

The Path To Follow

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Rabbi David Pinto Shlita

Elevating Yourself Through Torah Study

The Sages instituted the reading of *Parsha Bamidbar* before the festival of Shavuot and the reading of *Parsha Nasso* after the festival (*Tur, Orach Chaim* 428). This is because during Shavuot, which is the day we received the Torah, everyone resolves to add to their Torah learning and *mitzvot* performance, but they return to their work and forget their resolutions once the holiday has passed. Although each person took it upon himself to improve his ways and study throughout the year, his worries make him forget despite his best intentions, preventing him from truly fulfilling them. Hence he will sometimes lose hope and think, "I don't have the ability to fulfill everything that I took upon myself!"

This is why our Sages instituted the reading of *Parsha Nasso* immediately after the festival of Shavuot. In fact this *parsha* begins with the expression, "Elevate the head." The term *nasso* means to elevate, thereby telling us that although a person is responsible for his family, and although such a responsibility may prevent him from doing everything that he took upon himself during the festival, he cannot lose hope and is forbidden to become discouraged. He must not allow the evil inclination to enter him and say, "Since you can't fulfill all the resolutions that you took upon yourself, it's not worth the trouble of doing even what you can fulfill!" He must chase this thought away and do whatever he can, however little it may be.

The Gemara teaches, "One who sacrifices much and one who sacrifices little have the same merit, provided that the heart is directed to Heaven" (*Berachot* 5b). Yet when a person completely loses hope and does not do the little that he can, it would have been better had he not taken anything upon himself, rather than to commit himself to doing something and not fulfilling it. Even if he does but a little, what he has committed himself to doing is important.

Even for a Single Day a Year

This is why the Torah said, "Elevate the head." Even if a person does not fulfill all his resolutions, it should not make him sad, and he must not allow the evil inclination to entice him. He should instead elevate himself and do everything that he can. How can he elevate himself? By fixing times for Torah study. By learning Torah, he can chase away the evil inclination, as the Sages have said: "I created the evil inclination, but I created the Torah as its antidote" (*Kiddushin* 30b). Hence it is written, "Elevate the head of the sons of Gershon" (*Bamidbar* 4:22). Do not read Gershon, but *gerushin* ("chase"), for the Torah chases away the evil inclination. When a person studies Torah, he immediately chases the evil inclination away, as our Sages have said: "One who studies Torah, the forces of evil leave him."

Even if a person who works for a living cannot study for the entire day, the Sages have spoken to us about Rabbi Idi, the father of Rabbi Yaakov. To reach the Beit HaMidrash, Rabbi Idi had to travel an extremely long way, a three-month journey by foot. Rabbi Yochanan said to him, "Whoever studies Torah for even one day a year, Scripture considers him to have studied throughout the year" (*Chagigah* 5b).

Therefore even if a person cannot study for the entire day, he should at least make an effort to study for a few hours, morning or evening. In this way, he will manage to fulfill what he took upon himself during the festival of Shavuot. He will then be able to elevate himself, as it is written: "Elevate the head," for learning Torah elevates the head.

If a person fails to study Torah immediately after the festival, however, and if he fails to keep his word, he will forget what he has studied. This is because the giving of the Torah has already passed, but he did not fulfill his resolutions. The Sages have said, "If a person hears a Torah teaching and immediately fulfills it, then just as the initial teaching will endure with him, likewise what he immediately fulfills will endure with him. Yet if he hears and immediately forgets, then just as the initial teaching will not endure with him, likewise later teachings will not endure with him" (*Sifrei, Devarim* 48). In *Megillat Chassidim* we read, "If you abandon Me for one day, I will abandon you for two days" (*Yerushalmi, Berachot* 9:5).

Adding to Torah Study

The Torah makes another allusion in the verse: "Elevate the head of the sons of Gershon *gam* [also]" – even if a person cannot start something new that he resolved to do in the service of Hashem, he should at least add to what he has been doing up to now. Hence the Midrash states, "If a man has been undone by sin...what should he do to live? If he was accustomed to reading one page of Scripture, let him read two pages, and if he was accustomed to studying one chapter of Mishnah, let him study two" (*Vayikra Rabba* 25:1). This is why the verse uses the term *gam* ("also"), meaning that he must add something. Even if he cannot start something new, he should at least put an effort into adding something "also."

This is what our Sages meant in the Midrash on the verse, "It is more precious than pearls" (*Mishlei* 3:15), namely that the term *peninim* ("pearls") always designate a start (*Bamidbar Rabba* 6:1). That is, a person must start immediately after the festival to fulfill everything that he resolved to do in terms of additional Torah study and good deeds, even if it is only a start. If he starts something at the beginning of the year, Scripture will consider him to have studied throughout the year, and he will eventually study all year round.

However if he fails to start and does not make any resolutions during the festival, he will never be able to safeguard the Torah that he learns. Even if he studies, since he failed to start and did not make any resolutions during the festival, he will be unable to safeguard his Torah learning.

Since *Parsha Nasso* is close to the giving of the Torah, all the great principles of the Torah depend on it. The Sages, who counted all the letters of the Torah, found that this *parsha* is the longest in the entire Torah. This tells us that it is essential and that we must start from it. A person who takes upon himself the yoke of Torah study during the festival, and who studies it immediately afterwards, even if just a little, is promised that his Torah learning will endure.

Concerning the Parsha

Maintaining our Strength

It is written, "From new or aged wine shall he abstain" (*Bamidbar* 6:3).

The Torah does not mean, Rabbi Ovadia Sforno warns us, that one who abstains must afflict himself through fasting. By abstaining in that way, he will diminish his service of Hashem, as the Sages have said, and we must not mortify the body through affliction.

However we must abstain from wine, for by doing so we greatly diminish our desires and subdue our inclinations, but without losing any of our strength.

The Order of the Offerings

It is written, "The leaders of Israel, the heads of their fathers' household, brought offerings" (*Bamidbar* 7:2).

As we know, the leaders began making their offerings on the first day of Nissan, lasting for 12 consecutive days. The order of these offerings does not correspond to the birth order of the tribal fathers. Rather, the leader of the tribe of Judah brought his offering first, followed by Issachar and Zebulun, and only then the tribe of Reuven.

The Midrash indicates that because of this order, the tribe of Reuven was angry with Moshe. He replied that it was the order he had received from G-d. In fact the tribe of Judah had been ready to give up their lives by being the first to venture into the sea, and therefore they merited being the first tribe to bring their offering. After Judah came the tribe of Issachar, for the idea of bringing offerings for the inauguration of the Sanctuary came from Issachar. Furthermore, Issachar excelled in Torah study. Next came the tribe of Zebulun, which merited this position due to their pact with Issachar. Zebulun divided their revenue in two, giving half of it to Issachar in order for them to study Torah. In return, the tribe of Issachar agreed to share their reward for Torah study with Zebulun. It is said that in the future, the Holy One, blessed be He, will shelter those who support Torah next to those who study it.

Singular Blessings

It is written, "So shall you bless the Children of Israel" (*Bamidbar* 6:23).

Why does the verse begin in the plural, but then – within the actual blessing itself – we have the singular: "May Hashem bless you and safeguard you. May Hashem shine His face upon you...?"

The book *Dan MiDaniel* offers an explanation: The plural form is not fitting for every blessing, for blessings are not the same for each person.

For example, "May Hashem bless you" may signify a blessing through money or children. In fact money may be a blessing for one person, but a curse to another, for it may turn the latter off the right path. The same applies to children: When children are good and upright, they bring satisfaction to their parents, and hence they are a blessing. Yet when they cause their parents to suffer, they are not a blessing, but rather the opposite.

This is why the blessings are given in the singular, so that each person can receive the precise blessing that he needs.

A Faithful Witness

It is written, "The one who brought his offering on the first day" (*Bamidbar* 7:12).

We must say that the Torah comes from Heaven and that it was given during the time of Moshe, not that someone arose during the previous generations and invented the Torah, said Rabbi Yaakov Israel Kanievisky *Zatzal*. A clear proof exists in the Torah itself that it was not created by man.

Parsha Nasso describes the offerings of the twelve tribal leaders: The one who brought an offering on the first day, the second day, the third day, and so on. If a person had written this account, would he have gone to the trouble of writing the same exact description twelve times? He would have been content on describing the process of the offerings, who had brought which offering and how, and that is all. This can be nothing other than a faithful witness that the Torah was given by Heaven, through the hand of Moshe.

In the Path of the Fathers

From the Teachings of the Gaon and Tzaddik Rabbi David Hanania Pinto Shlita

Nasso & Gershon

It is written, "Elevate [count] the head of the sons of Gershon" (*Bamidbar* 4:22).

I would like to present several ways to explain this verse allegorically:

"Elevate [count] the head of the sons of Gershon" – the Holy One, blessed be He, ordered Moshe to elevate heads, meaning to encourage them to *garish* (chase away) the evil inclination from their heart.

If we say that the name Gershon alludes to the fact that we must chase the evil inclination from the heart, we must also explain by allusion that the name Gershon has the same numerical value as the expression *veyanusu mesanecha* ("and your enemies shall flee"), meaning that we must strive to chase away our archenemy, the evil inclination, and it will flee before us. We will thereby merit the coming of *mevasser tov* (i.e., *Mashiach*) – an expression that also has the same numerical value as the name Gershon – speedily and in our days. Amen.

Using another approach, we may say that the term *nasso* is composed of the same letters as *sana* (to hate), an allusion to the fact that the Holy One, blessed be He, hates those who are proud and feel superior to others.

Furthermore, we may say that Gershon evokes the term *ger* ("stranger"). That is, a person must be like a stranger in this world, for he comes from dust and to dust he returns. His days pass like a shadow, and his life lasts but 70 years, or perhaps 80 years.

The main thing that a person must do in this world is to prepare provisions for the journey ahead. In fact this world is like a corridor before the World to Come. The Sages have taught, "Prepare yourself in the corridor, so that you may enter the banquet hall" (*Pirkei Avot* 4:16). We must not be like a citizen of this world and immerse ourselves in its frivolous pursuits, such that we forget the reason why we are here, namely the World to Come.

Concerning the Parsha

May Hashem Bless You and Protect You

It is written, "May Hashem bless you and protect you" (*Bamidbar* 6:24).

Rashi states, "*May [Hashem] bless you* – that your possessions shall be blessed; *and protect you* – that no thieves attack you and steal your money."

The *gaon* Rabbi Ezra Attiya would often recount the following story in regards to this blessing:

In one of the cities of Torah scholars and sages, namely the Syrian town of Aleppo, lived the Fijutto family. They had a prestigious ancestry, and among them was the Austrian ambassador.

One member of this family, known for his great wealth, would sometimes lend money to the residents of Aleppo, both Jews and non-Jews. One day an Arab merchant came to see him. This merchant possessed fields and orchards, vineyards and gardens, and he earned a great deal of money. He was also known as a thief and a crook, a man who never let a penny out of his pocket if he could help it. He addressed the Jew with respect: "Mr. Fijutto, good day!"

"Welcome to my home. What brings you here?"

"Poverty," replied the merchant, "is what brings me to your home. I have an opportunity to enter into a very important business venture, but for that I need 200 lira for 6 months, after which I can repay you the entire amount."

Mr. Fijutto, who knew that this man never kept his word, said to him: "I am ready to give you what you want." The face of the merchant lit up with joy. Mr. Fijutto then took a packet of bank notes from his pocket and wrote a note valid for a period of 6 months, which he made him sign. He then asked the merchant to find a guarantor who would co-sign the loan.

The merchant was upset. "You're asking *me* for a guarantor?" he asked. "I have tremendous possessions! Do you think I'm poor? Your request hurts me, for who will I ask to be my guarantor? Everyone will laugh at me!" However Mr. Fijutto refused to give him the loan without a guarantor to co-sign for him.

When the merchant saw that he could not evade this requirement, he raised his voice a little and said with a stern face: "Lend me the money if you want, or don't lend me if you don't want. If you want a guarantor, G-d will be my guarantor!"

When Mr. Fijutto heard this, he wanted to sanctify the Name of Heaven. He nodded his head in agreement, as if to say: "If He is your guarantor, here is the loan. You just have to take it." He counted out 200 liras and gave it to him. The merchant took out a red handkerchief, wrapped the money in it, and placed it in his pocket, very satisfied. He then left in peace. The merchant rejoiced in having extorted 200 liras from Mr. Fijutto, for he had absolutely no intention of paying him back.

At twilight, as evening approached, the merchant was walking along a row of cabbage plants in one of his kitchen gardens, when he suddenly felt the need to relieve himself. However the money he was carrying in his pocket bothered him, and he placed it among the cabbage plants that were growing there. Now at night, cabbage plants open their leaves and blossom, and each day at sunrise they automatically close up.

When the merchant had finished relieving himself, he forgot that he

had left the money in the garden, for he wanted to hurry inside and sleep the sleep of the just. At sunrise, he went to check his money, but to his utter dismay he could not find it!

He immediately remembered that on the previous evening, at twilight, he had taken the money out of his pocket in the garden. He therefore went there and looked all around, but without success. As we have said, cabbage plants close up at sunrise, and it had enveloped his money. He returned home completely baffled.

Twice every week, the garden attendants would go between the rows of vegetables and pick out all the cabbage plants that appeared large and ripe. They would bring these vegetables to the local market to sell. On that day, they went through the rows of vegetables and noticed a large looking cabbage plant, the one that contained the bundle of money among its leaves. As usual, they brought the produce to the local market, where they offered to sell it to a merchant who was looking for quality fruits and vegetables.

The cabbage greatly pleased him, and as he weighed it in his hands to get a feel for its size, he called out to one of his employees: "Bring this cabbage to Mr. Fijutto. A few days ago, he asked me to bring him a beautiful and large cabbage if I found one."

The employee immediately did as his boss had asked, bringing the cabbage to the Fijutto home. There he entrusted it to his loyal servants, who carefully began to remove the cabbage leaves. All of a sudden, they came upon a red piece of thread, and since they had never seen anything like it, they summoned Mr. Fijutto for help. He carefully removed the cabbage leaves one at a time, until the entire bundle of money appeared. He opened it, thinking that the merchant would be coming to see him at any minute. The color, it seemed, resembled that of his handkerchief. The amount of money, when he counted it, was exactly the same as the loan.

Mr. Fijutto's excitement grew. He recited aloud the blessing, "Blessed is He Who returns what was lost to its owners!" In fact he himself had already considered this money to be lost.

Six months later, the merchant appeared in his office and began to give excuses for not having repaid the loan. He said that he didn't have the money at the time, and that he needed a few more months to repay it, including interest, for he swore by his religion that he was ready to repay it. As if to prove his honesty and sincerity, he said that he had not profited from the loan, but had lost it in a mysterious way. He remembered only that he had taken out the money from his pocket while he was in his garden, and that he never saw it again.

Mr. Fijutto then opened the bundle that he had stored away, turned to the Arab merchant, and said to him: "Is this bundle made with your handkerchief?"

"Yes."

"Now tell me the truth," Mr. Fijutto said to him. "Did you really intend on repaying this loan when you took it from me?"

Guard Your Tongue!

Obligated to Rebuke

Suppose that a person finds himself, for reasons beyond his control, among a group of habitual speakers of *Lashon Hara*, and he hears them speaking *Lashon Hara*. In that case, if he thinks that rebuking them will make them stop, he is certainly obligated by the Torah to do so. Even if he thinks that rebuking them will not work, he does not have the right to remain silent, lest they think that he agrees with them. – *Chafetz Chaim*

Rabbi Yaakov Chaim Sofer

The Rosh Yeshiva of Porat Yosef, the *gaon* Tzvi Yehudah Tsadka *Zatzal*, used to say: “The sanctity of the mouth is what supported two Torah giants of Israel.” One was Rabbi Israel Meir HaCohen *Zatzal* of Radin, the author of *Mishnah Berurah*, and the other was Rabbi Yaakov Chaim Sofer *Zatzal*, the author of *Kaf HaChaim*. They were considered the greatest *poskim* of their generation, and their *halachic* works constitute an indelible heritage for the entire Diaspora of the Jewish people, books that regulate the conduct of every Jewish home.

The silence adopted by the great *gaon* Rabbi Yaakov Chaim Sofer *Zatzal* was legendary. He tenaciously cleaved to it in everything he did and with every fiber of his being, his sanctified lips having adopted the marvelous virtue of silence. Never in his life was he heard saying anything unnecessary, and everything that he did was holy.

A Disciple of Great Torah Figures

Rabbi Yaakov Chaim Sofer was born in 5630 among the city of Torah scholars and sages, Baghdad in Iraq. He learned Torah and sanctity from his father, the pious Torah genius Rabbi Yitzchak Baruch, the son of Rabbi Eliyahu, who taught in Baghdad.

Rabbi Yaakov was fortunate enough to be educated and receive the Torah of Rabbi Abdallah Somech, Rabbi Elisha Dangur, and Rabbi Yosef Haim (the Ben Ish Hai), may their memory be blessed. Rabbi Yosef Haim was particularly fond of his very talented student, who possessed extraordinary spiritual strength. He greatly contributed to raising this exceptional personality in Torah and the fear of Heaven.

In his youth, Rabbi Yaakov Sofer was able to move to Jerusalem, where he became known as a great Torah scholar in both the revealed Torah and Kabbalah. In fact he became known as someone in whom Hashem’s spirit dwelled. In the tiny attic close to the Shoshanim LeDavid Beit HaMidrash, he would sit down to study Torah with all his strength. The elders of Jerusalem spoke with amazement about the radiance of his face, especially when he recited a blessing, and the tremendous concentration and enthusiasm of his fear and love of Heaven, which were conveyed to everyone who heard him.

You’re the Tzaddik!

The name of Rabbi Yaakov Sofer is connected to an amazing story that was told by the elders of the generation.

One night, the Angel of Death came to him in order to take his soul.

“Why do you want my soul?” asked Rabbi Yaakov. The angel replied, “A decree has been made in Heaven against the Jewish people, and it was decided that a soul of one of the sages of the generation should be taken instead.” Rabbi Yaakov asserted, “But I’m not a *tsaddik*! You have nothing to do here, especially since I don’t have time for those such as you. I haven’t yet finished writing my sacred work *Kaf HaChaim*! Go see Rabbi Yechezkel Ezra Halevi. He’s a *tzaddik* imbued with tremendous sanctity. See what he says.”

That is what the Angel of Death did.

It went to the home of Rabbi Yechezkel Ezra Halevi, woke him up, and told him what it wanted. Rabbi Yechezkel was angry and said, “Leave, otherwise I’ll destroy you with the sacred Names!” The angel tried to justify itself, saying: “I was sent here by Rabbi Yaakov Sofer. He told me that you are worthy of being called a *tzaddik*, and that I should take your soul.”

“Return to him,” said Rabbi Yechezkel, “and tell the one who sent you that I am not a *tzaddik*. He’s the *tzaddik*!”

Thus both sides continued to argue over who was a *tzaddik*, until finally Rabbi Yechezkel said to the angel: “Go see the *chacham* Yitzchak Shrem. He’s a *tzaddik*. In principle it’s a *tzaddik* like him that those who sent you had in mind.”

“In the morning,” recounted the *gaon* Rabbi Yehudah Tsadka *Zatzal*, “if I had not seen it with my own eyes, I would not have believed it: I arrived at the Shoshanim LeDavid Beit HaMidrash for *Shacharit*, and I there I saw Rabbi Yechezkel pacing up and down without *tallit* or *tefillin*, until finally Rabbi Yaakov Sofer’s noble figure arrived. Rabbi Yechezkel quickly went up to him and said with surprise, ‘What did you do to me last night? Who did you send me?’ Rabbi Yaakov simply replied, ‘What could I do? I’m not a *tzaddik*. He was sent to me by mistake. You’re the *tzaddik*, and so I sent him to you. Did I say something wrong? By the power of your words, he was sent away empty-handed.’”

Rabbi Yechezkel protested, “Me – a *tzaddik*? You’re the *tzaddik*!”

“Alright,” replied Rabbi Yaakov, “but what became of him?”

“I sent him to the *chacham* Yitzchak Shram,” replied Rabbi Yechezkel.

Rabbi Yaakov struck his hands with regret and said, “What have you done? The *chacham* Yitzchak can’t fight him! He must have already taken his soul!” They were still speaking when one of the students of the Beit HaMidrash entered, weeping with emotion, to tell people about the death of the *chacham* Yitzchak Shram.

Every Day

Rabbi Yaakov Sofer’s day began as early as midnight, when he would arise like a lion to serve his Creator. He recited the morning blessings according to the order of the Arizal’s *kavanot*, and he recited *tikkun chatzot* with tears and heart-wrenching cries.

Whoever saw this terrifying sight would shed tears of emotion. Such was the case with his family every night: They suffered when he prayed, for they could hear the weeping of the family head as he lamented the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the holy *Shechinah*. When Rabbi Yaakov learned that his family suffered because they could hear him reciting *tikkun chatzot*, he immediately decided to go to synagogue to recite his prayers and the *tikkun*, just as he would do at home. He would then study *Tikkunei HaZohar* and *Sha’ar HaKavanot*, linking night and day in Torah study.

In the middle of Shabbat, on Sivan 9, 5699, during *Seuda Shelishit*, Rabbi Yaakov Chaim Sofer was summoned to the celestial yeshiva. He left behind a rich heritage that has served as a foundation for Halachah in the homes of Jews who study his works and observe his writings.