



The Path To Follow

VA'ETCHANAN

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GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

Concealed Lashon Harah

The prohibition against speaking Lashon Harah applies even when the speaker does not explicitly mention the subject's name (being content on simply talking about him), given that it will be possible to discover who he was speaking about. This also constitutes Lashon Harah. Furthermore, even if the speaker's story contains nothing derogatory, if his words harm or shame the person he is speaking about, and the speaker had this intention from the start, it also constitutes Lashon Harah. In fact the Sages term this "concealed Lashon Harah." See how great is the prohibition against speaking Lashon Harah, for even if we do not speak out of hatred and we have no intention of speaking evil, but simply say something with a laugh or half-seriously, since we are still speaking derogatory words, the Torah prohibits it.

– The Chafetz Chaim

THE POWER OF PRAYER AND TORAH AT ALL TIMES

(BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, "I implored the L-RD at that time" (Deuteronomy 3:23). What time is this referring to? I have read in the name of the gaon Rabbi Israel Salanter Zatzal that here we learn that a person must not say, "This time is suitable for Torah and prayer, but that time is not. I can therefore relax in my service of Hashem, for I don't have the strength, the mind, or the time to study. However when I have the time, then I'll study." No! All times are good for prayer and Torah study. All times are suitable, and now is the best time. We must not neglect any opportunity to pray and study.

Why is this so? If a person sets aside a certain time by saying, "Such and such a time is suitable for me," it may come and go without him, for whatever reason, having studied or prayed. In that case he will have wasted everything. This is why Rabbi Israel Salanter said that all times are equally suitable. Perhaps it is precisely when we will be free that an accusation will arise without anyone annulling it. Therefore when we have time, we must occupy ourselves with Torah and prayer. This is the meaning of "at that time," an expression that has the same numerical value as the word tov ("good"). All times are good for Torah and prayer, and there is nothing good but Torah, as it is written: "I have given you a good teaching, do not forsake My Torah" (Proverbs 4:2). If Hashem enables you to find a time for Torah and prayer, you must not put it off – "do not forsake My Torah."

There is something else that we must learn from this week's parsha. Moses pleaded and prayed to be allowed into Eretz Israel after the war with Midian, concerning which he was told: "Afterwards you will be gathered to your people" (Numbers 31:2). Now when a person hears that he is going to die, he is usually too overwhelmed to pray. Yet here Moses prayed in a very lucid way. This teaches us that it is precisely in a time of anguish and danger that we must focus our thoughts on serving Hashem and praying to Him. In this way we will not lose hope in the face of misfortune.

Parsha Va'etchanan is always read on Shabbat Nachamu, just after Tisha B'Av. The primary consolation that we receive over the destruction of the Temple is therefore Torah and prayer. This is because the exile, as we know, will end through the study of Torah. I have read that the disciples of the holy Rebbe of Sanz asked him what he did before prayer. He replied that before praying, he would pray "to be able to pray at the time of prayer." This is what Moses did: "I implored the L-RD" – what supplication comes before prayer? "At that time, saying" – to be able to pray at the time of prayer. We find support for this idea in the Haftarah of Chazon Yeshayahu. In it, Hashem becomes angry and states that He does not desire offerings, nor the holidays or Sabbaths of the Children of Israel. Why? It is because they were content on simply setting aside time for themselves to study Torah, acting in accordance with the simple dictates of the law and not doing more than what was asked of them. In other words, they did not devote their spare time to the Torah. They did not use their spare time to study Torah, which is what led them to the three cardinal sins and the destruction of the Temple. This teaches us that a person must fix times for studying Torah and add every moment of spare time to his study. He must not content himself on having set aside a certain time, for the world rests upon Torah, prayer, and acts of kindness. We know that a person is a world in microcosm, and he must

tell himself: "The world was created for me." Hence he must constantly study Torah and pray, for otherwise the world – his world – will be destroyed.

The Sages say, "Why did Moses our teacher yearn to enter Eretz Israel? Did he want to eat of its fruit or satisfy himself from its bounty? However Moses said, 'Many mitzvot were commanded to Israel, and they can only be fulfilled in Eretz Israel' " (Sotah 14a). This is difficult to understand. The entire Torah carries the name of Moses, as it is written: "Remember the Torah of My servant Moses" (Malachi 3:22) and "The Torah that Moses commanded us" (Deuteronomy 33:4). It is his heritage. Therefore when anybody studies Torah and performs a mitzvah, it is as if Moses himself was performing it. The disciples he formed for the generations to come and who fulfill the Torah especially carry his name, and he has a part in the entire Torah. That being said, why did he so greatly implore Hashem to enter Eretz Israel to perform mitzvot?

The answer is that Moses knew everything that a talmid chacham would ever be called upon to discover. Now there are 70 aspects to the Torah, which is the precisely why Moses wanted Hashem to let him enter Eretz Israel. He wanted to perform all that would be discovered in the Torah; he wanted to personally carry out all the mitzvot according to these 70 aspects. This is the meaning of the verse, "I implored the L-RD at that time, saying" – by saying each mitzvah in the way that every disciple would say and explain it. That is why he wanted to enter Eretz Israel so greatly. How can we arrive at such a lofty level? It is solely by regarding all moments as being equally suitable for studying Torah and for prayer. It is by seeing the entire world as being contained in the Torah. We can then attain the truth of the Torah, in which case we can also compare all the explanations and opinions on each mitzvah, seeing that there is no difference on the way to perform any mitzvah whatsoever. The Torah will be fully understood without any divergent views in Halachah. Even in the novelties that will be discovered, there will be no doubts. That is what Moses wanted. From here we see just how much we must pray in order to plumb the depths of the Torah without stumbling.

This enables us to understand why Moses wanted the Torah as a free gift like the tzaddikim. Understanding Torah (which is called "good") depends on the goodness of Hashem, Who gave it to us as a gift. Hence we also ask for understanding as a free gift. It was given to Israel through goodness, as it is written: "One with a good eye will be blessed" (Proverbs 22:9) – this is Moses, who conducted himself in regards to the Torah with a good eye, and who gave it to Israel. Therefore it is impossible to make the understanding of the Torah depend on merit and to say, "It is by my merit that Hashem helped me to understand the Torah." This is because we may not possess such merit. Furthermore, how do we know that we are doing everything for the sake of Heaven, without any selfish interests at play, and that we possess such merit? With regards to Moses himself, we see that he made nothing depend on good deeds. How much more should this apply to us, we who are but dust? We must therefore not make anything depend on merit, but simply put a great effort into studying Torah. We will certainly attain it in that case.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

You Shall Not Covet

When a person's heart covets something that does not belong to him, it proves that he has little faith and confidence in Hashem. In fact if a person has complete confidence in Hashem, he will covet nothing (Rabbeinu Bechaye). The desire of the heart to obtain what others have proves that a person believes that obtaining it depends on his own abilities, not on Divine providence. Such an attitude stems from a lack of faith in Hashem. In truth, the soul of every Jew must fulfill the verse, "You shall remember the L-RD your G-d, for it is He Who gives you strength to acquire wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:18). When a person clearly remembers this concept, what reason will he have to covet? One who covets thereby proves that he thinks he has attained his place in life through his own strength, and therefore he possesses no faith (Be'er Moshe). One who recognizes that "I am the L-RD your G-d" will not covet or desire what he does not have, for he knows that "by your name you will be called, to your place you will be restored, and from what belongs to you, you will be given. No man can touch what is prepared for his fellow" (Yoma 38ab). On the other hand, a person who covets will yearn to obtain what belongs to others. He will therefore not believe that the Creator of all created him with wisdom and gives him what is good. He will not believe that Hashem gives him what he needs, and that what he does not possess is not good for him. Hence it is written, "You shall not covet... anything that belongs to your fellow." We must accept the decrees of G-d, decrees that prevent us from possessing a particular thing – something given to our neighbor – and we must believe that G-d alone knows what is good and appropriate for us. In that case, we will not be jealous of anyone (Iggeret Dekalah, p.174).

This is why we should rejoice in our lot and not covet or desire something that does not belong to us, for we know that if Hashem did not want to give it to us, we would be unable to take it by force or through trickery. We must instead trust in Hashem to sustain us and do what is good in His eyes (Ibn Ezra).

A Pearl From the Rav: Cleaving to Hashem

It is written, "You who cleave to the L-RD your G-d, you are all alive today" (Deuteronomy 4:4). This means that every person must cleave to the L-RD and do His will. Yet how is it possible to achieve such closeness to Hashem, for He is a devouring fire? It is in this regard that the verse tells us: "You who cleave" – at first it must be you, the Children of Israel, who are attached to one another and united in unity and closeness – meaning "all" – and then you will achieve closeness to the L-RD your G-d. This is what constitutes being "alive," for just as the Holy One, blessed be He, sustains the world, likewise you are attached to the life of Hashem, and there is no greater attribute than this.

Rabbi Akiva said that "You shall love your fellow as yourself" is a great principle of the Torah, for the Torah is called life. In other words, if you want to cleave to the Torah and to Him Who gives the Torah, you must love one another. In this way you will cleave to Hashem.

He Who Hears the Prayer of Everyone

It is written, "I implored the L-RD at that time, saying" (Deuteronomy 3:23).

Moses implored and asked for all the generations that "at that time" – when the Children of Israel come upon "that time," when due to the sufferings and misfortunes of the exile they will no longer pray with the right intentions, but only by "saying," speaking only with their mouth and lips – even then their prayer should be accepted (the Macharid of Amshinov).

Likewise the ancient tzaddikim said, "For You hear the prayer of everyone" – even when a prayer is only in the mouth, without the intentions of the heart because of the hardship of the exile, even then it will be heard.

The Tzaddikim Ask for a Free Gift

It is written, "I implored the L-RD at that time, saying" (Deuteronomy 3:23).

The Sages say, "Why did Moses our teacher yearn to enter Eretz Israel? Did he want to eat of its fruit or satisfy himself from its bounty? However Moses said, 'Many mitzvot were commanded to Israel, and they can only be fulfilled in Eretz Israel.'" (Sotah 14a). Such was the extent of the perfect man's desire to fulfill all the mitzvot. Moses, whose name is carried by the entire Torah, and whose entire life and every moment was filled with mitzvot, still felt that he lacked mitzvot that depend upon the land, and it was only for their sake that he implored Hashem to enter Eretz Israel.

The Vilna Gaon wept before his death, saying that he was ready to exchange his entire reward in the World to Come for an extra hour of life in this world. When he was questioned about this, he said that it is an explicit Mishnah: "One hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is better than all the life of the World to Come" (Pirkei Avot 4:17). This is precisely why the Vilna Gaon, who as we know was completely removed from all the pleasures of this world, considered the life of this world as being truly important. In fact a person on a great spiritual level constantly feels that every mitzvah and good deed he lacks are like a physical affliction. It is interesting to note that it is precisely people of this world, those who yearn for physical and material desires, who are willing to give up their world for a single desire that they have been unable to quench. In commenting on the term ve'etchanan, Rashi wrote: "Although the tzaddikim may base a request on the merit of their good deeds, they request only a free gift of the Omnipresent." This means that a tzaddik does not ask for any reward for his good deeds. It does not even enter his mind that he deserves a reward for something that constitutes his soul, and which is the source of his life. Hence all he can do is to ask for it as a free gift.

– Nachalat Eliezer

The Torah's Mitzvot Cannot be Modified

It is written, "You shall not add to the word that I command you.... Your eyes have seen what the L-RD did with Baal Peor, for every man that followed Baal Peor, the L-RD your G-d destroyed him from your midst" (Deuteronomy 4:2-3).

Some people do not really sin with the intention of transgressing Hashem's commands. Instead they are fooled by their intelligence, which makes them think that a certain prohibition does not apply to them.

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

Shabbat – A Remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt

One of the differences between the versions of the Ten Commandments found in Parsha Yitro and Parsha Va'etchanan concerns the mitzvah of Shabbat. In Parsha Yitro, the reason given for this mitzvah is: "For in six days the L-RD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore the L-RD blessed the Sabbath day and sanctified it." As for Parsha Va'etchanan, the reason given is: "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the L-RD your G-d has taken you out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the L-RD your G-d has commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."

The Rishonim explain that these two reasons are interconnected. The observance of Shabbat strengthens a person's faith in individual providence, implanted in us by the exodus from Egypt. The recollection of the exodus from Egypt and the recollection of Creation are interconnected, each having been caused by G-d's will alone, not by chance or natural means (The Kuzari). Hence these three beliefs are always together: The renewal of the world, the exodus from Egypt, and Shabbat. This is because Shabbat demonstrates that the world has a Creator and did not occur by chance. G-d brought it about and renews it as He desires. During the exodus from Egypt, we saw that the entire world is in His hands like clay in the hands of the potter, who does with it as he pleases (Radbaz, Ta'amei HaMitzvot).

Hence in the second version of the Ten Commandments, it is explicitly written: "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the L-RD your G-d has taken you out from there. . . . Therefore the L-RD your G-d has commanded you to keep the Sabbath day," for you must remember the great miracle that He did for you, as well as the guiding hand that you were granted. This is why He commanded you to observe Shabbat. Make it a memorial to constantly recall that He is the Creator of the world, and that He watches over His creatures – both for the good of those who do His will and to the detriment of those who transgress it – for all this became clear to you by the exodus from Egypt. To permanently implant this faith in you, you must observe Shabbat to safeguard what you have realized (Drashat HaRamban – Torat Hashem Temimah). A person who does not believe in "Who brought you out of the land of Egypt" will also not believe that "I am the L-RD your G-d." This is the foundation of the entire Torah: Wholehearted faith in Hashem and in individual providence (Rosh, Orchos Chaim, Yom Rishon).

EISHET CHAYIL

I Prayed For This Child

The mother of the Chafetz Chaim was a G-d-fearing woman, modest and humble. In honor of Shabbat, she lit numerous candles and scrupulously observed the day. She spent the entire day reading the parsha and the midrashim. In fact the Siddur, prayers, and psalms almost never left her hand. Five years after her wedding, she gave birth to her only son. The joy of this young woman knew no bounds upon seeing that her prayer had been granted and that she had a pleasant child, one whose face shined with cherished light. If the Temple had still been standing, she would have consecrated her son, the child for whom she had prayed, just as Hanna had done for Samuel in her time by consecrating him to Hashem. Furthermore, her son was even nobler than Samuel, for he was a Kohen, whereas Samuel was simply a Levite! Whatever the case, her son would study Torah, the only remaining treasure after the destruction of the Temple. Through the study of Torah, it is possible to reach the level of the High Priest. On Shevat 18, the child entered the covenant of Abraham. The local rabbi, all the prominent figures of the community, and all the friends of the family attended this celebration. Upon hearing that the child would be named Israel Meir, everyone in attendance expressed their wishes to the father and mother for their son to grow up and become a light in Israel. – The Chafetz Chaim

This is why the Torah states: "You shall not add...nor shall you subtract" – there is nothing to add or subtract from the mitzvot of the Torah due to the directives of our own intelligence; for "your eyes have seen what the L-RD did with Baal Peor." Even with regards to Baal Peor, the Children of Israel did not have the intention of prostrating themselves before it. On the contrary, they had the intention of scorning it, since the worship of Baal Peor consisted of a vile deed (involving disrobing before it). Nevertheless, "the L-RD your G-d destroyed him," and therefore you must learn that the Torah's mitzvot are not susceptible to any change (even one as fine as a hair) for personal reasons. This is because the entire Torah is totally separate and very lofty, and it is completely impossible to learn it through the principles of human intelligence.

– The Alsheich

The Fear of Heaven

It is written, "You shall not covet" (Deuteronomy 5:18).

Many people are surprised by this warning, for how can a person be prohibited from having certain thoughts, and what can he do if his heart still covets? The answer is that when someone desires something very strongly, as he is naturally prone to do, and he is about to attain it, then his desires burn in him like a fire. Nevertheless, if he were to suddenly be seized by some fear (e.g. if he were to slip on the road and be about to fall), his desires would leave him as if they had never existed, for in that instant he would forget all his desires. Such is the nature that the Holy One, blessed be He, breathed into man: Even a slight fear annuls all desire and greed. Once the Torah states, "You shall not covet," by the power of fear and the dread of the prohibition, the thought of coveting will no longer come to mind. Thus the verse states, "That His fear may be before your faces, that you sin not" (Exodus 20:17), for by the power of fear we can overcome our desires and not sin at all.

– Beit HaLevi

Overview of the Parsha

Contrary to Parsha Devarim, in which Moses pieces together the events from the outset of the people's journey from Horev until the conquest of the land, Parsha Va'etchanan deals with the events that take place at the beginning and end of this account (not as part of their journeys and conquest of the land), adding words of Mussar that we can learn from these events, especially a warning against idolatry. The parsha recounts Moses' pleas at that time, when the Children of Israel arrived at the Jordan, and it recalls the giving of the Torah at Horev to the chosen people who had emerged from Egypt, before they began the journey described in Parsha Devarim. From there it describes the cities of refuge on the other side of the Jordan, cities chosen by Moses at the end of their journey. It then returns to the subject of the Ten Commandments given at Horev, as well as the wonders of the giving of the Torah and Hashem's words to His people. The passage on Shema Israel is given, along with a warning to observe the mitzvot and an emphasis on Hashem's love for His people.

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTARAH

Double Exile and Double Consolation

It is written, "Console, console My people" (Isaiah 40:1).

When Hashem will return the remnant of Zion, the verse "console, console My people" – two consolations – will be fulfilled in us. This is because we have experienced two disasters: The enslavement of the body and the enslavement of the soul. In fact we have been struck twice during our bitter exile, for not only have numerous misfortunes assailed us in this world, we have also been prevented from serving Hashem and meriting life in the World to Come. Indeed, on the day of our deliverance we will emerge from this two-fold slavery towards two-fold liberty, freed from enslavement of body and soul. It is written, "The Egyptians mistreated us and afflicted us" (Deuteronomy 26:6). This verse employs two expressions, for "mistreated us" corresponds to the enslavement of the soul, and "afflicted us" corresponds to the enslavement of the body. The verse uses the term otanu (not lanu), for by the enslavement of the soul we became wicked and sinful, as it is written: "They mingled among the nations and learned their deeds" (Psalms 106:35). In parallel to this, our consolation will also be two-fold, as it is written: "I have surely visited [pakod pakadti] you, and what is done to you in Egypt" (Exodus 3:16). This means that there will be two visits – that of the soul and that of the body. Concerning the visit of the soul, it is written "you," and concerning the visit of the body, it is written "what is done to you." The Midrash also notes the double expression in the verse, "Jerusalem has sinned a sin" (Lamentations 1:8), and states: "They sinned twice, they were struck twice." The Midrash adds, "They were comforted twice" (Eicha Rabba 1:57). Hence we read, "I will rejoice and exult in Your kindness, for You have seen my affliction, You have known the troubles of my soul" (Psalms 31:8). Here too the verse employs a double expression: Joy and exultation. These correspond to two redemptions and two consolations. Exultation is not the same as joy. Exultation is the joy of the soul, whereas joy pertains to the satisfaction of the body. Thus we read, "Rejoice not, O Israel, like the exultation of the peoples" (Hosea 9:1), meaning that we must not reduce exultation to a crude and material joy.

– The Maggid of Dubno

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rashi

The year in which Rabbeinu Gershon ("the light of the exile") died, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (son of Yitzchak) was born. It was the year 4800 from the creation of the world, and during that same year Rabbi Chiskiah, the successor of Rav Hai Gaon and the last of the Geonim at Pumbedita, passed away. Thus the light of the Torah center of Babylon was extinguished. The Nassi was the fourth generation from that of Ben Zakai, the Nassi of the exile. He assumed two respected positions: That of Rosh Yeshiva and that of the Nassi of the exile. However his enemies denounced him to the Baghdad authorities. The governor, who wanted to rid himself of Rabbi Chiskiah, found a way to accuse him and seize all his possessions. He imprisoned and tortured Rabbi Chiskiah without mercy, and then he put him to death by the sword. Thus the period of the Geonim ceased at the hand of the executioner. It was then that a new light began to shine in France, a light from which commentaries on the written and oral Torah would emerge, the light of Rashi. Rabbeinu Shlomo Yitzhak was born to a father who was great in Torah and descended from a noble family. His mother was the sister of the great poet Rabbi Shimon ben Yitzchak of Troyes. His father was a great talmid chacham. At the age of 18, Rashi married a woman from his town and initially settled in Worms, where Rabbi Yaakov ben Yakar taught Torah. In every place that Rashi writes "Rabbi," he is referring to Rabbi Yaakov ben Yakar, whom Sefer Chassidim describes as having used his long beard to sweep the floor before the Aron HaKodesh. Rashi called Rabbi Yaakov "my old teacher" and said of him: "I know that he acts like a doormat that people trample upon, making himself as nothing." After the death of Rabbi Yaakov, Rabbi Yitzchak Halevi became the Rosh Yeshiva of Worms. – Toldot Gedolei Hara'ah

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

Better to be Burned than to Shame Someone

Mar Ukva had a poor man in his neighborhood, a man into whose door socket he would throw four zuz every day. At one point this poor man thought, "I will go and see who does me this kindness." Mar Ukva stayed late at the house of study on that day, and his wife accompanied him home. As soon as the poor man saw them near his door, he went after them. However they ran from him and fled into a furnace from which the ashes had just been swept. Mar Ukva's feet were burning, and his wife said to him: "Put your feet on mine." Mar Ukva was astonished that his wife was apparently more righteous than him, for her feet were not burned. She therefore consoled him by saying, "My merit is greater than yours because I am usually at home, and my donations are direct. The poor come to me for bread, meat, and all kinds of food that they eat right away. You, however, give them money, and they have to work at preparing themselves a meal." Why were Mar Ukva and his wife so afraid of the poor man that they fled into a furnace? It is because the Sages have said, "Better for a person to throw himself into a fiery furnace than to publicly shame his neighbor" (adapted from Ketubot 67b).

In reading this story, we note that Mar Ukva and his wife did not need to flee from their poor neighbor, for he was pursuing them and therefore bringing shame upon himself by his own free will. Therefore why did Mar Ukva put himself in danger by fleeing into a furnace? It is because the Sages said that it is "better" for a person – it is not an obligation, but something that is simply more fitting to do. In fact a person who seeks eternal delights will prefer to throw himself into a burning furnace than to shame others, "For G-d will judge every deed, even everything hidden, whether good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:14). We may ask why G-d would judge a person even for a good deed. The yeshiva of Rabbi Yanai explains: "This refers to one who gives tzeddakah to a poor person in public, thereby shaming him."

When Rabbi Yanai saw a man giving a zuz to a poor person in public, he said to him: "Better for you not to have given to him, than now that you have given to him in public and shamed him" (Chagigah 5a).

A TRUE STORY

When You Lie Down and When You Rise

After the Holocaust, as the Klausenburg Rebbe began to work with survivors in the United States, he lived for about eight months in a yeshiva building with orphan boys, contenting himself with very little and living in extreme poverty. The door to his apartment had a glass window, and the boys would look inside to see that the Rebbe was awake and diligently studying day and night. They almost never saw him asleep or resting. Sometimes he would study with his feet soaking in ice-cold water in order not to fall asleep. The boy who lived in the same apartment as him during the winter would cover the Rebbe with his coat so he wouldn't freeze. This boy recounted that almost every morning, the Rebbe asked him to exempt him from having to say the blessings on the Torah. One day the Rebbe remained sitting in his room during the entire night. In the morning, he slept for a few minutes in his chair, and when he awoke he was afraid of leaving his place without having washed his hands. He used the telephone that was on his desk to call the yeshiva's public phone. Someone who had gotten up early on that day answered it, and the Rebbe humbly asked him: "Perhaps someone can bring a glass of water and a bowl to my room?"

A few years later, as he was experiencing severe headaches, he would say: "It's wonderful – the more violent my headaches are, the more help that Heaven gives me to explain new Torah concepts!" On another occasion he said, "I'm afraid that I will have to constantly give Torah classes every day and at all times, for that's the only way my headaches stop. It's my only solution."

– Lapid Esh