

MATERIAL LIFE IS MEANINGLESS COMPARED TO SPIRITUAL LIFE

(BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

The Path To Follow

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It is written, “I call heaven and earth today to bear witness against you: I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse, and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring” (Deuteronomy 30:19). Rashi explains: “I call heaven and earth today to bear witness. For heaven and earth exist forever, and when evil befalls you, they will be witnesses that I warned you regarding all this. Another explanation of I call heaven and earth today to bear witness: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel, ‘Look at the heavens, which I created to serve you. Have they ever changed their ways? Has the sphere of the sun ever failed to rise from the east to illuminate the entire world, as it is stated, “The sun rises and the sun sets” [Ecclesiastes 1:5]? Look at the earth, which I created to serve you. Has it ever changed its ways? Have you ever sown it, that it did not grow? Or have you ever sown wheat and it yielded barley? Now they were created with neither reward nor loss in mind – for if they are meritorious, they nevertheless do not receive reward, and if they sin, they are not punished – and yet they have never changed their ways! So you, who will receive reward if you are meritorious and will be punished if you sin, how much more should you do so!’ ” Thus the words of Rashi.

It is certain that the Holy One, blessed be He, fixed the paths of the stars to perform the will of their Creator. Similarly, on earth we have never seen a person planting a tree in a certain place only to discover it growing elsewhere. Only the moon has no fixed position in the sky, for its path is constantly changing because “the strength of His deeds He declared to His people” (Psalms 111:6). Moses said, “You shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring” (Deuteronomy 30:19). Here Rashi explains: “You shall choose life. I instruct you to choose the portion of life. It is like a man who says to his son, ‘Choose for yourself a fine portion of my estate,’ and then directs him to the best portion, saying to him, ‘This is what you should choose for yourself!’ ”

It would seem that we need to understand the meaning of, “You shall choose life.” After all, which fool would not choose life if given the choice between life and death? To explain this, we must say that when a person becomes accustomed to the vanities of this world and this fleeting life, then materiality seems to constitute true life, and conversely spirituality appears far less important to him. In fact to him, the “lazy and foolish” who spend their time studying Torah in the Beit Midrash seem to be “dead.” When a person is immersed in the vanities of this world, he cannot tolerate reproof or moral instruction, for they seem completely alien and burdensome to him.

That is why Moses warned the Children of Israel to “choose life.” In other words: Choose true life, the life of Torah and moral values, and carefully consider what your duties are in this world, so as not to stray by engaging in meaningless pursuits. Otherwise such pursuits will seem like true life to you, yet it is a path that will lead you to spiritual death. When you eventually leave this world, you will not be able to take anything with you. It is only if you

choose true life that you will be given help in this world and in the World to Come.

The Sages have said, “Provide yourself with a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend” (Perkei Avoth 1:6), and in his wisdom King Solomon said: “Rejoice, young man, in your youth” (Ecclesiastes 11:9). This means that a person will be happy if he chooses, while still young, Hashem’s path in the holy Torah and makes it a personal acquisition. He will be happy if he clings to it like an inseparable friend, be it for a single instant, as King David said: “I am a friend to all who fear You” (Psalms 119:63).

The reason for this is that young men have tremendous strength, and when they choose to follow Hashem they will fight against the evil inclination with great vigor. Happy is the person who will not be ashamed of his youth when he reaches old age, given that it was not lost pursuing the vanities of this world. On the contrary, he served Hashem in his youth and filled his days with studying Torah and performing mitzvot and good deeds. He knew how to distinguish between the eternal life within us – the holy Torah that Hashem implanted in man’s body – and the life of this world, which only seems like a good life filled with pleasure, but in reality only leads to death. Pursuing the vanities of this world makes a person lose both this world and the World to Come.

In the word uvacharta (“and you shall choose”), we find the letters of the word bachur (“young man”) and chaver (“friend”). In other words, when a person becomes a close friend of the Torah in his youth, choosing it exclusively and acquiring it as his own, he will never depart from it. Instead he will keep it for his entire life, and in this way he will acquire the life of the World to Come, true life in which he will experience nothing but happiness.

Nevertheless, a person who fails to fight his evil inclination in his youth – choosing instead to follow the desires of his heart – and who only decides to return to Hashem in the midst of his life, he too will have a portion in the World to Come, where he will be greeted as a king. He will be considered like a baby that has just been born, and which never knew sin. In the World to Truth, he will be considered on the same level as the tzaddikim and the pious. Yet despite all this, he will bitterly regret the fact that he did not choose this path earlier on in life, for he will sense the absence of all the years in which he lived without Torah.

Hence the younger a person is when he acquires the Torah and cleaves to it, demonstrating his confidence in Hashem by studying the holy Torah with reverent fear, the more he will merit to walk along the path of life, which leads to life in the World to Come. Therefore “You shall choose life” means: While you are still young, you must cleave to the Torah, for in this way you will be planting seeds for eternity. If a person does this, he will live a life of constant spirituality. He will merit a good year, one filled with the blessing of being inscribed in the book of life.



*The Pinto Associations
around the world,
along with Rabbi
David Hanania Pinto
Shlita, send you their
best wishes for an
exceptional new year
5767. Shana Tova! May
we all be inscribed in the
Book of Life. Amen.*

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

When the River Split

It is written, "I call heaven and earth today to bear witness against you" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Rashi explains: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel, 'Look at the heavens, which I created to serve you. Have they ever changed their ways? ... Look at the earth, which I created to serve you. Has it ever changed its ways?'"

The Gemara recounts that Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair was on his way to redeem prisoners. Arriving at the River Ginnai, he said: "O Ginnai, divide your waters for me." The river replied, "You are about to fulfill your Maker's will, and I am also doing my Maker's will. While you may or may not fulfill your goal, I am sure of fulfilling mine." Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair said, "If you do not divide, I will decree that no waters should ever pass through you." The river immediately divided. There was also an Arab with Rabbi Pinchas, and therefore he once again addressed the river: "Divide yourself for this person as well, so he cannot say: 'Is this the treatment of a fellow traveler?'" It then split for him as well (Chullin 7a).

It is understandable that the river split for Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair after hearing these threatening words, for it was, after all, created to serve him. Yet why did it split for the Arab accompanying him?

We must conclude that it split for a regular individual only for the sake of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. He could not cross the river and leave the Arab behind, for he was liable to say, "Look at how he treats his fellow travelers!" This argument is just as daunting as trying to cross a raging river.

From here we learn that there are things that do not fall under the jurisdiction of a specific mitzvah. However they are engraved in man's behavior to the point of surpassing all other needs, to the point of being completely indispensable, of being part of his essence.

In this case we are speaking about harming the honor of one's fellow, even if he is an Arab accompanying you on a journey. Not paying attention to this mitzvah is a character flaw. Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair could only cross the river if everyone else with him crossed as well. Otherwise it would have meant that his character was flawed, that he had a deficiency in the way he fulfills mitzvot governing man and his fellowman. This is why the river that had respect for Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair, and which let him pass, also let the Arab accompanying him pass. The greatness of showing respect for others is illustrated by an incident that happened to Rabbi David Bekher, one of the great Torah figures of Turkey.

One of his children was getting married, but because the wedding was far from his home, it took Rabbi David several hours to get there. The journey was taking longer than planned, and because he was now late but still far from his destination, Rabbi David asked the driver to go faster. He in turn whipped the horses, but without success. Finally Rabbi David shouted to him, "Can't you go any faster?!" After he arrived and the ceremony took place, Rabbi David began to have regrets over the way he had spoken to the driver. He therefore wanted to apologize to him. He began looking for the driver, and when he found him he asked for forgiveness. Despite his supplications, however, the driver absolutely refused to accept his apology. Rabbi David promised to give him all his wealth if he would just forgive him, but it was useless. Suddenly the driver said to him, "I'm ready to forgive you, but only on one condition: You must give me half of your share in the World to Come."

Without hesitating, Rabbi David accepted his condition. This is the right way to appreciate the mitzvah of honoring one's fellowman.

A Pearl From the Rav

It is written, "Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel" (Deuteronomy 31:1).

In his book *Pahad David*, Rabbi David Pinto Shlita examines the expression, "Moses went." Where, in fact, did he go?

Rabbi Pinto explains that Moses, the humblest of all men, understood the gravity of sins between man and his fellowman. On the day of his death, Moses

stopped concerning himself with his own physical needs and the perfection of his soul, for his only goal was to reach out to every Jew in the camp and guide him along the right path. This is the meaning of the expression, "Moses went." He went throughout the camp and entered each tent to speak to everyone in their own home. He himself went to see them and made sure that his words, which emerged from his heart, entered the hearts of those he spoke to. Although he was their leader for 40 years and had the status of a king, and despite the fact that he spoke to Hashem, Moses did not consider it below his dignity to speak to each individual. He felt that if his words could make a difference with even the most ordinary of people – if his words could bring them closer to Torah – then he was honored to try.

From Moses we must learn to be concerned with the needs of others. If we notice a friend or a student has not come to a Torah lecture that he normally attends, we must go to his home and see if he needs help or moral support. We must not consider this as being below our dignity.

The Shofar

It is written, "Lest there be among you a root flourishing with gall and wormwood" (Deuteronomy 29:17).

The initials of the expression *shoresh poreh rosh vela'anah* ("a root flourishing with gall and wormwood") form the word *shofar*. The sounds of the *Shofar*, which awaken people to repentance, have the power to rip out every root of evil.

– Ma'ayana Shel Torah

The Heart of Your Offspring

It is written, "The L-RD will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring" (Deuteronomy 30:6).

Here the Torah is speaking of each Jew in every generation. Therefore why does it state, "The heart of your offspring"? After all, the expression, "Your heart" also applies to one's children.

The answer is that when a person repents, his children will also follow the right path and their hearts will not be spiritually blocked. Thus when "the L-RD will circumcise your heart," then automatically "the heart of your offspring" will be circumcised.

– Sefat Emet

Hashem Does Not Accept Bribes

It is written, "He will bless himself in his heart" (Deuteronomy 29:18).

There was once a man who desecrated Shabbat, and when he was reprimanded he replied: "Just watch how I'll rectify my sins!" At the end of Shabbat, he gave a great deal of money to charity and boasted to everyone that his actions were certainly more acceptable than had he not desecrated Shabbat and not given to charity. Of such people Scripture warns us, "When he hears the words of this imprecations" – when he is reprimanded for his wicked deeds, "he will bless himself in his heart" – he will boast in his heart. That is, he will boast of his good heart, of his generosity and good deeds, which he believes will rectify his sins. Hence Scripture tells us, "The L-RD will not be willing to forgive him" (v.19).

– Har Tzvi

Evils, Not Troubles

It is written, "Many evils and troubles will befall them, and they will say on that day, 'Is it not because our G-d is no longer among us, that these evils have befallen us?'" (Deuteronomy 31:17).

At first the verse states, "Many evils and troubles," yet in the end it mentions only "evils." The term "evils" represents the scourge itself, whereas the term "troubles" – which comes from the word *tzar* ("constricted") – denotes oppression that is so severe it can break a person. It can crush someone's spirit and submerge him into depression, making the world seem dark to him. This occurs in addition to the evils that he experiences. Such a situation happens to someone who has no faith or confidence in G-d. However one who fears G-d in his heart and sees His guiding hand in his life will not interpret evils as being troublesome oppressors, nor will he feel overwhelmed. As King David

said, “Even if I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me” (Psalms 23:4).

As soon as a person realizes that “G-d is no longer among us,” oppressive troubles will leave him, leaving only the evils themselves. Hence at the end of the verse we read, “These evils have befallen us,” nothing more.

– Rabbi Eliezer Menachem Mann Shach

To Each His Own

It is written, “For I know its inclination” (Deuteronomy 31:21).

The Mishnah states, “Who is strong? He who subdues his inclination” (Perkei Avoth 4:1). It states “inclination” in the singular, a reference to a person’s own inclination, not that of others.

Using the example of a Posek, the gaon Rabbi Yehoshua Ber (the author of Beit Halevi) points out that his role in the community is to always be occupied with Torah, for in this way he will be thoroughly versed in matters of Halachah. Now the reason he does this is to prevent the residents of his community from committing errors in Halachah. As for the wealthy, Hashem made them wealthy so they could give large amounts of money to tzeddakah and support the community. What does the evil inclination try and do? It disrupts the Posek’s studies and encourages him to take up another mitzvah, such as tzeddakah. In that case it will push him to occupy himself with the needs of the poor. Similarly, the evil inclination will go to the wealthy man and encourage him to devote himself to Torah study, for “the study of Torah is as valuable as all the mitzvot.” In this way the wealthy will be prevented from giving to tzeddakah and doing acts of chesed. “Who is strong? He who subdues his inclination” – his own inclination, under his own particular circumstances. Each person must attentively carry out what is incumbent upon him. He must avoid taking on roles that were not meant for him, since that would be like subduing the inclination of others. In that case he would be putting himself in their place and taking on their role, not his own.

Overview of the Parsha

After the terms of the covenant are introduced in Parsha Ki Tavo, the actual covenant is brought in Parsha Nitzavim. The promise is given that even if the covenant is violated, the Children of Israel will eventually repent. The parsha ends with words aimed at encouraging the observance of Torah and mitzvot.

After the terms of the covenant are introduced in Parsha Ki Tavo, and the covenant itself in Parsha Nitzavim, Parsha Vayeilech deals with the transmission of the Torah to the Children of Israel so it would remain with them for all time. At the beginning of the parsha, Moses tells the Children of Israel that the leadership of the people will be transferred to Joshua the son of Nun. Joshua is told that Hashem guides the people and walks with them, and he is given detailed instructions on how to lead them. Moses orders the Torah to be written and read in public at the end of the Shmita year, and the promise is given that the Torah will endure for all time.

GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

An Advantage and a Drawback

The advantage that man has over animals is that Hashem has given man a soul with the ability to speak. However this advantage depends on the way he uses his words. If he uses them for good – to bless the Creator of the world, study the holy Torah, support and encourage his friends, and so on – then his ability to speak will truly be beneficial to him. However if he all he does with his words is to utter Lashon Hara – to arouse hostility among friends, peddle slander, and so on – it is clear that this ability is no longer beneficial to him. Instead it is a drawback, for at least animals cannot do any harm by speaking.

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

The Mitzvah of Teshuvah

It is written, “You shall return and listen to the voice of the L-RD and perform all His mitzvot” (Deuteronomy 30:8).

The Chatam Sofer questions the meaning of this verse, for just a few verses earlier the Torah wrote: “You shall return to the L-RD your G-d” (v.2). Why is this repeated here?

Let us begin by citing the Rambam: “What is complete teshuvah? A person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit it, yet he abstains and does not commit it due to his teshuvah alone, and not because of fear or a lack of strength...this is a complete Baal teshuvah” (Hilchot Teshuvah 2:1).

What happens when a person becomes old and weak, when he no longer has the same drives that led him to sin? Is it impossible for him to do teshuvah in that case? He must not lose hope, for teshuvah depends solely on a Jew’s will. If he truly wants to – even if he is no longer the same person, no longer having the same energy and drives – he can still fulfill the mitzvah of teshuvah. Although it will not be complete teshuvah, through it he will come closer to the source, meaning closer to the Holy One, blessed be He. It is like a wealthy man who sinned on account of his money, until finally Hashem decides to take it all away and make him poor. Such a person should reflect on what has happened to him, realize that he has sinned, and completely return to his Creator. Although this is not complete teshuvah, since he no longer has the same opportunities or temptations as when he was wealthy, he must still fulfill the mitzvah of teshuvah and return to Hashem with all his might. Then Hashem in His great compassion, Who loves all His creations, will return this man’s wealth so he may overcome the same temptations and his teshuvah can be complete.

This is how the verses in question unfold: At first the Children of Israel sinned and were punished with exile, and in their exile they reflected on their situation and realized just how far they had strayed from the Torah. Yet how could they do teshuvah in exile? It would not be complete! Nevertheless they still had to fulfill this mitzvah and strengthen themselves in what they could. Each person had to do what he could to improve his service of Hashem. This is the meaning of the expression: “You shall return to the L-RD your G-d” (Deuteronomy 30:2). Once this happens, Hashem in His great compassion will return the Temple to our land so that we may once again overcome temptation and return to Him in complete teshuvah. This is what we learn from the verse, “You shall return and listen to the voice of the L-RD and perform all His mitzvot” (v.8), namely that we will merit to fully perform all the mitzvot.

EISHET CHAYIL

A Small Sacrifice to Make

Rabbi Meir Shapira, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Chachmei Lublin yeshiva and founder of Daf Yomi, was known around the world for his greatness and keen intellect.

Rabbi Meir’s father, the gaon Rabbi Yaakov Shimshon Zatzal, said of his wife: “Her burning love for Torah is what created a child that resembled her.”

She completely devoted her son Rabbi Meir to Torah, and when he grew up he would vividly describe the marvelous experience he had at the age of seven. On the day after Passover, the young Meir found his mother worried to tears. When he asked her why she was crying, she explained that she had hired a teacher for him from Skhistov. A good salary was even arranged for him, 300 rubles for the semester in addition to all his expenses. However two days had already passed since the holiday, and he still hadn’t arrived. “Do you know, my son,” she said to him, “that each day that passes without the study of Torah is an irreplaceable loss. Who knows, perhaps we didn’t offer him enough? Certainly in our time, an enormous amount of money is also considered a sacrifice. However for the Torah, which is so great and precious, it is a small sacrifice to make.”

A TRUE STORY

I Have a Request

It is written, “Be strong and courageous, do not fear and do not be afraid of them” (Deuteronomy 31:6).

During World War I, Russian soldiers noticed a light coming from the house of the gaon Rabbi Aaron, the Rav of Tverik in Lithuania. Certain that he was a spy, the soldiers rushed to take the house. Once inside, they found Rabbi Aaron immersed in study, hunched over a text of the Rambam. Of course this did not change their view that he was a spy, and therefore they told him that he was going to be executed for espionage. Rabbi Aaron, who understood their tremendous cruelty, said to them: “I would ask that you please grant me one final request. I am now completely immersed in a commentary of Maimonides regarding a matter of Jewish law. I ask that you please wait until I’ve managed to understand the meaning of one of his comments.”

When the soldiers heard this request, they were completely stunned, for such a thing was unheard of. Thus in their amazement, they granted Rabbi Aaron’s request. While they were waiting for him to finish, however, a sudden shift occurred in the city’s military balance, for the Germans had launched a massive attack and the Russians were forced to flee in haste.

– Lekach Tov

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

The Matter is Very Close to You

The book Tanna D’vei Eliyahu describes the teachings of Eliyahu HaNavi to Rav Anan. In it we find Eliyahu saying: “One day I was traveling from one place to the other, when I came across a man who knew neither Scripture nor Mishnah, yet ridiculed their contents. When he approached me, I said to him: ‘My son, what answer will you give to your Father in Heaven on the day of judgment?’ He replied, ‘Rabbi, I have an answer for Him! Heaven gave me neither discernment nor intelligence to study Torah!’ I said, ‘My son, what is your occupation?’ He replied, ‘I’m a fisherman.’ I said, ‘My son, who taught you weave a net from flax and to cast it into the sea?’ He said, ‘Rabbi, Heaven gave me discernment and intelligence for that.’ I said to him, ‘For procuring flax, weaving it into a net, and casting it into the sea to catch fish, you were given discernment and intelligence from Heaven? Yet for studying Torah – of which it is said, “The matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to perform it” [Deuteronomy 30:14] – Heaven gave you neither discernment nor intelligence?’ He immediately raised his voice and began to sigh and weep. I said to him, ‘Fear not, my son. Everyone gives this answer, but their actions point to their true intentions. For them and those like them, and for all who do the same, the verse states: “Ashamed will be those who work at combing flax and weaving nets” [Isaiah 19:9].’ ”

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

The Kabbalist Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol

Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol Zatzal was the son of the Kabbalist Rabbi Shlomo Pinto Zatzal. Thousands of stories are told of the numerous miracles that he constantly performed. However the main thrust of his actions focused on helping and supporting Jews. He demonstrated his tremendous power countless times to Gentiles in his entourage, with the result being that all the Gentiles of Morocco, even the most powerful, respected its Jewish citizens. All this was on account of Rabbi Haim Pinto, whose name was a source of pride for all the Jews of Morocco.

Among the many stories that are told of Rabbi Haim Pinto is one that occurred during the great war between Spain and Morocco. At the time, many people moved out of the cities, including Rabbi Haim Pinto himself. This community settled in the desert, where they eventually ran out of water. Rabbi Haim summoned his disciple, Rabbi Yaakov ben Sabbat Zatzal, and said to him: “Bring me some water.” His disciple retorted, “Where am I going to find water in the middle of the desert?” While he was still speaking, a man arrived carrying a skin filled with water on his shoulder. The end result was that the people were provided with water, and Jewish lives were saved. Afterwards Rabbi Haim said, “That man was my father, Rabbi Shlomo Zatzal, and he came to save us from disaster.” As we know, during the war Rabbi Haim remained outside the city itself. He stayed by the city walls, and through his great merit no bombs fell on the city. The remainder of his glorious deeds in saving Jews will soon appear in a book written by our teacher Rabbi David Pinto Shlita. Rabbi Haim Pinto left this world on Elul 26, 5605. May his merit protect us all.

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

Preparing Our Spiritual Garments

It is written, “Like a bridegroom rejoicing over his bride, so will your G-d rejoice over you” (Isaiah 62:5).

Some say that we have already seen the fulfillment of almost all the signs given by the Sages to signal the advent of the Final Redemption. Therefore why has Mashiach not yet arrived?

The answer is that obviously nothing is impossible for Hashem. In fact the Final Redemption can occur in the blink of an eye, as it is written: “Today, if you will only heed His voice” (Psalms 95:7; see Sanhedrin 98a). Therefore it is clear that the Holy One, blessed be He, is delaying the Final Redemption a little longer so we can prepare ourselves for Mashiach. In this way we will not end up greeting him completely devoid of Torah and mitzvot. We may explain this with a parable: A very wealthy man invited his parents and friends to the wedding of his son. He knew that many important figures would be attending the wedding, and he also realized that if simple people with torn clothes attended, he would be tremendously embarrassed. He therefore advised them to be careful with their clothing, meaning that they should be clean and presentable. In this way he would not be embarrassed when they sat near him.

The moral of the story is explained in our holy books. Hashem is known as a groom and the Jewish people as a bride. In fact this is explicitly stated in the verse: “Like a bridegroom rejoicing over his bride, so will your G-d rejoice over you.” The time for the Final Redemption is fast approaching, and Hashem can bring it about at any moment. In fact this is what we are waiting for. Therefore we must prepare ourselves by means of Torah, mitzvot, and good deeds, spiritual garments that we will wear in welcoming the King when He greets us with all His holy ones. If we are not ready at that time, however, our faces will be completely covered in shame. Hence we must spiritually awaken ourselves and our fellow Jews.

– From the Letters of the Chafetz Chaim