



The Path To Follow

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GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

Safeguarding the Senses

A person must realize that the senses which the Holy One, blessed be He, has implanted in him – seeing, hearing, speaking – are even more important to his soul in the World to Come than they are to him in this world. The Vilna Gaon wrote that when a person scorns a mitzvah, he is hurting himself, for everything that exists in his body draws its strength from a mitzvah. In fact the 248 positive mitzvot correspond to the 248 members of the body, which means that a failure to perform a mitzvah damages the part of his soul corresponding to that member. According to this, if a person is not careful while he is alive, and his mouth is used to uttering useless words, in the future the power of speech in his soul will be removed. How much shame will he have to suffer in Gan Eden, even if he merits a portion of it because of his other mitzvot, for he will be considered a mute who cannot speak!

– Shmirat HaLashon

BETWEEN MAN AND HIS FELLOWMAN

(BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, "The children of Reuben and the children of Gad had very abundant livestock. ... The children of Gad and the children of Reuben came and said to Moses.... 'If we have found favor in your eyes, let this land be given to your servants as a heritage. Do not bring us across the Jordan.' Moses said to the children of Gad and the children of Reuben, 'Shall your brothers go out to battle while you settle here? ... Behold, you have risen up in place of your fathers, a band of sinful people, to add more to the burning wrath of the L-RD against Israel' " (Numbers 32:1-15).

We need to understand why Moses did not allow the children of Gad and Reuben to immediately tell him what they meant by their request. Instead he interrupted them and issued a reprimand. There is something else that we need to understand, for the cities that they wanted to settle in were part of the territory belonging to Sihon and Og, and when these cities were conquered, nobody settled there. Therefore why did Moses not annex them to Eretz Israel, in which case the entire discussion would have been moot?

It is possible to explain this passage through the teachings of Mus-sar, for we always read this parsha during the period known as Bein HaMetzarim. It is connected to the destruction of the Temple, and we must learn a lesson from it. The Gemara recounts the story of a person who was hosting a meal in his home for the Sages. A mix-up occurred, and one of the host's enemies, a man by the name of Bar Kamtza, was invited. Upon arriving, he wanted to partake of the meal along with the Sages of the city. Despite the supplications of Bar Kamtza, the host stubbornly refused to give him a seat at his table. Bar Kamtza was filled with rage and said, "Since the Sages saw how scornfully this man treated me, and yet they said nothing, I will go and speak to the emperor." He therefore went to the Roman emperor, who was in control of Jerusalem, and said to him: "The Children of Israel are rebelling against you!" The emperor asked, "How do you know this?" He answered, "Send me to them with an offering from you for the Temple. I am certain that they will not offer it upon the altar." The emperor sent his offering, and on the way to Jerusalem Bar Kamtza made a blemish on it, one considered a blemish only by the Children of Israel. Nevertheless, the Kohanim wanted to offer it on the altar for the sake of peace.

Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas objected to this, arguing: "People will say that blemished animals are offered upon the altar." It was then suggested that Bar Kamtza be killed, which would prevent him from informing on them to the emperor. Yet Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas said to them, "Is one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals to be put to death?" Bar Kamtza returned to Rome and described what happened to the emperor, who sent his armies against Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. Hence Rabbi Yochanan said, "By the humility of Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas, our house has been destroyed" (Gittin 55b-56a).

This raises a perplexing question. The Sages have taught, "Why was the Second Temple destroyed, since in its time people occupied themselves with Torah, mitzvot, and the practice of charity? Because of the prevalence of baseless hatred" (Yoma 9b). That being said, how can these two teachings be reconciled?

The answer is that there is a connection between the two. The Sages at the meal witnessed their host humiliating Bar Kamtza, but they did not reprimand him in any way. Afterwards, when a blemished offering was presented to them, everyone began to discuss the case, with some permitting and others prohibiting the offering. When that happened, the attribute of justice said: "These Sages were silent when they saw

their host shaming a fellow Jew on account of baseless hatred, not reprimanding or saying anything to him. Now that a simple offering is the issue, everyone is opening his mouth to permit or forbid it. If they had remained silent – if they had said nothing about the offering and had indeed brought it upon the altar – it could be said that they simply do not know how to reprimand. However since they raised their voices in this case, but not with their host, they are guilty. As long as disputes arise among them, they do not deserve to remain in their land."

At that point, it was decreed that the Temple would be destroyed and that the Children of Israel would go into exile. G-d is lenient when it comes to matters between man and G-d, but not when it comes to matters between man and his fellowman. We learn just how serious a sin is by the atonement that it requires. Sins between man and G-d are atoned by repentance on Yom Kippur. However sins between man and his fellowman – even if the sinner has repented and confessed – are not atoned by Yom Kippur unless the wronged party forgives him (Yoma 85b).

The Midrash states, "The generation of Ahab were idolaters, and yet when they went out to war they were victorious. ... Since none of them spoke Lashon Harah, when they went out to war they were victorious. ... As for the generation of Saul, all of them spoke Lashon Harah" (Devarim Rabba 5:10). Everyone in Saul's generation was a ben Torah, and yet they were not victorious in war on account of Lashon Harah. This enables us to understand what happened to the children of Gad and Reuben. Since the Sages say that Eretz Israel is only acquired through hardship (Berachot 5a), Moses did not annex the territory of Sihon and Og to Israel, for such territory is not acquired through hardship. Hence when the children of Gad and Reuben said to him, "Do not bring us across the Jordan," it implied that they did not want to go through hardship along with the rest of the Children of Israel. It implied that they wanted to settle in the land of Sihon and Og, for which they would not have to struggle to acquire. Moses therefore immediately interrupted them by saying: Do you think that you can settle down quietly and without problems while the other Children of Israel suffer for the land of Israel? Will your brothers go out to war while you dwell here? The greatest division among people occurs when one is not concerned about the pain of others. The children of Gad and Reuben quickly replied, "We ourselves will go armed before the Children of Israel until we have brought them to their place, and our little ones will live in the fortified cities before the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes until the Children of Israel inherit every man his inheritance" (Numbers 32:17-18). They took it upon themselves to share in the difficulties of their brothers in Eretz Israel, and to do more than Moses asked of them. They did not move from there until the entire country was conquered and divided. At that point they returned and dwelled in peace, as Rashi says on Numbers 32:24: "Moses had asked of them only 'and the land will be conquered before the L-RD, afterwards you may return' [v.22], but they undertook, 'until the Children of Israel will have inherited' [v.18]." Nevertheless, because they did not mention their request properly – having said, "Do not bring us across the Jordan" – the Holy One, blessed be He, punished them, as the Midrash states: When Sennacherib exiled the 10 tribes from their land, they were the first to be exiled. This is because they could have presented their request without saying: "Do not bring us across the Jordan," which seemed to imply that they did not want to share in the problems of the other tribes. Since they used this expression, they were the first to be punished.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

He Shall do Everything that Proceeds from his Mouth

From the passage on vows we learn the great power of words, which can transform something mundane into something sacred. From here we must learn to conserve our words and not waste them by speaking needlessly. Rabbeinu Yitzchak Arema, the author of Sefer HaAkedah, writes that people who say useless things offend the Creator. They are like an individual to whom the king has given a royal garment, and instead he puts it on his donkey. Hashem has given man the power of speech in order for him to adorn his mouth with words of Torah, to guide people and teach them the path to follow. However they use the power of speech to adorn their bodies. The author of Sefer HaBrit adds that frivolous words represent a desire just like any other, yet one that lasts a lifetime. Even when other bodily desires wane, this fault is often found among the elderly because they no longer have bodily desires, a love for food and the like, but they still seek pleasure in this world. What do they do? They sit outside, staff in hand, and spend their time listening to and recounting meaningless things, for their mouths are open and moving their tongue comes easy to them, until they die without wisdom.

In former times, someone asked a philosopher what was the greatest part of man, and what was the worst. He responded to both questions with one answer: The tongue. In fact if we use it properly, it is the best part of the body, and if we use it improperly it is the worst. What is beneficial for the tongue is to continually study Torah day and night, as it is written: “The tree of life is healing for the tongue” (Proverbs 15:4). This refers to the Torah, as it is written: “She is a tree of life to those who grasp her” (ibid. 3:18).

– Sefer HaBrit

A Pearl From the Rav:

Vows are a Fence for Austerity

Vows and oaths, by which a person can prohibit something to himself, are an effective way to conquer the evil inclination, as the Sages have said: “Whoever witnesses a suspected woman in her disgrace should withhold himself from wine” (Sotah 2a). In fact a person is liable to be harmed by what he sees, an influence so powerful that he must establish fences for himself, as the Sages have said: “Make a fence around the Torah” (Pirkei Avot 1:1). This can be done by vowing to distance himself from things that are pleasurable, for an abundance of pleasure is liable to lead to sin. Hence if a person sees that his desires are too strong for him, he should offer these desires to Hashem. He can fight against the evil

inclination in this way throughout life, for he is offering all these desires to Hashem as a gift. However since it is written, “Better not to vow, than to vow and not pay” (Ecclesiastes 5:4), it is preferable not to make many vows. Yet there is a way of distancing oneself from the influences of the evil inclination and society by fleeing to the Beit Midrash, for it is written: “I have been for them a small sanctuary” (Ezekiel 11:16). These are synagogues and houses of study. In this regard it is written, “If this wretch [the evil inclination] assails you, lead him to the Beit Midrash” (Kiddushin 30b). It does not say “if you encounter him,” but, “if [he] assails you,” for the very fact that a person encounters the evil inclination constitutes an assault on his conduct, which was not sinless. If he leads the evil inclination to the Beit Midrash, he will be protected from it by the study of Torah, since the Torah protects and saves (Sotah 21a), for it is a remedy against the evil inclination (Kiddushin 30b, Bava Batra 16a). Actually, the evil inclination will sometimes go into the Beit Midrash along with a person, where it will disturb others and prevent them from studying. A person must lead the evil inclination to the Beit Midrash and go inside by himself – leaving the evil inclination out. However the main thing is Torah study, as it is written: “The soul of a laborer works for him” (Proverbs 16:26). In this way he will be isolated from all worldly concerns, and he can sanctify himself entirely for Hashem and His Torah. It is like making a vow by prohibiting all the pleasures of this world to himself.

One Who Speaks the Truth Will Fulfill His Vows

It is written, “He shall not profane his word. According to all that proceeds from his mouth, he shall do” (Numbers 30:3).

The Torah begins the passage regarding vows by stating, “When a man vows a vow to the L-RD...he shall not profane his word.” The Beit Yosef Zatzal asks: “Why does the Torah command, ‘He shall not profane his word’ – which includes everything that he says – instead of stating, ‘He shall not profane his vow or oath’?”

The Beit Yosef responds by saying that this is not a prohibition or a command, but rather some advice, a guideline. If a person gets used to acting in accordance with what he says, no falsehood will emerge from his mouth. If he accustoms himself to fulfilling everything that comes from his mouth, even if not a vow or oath, he will certainly not profane his vows or oaths!

Good Neighbors

It is written, “Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them, ‘When you cross the Jordan to the land of Canaan, you shall designate cities for yourselves, cities of refuge shall they be for you, and a murderer shall flee there – one who takes a

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

The Usefulness of Vows and Oaths

Every person experiences moments of spiritual awakening and elevation. During such times, he is better, more refined, and more spiritual. However such times come and go, and the difficult part is maintaining the resolutions that we take at those times. Vows and oaths are destined for such a situation, for they enable us to permanently fix the good resolutions that we have undertaken. The Akedat Yitzchak explains: When a person feels an awakening in his heart and is drawn towards doing something good, and yet he suspects that this awakening will not last, it is fitting for him to fervently make a vow by promising to continually maintain this spiritual awakening in him. A similar situation occurs when we see a precious object being sold, and we are not sure that it will be available later on, for we immediately buy it before it is gone. Thus it is written, “A wise son harvests in the summer” (Proverbs 10:5). In this way, vows and oaths are among the ways of the tzaddikim, whom Hashem has infused with a spirit of understanding and the fear of Heaven, and who seek to safeguard moments of spiritual awakening.

As time goes on, a person may feel that the vow he made has become burdensome to him. He should realize that this is the clearest sign that he has done a good thing by making this vow. In fact the reason it has now become difficult for him is that his spiritual awakening has vanished. If he had not made this vow, he would no longer be adhering to the good conduct that he took upon himself, which is difficult to maintain. Hence the only reason he is doing so is because of his vow. There is no doubt that when a person regrets having taken a good deed upon himself through a vow or an oath, it is precisely then that he should rejoice and strengthen himself, for he knows that what he did has succeeded. It is as if he had taken a laxative and is now feeling his stomach rumbling, an indication of its effectiveness.

– Sefer Akedat Yitzchak, Sha’ar 51

EISHET CHAYIL

Education in the Home

The basis for the existence of the Jewish people, of our Torah, and of our religion is the education of children. Such education is designed to teach them Hashem’s Torah and to raise them in the observance of mitzvot, such that they never turn from Hashem and His Torah for the rest of their lives. Based on this principle, the Torah constantly gives us directives and warnings on which the existence of faith and the foundations of Torah depend. Our ancestors always observed this principle with all their heart and soul, having studied and taught their own children Hashem’s Torah, both written and oral. They rooted in themselves a pure faith in Hashem and His Torah, to the point that they wholeheartedly gave their lives for the faith of the living G-d. At the cost of their very lives, they taught their children a Torah that was pure and complete. This practice has continued up until the generation in which we are now living, one in which the holy Torah and all its law and mitzvot are engraved upon our hearts, being dear to the eyes of all who observe and fulfill them, and among which none is missing.

life unintentionally. The cities shall be for you a refuge from the avenger, so that the murderer will not die until he stands before the assembly for judgment’ ” (Numbers 35:10-12). The cities of refuge were inhabited by the Levites. Why were the dwelling places of the Levites specifically chosen as areas where an unintentional killer could seek refuge? The answer is that the unintentional killer committed a grave sin and must repent. The way to do so is precisely by living for a certain time next to the Levites – holy individuals who have no inheritance in the land, whose only inheritance is Hashem, and who are occupied with the service in the Sanctuary throughout their lives and eat the ma’aser. It is therefore easier to repent when living close to such neighbors, learning from their deeds, absorbing the holiness of their land, and appeasing the attribute of strict justice.

We Caused the Delay

It is written, “These are the journeys of the Children of Israel, who went forth from the land of Egypt according to their legions” (Numbers 33:1).

The holy Alsheich Zatzal wrote that this verse is, so to speak, a complaint, for when the Children of Israel left Egypt, it is written: “I carried you on the wings of eagles” (Exodus 19:4). Here Rashi explains, “This is the day that the Israelites came to Rameses. The Israelites were scattered throughout the land of Goshen, and in short time, as they came to begin their journey and leave, they all gathered at Rameses.” Therefore why were all these journeys required? They could have entered the land of Israel in just a few days! However because they created such a tremendous delay, “These are the journeys of the Children of Israel.”

The Intentions of the Heart

It is written, “A murderer shall flee there – one who takes a life unintentionally” (Numbers 35:11).

Unintentionally killing someone is, in reality, a sin. The killer is not exempt from punishment, though he is not punished with death. Writing on this issue, Rabbeinu Bechaye states that this law demonstrates that the intentions of the heart are the essential thing in man, and the essential thing in all mitzvot and sins. This is why the unintentional killer is punished with exile, not by death, for his heart did not agree with the death. As long as a person’s actions and intentions are not the same, he is not punished with death.

Thus with respect to mitzvot, all depends on the intentions of the heart. If a person performs a mitzvah, but not for the sake of Heaven, he is not completely rewarded for it. A person must have the intention of performing mitzvot for the sake of Heaven, as King David said: “I will lift my hands to Your commandments, which I love” (Psalms 119:48). Lifting the hands designates the intentions of the heart, as it is written: “Let us lift our hearts with our hands” (Lamentations 3:41).

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTARAH

Growing Accustomed to Sin

It is written, “How can you say, ‘I have not become defiled, I have not gone after the Baalim’?” (Jeremiah 2:23).

The prophet is reprimanding the Children of Israel and telling them: You are committing grave sins, so how can you say, “I have not become defiled”? This means that they were so immersed in sin that they no longer sensed it, as our Sages have said: “Once a man has committed a sin once or twice, it seems permitted to him” (Yoma 86b). The Chafetz Chaim explains this statement with a parable: Throughout his life, a man sold aromatic herbs for a living. Next to his shop was a tannery, and the fragrance of his herbs was repulsed by the dreadful odor of the hides. One day his financial situation changed, and he lost his possessions and was forced to close his shop and look for a job. However he found nothing. His neighbor the tanner offered him a position in the tanning business, but initially he couldn't even contemplate the offer. After all, it had been difficult for him to tolerate the smell of hides from a distance, so how could he possibly work in a tannery itself? However his financial situation was getting more difficult with each passing day, and he eventually accepted the tanner's offer. On the first day he was forced to hold his nose, and just staying in the shop was difficult for him. The next day he suffered a little less, until with time he became used to it. In fact his initial disgust eventually disappeared, and it was as if he had worked in the tannery his entire life.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbeinu Immanuel Chai Riki

Rabbi Immanuel Chai Riki Zatzal was born more than 300 years ago, on Tamuz 15, 5448, in the Italian city of Ferrara. He was one of the leading Torah figures in Italy, both in the revealed Torah and in Kabbalah. In his book Ma'assei Choshev, he personally testified that he saw Eliyahu HaNavi: “Do not be astonished to see in my book that I often mention Eliyahu HaNavi, for Hashem has given me the merit to see him, and I asked him to explain a statement in the Zohar.”

Rabbi Immanuel and his family later moved to Israel and settled in Sefat. It was there that he finished writing his great work on the mishnayot, entitled Hon Ashir.

He had started writing this book at the age of 28, while still in Italy. At the time he called it Dikdukei Aniut, for in his great modesty he considered himself to be spiritually poor. However the gaon Ephraim Cohen Zatzal said to him, “The book Dikdukei Aniut is written with a very fine eye, with the sharp and exacting mind of a Torah master, one who studies it for the sake of Heaven and observes it in poverty.”

Many Torah scholars encouraged him to change the book's title, but he did not want to listen. Nevertheless, he was crushed by his extreme poverty, and he was eventually forced to leave Eretz Israel. His troubles didn't stop there, however, for he was imprisoned by harsh overseers who stole everything he had, leaving him with only his manuscript of Dikdukei Aniut. It was a name that characterized his situation so well that he decided to change it to Hon Ashir. From then on his fortunes began to change, and he was able to publish it in a beautiful edition.

He wrote six books, foremost among them being Mishnat Chassidim, which is a kind of “Mishneh Torah” for Kabbalah. On Rosh Chodesh Adar 5503, he died a martyr's death when some criminals tried to force him to eat forbidden meat, which he refused to put into his mouth. May Hashem avenge his blood.

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

The Great Platform Led to His Forgetfulness

The inhabitants of Simonia went to see Rabbeinu HaKodesh (Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi) and asked him to appoint for them a man who was a sage, chazan, dayan, and preacher, a man who understood the Mishnah. They wanted a leader to show them the path to follow, and to guide all their actions.

He appointed a sage by the name of Levi bar Sissi, and the inhabitants of Simonia accepted his appointment. They brought the sage to their town, built a great platform for him and set him upon it, and addressed all their Halachic questions to him.

However this sage did not answer any of their questions. In fact it seemed that he didn't know how! Hence the inhabitants of the town said among themselves, “It appears that he isn't competent in Halachah. Let's question him on Aggadah.”

They questioned him, but again they received no answers. Seeing this, they sent a delegation to Rabbeinu HaKadosh and complained, “What kind of sage have you sent us? He knows absolutely nothing! He didn't answer any question that we asked him!” Rabbeinu HaKadosh summoned Levi bar Sissi and repeated the questions that the inhabitants of town had asked him. This time, however, he answered every question. Rabbi HaKadosh said to him, “You answered every question. Why didn't you answer the inhabitants of Simonia when they asked you the very same things?”

He replied, “When I arrived in town, they built a great platform for me and set me upon it. My heart then became infused with pride, and I forgot everything I had learned.”

Rabbeinu HaKadosh said, “Although you were humble at first, you could not answer the questions put to you because you lifted yourself up!”

– Ma'asechem Shel Tzaddikim

A TRUE STORY

He Shall Not Profane His Word

The gaon Rabbi Akiva Eiger Zatzal once found himself in a small town, and the local residents approached him to explain a problem they had. A man had entered the local Beit Midrash and settled himself in the ezrat nashim, having made a vow never to leave the place. In fact the residents of town were forced to see to all his needs, both small and large, since he had vowed never to leave, not even for an instant. This was very burdensome for them. “Perhaps,” they asked Rabbi Akiva, “you could find some way of exempting him from his vow?” “Everyone follow me,” was his immediate reply. He went to the Beit Midrash with an entire crowd of people following behind. When they arrived, the man who had isolated himself inside was overcome with fear. He said, “Rabbi Akiva Eiger, why have you gone to all the trouble of coming here?”

Rabbi Eiger replied, “I have come to pay you a visit, for I've heard that you don't leave the walls of the Beit Midrash.” Upon hearing this, the man exclaimed: “Woe to me and woe to my soul! I've disturbed the Rav of the entire Diaspora by making him visit me, although I'm just a simple man!” As soon as these words left his mouth, Rabbi Eiger asked him: “If you had known that I would pay you a visit, would you have vowed never to leave the Beit Midrash?” “Certainly not,” the man said. “How could I have dared to disturb our teacher?” Rabbi Akiva Eiger then said to him, “In that case, you are free from your vow. You are free from your vow.”