

THE ROLE OF THE SOUL: SERVING HASHEM IN THIS WORLD

(BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, "It shall be, when you enter the land that the L-RD your G-d gives you as an inheritance and you possess it and dwell in it, that you shall take the first of every fruit of the ground that you bring in from your land that the L-RD your G-d gives you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the L-RD your G-d will choose to make His Name dwell there" (Deuteronomy 26:1-2). We shall explain these verses from the viewpoint of Mussar. In our time, when the Temple no longer stands and we no longer bring firstfruits, it is a mitzvah for us to understand how we can fulfill these verses, since the entire Torah was given to each generation.

The Sages have taught, "Against your will you were created, against your will you were born, against your will you live, against your will you die, and against your will you are destined to give an accounting before the Supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He" (Pirkei Avoth 4:22). When Hashem brings down a soul into this world, it says: "Master of the universe, it is impossible to emerge from beneath the Throne of Glory, from a world that is entirely good, and descend into a world that is completely dominated by the evil inclination. Who knows if I will be able to resist? Better that You leave me here, where I am close to You!" At that point Hashem tells the soul, "You will descend into the material world against your will, for I created you to resist the evil inclination. As long as you remain hidden beneath the Throne of Glory and nourish yourself from the splendor of the Shechinah – as long as you do not descend into the material world, study Torah, and perform mitzvot – all the nourishment that I give you is only through My favor. That is why I have decreed that you must descend into the material world to study Torah and fulfill mitzvot. If you do well, you will receive a reward. Whatever happens, you will not descend alone. I will personally descend with you and help you to confront the evil inclination."

The soul of man is actually a Divine spark, for when the soul is above, an angel teaches it the entire Torah, as Hashem did for Moses in Heaven. The soul has no greater enjoyment than this, and when the time comes for it to descend into the world, it does not want to go. Instead it wants to remain learning Torah with an angel, not to venture into a world of the evil inclination and hardships. It says, "Master of the universe, why have You decreed that I must descend into the world?" Hashem answers the soul in the same way that He answered Moses when he was in Heaven: "Go, descend" (Exodus 32:7) – for your own benefit and your own good, because as long as you are in Heaven, as long as an angel teaches you Torah and you do not need to put an effort into it, you will receive no reward whatsoever. Therefore descend into the world, fulfill mitzvot, and I will give you a reward. Do not be afraid of the evil inclination, for I am descending with you into the world. Hence it is written *lech reid* ("go, descend"), which has the same numerical value as the term *nered* ("let us descend"). This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, also descends with the soul into the world, which is why it is written: "Vehaya [It shall be] when you enter the land," for the term *vehaya* is formed by the same letters as the Tetragrammaton. This teaches us that when the time comes for the soul to descend into this world, which is completely material, it does not want to go. Yet at the same time, the Holy One, blessed be He, descends with it, and it is happy to be able to study Torah and fulfill mitzvot. Hence it is written *vehaya*, which is an expression of joy.

Once the soul has descended into the world and experienced it, it no longer wants to leave this world and its vanities. At the same time, the Holy One, blessed be He, tells man: "Against your will you die, taking no money with you from this world. All your money, all the effort that you put into acquiring it, will be left to others." The Holy One, blessed be He, asks man to fix times for learning Torah and performing mitzvot, and he replies: "I didn't have time to study Torah and perform mitzvot, for I had too many

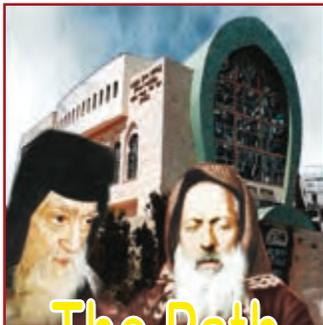
possessions that took up my time. Therefore why did You bring me down into this world against my will? Why did You give me all this money, since it made me stumble?" At that point the Holy One, blessed be He, says to him: "When you descended into this world, I descended along with you. And where were you? You were busy with your money and did not know that I dwelled in you and helped you to overcome the evil inclination. If you ask why I did not awaken you, the answer is that I did not say anything because I saw that you were occupied with material concerns." The soul is like a deposit placed in man's hands, and he must protect it from the evil inclination so as not to tarnish it with his sins.

On the verse, "Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out" (Deuteronomy 28:6), the Gemara states: "That your going from the world should be like your coming – just as you came into it without sin, so should you go out from it without [sin]" (Bava Metzia 107a). The soul will eventually be reclaimed, though a person does not know when the owner of the deposit will come to reclaim it. Hence he must be careful that his soul is worthy of being returned at all times. In this way he will not shame the owner of the deposit when he returns for it, so that he does not find it tarnished.

This is why the verse states, "That the L-RD your G-d gives you as an inheritance." Just as Eretz Israel is a conditional heritage and deposit in the hands of the Children of Israel – as our Sages have said: "If you do G-d's will, the land of Canaan is yours. Otherwise you will be exiled" and, "So that the land does not vomit you out when you defile it" (Leviticus 18:28) – likewise the soul is a deposit that is placed in man's hands, and he must protect it from all harm.

How can a person safeguard this deposit so that the evil inclination does not ruin it? It is through much Torah study, which is why the Torah has given man some useful advice that will enable him to render his soul to his Creator and bring Him satisfaction when his time comes to leave this world: He must go to the yeshiva and study Torah. A person should not say, "If that's the case, then I'll stay in yeshiva for my entire life to study Torah, and I won't practice mitzvot, which are too difficult for me," for the goal of learning Torah is to bring man to the performance of mitzvot.

This is why the Torah states, "You shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground that you bring in from your land that the L-RD your G-d gives you." The firstfruits (*reshith*) are none other than the Torah, which teaches us that a person must study Torah and fulfill mitzvot in order for Hashem to give him a reward in the World to Come. The firstfruits represent this reward. In fact the soul cannot study Torah and fulfill mitzvot without a physical body, and the fulfillment of mitzvot can only occur in this world, not in the World to Come. Not only that, but the majority of mitzvot deal with material things, such as the Shmita year, the Jubilee, and circumcision, while few of them deal with spiritual things such as prayer. When a person dies, he is exempt from mitzvot, which is why the Holy One, blessed be He, rewards the soul for the body that practiced mitzvot in this world. The Torah therefore states, "You shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground that you bring in from your land," for this Torah and its fruits come only from the land, from this material world. When a person dies, he takes nothing with him, not silver or gold, but only the Torah and mitzvot that he acquired in life. These are the firstfruits of man, the first of his fruits, and there are no firstfruits but the Torah. By doing this, a person will merit to sense the reality of Hashem within him.



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GUARD YOUR TONGUE

Blessed Instead of Cursed

The Holy One, blessed be He, has given a special blessing for a person who pays attention to not speaking Lashon Harah (and conversely, a curse for one who usually speaks Lashon Harah), as it is written: "These shall stand to bless the people on Mount Gerizim" (Deuteronomy 27:12). For each of the ten "Cursed be," the Levites began by reciting the blessing for one who was careful in regards to that sin. Hence they first said the blessings "to every man of Israel in a loud voice," concerning everyone who did not sin in that way, and all the Children of Israel replied "Amen." Next, "Cursed is the one who strikes his fellow in secret," which designates Lashon Harah, and all the Children of Israel replied "Amen." How careful must we be in regards to this sin, for which we are cursed by all Israel! Happy is the person who is careful not to sin in this way, for he is blessed by all the Children of Israel together! – The Chafetz Chaim

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

Heads, Not Tails

It is written, “The L-RD shall make you the head, not the tail” (Deuteronomy 28:13).

Otzar HaMidrashim states that during the time of King Solomon, Asmodeus the king of demons said to him: “If you want, I will show you something that you have never seen in your life.” King Solomon accepted. He immediately stretched out his hand towards the earth, and a man with two heads and four eyes emerged from it. He worked and harvested, and he became very wealthy, among the wealthiest men in the world. After a certain time, the man died and left an inheritance to his children, who fought over it. Six of his sons said, “We are seven sharing the inheritance of our father.” However the seventh son, who had two heads, said: “We are eight, and I should have two shares in the inheritance.” They went to see King Solomon and said, “You Majesty, we are seven, our brother has two heads and says that we are eight, for he wants to take two shares for himself by dividing our father’s inheritance into eight parts.”

When King Solomon heard this, the Halachah escaped him. In the middle of the night, he entered the Temple and stood in prayer before G-d, saying: “Master of the universe, when You revealed Yourself to me in Gibeon, You said: ‘Ask what I shall give you,’ and I asked You for neither silver nor gold, but only for wisdom to judge men with righteousness.” The Holy One, blessed be He, replied: “I will give you wisdom in the morning.” Come morning, King Solomon assembled the Sanhedrin and said, “Bring me the man with two heads.” He was immediately brought forth. King Solomon said, “Bring me some hot water,” and hot water was brought. He then poured hot water and old wine over one of the man’s heads. The second head screamed: “Your Majesty, we are dead, we are dead. We are one, not two, and we will no longer tell you that we are two!” When the Children of Israel heard the ruling of the king, they were amazed, trembled, and were in awe of him. Therefore it is said that he was the wisest of all men. From here we learn that we must examine the head in order to verify that it testifies to an extra person. If the head also feels what happens to the other, there is but a single person. If it only feels itself, it is not a head that is fully connected to that body; it is simply attached to it, like a tail. May we be heads, not tails.

– Shemua Tovah

Removing the Old Before the New

It is written, “Moses and the priests, the Levites, spoke to all Israel, saying: ‘Be attentive and hear, O Israel. Today you have become a people to the L-RD your G-d’ ” (Deuteronomy 27:9).

Growing old is a source of all kinds of sins. Its opposite, renewal, is the key to the eternity of the Torah and mitzvot. Such is the nature of the world: A person always aspires to something new, whereas what has grown old displeases him. See how many things are constantly renewed in the world, which then give way to novelties invented by man. As the verse states, “They did not know G-d; they always came with new things” (Deuteronomy 32:17). It is precisely because things are new that they are chosen over older

things. This is not the view of the Torah, which for thousands of years has been the same Torah with the same mitzvot, having lost none of its appeal for the Children of Israel. Hence we received the order that “every day you should regard the mitzvot as if they are new, as if you are being commanded them just today” (Rashi on Deuteronomy 26:16). This is the explanation given to the verse, “On this day they arrived in the desert of Sinai” (Exodus 19:1). What does the expression “on this day” signify? “That the words of the Torah should be new to you, as if they were given just today” (Tanhuma). How does this renewal come about, which occurs solely to safeguard the old?

The answer is through the study of Torah, which is the only way to be protected from the evils of growing old. This applies especially to the diligent study of Torah, particularly if such diligence leads to novel Torah explanations, as it is written: “Wisdom preserves the life of those who possess it” (Ecclesiastes 7:12). The more that a person focuses as he studies Torah, the more the ancient Torah renews itself in him, for he has found wisdom and new flavor in it. Thus the verse states, “When you beget children... and you will have grown old in the land and you become corrupt” (Deuteronomy 4:25). A grave danger lies in the fact that “you will have grown old in the land,” for everything becomes old for such a person, with nothing making an impression in his heart. As for one who wants to be protected from this, he must realize: “Today you have become a people” – he must act such that “every day you should regard the mitzvot as if they are new, as if you are being commanded them just today.”

– Sefer HaYovel

You Who Hears Prayer

It is written, “Then we cried out to the L-RD, the G-d of our fathers, and the L-RD heard our voice” (Deuteronomy 26:7).

The verse does not say “He heard our prayer,” but rather “He heard our voice.” This teaches us that we must cry out to Hashem during trying times, and He will answer us. Even if He sometimes answers after several days, or even after several years (as the Midrash tells us, there is a prayer that is answered after several years), crying out to Hashem is effective. The essential thing is to ask with the entire community, and to ask after performing mitzvot, just as we recite the prayer Harachaman after having performed the mitzvah of reciting Birkat Hamazon.

– The Chafetz Chaim

Three Requirements

It is written, “And now, behold: I have brought the first-fruits” (Deuteronomy 26:10).

The Midrash states that the term ve’atah (“and now”) means immediately, the term hineh (“behold”) denotes joy (see Rashi on Numbers 18:8), and the expression heveti (“I have brought”) means from what is mine. Three things are required for the fulfillment of mitzvot: (1) Not to push them back until later, but to do them immediately; (2) To carry them out with joy, as it is written: “They rejoice and are glad to do the will of their Creator” (Sanhedrin 42a); and (3) To perform them even with money that we need for ourselves, without waiting for extra money that “is mine.”

– Divrei Sha’ar Chaim

The Blessing of Children

It is written, “Gaze down from Your holy abode...and bless Your people Israel” (Deuteronomy 26:15).

The Sifrei states, “Bless Your people Israel with sons and daughters.”

When a person accomplishes the mitzvah of the firstfruits, he knows and understands that it not only deals with the fruit of the earth, but the fruit of the womb as well. He must offer to Hashem the firstfruit of his children’s years, drawing his children towards holiness through a proper Torah education. By doing this, he will automatically be blessed “with sons and daughters,” for then children constitute a blessing for their parents and will never be strangers to them.

– Avnei Ezel

Today, Not Tomorrow!

It is written, “Today the L-RD your G-d commands you to perform these decrees” (Deuteronomy 26:16).

The evil inclination in a person tells him, “Today I don’t have the time, so I’ll study Torah and repent later. Tomorrow’s another day, and I’ll improve my ways then.” The evil inclination says this to a person on the following day, and so on for the rest of his life. Hence the Torah warns us, “Today the L-RD your G-d commands you to perform” – today, not tomorrow!

– The Chafetz Chaim

I Fear No Evil, For You are With Me

It is written, “All these curses will come upon you and overtake you” (Deuteronomy 28:15).

The term vehisigucha (“and overtake you”) is written fully, meaning with a vav. Yet in the phrase, “All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you” (v.2), the term vehisigucha is written without a vav. Why the difference? That which is good is more abundant than what is evil, and a blessing comes more complete and filled than a curse. Therefore how is it possible for the verse describing the curses to be written “fully,” while the verse describing the blessings to be lacking? Rabbeinu Bechaye says that it is written fully here according to the expression, “I am with him in distress” (Psalms 91:15), a verse in which each word ends with either the letter yud, hei, or vav. Thus here, a verse that describes a time of suffering, the three letters of Hashem’s Name are written. Since the Torah frightened the people by the curses, it is saying by allusion that they will not perish, for Hashem is present in their suffering to protect them.

Overview of the Parsha

The final mitzvot contained in the book of Deuteronomy relate to the spoken word, similar to the mitzvot of hekdesch at the end of the book of Leviticus, and vows and oaths at the end of the book of Numbers. Here we have firstfruits and tithes, which contain verbal declarations before Hashem. The parsha describes the words of Hashem and His people, which indicate His relationship to the chosen people. The people are then commanded to permanently safeguard the Torah by engraving it upon stones that are to be erected later on, and to recite the blessing and curse after they cross the Jordan. The parsha describes the words of the covenant in the plains of Moab, as it stresses the importance of the Torah and the covenant.

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

The Mitzvah to Be Happy with One’s Lot

The time of the firstfruits is an opportunity for a person to rejoice in what he has, not in what he does not have. As the Kuzari states in his book, “The mitzvah to rejoice in one’s lot was given to us by the verse: ‘You shall rejoice in every good thing that the L-RD your G-d has given you’ [Deuteronomy 26:11]. This is not simply a mitzvah whose performance incurs a reward, though no punishment is incurred if not performed. It is a positive mitzvah, for if we are not happy with what Heaven has given us, we will incur a harsh reprimand.” The Kuzari continues by stating that a person who transgresses the mitzvah of being happy with his lot detracts from the praises that he should express for all these benefits, for joy leads to praise. In that case he will fulfill the passage: “Because you did not serve the L-RD your G-d amid gladness and goodness of heart...you will serve your enemies” (Deuteronomy 28:47-48).

Being happy with one’s lot does not depend on a particular kind of character. Rather, it is the result of strong faith. As for not being happy with one’s lot, this demonstrates a distortion of faith. In fact a person who truly believes in Hashem will be happy with his lot, for it is clear to him that he can certainly attain perfection with the abilities that Hashem has given him. He knows what the Sages explained, namely that all beings “were created with their particular characteristics,” and that no person in the world resembles another. Every individual is unique in terms of his particular traits, and “one kingdom does not interfere with the other, even to the extent of one hair’s breadth” (Yoma 38b). Being happy with one’s lot is rooted in the fact that a person considers everything he possesses as a means to a particular end, one that enables him to accomplish his role in the world. By looking at things in this way, if we are lacking something that we want, it is apparently our role in the world to deal with this lack. Certain people must assume their role in this world amid abundance, overcoming the trials that stem from it. Others have the opposite role to play, meaning that they must overcome the trials of complete destitution. Each person has certain things and lacks other things. These constitute the tools that he needs – the tools needed by him and him alone – in order to fulfill his unique task in this world as a soldier of the Holy One, blessed be He.

– Emet VeEmuna

EISHET CHAYIL

Saved by Fire

A fire once broke out in the town where Rav Huna lived. It spread and eventually made it to Rav Huna’s district, but there it stopped and went out. The people saw this as a miracle, and they believed that the numerous merits of Rav Huna had protected him as well as his entire district from the fire. Rav Huna had a dream in which he was told that it was true, he did have numerous merits, and he was worthy of having a miracle performed on his account. Yet this time, the miracle occurred by the merit of a pious woman who lived in the same district. What had she done? On the eve of Shabbat, she would heat her oven and permit her neighbors to use it for preparing Shabbat meals. Since this woman had shown kindness to others through fire, Heaven rewarded her measure for measure. Thus neither her home, nor the homes of her neighbors, was touched by the fire.

A TRUE STORY

Crying Out to the G-d of our Fathers

The Midrash on Parsha Va'etchanan states that prayer is known by ten designations (Devarim Rabba 2:1).

A pious merchant from the town of Karlin traveled to Vienna for business, and he was obligated to stay there for a certain time. For Shabbat, he decided to pray in the Beit Midrash of the Rebbe of Chortkov. On Wednesday, he went there to receive a blessing from the Rebbe, and he asked him: "It's the custom in Karlin to pray in a loud voice and to cry out during prayer. May the Rebbe not get upset with me if I do this!" The Rebbe listened to him and replied harshly, "What place does screaming have in prayer? We are standing before the King, and we must pray in silence and fear. That is our custom, and there is no reason to change it." At that point the chassid thought that he would not be able to pray there. Yet come Shabbat, there was no other place to pray. He therefore went to the Rebbe's Beit Midrash and tried as best he could to silence his enthusiasm and control his emotions. Yet when the time came to recite Nishmat Kol Chai, he forgot about everyone else and began crying out with all his strength. After the prayers ended, he was quite upset with himself for having disobeyed the Rebbe's instructions, and he feared his anger. He therefore went to see him again, this time to ask for forgiveness. The Rebbe replied, "For what? On the contrary, crying out is one the best ways to pray. Better a prayer with shouts than a prayer that is cold and unfeeling." The chassid was shocked. "But the Rebbe said..." The Rebbe smiled: "When a Jew comes to me on Wednesday and says that he plans on crying out on Shabbat, it's my duty to tell him that crying out is not essential to prayer. However when he is praying and his heart overflows and bursts into loud cries, there is nothing better!" – Lulei Toratcha

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTARAH

Everyone United Like a Single Person

It is written, "Arise, shine, for your light has come" (Isaiah 60:1).

This week's haftarah teaches us the power of the Jewish community, and in another haftarah we read: "All flesh together will see that the mouth of the L-RD has spoken" (ibid. 40:5). When the entire people are concerned, it is a completely different vision: When everyone sees "together," they merit seeing "that the mouth of the L-RD has spoken." Included among the components of the incense was galbanum, which the Sages said had an unpleasant odor. From this we learn that "a fast in which none of the sinners of Israel participate is no fast" (Kerithoth 6b). With regards to the four species comprising the lulav, some come from fruit-bearing trees, while others do not. Nevertheless, the lulav needs them all; if one of the species is lacking, the entire lulav will be useless and not accepted. In fact as long as all the people are not united, they do not comprise a "community," as it is written: "Their heart is divided; now they will be found guilty" (Hosea 10:2). The Torah states, "When he hears the words of this curse, he will bless himself in his heart, saying: 'I shall have peace, for I walk in the stubbornness of my heart, to add drunkenness to thirst' " (Deuteronomy 29:18). The Sforno explains that such a person is telling himself, "Even if I accept everything with my mouth, I am voiding it in my heart." He thinks that he will enjoy peace because he is accepting everything with his mouth alone, in order to add his thirsty soul to the community of G-d – which does not thirst and has distanced itself from all material desires – so he can rejoice along with the community in its blessing. Yet with regards to him it is written, "The L-RD will set him aside for evil among all the tribes of Israel" (v.20), meaning that he will be forcefully separated from the community. With regards to the manna, we also see that everyone without exception ate it from, so to speak, a single plate. As for Joshua, who separated himself from the community and pitched his tent near the mount when Moses ascended it, he needed special merit for the manna to come down for him. Such is the power of the community.

– Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

Boastfulness Leads to Forgetfulness

Our Rabbis taught: This Halachah was forgotten by the sons of Bathyra. On one occasion, the fourteenth [of Nissan] fell on Shabbat, but they forgot and did not know if the Passover offering overrides Shabbat. They said, "Is there any man who knows whether the Passover overrides Shabbat or not?" They were told, "There is a certain man who has come up from Babylonia, Hillel the Babylonian by name, who served the two greatest men of the time, and he knows whether the Passover overrides Shabbat or not. They summoned him and said, "Do you know whether the Passover overrides Shabbat or not?" He said to them, "Have we only one Passover during the year that overrides Shabbat? Surely we have many more than 200 Passovers during the year that override Shabbat!" They said to him, "How do you know?" He answered, "The expression 'in its appointed time' is stated in connection with Passover, and 'in its appointed time' is stated in connection with the tamid. Now just as 'its appointed time' stated in connection with the tamid overrides Shabbat, likewise 'in its appointed time' said in connection with Passover overrides Shabbat. Moreover, it follows logically: If the tamid – which is not punished by kareth – overrides Shabbat, then is it not logical that Passover – which is punished by kareth – overrides Shabbat?"

They immediately set him at their head and appointed him Nassi over them. He sat and lectured the entire day on the laws of Passover, and he began rebuking them with words. He said to them, "What happened to you, such that I came from Babylonia to be a Nassi over you? It was your indolence, because you did not serve the two greatest men of the time, Shemaiah and Abtalyon." They said to him, "Rabbi, what if a man forgot and did not bring a knife on the eve of Shabbat?" He replied, "I heard this Halachah, but I have forgotten it. Yet leave it to Israel: If they are not prophets, then they are the children of prophets!" On the next day, Hillel saw what was happening and remembered the Halachah. He said, 'Thus have I received the tradition from the mouths of Shemaiah and Abtalyon.' ... Rav Yehudah said in Rav's name: "Whoever is boastful, if he is a sage, his wisdom departs from him. If he is a prophet, his prophecy departs from him." If he is a Sage, his wisdom departs from him: [We learn this] from Hillel. For the Master said, "He began rebuking them with words," and then he said to them, "I heard this Halachah, but I have forgotten it."

– Pesachim 66ab

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Shlomo Nissim Algazi

Rabbi Shlomo Nissim Algazi, the author of Yavin Shemua, served as a Rav in Smyrna (present day Izmir, Turkey) and Jerusalem. He did a great deal for the poor, and after his passing he left nothing other than the amount of the Rebbeztin's ketubah, for he had distributed almost all his earnings to the poor and the talmidei chachamim. His piety and diligence in study were extraordinary, and he almost never looked outside his four cubits. The Chida wrote, "And I, being only a youngster, merited welcoming the Shechinah in 5513 for a few days. Rabbi Shlomo came to Jerusalem and returned to Smyrna to print his book, and then he returned to Jerusalem, where he was buried." His grandson, Rabbi Shlomo Algazi, a Rav in Egypt, lived almost 90 years, and his great grandson, Rabbi Yaakov Algazi, an Av Beit Din in Jerusalem, authored the books Shema Yaakov, She'erit Yaakov, Neot Yaakov, and Emet LeYaakov. Rabbi Shlomo Nissim Algazi Zatzal wrote numerous books on various fields of Torah. Researchers have found that all his books are alluded to in the names of himself and his family. In fact the Chida states that the initials of the Rav's books are the initials of his name and that of his family, which he describes in detail.

– From Shem HaGedolim