out to war, why do the Jewish people need to reduce the number of their soldiers to such an extent?

On this subject Rashi states: “Rabbi Jose the Galilean says that [this refers to] one who is afraid of his sins. Thus the Torah gives him the excuse of attributing his return home to a house, a vineyard, or a wife, in order to cover up for those who return because of their sins, so that people should not understand that they are sinners. One who sees this person returning would say, ‘Perhaps he has built a house, or planted a vineyard, or betrothed a woman.’”

The respect that people must have for others should reach this level. It is to this extent that we must worry about not causing others embarrassment.

Furthermore, what sin is being discussed by this verse, a sin that would cause a soldier to fear that he might die in battle? It is not a sin such as idolatry or murder, for the Sages have said that this soldier was afraid of having spoken between donning the tefillin of the arm and the head. This gives us another perspective on sin, every sin, even those that seem trivial to us.

Actually, this is quite extraordinary. Why is this soldier not being asked to repent? After all, he is a man who, aside from his sin, is clean of all wrongdoing.

It would therefore seem that a sin such as the one in question has deep roots. In fact we are dealing with a tzaddik here, a person who did not commit any sin. Therefore why was he unable to remain silent as he was donning his tefillin?

A person who repents must not only uproot the wrongful deed that he committed. He must probe deeply and eradicate its root causes so it no longer manifests itself. His repentance must be like a “circumcision,” for he must excise and reject its primary causes, meaning its roots. This is elul, a word formed by the initials of et levavcha ve’et levav zarecha (“your heart and the heart of your offspring”). The month of Elul has the power to cause repentance of this magnitude, and if a person eliminates negative middot from his heart, they will never return, neither to him nor to his offspring.

A Pearl From the Rav

It is written, “Judges and officers shall you make for yourself in all your gates” (Deuteronomy 16:18).

In his book Pahad David, Rabbi David Pinto Shlita asks why this verse uses the word lecha (“for yourself”). The answer is that it is part of human nature for a person to see his own virtues, but other people’s flaws. A person is so biased that he ignores his defects and deficiencies and always seeks to justify himself. This is why the Torah warns us by saying, “Judges and officers shall you make for yourself” – precisely for yourself, meaning that you must be your own judge and officer. You must not believe that without a constant critique, without the judges and offices that you must place over yourself, you can conquer the evil inclination. A person’s biases are so powerful that the Torah itself called this parsha shoftim (“judges”), thereby warning us to seek protection by placing judges and officers over ourselves.

Seven Gates

It is written, “Judges and officers shall you make for yourself in all your gates” (Deuteronomy 16:18).

The holy Shelah wrote: “In all your gates. These are the seven gates of man, which allow him to either stray from the path or walk along it. These gates are his two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and his mouth. Hence he must place ‘judges and officers’ at all these gates.”

With Whom Should You Be Simple?

It is written, “Tamim [Simple] shall you be with the L-RD your G-d” (Deuteronomy 18:13).

Rashi states, “Conduct yourself with Him in simplicity and depend on Him, and do not inquire of the future. Rather, accept whatever happens to you with simplicity.” Such conduct regards “the L-RD your G-d.” Regarding human beings, however, we must not conduct ourselves with simplicity. Rather, we must employ the utmost wisdom in dealing with others, lest they deceive us. We see this with Jacob, whom Scripture describes as “a simple man” (Genesis 25:27), for he dealt with Laban shrewdly and with discernment.

One day students from the Radin yeshiva went to see the Chafetz Chaim and complained that they had lost their money to some deceitful merchants. The Chafetz Chaim replied that since, as yeshiva students, they were used to acting simply with Hashem, they had mistakenly assumed that they could do the same with people. However this is not the case, for Scripture states: “Simple shall you be with the L-RD your G-d” – with Him, not with man.

A More Numerous People Than You

It is written, “When you go out to battle against your enemy, and you see horse and chariot, a more numerous people than you” (Deuteronomy 20:1).

We must ask why the verse uses the term mimcha (“than you”), since it would have been sufficient to state, “and you see horse and chariot, a more numerous people.”

This teaches that when we go out to war and see horses and horsemen, a numerous people, and we are afraid of them, we must realize that we have brought this upon ourselves because of our sins. Everything that happens in the world, for better or worse, is determined by whether or not we perform mitzvot. Thus the verse states: “When you go out to battle against your enemy, and you see horse and chariot, a more numerous people,” realize that this stems mimcha (lit. “from you”), for your deeds have brought this about.

– Torat HaParasha

Let Him Return Home

It is written, “Who is the man who has built a new house and has not inaugurated it? Let him go and return to his house” (Deuteronomy 20:5).

Targum Yonatan translates this as: “One who has built a new house and has not inaugurated it – he did not affix a mezuzah to it.”

We must understand the words of the Targum as an allusion, according to the Sages’ statement that the mezuzah protects a man and his house, and that Hashem protects it from outside (Menachot 33b).

Thus the Targum is saying: “He did not affix a mezuzah to it” – he is punished measure for measure, for just as he did not protect his house by affixing a mezuzah to it, so too will he not be protected in war. He must therefore return home.

Simple Shall You Be

It is written, “Simple shall you be with the L-RD your G-d” (Deuteronomy 18:13).

The Alsheich states that Hashem (“the L-RD”) represents mercy, while Elokim (“G-d”) represents strict justice. Thus whether He acts with you according to mercy or strict justice, you must always act simply with Him. The Yerushalmi recounts that there was a non-Jew who looked to the stars for guidance. He eventually converted, and at one point he had to leave home for business. However when he saw in the stars that danger lurked on the road, he decided not to go. Afterwards, however, he changed his mind: “Why did I convert? Was it to still believe in the stars?” He therefore took to the road. While traveling, however, he encountered wild animals

and barely made it back alive. The Yerushalmi states, "Because he looked to the stars, he endangered his life. Yet because he had faith in Hashem, in the end he was saved" (Shabbat 6:9). This is the meaning of, "Simple shall you be with the L-RD your G-d."

False Prophecy

It is written, "But the prophet who shall willfully speak a word in My Name, which I have not commanded him to speak..." (Deuteronomy 18:20).

The book Toldot Adam states that a certain scholar from the east came to Vilna in order to enjoy the company of the tzaddik Rabbi Zalman. He also wanted to see just how extensive his knowledge was of the Rambam's works. This Sephardic scholar went to the Beit Midrash of the tzaddik and said to him, "I've heard that you're extremely well-versed in the works of the Rambam. Although I would like to stay in Vilna and enjoy your company, Hashem said to me: 'Do not go.'" Rabbi Zalman was astounded by what this man said: "My brother, don't you know, have you not heard? There is an extensive work by our great master the Rambam [Hilchot Avodah Zarah 5:8], stating that one who prophesizes something that he did not actually hear in a prophetic vision, or one who hears the words of another prophet and attributes them to himself, such a person is a false prophet! We should be very careful not to say, 'Hashem said to me.'" This Sephardic sage had come to learn the extent of Rabbi's Zalman's knowledge of the Rambam, which he definitely showed him!

Blood is Not Water

In Parsha Ki Teitzei the Torah again states: "When you go out to battle your enemies" (Deuteronomy 21:10). This tells us that the subject of warfare is not yet over. That being the case, why does the passage dealing with the heifer (whose neck is broken) appear in between? The answer is that when a person commits an act of cruelty, it tends to imbue him with a cruel nature. Concerning a city given over to idolatry, the Torah tells us to burn it along with all it contains. We do this so that Hashem will turn from His anger and take pity on us. Why must Hashem take pity on us? It is because He commanded us to do a cruel thing. That being said, we must not think that because of this commandment we will automatically become cruel, since Hashem takes pity on us. Here the Torah commands us to go out to war, and after three sections that pertain to warfare it gives us the section on the heifer whose neck is broken. This is to teach us that blood must not evoke indifference. The discovery of a dead body justifies the breaking of a heifer's neck and testimony from the elders of the nearest town, certifying that they did not spill this blood. Why do we go to all this trouble? It is to make us realize that blood must not be overlooked, that blood is not water.

EISHET CHAYIL

How to Merit a Tzaddik For a Son

Rebbetzin Rivka Miriam of Belz, the wife of the Belzer Rebbe, Rabbi Yehoshua, performed many deeds of chesed. In fact she normally distributed a great deal of money to the poor each week.

One Friday the Rebbe could hear the sounds of heart-wrenching weeping coming from the Rebbetzin's room. He immediately went and asked her why she was crying. She said that during the week, she was unable to come up with the amount of money that she normally distributed to the poor. Up to that point, she was hoping that the money would somehow arrive, yet the time for candle lighting was soon approaching, and she still didn't have enough to distribute to the poor. Hence her tears.

Rabbi Yehoshua said that he would lend her whatever she needed in exchange for some collateral. The Rebbetzin agreed, and she quickly gave him an expensive scarf as collateral for the loan. With great joy she hurried to distribute this money to the poor before Shabbat, and only then did she go and light candles with joy and contentment.

When Rabbi Yehoshua saw this, he pointed to their son Issachar Dov and said, "By lighting the candles in this way, it's not surprising that we had a son like him." In fact the Rebbetzin merited being the mother of this boy, the next Belzer Rebbe, Rabbi Issachar Dov.

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

Great Wisdom is Required to Be Simple

It is written, "Simple shall you be with the L-RD your G-d" (Deuteronomy 18:13).

Rabbi Naphtali of Ropshitz, a disciple of the Chozeh of Lublin, was shown great affection by his teacher. Other than his greatness in Torah and Chassidut, he was extremely intelligent and perceptive, and it was his capacity for profound thought that endeared him to his teacher. Once during a holiday, the Chozeh of Lublin said to him, "Naphtali, it is written in our Torah: 'Simple shall you be with Hashem your G-d.' The verse doesn't say 'wise,' but 'simple.' From here we learn that being simple is greater than being wise."

"This is true," answered Rabbi Naphtali tit for tat. "It is better to be simple than wise. Yet how much wisdom does a Jew need to reach the level of being simple with Hashem?"

What did Rabbi Naphtali mean by this? It seems that he was saying that simplicity requires an absence of wisdom! Onkelos translated the verse in question as, "You shall be wholehearted in the fear of the Eternal your G-d."

The proper approach to this mitzvah is that one must be wholehearted. Simplicity means being whole, and one who is simple and whole receives the Creator's all-encompassing guidance. Such a person assumes nothing, and therefore he does not try to determine future events, for he does not seek to involve himself with Hashem's way of guiding him. He is filled with confidence in the Master of the universe, and he realizes that he needs a great deal of wisdom for this. He needs wisdom to understand that not everything is under his control, as well as wisdom to understand that his actions – despite all his efforts – remain efforts, nothing more. To better understand this principle, we shall cite the following story:

The Baal Shem Tov asked his disciples to make him some wine. They had learned all the Halachot concerning the making of wine, and they adhered to all its stringencies. They shut themselves in a house and even closed all the windows so nothing could enter and invalidate the wine they were making. When the process was finished and they were bringing the barrel of wine to their venerated teacher, it fell from a cart and began to roll away. As they started to run after it, they shuddered as they saw it rolling toward a non-Jew who was standing by the roadside. Using their hands, they signaled to him not to touch the barrel. However not only did this non-Jew stop the barrel, he also shook it to determine its contents. Now when a non-Jew touches wine, it becomes forbidden to drink. Therefore the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov made a huge ruckus when they saw this non-Jew ruining their wine. Sad and bitter, they returned to their teacher empty-handed. They asked him why this had happened, and what it meant. The Baal Shem Tov replied, "You were so careful in making the wine that you left no room for the Holy One, blessed be He, to protect it." This is the mitzvah of, "Simple shall you be with the L-RD your G-d," meaning that we must perform our duties and leave the rest up to Hashem. We have no need to overly involve ourselves with running the world.

A TRUE STORY

The Power of a Bribe

It is written, “You shall not accept a bribe, for the bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous” (Deuteronomy 16:19).

When Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt, the author of *Ohev Israel*, served as the Rav of Kolbassov, two wealthy merchants came before him in a Din Torah. After the Rav listened to the statements of both parties, he immediately felt that one of them was in the wrong. When the man whom the Rav suspected of wrongdoing realized that the judgment was going against him, he decided to give the Rav a bribe. However he feared doing this openly, so he slipped some money into the Rav’s coat as it hung against the wall, without anyone noticing.

Suddenly, the Rav realized that he was beginning to justify the party he previously felt was in the wrong. In fact the Rav was so amazed at the shift in his own opinion that he decided to hold a short recess. Wanting to go outside in order to think things over, the Rav put on his coat and felt the money that had been placed in his pocket. At that point he thought, “Imagine the power of a bribe! Even before I knew that I was given one, it began to influence me once it came into my possession!”

The Rav had long wondered about the verses in Parshiot Mishpatim and Shoftim which state that a bribe perverts the words of the righteous, for how can the Torah describe someone as righteous if he accepts a bribe? Now he fully understood this concept, for someone may not know that he has received a bribe, in which case he would still be considered righteous. Yet even then, a bribe will manage to distort justice and deform the truth.

– Torat HaParasha

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Morgenstern of Lomaz

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Morgenstern Zatzal was born in 5612 in Kotzk, Poland to Rabbi David of Kotzk, the son of the holy Seraph, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgenstern (the first Kotzker Rebbe). From his youth he was known for his insight and learning in all realms of Torah. When he reached the age of marriage, he married the daughter of Rabbi Shlomo (the Rebbe of Radzymin and son of Rabbi Yaakov Aryeh). Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch remained in Radzymin after his marriage, and his wife’s grandfather Rabbi Yaakov Aryeh saw to all his needs. Rabbi Yaakov Aryeh also studied many hours with him and taught him the Torah’s secrets. After the death of his father Rabbi David, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch began to lead the community from the small town of Radzymin. However he soon moved to Lomaz and assumed the position of Rebbe there, a city whose name is forever identified with his own, since he is known as the Rav of Lomaz. A few years later, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch went to live in the suburb of Praga, near Warsaw, and from there he moved to Warsaw itself, where he continued to lead the community. Countless people gathered in his shadow and avidly drank in his words. He was also known for his miracles, and many came to him desperately seeking help.

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Morgenstern lived a long time. On Elul 3, 5686 his soul departed for the celestial academy, and his body was laid to rest in the Gansha cemetery of Warsaw. Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch left behind sons and sons-in-law who were Rebbes, among them being Rabbi Nechemia Alter Zatzal, the brother-in-law of the Gerer Rebbe, the Lev Simcha Zatzal. May his merit protect us all.

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

Those Who Look to the Stars

Rabbi Akiva had a daughter, and astrologers told him: “On the day she enters the bridal chamber, a snake will bite her and she will die.” He was very worried about this. On that day [of her marriage], she took a brooch, stuck it into the wall, and by chance it penetrated into the eye of a serpent. The following morning, when she took it out, the snake came trailing after it. “What did you do?” her father asked her. “A poor man came to our door in the evening.” she replied. “Everybody was busy at the banquet, and there was none to attend to him. So I took the portion that was given to me and gave it to him.” “You have done a good deed,” he said to her. At that point Akiva went out and taught: “Charity delivers from death – and not [merely] from an unnatural death, but from death itself.”

The mother of Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak was told by astrologers, “Your son will be a thief.” [Therefore] she did not let him [go] bareheaded, saying to him: “Cover your head so that the fear of Heaven may be upon you, and pray [for mercy].” Now he did not know why she said this to him. One day he was sitting and studying under a palm tree, when his head-covering fell off. Temptation overcame him, and he climbed up and bit off a cluster [of dates] with his teeth.

– Shabbat 156b

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

The Story of Consolation

It is written, “I, only I, am He Who consoles you” (Isaiah 51:12).

Our Sages state in Yalkut Shimoni that in the future, the Holy One, blessed be He, will address the nations of the world and tell them to console Israel. Upon hearing this, Israel will protest: “After such a long exile, filled with bitter suffering, have You not found other consolers for us than these non-Jews? We want to be consoled by You, not by the nations that enslaved and persecuted us.” The Holy One, blessed be He, will immediately reply: “If you want to be consoled only by Me, then I will console you.”

We find this idea alluded to the first verse of each of the four Haftorot of consolation. The Haftorah of Va’etchanan begins with the verse, “ ‘Console, console My people,’ says your G-d” (Isaiah 40:1). The Haftorah of Eikev states: “Zion said, ‘The L-RD has forsaken me, my L-rd has forgotten me’ ” (ibid. 49:14). The Haftorah of Re’eh states: “O afflicted, storm-tossed one, who has not been consoled” (ibid. 54:11). Finally the Haftorah of Shoftim states: “I, only I, am He Who consoles you” (ibid. 51:12).

The connection between these Haftorot is the following: Hashem addresses the nations and tells them, “Console, console My people,” after which Zion states: “The L-RD has forsaken me, my L-rd has forgotten me.” In other words: Why have You abandoned me, O G-d, and forgotten to console me Yourself, ordering the nations to do so instead? The Holy One, blessed be He, answers: “O afflicted, storm-tossed one, who has not been consoled” – You are poor and beaten by the storm and find no consolation in yourself, for you wait to be consoled by Me, which is exactly what I shall do. Thus, “I, only I, am He Who consoles you.”

– The Maharam Shapira of Lublin