



The Path To Follow

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GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

Protected by Faith

The more a person strengthens his faith in Hashem, the less likely he is to sin by speaking Lashon Harah. For example, a person whose friend has caused him a financial loss, or who has offended him, might be tempted to repay him by speaking ill of him. However if his faith in G-d is strong, he knows (and keeps it close to heart) that nobody can touch what has been prepared for his fellow (Yoma 38b), not even by the slightest amount. He also knows that a person's sustenance is fixed for him on Rosh Hashanah (Beitzah 16a), and that all a person's money, honor, and social status are allotted to him by Hashem. Since nobody can deprive him of what Heaven has allotted him, this realization weakens the power of the evil inclination, which pushes him to speak ill of the person who harmed him.

THE STUDY OF TORAH PURIFIES MAN

(BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

Our parsha discusses the impurity resulting from contact with a corpse, and how it can be rectified. When we think about it, this mitzvah leads to many restrictions. A person who became impure through contact with a corpse should separate himself from people who are not impure, lest he render them impure by touch. He should also not touch utensils or objects that are not impure, lest he render them impure as well. If someone were to extend his hand to greet him, he would have to say: "So as not to become impure, don't touch me."

Several questions arise when we think about this mitzvah, questions that we will now examine. Why does the Torah decree that a person becomes impure upon touching a dead body, since there is a mitzvah to care for a corpse and bury it? If impurity is decreed on someone who cares for a corpse, it may lead him to avoid this responsibility, for he may not want to isolate himself from people and things for seven days.

We may also ask why it is precisely the ashes of the red heifer that purify a person. That being said, since we no longer have these ashes today, and since we are constantly in a state of impurity due to contact with the dead (despite all the tevilot and netilat yadayim), we remain impure. Therefore how can we become holy in our time? We also have to understand why the Sages said, "Even as the red heifer procured atonement, so does the death of the tzaddikim procure atonement" (Moed Katan 28a). What connection is there between the atonement procured by the ashes of the red heifer and the death of the tzaddikim? We shall try to explain everything as best we can.

When Hashem created the first man, He created him in a state of perfection and with great wisdom. He put everything in the mind of the first man, to the point that he understood all the secrets of Creation and gave each creature a name whose root reflected its essence. He also gave a Name to the Holy One, blessed be He. The first man was called Adam, for he was taken from the earth (adama), and he was wise enough to name Chaya, the mother of all the living (Genesis 3:20).

Furthermore, the tzaddik and kabbalist Rabbi Yehuda Petaya Zatzal stated that the first man was a great sage, for he was wise enough to understand what death was, even though nothing had yet died. When Hashem told him that he would die if he ate from the Tree of Knowledge, how could he have been afraid of death if he didn't understand what it meant? This signifies that in his immense wisdom, Adam knew enough to fear death, even before understanding its exact nature. Thus Hashem placed him in the Garden of Eden to work and keep it (Genesis 2:15), and He commanded him not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. In fact Hashem wanted man to use the great wisdom that He endowed him with, not to seek answers from the Tree of Knowledge. It was not meant to make him wise, for Hashem did not want him to possess that kind of wisdom. Therefore He prohibited him from partaking of it. However the man did not stop there, and he brought death and disaster upon humanity. What happened to the first man also contains a lesson for every Jew today: The Holy One, blessed be He, gave us His Torah (the written Torah and the oral Torah), and the Sages prohibited us from studying the wisdom of the Greeks and other philosophies (Yalkut Shimoni, Mishlei 937), for we

must content ourselves with the wisdom of the Torah, which contains everything and all means to perfection, as it is written: "The Torah of the L-RD is perfect" (Psalms 19:8).

Since we have reached this point, we shall explain the meaning of the ashes of the red heifer. This week's parsha begins with the declaration, "This is the decree of the Torah" (Numbers 19:2), an allusion to the fact that a person must cleave solely to the decrees of the Torah, not to other kinds of wisdom, for in this way he will form a bond with Hashem. This is also what the parsha alludes to further on: "When a man dies in a tent" (v.14), concerning which the Sages have said: "Words of Torah are firmly held by one who kills himself for it" (Berachot 63b). This refers to the tent of Torah, meaning that a person must give himself entirely to the wisdom of Torah, not to try and have it both ways by absorbing, in addition to the Torah, foreign wisdom. Our entire focus should be on the holy Torah, as it is written: "Go over it again and again, for everything is in it" (Perkei Avoth 5:22).

As for the ashes of the red heifer, which procure atonement, this tells us by allusion that in sanctifying and purifying ourselves, we become as pure and upright as the first man before the sin. The Holy One, blessed be He, created him from dust, which is also called ash, as it is written: "They shall take for the unclean person some of the ash" (Numbers 19:17). Similarly, the word adam ("man") is formed from the initials of efer ("ash"), dam ("blood"), and mara ("gall"), as the Sages have said (Sotah 5a). This teaches us that the degree to which a person fulfills all the laws related to the impurity of the dead and to his purification – without arguing over the mitzvah – is the degree to which he is purified.

Yet today, when we no longer have the ashes of the red heifer, we still have a way to purify body and soul, namely through the study of Torah. This is because the Torah cannot contract impurity, as the Sages have said: "Words of Torah are not susceptible to impurity" (Berachot 22a). On the contrary, the Torah elevates a person from the level of liability to the level of gain. As the Sages have said, "Why are 'tents' mentioned alongside of 'streams,' as it states: '[How goodly are your tents, O Jacob...] as streams stretched out, as gardens by the river side, as aloes planted...' [Numbers 24:5-6]?" To tell you that just as streams bring a man up from a state of uncleanness to one of cleanness, so do tents bring a man up from the scale of guilt to the scale of merit" (Berachot 15a-16b). Rashi explains that tents refer to houses of study.

From here we learn that the Holy One, blessed be He, foresaw that both Temples would be destroyed and that there would be neither altar, nor priest, nor ashes of the red heifer. Hence at the beginning of the parsha He states, "This is the decree of the Torah." Actually, if a person has strayed by going off to study other wisdom, he can rectify this situation by abandoning that wisdom and devoting himself solely to the study of Torah. Conversely, if he neglects the study of Torah, he will eventually stumble and become impure by a corpse. In other words, when he demonstrates a weakness in Torah study, it will lead to impurity. His purification consists of putting an effort into studying Torah and performing mitzvot, by the ashes of the red heifer, so he can return to the state of a newborn baby.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

Complete and Wholehearted Forgiveness

It is written, "The people spoke against G-d and Moses: '...our soul is disgusted with this vile bread.' G-d sent poisonous serpents against the people, and they bit the people" (Numbers 21:5-6).

The king of Edom, as well as the king of Arad, did not allow the Children of Israel to pass through their land. The latter even went out to fight against Israel. In the end, Hashem listened to the Children of Israel and delivered the Canaanite king of Arad into their hands, after which they continued on their journey. At that point a grievance escaped their lips, a cry of ingratitude: "Why did you bring us up from Egypt to die in this desert, for there is no food and no water, and our soul is disgusted with this vile bread." The Children of Israel were immediately punished, for Hashem "sent poisonous serpents against the people, and they bit the people. A large multitude of Israel died." The people went to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the L-RD and against you. Pray to the L-RD, that He remove the serpent from us" (v.7). When Moses prayed, Hashem said to him: "Make yourself a poisonous [serpent] and place it on a pole, so that anyone who was bitten will look at it and live" (v.8). Our Sages have explained (Avodah Zarah 44a) that Moses was asked to make a serpent for himself, although it was the Children of Israel who had sinned and acknowledged it. Why did Moses have to pay for their repentance by using his own resources to make a serpent to heal them and rectify their souls? Rabbi Chaim Ephraim Zaitchik Zatzal said that the Torah is teaching us a moral lesson here. True, the Children of Israel were the ones who sinned.

However they acknowledged their sin once they were punished, and Moses did not neglect to pray for them and ask Hashem to forgive them. Here we see the humility of Moses, who did not refrain from asking for mercy on them. Furthermore, our Sages have explained that the expression, "Moses prayed" teaches us that a person should not be cruel by refusing to forgive others, since Moses wholeheartedly forgave them. Hashem said to him, "Make yourself" – from what is yours – to demonstrate and prove that the forgiveness and self-denial demonstrated by Moses were real, beyond any suspicion of bitter feelings. In fact Hashem asked Moses to do something that would cost him money, thereby proving that his forgiveness was real, beyond the shadow of a doubt. The Sages have said, "Now did the serpent kill or did the serpent keep alive? No. [What this indicates is that] when Israel directed their thoughts above and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they were healed" (Rosh Hashanah 29a). Here the Sefat Emet asks: If their healing consisted of looking to Heaven, why did they need a serpent? He answers by saying that Hashem placed the power of healing in the serpent, and the Ramban wrote that Hashem renders the bitter sweet by means of the bitter. Hashem wanted to teach us that even when a natural and physical healing takes place, we must still raise our eyes to Heaven and realize that everything depends on Him.

A Pearl From the Rav

It is written, "The Children of Israel, the entire assembly, arrived at Mount Hor" (Numbers 20:22).

Rashi explains: "Mount Hor. A mountain atop a mountain, like a small apple atop a big apple." In his book Pahad David, Rabbi David Pinto Shlita asks why the verse uses the expression Hor HaHar instead of Rosh HaHar ("the top of the mount"). We can explain this according to the words of the Sages, who compare the evil inclination to a mountain (Sukkah 52a). This means that when a person succeeds in conquering

the evil inclination when it tries to make him stumble, it will immediately attempt to build another mountain atop, as it were, the previous one, and this is Hor HaHar. True, the last mountain is not so large at first. In fact it is no thicker than a hair, so that people do not feel that it can make them stumble. A person must realize, however, that he is endowed with lofty powers that can help him fight and defeat the evil inclination regardless of how it presents itself, be it as a mountain or as a mountain atop a mountain.

Not Bitter

It is written, "This is the decree of the Torah that the L-RD has commanded, saying" (Numbers 19:2).

This verse teaches us that although there are several kinds of mitzvot that human nature finds difficult and bitter, it is nevertheless proper that a person should, for the sake of his love of Hashem, find them pleasant and sweet. The story is told of a great chassid who was extremely refined, a man who would usually wash a fruit seven times before eating it. Now this chassid was a mohel, and when his friends asked him how he suctioned away the blood during a circumcision without being disgusted by it, he replied: "It doesn't disgust me because Hashem commanded me to do it. Similarly, I'm not bothered by eating maror on Passover, since Hashem's mitzvot are precious to me."

This is what the verse is teaching us: "That the L-RD has commanded, saying" – by cutting the word leimor ("saying") in two, we get lo amar ("not bitter"), meaning that everything that Hashem commanded us is not bitter. On the contrary, it is sweet and pleasant.

– Od Yosef Chai

Why He Wrote a Decree

It is written, "This is the decree of the Torah" (Numbers 19:2).

On this particular expression, which appears at the beginning of our parsha, Rashi states: "Because the Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel, saying, 'What is this commandment, and what purpose does it have,' the Torah uses the term 'decree.'" We may ask why the Satan and the nations of the world question the purpose of this particular mitzvah, since there are many mitzvot that have not been explained! The Maggid of Zlotchov, Rabbi Yechiel Mechel, replies by saying that further on in the parsha, Rashi cites Rabbi Moshe HaDarshan as saying that one of the reasons for the mitzvah of the red heifer is that it atones for the sin of the golden calf. According to this explanation, we can understand why the Satan and the nations of the world question this mitzvah. That is, they want to remind everyone of the sin of the golden calf, a sin that our fathers committed in the desert, in order to arouse serious accusations against Israel. Since that is the intention of our accusers, those who hate Israel, the mitzvah of the red heifer was deliberately given as a chukat ("decree"). Hence the Torah tells us that this mitzvah is a Heavenly decree, and in order not to arouse accusations against the Jewish people, there is no reason to reveal its true explanation.

– Parperaot LaTorah

On the Eve of Shabbat

It is written, "He that touches a corpse...shall purify himself with it [the ashes of the red heifer] on the third day and on the seventh day" (Numbers 19:11-12).

This passage contains a great allusion to the fact that even in times when the ashes of the red heifer no longer exist, a person can still purify himself by constantly cleaving to the Torah, studying and teaching it in order to observe, perform, and carry out its words. In fact the Sages have said that one day for the Holy One, blessed be He, is like a thousand years. By this they meant that the six days of Creation correspond

to the six thousand year existence of the world, with the seventh day corresponding to the World to Come, which is entirely Shabbat. Each of these days corresponds to a thousand year period, as the Ramban explains in detail on Parsha Bereshith.

Now the Torah was given during the third millennium, which corresponds to the third day. One who purifies himself on the third day – meaning a person who purifies himself by the Torah that was given on the third day – shall be purified “on the seventh day.” That is, his purification will be complete in the World to Come, the day that is entirely Shabbat. Yet if he does not purify himself on the third day, then he will not be purified on the seventh day, for one who does not trouble himself on the eve of Shabbat will not eat on Shabbat.

– Derech Chaim Tochachot Mussar, Citing the Holy Shelah

Guard Your Tongue!

It is written, “Any open vessel that has no cover fastened to it is unclean” (Numbers 19:15).

In commenting on this verse, the tzaddik Menachem Mendel of Kotzk said that the mouth is the most precious and marvelous vessel that the Creator, in His goodness, has given to us. It is what makes us greater than animals, which is why everyone must use this precious instrument with the greatest of care. We find an allusion to this teaching in this week’s parsha: “Any open vessel that has no cover fastened to it” – a person who uses his mouth without any discretion, constantly opening it to utter useless and foolish things – “is unclean.” By doing so, he renders all his bodily members impure, in addition to harming his soul, for there no real way to rectify the effects of profuse and harmful speech. The Tanna Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel teaches us, “All my days I grew up among the Sages and did not find anything better for one’s body than silence...and whoever engages in excessive talk brings on sin” (Perkei Avoth 1:17).

– Parperaot LaTorah

Overview of the Parsha

Parsha Chukat begins by concluding the interruption of the people’s journey after they erected the Sanctuary, which began in Parshiot Beha’alotcha and Shelach. It ends by continuing the account of the journey of the people towards the land of Israel, until they encamp in the plains of Moab. From there the people would cross the Jordan and enter the land. Once the legitimacy of the priesthood is established in Parsha Korach, Parsha Chukat describes the reconciliation of the people to the Sanctuary by means of a red heifer brought before its entrance. The ashes of the red heifer are to be mixed with living water and sprinkled upon a person rendered impure by a corpse, an impurity that distances him from the Sanctuary.

Before continuing with the journeys of the generation that would enter the land of Israel, the death of Miriam and her burial in Kadesh are described. We also read about the complaining that occurred there, after which Moses and Aaron were forbidden to enter the land of Israel. The Children of Israel ask to pass through Edom (a request this is refused), and they travel from Kadesh to Mount Hor, where Aaron dies. The Canaanite king of Arad subsequently attacks the Children of Israel, and G-d sends serpents to bite and kill the people when they rebel against Him and Moses on account of their bread and water. When they arrive at the well, Moses gives them water on Hashem’s command, and the Children of Israel sing the song of the well. At the end of the parsha, the people march towards their land and make their first conquests in the land of the Amorite and in Bashan, where they defeat Sihon and Og.

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

Let Us Consider

It is written, “Therefore the poets say: Come to Heshbon – let it be built and established as a city of Sihon” (Numbers 21:27).

Our Sages have interpreted this verse as follows: “‘Therefore hamoshelim [the poets] say.’ Hamoshelim – those who rule their evil inclinations; ‘Come to Heshbon’ – come, let us consider the account [heshbon] of the world: The loss incurred by the fulfillment of a precept against the reward secured by its observance, and the gain gotten by a transgression against the loss it involves. ‘Let it be built and established’ – if you do so, you will be built in this world and you will be established in the World to Come” (Bava Batra 78b). Ancient sources have voiced astonishment at this explanation. Since the verse is speaking about the war between Sihon and Moab, how can it be connected to “those who rule their evil inclinations,” which is far from the simple meaning of the text? In his book Darchei Mussar (Parsha Vayigash), Rabbi Yaakov Neiman Zatzal recounts how the gaon Rabbi Israel Salanter gave a particular lesson to his students: “The Mishnah states that if a person finds a note of indebtedness with a mortgage clause pledging the debtor’s property, he should not return it. Yet the Gemara objects by asking, ‘If the debtor acknowledges [his debt], then even if there is a mortgage clause in it, why should he not return it?’ [Bava Metzia 12b]” When Rabbi Israel Salanter reached this last phrase, he was so moved that he began to cry. His students asked him why, and he replied that when he began to study this passage, he remembered that the Holy One, blessed be He, also asks: “If you recognize that you are indebted to Me, why do you not repay Me? Why do you not repent?” Although the Gemara is speaking of something completely different, Rabbi Israel (who always had the fear of G-d before him and was careful to serve Him throughout his life) perceived something else here, something that people who do not fear G-d fail to perceive. We must explain the verse in question in a similar way. When the Sages came to the phrase, “Therefore the poets say,” since their lives were filled with the fear of G-d, and since they were afraid of not filling their obligations to the Creator, the idea of soul-searching immediately came to mind, and they said to one another: “Come, let us consider the account of the world.” Rabbi Israel Salanter himself explained this passage as follows: We see people who steal from the righteous and succeed in their misdeeds, whereas a person who has been robbed experiences continual hardship. If we judge events according to what our eyes see, it will appear that Hashem’s world is unjust. However this is only because our viewpoint is short-lived. If we were like G-d, knowing what happened in previous years, we would have no difficulty understanding it. Thus it is written, “Let us consider the account of the world,” meaning a general view of all that takes place, for then we will realize that there is no injustice in the world, nor is any deed ever forgotten.

– MiShulchan Gavoha

ESHET HAYIL

Nothing in the World That I Care for More

It happened once that a woman in Sidon lived with her husband for ten years without bearing him a child. They came to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and requested to be parted from one another. He said to them, “I adjure you, just as you have always shared a festive meal together, so do not part except with rejoicing.” They took his advice and rejoiced by making a great feast and drinking very freely. Feeling in a good mood, he said to her: “My daughter, pick out any article you want in my house and take it with you to your father’s house.” What did she do? When he was asleep she gave an order to her servants and handmaids to lift him up on the bed and carry him to her father’s house. At midnight he awoke from his sleep, and when the effects of the wine passed from him he said: “My daughter, where am I?” She replied: “You are in my father’s house.” He said, “And what am I doing in your father’s house?” She replied, “Did you not say to me last night, ‘Take any article you like from my house and go to your father’s house’? There is nothing in the world that I care for more than you.” They again went to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and he went and prayed for them, and they became fertile.

– Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:30

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

Like a Servant Before the King

The son of Rabbi Gamliel once fell ill. He sent two scholars to Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa to ask him to pray for him. When he saw them he went up to an upper chamber and prayed for him. When he came down he said to them, "Go, the fever has left him." They said to him, "Are you a prophet?" He replied, "I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I learned this from experience. If my prayer is fluent in my mouth [Rashi: If my words flow freely and my supplication flows from my heart to my mouth], I know that it is accepted. If not, I know that it is rejected." They sat down and made a note of the exact moment. When they came to Rabbi Gamliel, he said to them: "By the Temple service! You have not been a moment too soon or too late, but so it happened: At that very moment the fever left him and he asked for some water to drink."

On another occasion it happened that Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa went to study Torah with Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai. The son of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai fell ill. He said to him, "Chanina my son, pray for him that he may live." He put his head between his knees and prayed for him, and he lived. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai said, "If ben Zakai had stuck his head between his knees for the whole day, no notice would have been taken of him." His wife said to him, "Is Chanina greater than you?" He replied to her, "No, but he is like a servant before the king [who can see the king at any time], whereas I am like a nobleman before the king [who can only see him at fixed times]."

– Berachot 34b

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

Above Instinct

It is written, "Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, 'If you bring me back to do battle with the Ammonites...I will become your leader.' ... Jephthah spoke all his words before the L-RD in Mizpah" (Judges 11:9-11).

It would seem that Jephthah was seeking honor for himself by making this request to the elders of Gilead. Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz (Sichot Mussar, article 19 [5733]) said that this view is mistaken, for even the lowest of the low would be ashamed to openly demand honor, and how much more would a judge in Israel be ashamed to do so. Furthermore, Jephthah spoke before Hashem, placing Him, so to speak, as a witness between them in this regard. There was certainly no honor-seeking in this case. Rather, Jephthah knew that he would be unable to convince the Ammonites unless Israel believed in him and appointed him as their leader, for the confidence that people place in their leaders is what gives them the strength to lead the nation in times of war. Since his request was made with pure intentions – a request whose goal was to save Israel from its enemies – Jephthah could speak before Hashem as if he was not even mentioning himself, but rather someone else. Indeed, Jephthah was indifferent as to whether he was praised or scorned, for he raised himself above the instinctual and natural reactions of man.

A TRUE STORY

For the Honor of a Talmid Chacham

It is written, "The people spoke against G-d and Moses.... G-d sent poisonous serpents against the people, and they bit the people" (Numbers 21:5-6).

A Jewish tax collector, a wicked man, died on the same day as a very pious man. All the residents in town went to the funeral of the latter, whose procession was followed by the procession for the tax collector. The processions were attacked on the way to the cemetery, and everyone abandoned the coffins and fled. After a certain time, the leaders of the town returned to bury the pious man, but his coffin was accidentally exchanged for that of the tax collector. Although a certain student had remained behind the coffin of his teacher, nobody listened to him when he cried that they were taking the wrong coffin. As it turned out, the relatives of the tax collector ended up burying the pious man, which greatly upset his student. After all, what sin had the pious man committed to be buried with contempt, and why had the wicked man been buried with such honor? The student's teacher appeared to him in a dream and said, "Do not be upset. Come, I will show you my glory in Gan Eden, as well as the fate of this man in Gehinnom. I once heard someone speaking ill of a talmid chacham, but I did not protest, which is why I was punished. As for the tax collector, he once prepared a meal for the governor of the city. When the governor failed to appear, the man distributed the meal to the poor, which is why he was rewarded."

– Rashi on Sanhedrin 44b

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Baruch Frankel Teomim – The Author of Baruch Ta'am

The gaon Rabbi Baruch Frankel Zatzal was the son of the gaon Rabbi Yehoshua Yechezkel Teomim, the Av Beit Din of Ostrovitz. Rabbi Baruch was also the grandson of the famous gaon Rabbi Yona Teomim (the author of Kikayon DeYona) and the great-grandson of the gaon and kabbalist Rabbi Nathan Shapira (the author of Megale Amukot).

At the age of marriage, Rabbi Baruch wed the daughter of the wealthy Reb Yudel Parnass of Wischnitz, who greatly admired him and provided for all his needs. At that point Rabbi Baruch started to become famous throughout the country, and he never stopped growing in Torah through his deep and extraordinary insight. With his sharp mind he could descend to the very depths of Halachah, and from everywhere people came to him with Halachic questions, all of which he could answer in an instant.

Initially appointed as the Rav and Av Beit din of Wischnitz and the surrounding regions, he later moved to Leipnik and taught Torah to many students. He lost his sight near the end of his life, a loss that he described in the following way: "The Sages have said that the words of Torah only endure with a person who kills himself for them. At least I had the merit to kill my eyes for the words of Torah."

As a Rav, Rabbi Baruch worked ceaselessly and never sought reward. As such he merited that all his descendants after him became rabbis without interruption. His son-in-law, Rabbi Chaim Halberstam, was the holy Rebbe of Sanz and author of Divrei Chaim. From Rabbi Baruch's writings, the responsa Baruch Ta'am was published. His life ended on Tammuz 6, 5585, as his soul left for the celestial academy. May the memory of the tzaddik be blessed.