

# The Path To Follow

Emor

441

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Under the Direction of Rabbi David H. Pinto Shlita

[www.hevratpinto.org](http://www.hevratpinto.org) | [hevratpinto@aol.com](mailto:hevratpinto@aol.com)

Editor-in-Chief: Hanania Soussan

32 rue du Plateau 75019 Paris, France • Tel: +331 48 03 53 89 • Fax: +331 42 06 00 33

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Rabbi David Pinto Shlita



## Pride is the Source of All Sin

**I**t is written, “Say to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and tell them: Each of you shall not contaminate himself for a person [nefesh] among his people” (Vayikra 21:1). What does nefesh mean? We may say that it designates a person’s body, his 248 limbs and 365 sinews, for they constitute the “people” of the body (cf. Nedarim 32b on the expression ve’anashim bah me’at [Kohelet 9:14]). This means that a person must not make himself impure through pride, for in that case his body and all its parts will also become impure.

Regarding the juxtaposition of Parsha Kedoshim with Parsha Emor, the Zohar states that at the beginning of the former (Vayikra 19:2), Scripture warns the entire community of Israel to sanctify itself, and then in Parsha Emor it warns the priests to be holy. Scripture also gives a warning to the Levites, as it is written: “To the Levites shall you speak and you shall say to them” (Bamidbar 18:26). All this was in order for everyone (including the great among the people) to be holy and pure. They were also to be vigilant regarding the 248 members that correspond to the positive mitzvot (Makkot 23b; Tanchuma, Teitzei 2), and to sanctify themselves as much as possible.

However this still needs to be clarified. In Parsha Kedoshim the Torah warns the entire community of Israel (which includes the priests and Levites) to sanctify itself. Therefore why were the priests and Levites given a special warning?

The answer is that without this additional warning to the priests (in Parsha Emor), as well as to the Levites, people could have mistakenly believed that since they were holier than the rest of the Jewish people, they could therefore trust in their holiness, without the need for them to implement extra spiritual fences for themselves. This is why they were given a special warning, for it is precisely because they were holier that they had to sanctify themselves with even greater intensity, lest they fall into pride, which resembles sexual immorality (see below). They required an extra degree of sanctity because they worked in the Tent of Meeting, and as the Sages have said: “The greater the man, the greater his evil inclination” (Sukkah 52a). The Sages explain that the repetition, “Say to the priests...and tell them” (Vayikra 21:1) conveys a warning to the great regarding the small (Yebamot 114a). In other words, after having warned the latter about holiness when addressing the entire community of Israel (in Parsha Kedoshim), the Torah again warns the great, the priests and Levites, that they must also distance themselves from sin and pride.

In Parsha Pinchas it is written, “Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the priest” (Bamidbar 25:11). The Sages have explained that the tribes were scorning him by saying, “Look at this son of Puti, whose mother’s father [Jethro] fattened [pitem] calves for idol worship, and he went and killed a prince of a tribe of Israel” (Sotah 43a). On this Rashi says, “Scripture therefore traces his lineage to Aaron” (Rashi on Bamidbar 25:11).

The following questions need to be addressed:

1. Why did the tribes scorn Pinchas for having killed Zimri the son of Salu, the tribal leader of Shimon (Bamidbar 25:14), since Zimri was liable to death and Moshe had given Pinchas permission to act? Was there any reason for Pinchas to be scorned?

2. Why did they remind Pinchas of the sins of his grandfather Jethro, since Jethro repented, converted to Judaism, and became a tzaddik (Mechilta, Yitro)? In fact Jethro became such a tzaddik that he merited having a parsha added to the Torah, a parsha that bears his name (Shemot Rabba 27:8; Sifri Beha’alotcha 10:29). Why, therefore, did they remind Pinchas of his grandfather’s past sins?

3. If Pinchas was to be reminded of his grandfather’s sins, why was it done precisely during the incident involving Zimri? Why not on another occasion?

The explanation is the following: What incited the anger of the tribes against Pinchas was the fact that he was a priest, and therefore he endangered his people by killing Zimri. In fact if the guilty parties had died by his hand there and then, Pinchas would have been in danger of becoming impure, and furthermore he could have died in the fight itself. This is why he was imputed with sin, on the assumption that his zealous action had not been motivated by a love of Heaven. Otherwise, why did he act before those who were older and better than him in exercising G-d’s vengeance? Even if he had acted in accordance with the law, as the Sages have said (Sanhedrin 82a), the tribes still believed that his killing of a Jewish leader stemmed from pride. The very fact that Pinchas entered the tent and saw such a lewd act proved (according to his detractors) that pride had warped his judgment. Now pride is in the same category as idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder. Pinchas therefore put himself in danger of idolatry, and he committed a sin by the lewd spectacle that he saw, a kind of sexual immorality. Why did he do these things by entering the tent?

Thus the tribes tried to understand from where this pride originated, and they ascribed it to his ancestry, meaning to his grandfather Jethro, who had been an idolater before repenting (Shemot Rabba 1:32). Jethro transmitted this idolatrous trait to his descendants, and although he later became a tzaddik, this ancestral source was still doing damage. This is why the tribes believed that Pinchas had transgressed the warning given by the Torah to the priests to guard themselves from pride, as we have said concerning the verse: “Say to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and tell them: Each of you shall not contaminate himself for a person” (Vayikra 21:1).

To counter the erroneous view of the tribes, Scripture therefore linked Pinchas to Aaron the priest. This meant that although Pinchas was a descendant of Jethro, he drew his actions from Aaron the priest, who was completely humble and said of himself and Moshe, “What are we?” (Shemot 16:7). This is also why many miracles were performed for Pinchas when he killed Zimri (Sanhedrin 82b; Targum Yonatan, Bamidbar 25:8), and it is why Pinchas was protected from all harm – all due to the merit of Aaron the priest. As for someone who is filled with pride, it is certain that there is a defect in him regarding what he inherited from his ancestors. However since Pinchas descended from Aaron the priest – who was exceedingly humble and did everything for the love of Heaven – the influence of Jethro’s lineage was no longer perceptible in Pinchas, to the point that Scripture testifies, “He jealously avenged Me among them” (Bamidbar 25:11), without any personal interest, without pride, and solely for the love of Heaven.

### The Holy City

In the city of Kedoshith in the Galilee, people placed large posters on billboards that read: "Our guide and teacher, Rabbi Shmaryahu HaCohen, invites the entire community, from the youngest to the oldest, to an important assembly." When everyone had gathered together, the Rav told them the following:

"I wish to inform you of a special task that I desire to impose on all the residents of the community, without exception."

Many people automatically reached for their wallets, certain that the request consisted of a collection. However the Rav's discourse took another turn.

"I want you to be holy. Starting tomorrow, I'm asking everyone, from the youngest to the oldest – including women and children – to be holy. That is what I wanted to tell you. And now, holy flock, go home and begin to be holy."

"What?"

"Us – be holy?"

"What are we, that we can be holy?"

When the Rav finished making his request, the public was utterly confused.

"What did the Rav say?"

"You heard what he said!"

"I'm going to be holy? What does a holy policeman look like?" asked the town's police chief.

"And how can a person be a holy tailor?" asked the tailor.

"Am I going to open a holy restaurant?" asked the owner of an eatery.

"How can one be a holy mechanic, a holy street sweeper, a holy engineer, a holy banker, a holy electrician, or a holy farmer?" asked someone rather loudly.

"What is the Rav talking about?" asked Chaim the businessman. "Rabbis, Torah scholars, kabbalists, tzaddikim, and judges – those who occupy themselves with Torah day and night – they can be holy. As for us – who spend the whole day working – how can we be holy?"

The Rav quieted the crowd down and said, "I'll explain what I mean. I didn't invent the requirement to be holy. It is clearly written in the Torah: 'Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: "Speak to the entire assembly of the Children of Israel and say to them, "You shall be holy, for I Hashem your G-d am holy" ' [Vayikra 21:1]."

The Rav continued: "It's not without reason that this mitzvah was given before the entire Jewish people together. If it had been given like all the other mitzvot – first to Aaron, then to his sons, then to the elders, and finally to everyone else – the people would have thought that it applied only to Torah scholars and tzaddikim. That is why Hashem ordered Moshe to assemble the entire community in order to command them to be holy. Parsha Kedoshim explains how we can all conduct ourselves with holiness."

The Rav went on to explain what holiness entails: "If instead of taking the entire harvest for himself, a farmer leaves the leket [gleanings], shikchah [forgotten bundles] and pe'ah [unharvested edge of his field] for the poor, and gives the terumah [offering] and ma'aser [tithe] to the kohanim and the Levites, his labor is transformed into holy work. A businessman who owns accurate scales, weights, and measures is thereby conducting his transactions with honesty, and thus his work becomes holy. The individual who observes the laws of discretion and modesty that are found in Parsha Kedoshim thereby lives a holy life. The one who guards his tongue from Lashon Harah, his tongue becomes holy. All human activity becomes sanctified if people do their work for a love of Heaven, not simply to earn money. If one sweeps the streets with the intention of making the city a clean place, he does holy work. We can all be holy, each according to his own level, and with G-d's help we can all be successful."

After a year, the city of Kedoshith became known for its special ambiance. During city meetings, nobody yelled at or insulted others. In the local newspaper, there were no slanderous stories or tales of defamation, only accounts of people helping others and mitzvot being done. The courts were almost without work, for no one attempted to earn money dishonestly. Any doubts that arose in a trial were justly clarified by the judges, and lawyers acted honestly and recognized the truth. Residents from villages and settlements

around Kedoshith came to the city for a din Torah because they believed that justice there was certain. Men and women in the city dressed modestly, without trying to be noticed for their apparel. City workers received their salaries on the same day and performed their work with integrity, not carelessly. All these things greatly boosted the city's economy. Doctors worked extra house and paid visits to people's homes without charging extra. The poor did not have to beg for money, for the city's charitable organizations collected enough and discreetly allocated it to them by depositing it into their bank accounts. Children did not utter vulgar words, and no obscenity was heard in the city. Whenever a car broke down, others immediately stopped and offered to help. Public transport was barely used, for almost everyone offered others a lift in their own vehicles. There was no need to lock cars or bicycles, and homes remained open, without doors needing to be reinforced or barred. The city's houses of study were filled with people studying Torah, and Torah lessons were given on the local television station along with visual presentations to make understanding easier. There were also educational organizations that elevated the moral consciousness of youngsters. Nobody threw garbage outside, and street sweepers were free to study for half the day; all they had to do was empty trashcans. The police were mainly busy directing traffic and carrying out the mitzvah of returning lost items. There were no traffic accidents, for everyone drove carefully. People from all over came to see this amazing and contented city, the holy city of Kedoshith.

## Your Eyes Shall Behold Your Teacher

### Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was one of the most remarkable men to have ever lived. Very few in number are those individuals whom his contemporaries, as well as his posterity, have held in such high esteem. In the era in which he lived, people would oftentimes say, "Happy are the days in which a man like Shimon bar Yochai can be found." And today there are still tens of thousands of Jews that journey to his tomb on the anniversary of his passing (Iyar 18, Lag BaOmer) to pray there.

Through his own efforts, this great man raised himself out of a position of the greatest hardship. In Jerusalem, it is said that Rabbi Akiva refused to admit Rabbi Shimon as one of his students, and that he only did so after making him pass an exam. His father Yochai had been on the Roman side during the terrible time in which Emperor Hadrian had ordered Jews persecuted (Pesachim 112a). This is probably the reason why Rabbi Akiva refused to take in the young Rabbi Shimon among his students. Yet, all the same, Rabbi Shimon managed to stand out among all the students and became (along with his companions Rabbi Yossi, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehudah, and Rabbi Nechemia) one of the pillars of Torah.

As opposed to his father, Rabbi Shimon was pursued by the Romans and condemned to death. The situation was so serious that he, along with his son Rabbi Eliezer, had to hide in a cave for 13 years where together they studied Torah incessantly. After the death of Emperor Hadrian, he was sent to Rome by his fellow Jews. There he succeeded in curing an imperial princess from a serious illness, at which time Emperor Antoninus suspended Hadrian's decrees.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai also attained importance in a domain other than the study of Talmud. He achieved a profound understanding of Kabbalah, of which he became the main guide. When we say that he was the author of the holy Zohar, one should nevertheless not take this to mean that he himself wrote it, but rather that it was the Sages after him who did so. His son and his students received their understanding from him, so well in fact that the Zohar carries the imprint of his spirit. One day, one of his students went abroad to devote himself to business. Returning some time later with great wealth, his former fellow students saw him and were seized with a desire to become wealthy, and so they also wanted to abandon their studies and go off in search of riches. When Rabbi Shimon learned of this, he brought his students to a vast plane. There he prayed for G-d to cover the entire area with gold, and it was so. "The one whose heart clings to gold," said their teacher, "should take what he wants. But know that the one who now takes of this gold loses his share in eternal life." No hands reached out to take the gold, and his students abandoned the idea of exchanging the precious good of the Torah for gold (Midrash Rabba, Pekudei).

### The Importance of Praying with the Community

It is written, “I shall be sanctified among the Children of Israel” (Vayikra 22:32).

The Jerusalem Talmud notes that here the Torah states, “among the Children of Israel” and elsewhere, “the Children of Israel came to buy among those that came” (Bereshith 42:5). Just as in the latter case the Children of Israel were ten in number, so too in the former case they number ten. This teaches us that sanctified prayer can only be recited when at least ten men are present (Yerushalmi, Berachot 7:3).

We know that prayers said with the community are much more valuable than individual prayers, and that a great gulf separates them. From where did the Sages derive this rule?

Tractate Taanith (8a) recounts that a passage in Tehillim was found to describe a certain group of people: “But they sought to beguile Him with their mouth, and they deceived Him with their tongues. Their heart was not constant with Him, and they were not steadfast in His covenant” (Tehillim 78:36-37). This refers to individuals who try to deceive the Holy One, blessed be He, in their prayers by praying solely with their mouth and tongue, meaning superficially, on the outside. Yet on the inside, “Their heart was not constant with Him,” meaning that they also rely on their own abilities. In the following verse, King David tells us how such a prayer can be effectively recited: “Yet He, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity” (v.38), meaning that the Holy One, blessed be He, Who is filled with compassion, forgives their sins because of such prayer.

If we were to ask how a prayer that King David described as being but a farce, a prayer that is devoid of all good faith, can nevertheless be effective, the Sages explain that King David was speaking of a special prayer that carries tremendous power, namely “a prayer with the community.” Rashi explains: “A prayer with the community is heard in Heaven even if everyone did not pray wholeheartedly or willingly.”

King David therefore gave us a clear picture of the difference between individual prayer and a prayer said with the community. Individual prayer requires a “push” to arrive before G-d, meaning that it needs angels to help it arise to the Throne of Glory. During the course of such an ascent, the angels verify the prayer to see if it is worthy of being presented before Hashem. The prayer of the community, however, does not require the power of men or angels, and it ascends directly to Heaven and is accepted without any intermediate verification.

We will cite a marvelous parable to better understand the meaning of this concept:

There was once a despotic and tyrannical king who wished to know the exact number of his subjects. He thought about the best way to conduct a census, and he came up with a plan to enrich the royal treasury at the same time. He decreed that each of his subjects must bring a quart of wine and drop it into an immense vat in the middle of town. Thus by the amount of wine collected, the king would know the number of his subjects, and furthermore he would gain hundreds of gallons of wine that would go directly into the royal treasury. A herald immediately announced to all the subjects in the realm that they had to bring a quart of wine per family and drop it into a large vat that was located in the capital. At the end of this announcement, he said that the census would end at eight o'clock in the evening, and whoever did not comply would be thrown into the dungeon!

Having no choice, everyone began to obey the king's orders. However among his subjects was one individual who was extremely poor and could barely feed his family. He certainly didn't have a quart of wine to bring to town, but since the king had given the order, what could he do? He thought about this for some time, and then he came up with a wonderful plan. He waited until about noon, when there were many people in town and a tremendous crowd gathered to bring their bottles of wine. He also brought a bottle, but it was filled with water! He therefore got in line, and when the time came he poured his bottle of water into what was, at that point, a full vat of wine – and no one could tell the difference! He therefore went home happy and relieved. When his neighbor saw how happy

he was, he asked him why. He then explained the situation to him. Since it was getting close to eight o'clock, and the neighbor still hadn't brought his quart of wine, he decided to use the same strategy. He therefore took a bottle of water and approached the large central vat in town. By that time, however, the crowds had dispersed, and the soldiers stationed there could easily see that the liquid he was pouring into the vat was water, not wine. They therefore stopped him on the spot and accused him of treachery, and he was led away to the dungeon. Hearing about what had happened to him, the poor man had pity on his neighbor and went to visit him in prison. He said to him, “If you had gone when there was a large crowd, like I did, nobody would have noticed you. But since you were all alone with your bottle, you were easily spotted, and everything you did was carefully scrutinized by the soldiers.”

The lesson that emerges from this parable constitutes the answer to our question: When someone prays with a minyan of ten men, even if he only has a paltry “bottle of water,” his prayer is “swallowed” by the community. Therefore whatever is lacking in his prayer is not so evident, which is why it ascends to Heaven without being scrutinized. Such is not the case when someone prays alone, for then his prayer is scrutinized, and all foreign thoughts that occur to the person as he prays are brought out and accentuated. In that case he needs a great deal of Divine mercy for his prayer to arrive at the gates of Heaven. Let's think about this! – Imrei Yechezkel

### Every Generation and its Leaders

It is written, “Speak to the priests...and tell them” (Vayikra 21:1).

From here the Midrash teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed Moshe every generation and its leaders.

The tzaddik Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pshischa asked why the Holy One, blessed be He, showed Moshe every generation first, and only afterwards did He show Moshe its leaders. Rabbi Bunim replied by saying that if Hashem had begun by showing Moshe the leaders of each generation, when he would have seen him (Rabbi Bunim) among them, Moshe's hair would have stood on end in shock, and in his astonishment he would have asked, “Is ‘Bunim the blind’ also among the leaders of the generation?” However since Moshe began by first seeing what each generation was like, he could not have been surprised that such a poor generation would have a leader such as Bunim.

– Ma'ayanot HaNetzach

### Nothing Can be Done Against Hashem's Directive

It is written, “A widow or a divorced woman...he shall not take” (Vayikra 21:14).

The story is told of a baal teshuvah who married a young woman and built an exemplary Jewish home. Their family and friends, and everyone who knew them, spoke of the marvelous peace that reigned in their home. The education of their children was also exemplary, faultless in fact, and everything was done in the best possible way. They lived in tranquility with a love for Torah and a true fear of Heaven.

Suddenly a terrible discovery was made: The man's mother-in-law wasn't Jewish, and therefore his wife had to convert! However since the man was a Cohen, he was forced to leave his wife. The facts were still being clarified, but nevertheless they were true, and there was nothing he could do against Hashem's directive.

The man arrived at the home of a great Rav to ask him for advice. The Rav latter described the situation in the following way: “I felt that if there are still some Jews like this in the world, we have nothing to worry about. Imagine what tremendous hardship was confronting this Jew, for he had managed as a baal teshuvah to find a wife and build a beautiful home based on Torah and the fear of G-d, and then suddenly, in an instant, his entire world fell apart!

“Rivers of tears spilled from that man's eyes, but he was firm in his resolve,” the Rav recounted. “He told me that if it turned out that his wife's mother wasn't Jewish, he would leave her as Hashem commands.” – Tuvcha Yabiu

### Hashem Does Not Ask the Impossible

It is written, “Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: ‘An ox or a sheep or a goat’” (Vayikra 22:26-27).

The Sages said in the name of Rabbi Yehuda bar Shimon: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘I have given you ten kinds of beasts. Three are in your domain and seven are not in your domain. The three in your domain are, “The ox, the sheep, and the goat” [Devarim 14:4], and the seven that are not in your domain are, “The hart, and the gazelle, and the roebuck, and the wild goat, and the pygarg, and the antelope, and the mountain sheep” [v.5]. I did not put you to any trouble and I did not tell you to weary yourselves on the mountains in order to bring a sacrifice to Me from those that are not in your domain, but I asked only from those that are in your domain, from that which was reared upon your own crib” (Vayikra Rabba 27:6). This is why the prophet says, “O My people, what have I done to you, and how have I wearied you?” (Micah 6:3). The Holy One, blessed be He, did not ask Jews to weary themselves in running upon the mountains to bring Him offerings, but only to bring those animals which they keep among their herds. Yet what do we say about the other 613 mitzvot and those that stem from them? We complain that just studying them demands great effort!

We learn a great principle from this, namely that everything that is close at hand – that which a person can easily get up and do – is not wearying. It is only when he has to get up and find something – when he does not have it nearby – that is called wearying. All the mitzvot are close at hand, and we have the opportunity to fulfill them. It is not difficult to do, as the Torah itself states: “But the matter is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it” (Devarim 30:14). – Kountrass HaChaim

## Profaning Hashem’s Name is the Gravest Sin of All

It is written, “You shall not profane My holy Name” (Vayikra 22:32).

The Sages have taught that profaning Hashem’s Name by mistake is as serious as profaning it on purpose (Kiddushin 40a). When we speak about profaning Hashem’s Name, we seem to be dealing with someone who has rejected the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven and has openly committed sins. In reality, things are infinitely more subtle than we can imagine. The Gemara asks, “What constitutes a profanation of the Name?” (Yoma 86a). Rabbi Yochanan answers, “In my case, [it is a profanation if] I walk four cubits without [uttering words of] Torah or [wearing] tefillin.” Rashi explains: “Not everyone will realize that I am worn out by continual review, therefore they might learn to neglect their studies from me.” Rav said, “For someone like me, an example would be if I took meat from the butcher without paying him right away” (Yoma 86a). The Sages have taught that he did not have to go far to be guilty of this terrible sin, which is why anyone who looks like a ben Torah or an Orthodox Jew, but does not behave in the spirit of Torah, profanes Hashem’s Name. As the Gemara says, “If one studies Scripture and Mishnah...but is dishonest in business and discourteous in his relations with people, what do people say about him? ‘Woe to him who studied Torah, woe to his father who taught him Torah, woe to his teacher who taught him Torah! This man studied Torah: Look at how corrupt his deeds are, at how ugly his ways are’” (ibid.). The Gemara goes on to say, “If one has been guilty of profaning the Name, then repentance has no power to suspend punishment, nor can Yom Kippur procure atonement, nor can suffering finish it. However all of them together suspend punishment, though only death finishes it, as it is said: ‘And it was revealed in my ears by the L-rd of hosts, “Surely this iniquity shall not be purged from you until you die’” [Isaiah 22:14]” (Yoma 86a).

This is why everyone must guard themselves from such a grave sin – one that is not atoned except by death – and put an effort into loving Hashem’s Name. In that case it is said, “You are My servant Israel, in whom I will be glorified” (Isaiah 49:3).

## Dying for the Sanctification of the Divine Name

It is written, “I will be sanctified among the Children of Israel” (Vayikra 22:32).

The Jewish people have always been the symbol of self-annulment. In fact at all times and every moment, they are ready to stretch out their necks and die for the sanctification of Hashem’s Name. As the Sages have said, when Jews are led out to execution, the following exchange takes place: “Why are you being led forth to be stoned? Because I circumcised my son. Why are you being led forth to be burned? Because I observed Shabbat. Why are you being led forth to be killed? Because I ate unleavened bread. Why are you being led forth to be

beaten with a scourge? Because I built a sukkah, because I took a lulav, because I put on tefillin, because I inserted the blue thread, because I did the will of the Father Who is in Heaven” (Vayikra Rabba 32:1). It is said regarding the gaon Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, the Rosh Yeshiva of Baranovitch (may Hashem avenge his blood), that when the Nazis wanted to execute him along with other Jews, he turned to them and uttered his final words: “Apparently they consider us tzaddikim in Heaven, for we were chosen to atone for Klal Israel with our lives. If so, we must repent completely here and now. Time is short. The road to the Ninth Fort [where the Slabodka-Kovno martyrs were massacred] is rapidly approaching. We must realize that our sacrifice will be more acceptable when it is accompanied by repentance. We will thereby rescue our brothers and sisters in America. We are now about to perform the greatest possible mitzvah!” He then added, “In the Mincha prayer of Tisha B’Av we say, ‘You destroyed it by fire, and with fire shall You rebuild it.’ The fire which will now consume our bodies is the very same fire which will give rise to the rebirth of the Jewish people.”

– Kovetz Shiurim, Introduction

## Pirkei Avoth

### The Jewish Home

The Mishnah states, “He used to say: At 5 years of age, the study of Scripture; at 10, the study of Mishnah; at 13, the mitzvot; at 15, the study of Gemara; at 18, marriage” (Pirkei Avoth 5:22).

“At 18, marriage” – at first glance, is it not surprising that our Mishnah recommends that this essential step in the life of man should be undertaken at an age at which he is not yet fully developed intellectually?

Upon careful consideration, however, one must recognize that this view resonates with the ideal that the Torah has in mind, namely the one expressed by the Psalmist with the following words: “Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of youth” (Tehillim 127:4). As often happens in our days, a man will get married only after having reached at least half the age allotted to him (which is 70, according to Tehillim 90:10). In such a case, when he has children and they grow up in a household of much older people, the large age gap between the generations in itself constitutes a serious danger. Hence children’s education, instead of being done by the parents themselves, is entrusted to very competent people perhaps, yet strangers nonetheless. And when it becomes the turn for these children to become adults and they arrive at a crossroads in life, they will not be, as the verse above states, “arrows in the hand of a warrior.” They will most often escape the guidance of those who should be their natural mentors.

Without a doubt, the society that we live in and the conditions of modern life make the establishment of a home more difficult than in previous times. And little by little, even in the environment of those who live in conformity with Jewish tradition, the ideal proposed by the Sages (“at 18, marriage”) has been abandoned. Does the abandonment of this ideal – the path that we have followed for numerous generations – truly constitute progress?

Our ancestors, who trusted in G-d, complied in every matter with the principles taught by our Sages. Step by step, they followed the educational guidelines specified in our Mishnah. We can only express, as does Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the hope that “the time will come when we will realize that we should follow the instructions of the ‘fathers’ to guide our youth on the path of duty” (Rabbi Hirsch’s Commentary on Pirkei Avoth).

Unfortunately, for the time being the spirit in which we are now raising our children is diametrically opposed to the one that our Sages have suggested. Our instructions are, above all, pragmatic in nature, and we are more concerned with that than with character development, intellectual growth, or reasoning abilities. Indeed, we are more concerned with teaching our children what will be necessary to earn a living. Furthermore, when we complain that our children are being overworked at school, we are doing so in order to suppress spiritual instruction and demand more practical training. - by Rabbi M. Lehman Zatzal