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HOW TO PLEASE HASHEM (BY RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, “Hashem spoke to Moshe after the death of Aaron’s two sons, when they approached before Hashem and they died” (Vayikra 16:1). The Ohr HaChaim Hakodesh asks why the verse says “Hashem spoke,” given that we are not told what Hashem said. Furthermore, what is the meaning of “and they died,” since the verse already says “after the death”?

We may answer these questions according to what our Sages have said, “He shall live by them [Vayikra 18:5] – but he shall not die by them” (Yoma 85b). It is also said, “Words of Torah are firmly held by one who kills himself for it” (Berachot 63b). How can we fulfill both sayings at the same time?

When a person distances himself from the pleasures of this world, eating only in order to live, it is considered by Scripture as if he has killed himself for Torah. In fact the Zohar states, “Torah endures only in one who kills himself for it. Death means poverty, for a poor man is considered as dead” (Zohar II:158b). In fact poverty is considered like death, and in the Midrash the Sages have said that Torah is not found with one who seeks pleasure and honor in this world, but with one who kills himself for it, as it is written: “This is the Torah: A man who dies in a tent” (Bamidbar 19:14).

What Caused Their Death?

Nadav and Avihu did not act in this way. Instead they truly killed themselves for the sake of Torah and holiness. They were prepared to die in order to draw closer to the holy Shechinah, which is why they did not marry, for they wanted to be close to the Shechinah at all times. Hence we are twice told that they died – teaching us that they killed themselves in order to draw closer to the Shechinah, as it is written: “When they approached before Hashem and they died.” What exactly caused their death? It was the fact that they drew too close to Hashem.

Since they did not act correctly, G-d become angry with them and said: If you want to draw close to Me, you do not have

the right to annul even the smallest letter of the Torah, not even for an instant. And if you say that these mitzvot will turn you away from serving Me, you are not correct. Have I given the mitzvot to angels? I gave the Torah and mitzvot only to man, as the Sages have taught: “The Torah was not given to the ministering angels” (Berachot 25b). When you learn Torah and observe mitzvot, and when you sanctify your material deeds, you will draw closer to the Shechinah and surpass the level of angels. Now that you think you are angels, by your lives, I will take your souls! Furthermore, since you want to kill yourselves for sanctity and you are acting abnormally, you are responsible for your own deaths, since I placed man in this world so he could live, not die. Just as a person is forbidden to physically injure himself (Bava Kama 91b), how much more is he forbidden to kill himself! Yet by acting normally, and by studying Torah and practicing mitzvot, you can elevate yourselves little by little. I am not pleased with how you are acting.

This is why the verse states, “Hashem spoke to Moshe after the death,” to teach us that this is precisely what Hashem said here, neither more nor less. What did He say? He said that the Children of Israel must not emulate Nadav and Avihu, who distanced themselves from sensible behavior and believed that they were angels. It is only by studying Torah and observing mitzvot that a person attains holiness. Piety does not mean cutting yourself off from others. The book Arvei Nachal (Parsha Va’etchanan) states that the philosophers who lived before the giving of the Torah believed that in order to elevate themselves and make their souls live forever, they had to flee into the wilderness, eat herbs, and do other such things. They believed that it was impossible to improve themselves otherwise, and they perished in their foolishness. The Torah teaches us how to please Hashem through mitzvot, which deal with how we must live in this world, as our Sages have said: “Combine the study of [Torah] with a worldly occupation” (Berachot 35b).

This is why the Holy One, blessed be He, warned Aaron by saying: “He shall not come at all times into the Sanctuary” (Vayikra 16:2). Aaron was to be careful not to emulate Nadav and Avihu, who came into the holy place at any time they pleased, for whoever comes at any time will elevate himself to the level of an angel. What will become of him at that point? He will die. Yet if he refrains from entering, he will not die.

The Same Fate Awaits the Righteous and the Wicked

If we ask why Hashem did not give this warning before Nadav and Avihu entered the Holy of Holies and died, the answer is that G-d did not have the time to give them this order before they feasted their eyes upon the Shechinah at the giving of the Torah and became liable for death. As our Sages have taught, “Nadav and Avihu uncovered their heads and allowed their eyes to feast on the Shechinah, as it says: ‘He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the Children of Israel. They saw G-d, and they ate and drank’ [Shemot 24:11]” (Shemot Rabba 45:5). G-d did not want to disrupt the joy of the Children of Israel, which is why He waited until the eighth day of the inauguration.

We can now understand a statement found in the Midrash on this week’s parsha: “After the death of Aaron’s two sons. Rabbi Shimon opened his discourse with the text, ‘All things come alike to all. The same fate awaits the righteous and the wicked’ [Kohelet 9:2]” (Vayikra Rabba 20:1). What does this have to do with Nadav and Avihu?

According to what we have said, we see that a wicked person is one who rejects the yoke of the Torah. It is therefore normal that he be liable for death. However the tzaddik who truly kills himself in order to draw closer to the Shechinah, emulating the ways of Nadav and Avihu, is also liable for death. We must all choose the middle path, sanctifying ourselves in what is permitted.

CONCERNING THE PARSHA

Reprimanding and Defending

It is written, “He shall don a sacred linen tunic, and linen breeches shall be upon his flesh” (Vayikra 16:4).

Rashi cites the Sages in stating that from here we learn that the Kohen Gadol “does not perform the service inside wearing the eight garments with which he performs the service outside, for those [garments] contain gold, and a prosecutor cannot become a defender. Instead [he wears] four garments, like an ordinary kohen, all of which are of linen.”

In recent times, lamented the gaon Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin Zatzal in his book *Oznaim LaTorah*, there have been more and more people claiming to be great friends of the Jewish people. They oppose whoever reprimands the permissiveness of the generation, and they say that it is forbidden to criticize the Jewish people, who are holy. They base themselves on a powerful support, the gaon and tzaddik Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev Zatzal. As most people know, he would always defend the merits of the Jewish people, and therefore anyone who defends his merits is invariably correct. The situation has reached such a point that the mitzvah of reprimanding others has been annulled. One such “defender” protested against the rav of his city because he had reprimanded someone for eating forbidden meat in the kitchen of a good-for-nothing. He therefore raised a complaint about the rav, saying that it was forbidden to accuse a Jew.

Yet in reality, said Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, there is no doubt that if we see a man or woman transgressing the law of Moshe and Israel, we must reprimand them as much as possible. Every rav in Israel must reprimand the people for their sins, in order for them to return to Hashem and repent. This “accusation” is but a “merit” for Israel, for in this way their hearts are drawn closer to their Father in Heaven.

What is the issue here? When a person reprimands an individual or a group of people, he has the duty to address them and alert them of their sins. On the other hand, when the rav or person making the reprimand prays to the Holy One, blessed be He, he must defend Israel and find pretexts for their sins and transgressions, even if in a dubious or complicated way. One must always try to look for the merit of Jews and seek their good before the Holy One, blessed be He.

This has nothing to do with the mitzvah of reprimanding, which exists at all times, for otherwise the Torah would disappear from Israel. In fact without reprimands, everyone would do whatever they want.

Finding All Sorts of Pretexts

We see this simple difference in the garments of the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur. How? When the Kohen Gadol is officiating on the greatest day of the year with the complete help of the kohanim and Israelites, who have come to see the service in the House of G-d on the holy day, the Kohen Gadol wears garments of gold. It does not even matter if wearing such garments evokes memories of the golden calf. On the contrary, the people will see and remember the wrath of Hashem on Mount Horev, and they will be ashamed and return to Hashem, Who forgives.

Yet when the Kohen Gadol enters the Holy of Holies, it is forbidden for anyone to find himself anywhere within the Sanctuary, as the verse states: “No man shall be in the Tent of Meeting when he goes in to make atonement in the holy place until he comes out” (Vayikra 16:17). The Kohen Gadol alone prays to Hashem for the Jewish people, and no one else hears him. At that point there is obviously no need to criticize the people, and he must find all kinds of excuses and pretexts to cover their sins and highlight their merits before Hashem. How much more is the Kohen Gadol to distance everything that can recall the sins of the Jewish people! He therefore removes his garments of gold – gold from which the calf was made – and dons garments of white linen, a sign of the forgiveness of sin, as the prophet Isaiah states: “If your sins are like scarlet, they will become white as snow” (Isaiah 1:18).

In reality, the best way to favorably judge others is to put an effort into finding the good and light that exists in each Jew, as it is written: “With righteousness shall you judge your fellow” (Vayikra 19:15). Even if someone has the impression that his fellow has wronged him and tried to hurt him, if he nevertheless puts an effort into looking for the good in him, he will judge him favorably. Thus as Rabbi David of Lelov Zatzal said, “There is not a wicked Jew in the entire world!” If we see something bad in a Jew, we have actually discovered the non-Jewish part within him, the *goy* within the Jew.

It is widely known that the tzaddik Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev Zatzal constantly defended the Jewish people. He said that everyone must constantly defend Israel and only see the good in Jews. Obviously, anyone who develops this attitude will merit Hashem’s help in not seeing any evil among Israel, and he will always be able to defend Jews and confer merit upon them.

I know!

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak loved every Jew and had compassion on whoever was called a Jew. For him every Jew was righteous by default, and he would defend him.

It is said that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak once went into the city on Tisha B’Av, and there he saw a Jew sitting on the porch of his home eating in full public view. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak said to him, “My son, you have certainly forgotten that today is Tisha B’Av.”

“No, Rabbi” he replied, “I know that today is Tisha B’Av.”

“Perhaps you don’t know,” retorted Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, “that today is a fast day, and that it’s forbidden to eat and drink on this day.”

“I know that Tisha B’Av is a public fast day,” brazenly replied the man.

“In that case, you must be frail and your doctors have ordered you not to fast,” countered Rabbi Levi Yitzchak.

“Certainly not,” the man responded. “I’m in very good health!”

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak then raised his eyes to heaven and exclaimed, “Sovereign of the universe! Look at how great the love for truth is in Jews! This Jew prefers to incriminate himself rather than to utter a lie!”

AT THE SOURCE

An Unusual Juxtaposition

It is written, “Every man shall fear his mother and his father, and My Sabbaths you shall keep” (Vayikra 19:3).

Here the Chida Zatzal cites the Arizal in pointing out something amazing:

There are two subjects juxtaposed in this verse – “Every man shall fear his mother and his father” and “My Sabbaths you shall keep” – namely the mitzvah of respecting one’s parents and the mitzvah of observing Shabbat. This comes to teach us that one who properly observes Shabbat and teaches Torah on Shabbat greatly honors his father in the World to Come.

This is the simple meaning of the juxtaposition of these two mitzvot, alluding to the fact that one who studies and gives Torah explanations on Shabbat will bestow great honor upon his father in the World that is entirely good.

A Triple Warning

It is written, “You shall not cheat your fellow and you shall not rob. A worker’s wages shall not remain with you overnight until morning” (Vayikra 19:13).

If there is a dispute between an employer and an employee in regards to the latter having received his wages, the din is that on that very day the employee takes an oath that he has not received them. He is then believed and given his wages. On the next day, however, he can no longer take an oath and be given his wages.

Accordingly, Rabbi Leibush Charif Zatzal said that the above verse first warns the employer against cheating his employee. The verse then issues a second warning, this time to the employee, about receiving his salary twice by stealing from his employer – hence it states “you shall not rob.” Finally, the verse warns that an employer may deliberately want to keep the wages of his employee until the next day, in order for him to lose his right to receive his wages by taking an oath. It therefore says, “A worker’s wages shall not remain with you overnight until morning.”

Setting the Price in Advance

It is written, “You shall not cheat your fellow and you shall not rob” (Vayikra 19:13).

In his booklet Sefat Tamim, the Chafetz Chaim gives us some excellent advice regarding the prohibition against cheating an employee of his wages:

“Everyone engaging another to perform a task for him for pay should first have the worker agree on the price. Otherwise one may very easily become guilty of robbery or withholding the wages of a hired worker, unless he is ready to squander his money to extricate himself from any doubt. Does not every person require hundreds of tasks to be performed for him each year? Very frequently it happens that after the completion of the task, an argument ensues between the employee and the employer regarding the payment of the fee. When they part, each feels in his heart that he has been robbed by the other. It is only that he is reluctant to argue, and he has by no means wholeheartedly relinquished his claim. At other times, the two quarrel with each other. ... Now if an employer pays a single penny less than what the local custom requires, the Torah brands him as a gazlan, a robber, and as one who withholds the wages of a hired hand. Yet who can really determine what local custom requires in each particular instance? Thus anyone wishing to fulfill his obligations, without any misgivings, would always be forced to pay his worker whatever the latter demands. This would cause great difficulty. Hence the person wishing to do what is right in the eyes of Heaven will set the price with his workman in advance, and so remove all doubt. ... A talmid

chacham will certainly follow this procedure, since otherwise, if he refuses to pay what the worker demands, he may easily be guilty... of profaning the Divine Name, for the workman will proclaim that he has been cheated by a talmid chacham.”

Measure for Measure

It is written, “You shall rise in the presence of an old person” (Vayikra 19:32).

The Gemara states, “Every talmid chacham who does not rise before his teacher is called wicked and will not live long” (Kiddushin 33b).

Why is a talmid chacham punished so severely, to the point that he “will not live long”? Rabbi Moshe Sofer Zatzal explains that such a punishment is measure for measure: Just as the talmid chacham did not rise before his teacher, he will not live long enough for people to rise before him to fulfill the mitzvah: “You shall rise in the presence of an old person.” Thus no one will rise before him, in accordance with how he himself acted.

By Allusion - Don’t Curse Yourself

It is written, “You shall not curse cheiresh [the deaf]” (Vayikra 19:14).

The term cheiresh is formed by the initials of chaim (life), ra’im (bad), and shelcha (your).

This tells us by allusion that a person must not curse himself when he is beset by misfortune or poverty (i.e., “You shall not curse cheiresh [your bad life]”). The Holy One, blessed be He, does not want man to be cursed, but blessed. Thus we read, “Hashem desires for the sake of his righteousness” – for the righteousness of His created beings.

– Siftei Kohen

THE WAYS OF THE FATHERS INSIGHTS ON PIRKEI AVOTH BY RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA

Humble Yourself and G-d Will Elevate You

Akavya ben Mahalalel said, “Look at three things and you will not come to sin” (Pirkei Avoth 3:1).

I thought that I would explain this allegorically. Why is this Tanna not called “Rabbi” like all the other Tannaim?

It is because his name and that of his father contain an allusion: Akavya is Akev Y-A – whoever feels like a heel (akev) before Hashem – is ben Mehalalel E-L, he alone is worthy of praising Hashem, just as King David did. At first he said, “I am a worm and not a man, the scorn of humanity” (Tehillim 22:7), and only then did he say: “I will proclaim Your Name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise You” (v.23).

This is why this Tanna is not called “Rabbi,” for he put into practice the allusion hidden within his name. He always felt like a heel, and he annulled himself before Hashem. In this Mishnah, he explained to his students how they could completely annul themselves before Hashem, by constantly reflecting upon where they came from, where they were going, and so on. Once a person feels small before Hashem, he can begin to understand the greatness of Hashem, before Whom he will be called upon to give an accounting. He will then be able to pray to Him, praise Him, and glorify Him. Yet a person who grows proud cannot possibly understand the greatness of Hashem. The more that a person humbles himself, the more he can understand Hashem’s greatness.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

RABBI YOSEF TEOMIM – THE AUTHOR OF PRI MEGADIM

Rabbi Yosef Teomim Zatzal was born in 5487 to the gaon Rabbi Meir, a dayan and posek in Lvov. As a child, he was raised by his father and learned Torah in poverty and want. Despite all this, his love for Torah was never affected. He had a powerful desire to study diligently and thoroughly, contrary to most of his friends, who devoted themselves to playing children's games.

As Rabbi Yosef grew, his level in Torah and fine character traits increased. He was known as one of the most gifted young men in the region, and an honorable Jew from Kumara took him as his son-in-law. After his wedding, he continued to study Torah day and night, for nothing else interested him.

Rabbi Yosef was humble and concealed his greatness. He taught Gemara and the commentators for several years, and he considered himself as a simple educator when he began teaching. In fact that is how he described himself when signing his letters. In the introduction to his book, he speaks of his work as a teacher, which was apparently successful. Among other things, he states: "I, the small...had a few important students."

Although Rabbi Yosef considered himself to be a simple educator, this view was not held by the residents of Lvov, who were fully aware of his greatness and the power of his Torah, as well as his incredible diligence in study. It is therefore not surprising that after a short time, he was invited to become the dayan of the community. He accepted this position, left his teaching job, and departed for Lvov.

Rabbi Yosef studied for the sake of Torah, with extreme humility, and solely for the love of Heaven. Thus in him was fulfilled the statement in the Mishnah: "Whoever occupies himself with [the study of] Torah for its own sake merits many things" (Pirkei Avoth 6:1).

Rabbi Yosef studied for several years with the tzaddik Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev Zatzal, who earned the great distinction of being called "the defender of Israel." At the time, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was still relatively young, living with his father-in-law Reb Israel Peretz of Libertov.

The gaon Rabbi Yosef Lonstein, the Av Beit Din of Sorotz, said of Rabbi Yosef Teomim: "He was like a great Torah figure when he studied, fully engaged with all his senses. He was always deeply absorbed in his studies and would review them several times over." The gaon Rabbi Simcha of Dobraka, who was his student, would go to his home every day after dawn. He testified that for 20 years, Rabbi Yosef would study tractate Chullin with a clear mind before working on his books. His most famous book is Pri Megadim, which essentially consists of explanations and commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch. The book is divided into three parts: (1) Mishbetzot Zahav, a commentary on Orach Chaim (with a supercommentary on Turei Zahav); (2) Eshel Avraham, a commentary on Magen Avraham; and (3) Siftei Da'at, a commentary on the Shach's Siftei Kohen. He also wrote a commentary on the Talmud.

A Proclamation from Heaven

Rabbi Yosef Teomim once paid a visit to the tzaddik Rabbi Yechiel Michal of Zlotchov Zatzal, who welcomed him with great honors. He told Rabbi Yosef that Heaven had declared that the Halachah was in accordance with his opinion, for he studied in purity and for the sake of Heaven.

In his Responsa Divrei Chaim, Rabbi Chaim of Sanz Zatzal wrote that the teachings of Pri Megadim were a balm for the eyes, and that its words contain an amazing, sanctified zeal for all methods of Torah study.

Despite the praises that he received from the mouths of Torah giants, Rabbi Yosef's humility was great, limitless in fact. He simply held no importance in his own eyes.

Rabbi Yosef returned to Lvov upon his father's death, and before the wave of admiration that surrounded him he wrote: "This holy community of Lvov welcomed me to guide them in place of my father. I know that I am not worthy of this honor, for what is straw in comparison to wheat? I have not even reached the level of the least of his students. This generation has seen the fulfillment of the teaching: 'If the Rishonim are like men, we are like donkeys.' How much more does this apply to me, for I do not even possess the wisdom of a man! I have neither Torah nor wisdom, and although I have studied the Gemara and poskim all my life, I have attained but very little."

In 5542, Rabbi Yosef Teomim was appointed as the Av Beit Din of Frankfort, where his soul found peace. It was there that he published his Pri Megadim. It must be noted that even when he served as the Rav of such an important community as Frankfurt, he still signed his letters using the designation "teacher."

Rabbi Yosef remained as the Rav of Frankfurt for a decade, until he was summoned to the celestial yeshiva on Iyar 4, 5552. His works are studied in all corners of the earth.

GUARD YOUR TONGUE

Ridiculing Others

There is something that I would like to discuss in particular, for I see many people who are used to it. When someone gives a lecture in the Beit HaMidrash, it is forbidden by the din to ridicule him and say that his lecture is not interesting and contains nothing worth listening to.

Because of our numerous sins, we see many people paying absolutely no attention to this, for they fail to realize that all such ridicule is forbidden. It is complete Lashon Harah, for it often happens that such ridicule will hurt people financially and sometimes cause them pain and humiliation. Even if it is true, Lashon Harah is forbidden for being true. If the speaker is an honest person, he must be privately told that his words will not be heard if he expresses himself in such a manner. In this way we fulfill, "You shall love your fellow as yourself."