

The Path to Follow

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MOSHE'S REPRIMAND: THE TORAH AND UNITY DEFEAT THE EVIL INCLINATION

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

At the beginning of this week's parsha, we find Moshe's admonishment to the Children of Israel. He reprimands them by means of the places where they had upset G-d, telling them that they can do teshuvah despite having sinned. If reprimands can make their way into a person's heart, they can help him to repent, as it is written: "Take words with you and return to Hashem" (Hosea 14:3). Moshe reprimanded the Children of Israel by way of allusion, however, because he did not want to shame them (Sifrei). In reflecting upon this, we can discover which reprimands lay hidden in his words.

"On the other side of the Jordan" (Devarim 1:1) – this alludes to the fact that repentance is useful for the sinner's entire past, meaning all his evil deeds, for the numerical value of the term yarden ("Jordan"), including the word itself, is the same as rah ("evil"). In other words, teshuvah (repentance) is effective against all that is rah (evil). The term bamidbar ("in the desert") encompasses the word midbar, which evokes daber (to speak). This alludes to the fact that repentance is useful for all the frivolous words that a person has spoken.

The term ba'arava ("in the plain") is formed by the same letters as ba'avera ("in sin"), signifying that teshuvah is effective against all sins. "Opposite Sur" alludes to effective advice on how to outsmart the evil inclination. As the Sages have said, "Let a person remind himself of the day of death" (Berachot 5a), for death (sof) is the fate of all men. The Sages explain that recalling the day of death enables a person to always remain upright before Hashem his G-d.

When we reflect on all of this, we will automatically start to perform mitzvot, which are called fruit, leaving behind all that is not important. This is the meaning of "between Paran and Tophel," for Paran evokes peri (fruit), and Tophel evokes things that are tephelim (not important).

In the final analysis, the evil inclination does not weaken when someone repents. In fact it once again tries to kill him (Kiddushin 30b; Kallah 2a). On the other hand, the good inclination encourages a person to do mitzvot. He therefore finds himself in the middle, having to overcome all kinds of obstacles in order to remain white and pure, without sin. Even if he has often transgressed, his premeditated sins will be considered merits when he repents out of love (Yoma 86b; see also Bava Metzia 33b). Indeed, "If your sins are like scarlet, they will become white [lavan] as snow" (Isaiah 1:18); hence the expression "and Lavan" (Devarim 1:1). Only in this way will we merit to sit in the courtyards (hatzerot) of the house of Hashem in the World to Come, which explains the expression "and Hazerot" (ibid.). There we will receive the reward for our work, which is the meaning of "and Di-Zahav" (ibid.), for zahav is gold.

We may also explain Moshe's admonishment as follows: If a person wants to defeat the evil inclination and remain white (lavan), he must follow the advice of the Sages: "If that repulsive wretch [the evil inclination] meets you, drag him to the Beit HaMidrash" (Sukkah 52b). These are the courtyards (hatzerot) of Hashem. In so doing, we will arrive at Di-Zahav (gold), meaning we will attain all that is good – an abundance of blessing and success granted by the Creator of the universe.

We can also explain Moshe's admonishment kabbalistically. In the expression ve'Di-Zahav, the letters forming the term ve'Di have a combined numerical value, including the term itself, of 21. Also having a numerical value of 21 is the Divine Name E-hyeh, through which G-d appeared to the Children of Israel (Shemot 3:14). The Children of Israel, however, made a calf of gold (zahav) and said: "This is your G-d, O Israel" (ibid. 32:4). Hence Moshe reprimanded them by way of allusion, saying: ve'Di-Zahav – ve'Di [same numerical value as the Name of G-d], you have exchanged Him for zahav (gold) and you must repent. Furthermore, there is no mitzvah that does not contain Hashem's Name. Now we know that the word mitzvah is formed by the same letters as the Tetragrammaton, for the letters mem and tzadi become yud and hei via Atbash [a simple substitution cipher]. Along with the letters vav and hei, the term mitzvah thus forms the Tetragrammaton. In fact a person who takes a mitzvah – which contains Hashem's Name, the numerical value of which is the same as ve'Di – and exchanges it for zahav (gold), meaning for the present world, has exchanged his Creator for gold. His punishment will be severe, and he must immediately and wholeheartedly repent. According to this explanation, we can understand the essence of Tu B'Av (the 15th of Av), which immediately proceeds Parsha Devarim and Tisha B'Av. As we know, Tu B'Av rectifies many sins, including those mentioned by Moshe in his admonishment.

The Sages have said, "For Israel, there were never greater days of joy than Av 15" (Mishnah in Taanith 26b). This is difficult to understand, for how can we claim that Av 15 was greater than, say, Rosh Hashanah or Shavuot?

We may explain this by noting that it was precisely on Av 15 that joy was complete, for even the daughters of the wealthy went out in borrowed plain clothes in order not to shame those girls who could not afford nice ones (Taanith 26b). There was an awakening below in the realm of men, an awakening that caused peace and unity to reign. As we know, this leads to an awakening above, one that brings abundance and peace upon the entire world.

Such is not the case for the other holidays, which do not contain the concept of equality between rich and poor. During other holidays, each person celebrates in his own particular way. Hence from this point of view, there is no holiday that can compare to Av 15. It is a day that marks unity, and unity leads to all good things and the rectification of misdeeds. As such, we may rectify all that is mentioned in Moshe's admonishment.

We may also explain why Av 15 was specifically selected for this purpose, rather than some other day, as well as why five things happened to the Children of Israel on that day, as our Sages have said. What does this day represent?

In my humble opinion, several catastrophes occurred during the month of Av, starting from the time of the spies. The Children of Israel wept throughout the night of the 9th of Av, without justification, and as a result Hashem established their tears for the generations to come. The Temple was destroyed because of the three cardinal sins as well as baseless hatred. Hence it is fitting for this month to be precisely the one in which Hashem performs miracles and wonders for the Jewish people, in order that we may return to Him and He may



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forgive us. At that point, He will pour out all His kindnesses upon us.

In fact G-d provided the cure before the ailment, and on Av 15 the people of the generation of the desert ceased dying. At that point, all the Children of Israel saw that Hashem had forgiven them, which is why they later forgave the tribe of Benjamin and were reunited.

Why precisely the 15th? Fifteen is the numerical value of yud-hei, and we know that this Name alludes to peace and the Shechinah. As the Sages have said (Sotah 17a), if a man (ish) and woman (ishah) are worthy, the Shechinah dwells among them, for ish contains the letter yud and ishah contains the letter hei. Hence there is peace and the Shechinah between them. In the opposite case, the yud is removed from ish and the hei is removed from ishah, leaving the letters aleph and shin. These letters form aish ("fire"), meaning that a fire will devour them.

Since the number 15 symbolizes the Divine Name that denotes peace, Hashem chose it precisely in order to show the Jewish people that He is their father. Hence they should also demonstrate unity and peace towards one another, for the poor received from the wealthy, and the wealthy went to visit the poor. In this way, they rectified the sin of baseless hatred.

Real Life Stories

Gathering What Remains

One day, a defiant man tried to provoke Rabbi Yosef Dov of Brisk with a question: "Why do Jews mourn between Tammuz 17 and Av 9, and also on Av 9 itself? Nothing can change their situation!"

The Rav replied, "I shall answer you with a parable: Imagine that a fire has broken out in a city and destroyed numerous homes. If one resident leaves the remains of his burnt-out home and no longer concerns himself with it – to the point that he even abandons objects that were spared by the fire – we would think that he has no intention of returning to rebuild it. On the other hand, a person who puts in a great deal of effort into looking for objects amid the heap of ashes, meticulously sifting through each undamaged brick and gathering what remains, such a person certainly has the intention of rebuilding his home soon."

The Rav concluded, "The same applies to us. As long as we mourn the destruction of Jerusalem and the fire that burned our holy and glorious House, we may rest assured of its rebuilding, speedily and in our days."

Worrying About His Father

We find a profound teaching by the gaon Rabbi Eliezer Papo, the author of Pele Yoetz, regarding the pain that we should feel over the destruction of the Temple. He wrote the following:

"The destruction of the Temple, which occurred because of our great sins, must grieve us not because we are left languishing and confused in exile. We must mourn, above all, over the suffering that G-d feels, since it is immense! It is like a man who loves his father, but who infuriated him to such an extent that his father abandoned him. If this man truly loves his father, he will not be overly concerned about his 'punishment,' but rather by the anger and suffering that he has caused his father."

On the Same Day

Following the example of Aaron the Kohen, Rabbi Rafael of Bershad "loved peace and pursued peace." In fact he devoted a significant part of his time to restoring peace between men, as well as among couples.

He once went to see a couple on Tisha B'Av in order to reconcile them.

Surprised by this, his students asked him: "Rabbi, can't you delay this meeting until after Tisha B'Av?"

Rabbi Rafael replied, "It is because of baseless hatred that the Temple was destroyed. On the anniversary of its destruction, we must therefore apply ourselves even more to restoring peace and increasing baseless love among the Jewish people."

True Joy

Some chassidim once asked Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, the defender of the Jewish people, a question:

By way of allusion, we may say that this evokes Av 15 itself, for the expression chamisha assar menachem av ("Av 15") has the same numerical value as the words yom achdut ve'ahava l'Israel ("a day of unity and love for Israel").

This is what Moshe's admonishment alludes to: Learning Torah, showing unity, and demonstrating love for one another. In that case, it becomes possible to rectify all misdeeds and do complete teshuvah. We see an allusion to this in the numerical values of the expressions in Moshe's admonishment.

In fact the expression eleh hadevarim asher diber Moshe ("these are the words that Moshe spoke") has the exact numerical value as the words achdut otzar haberachot ("unity is a treasure-trove of blessings"). Furthermore, the expression eleh hadevarim asher diber Moshe el kol Israel ("these are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel") has the same numerical value as the words haTorah nitzachon hayetzer harah ("the Torah and unity ensure victory over the evil inclination"). It is only by these words that we can conquer the evil inclination and reach Av 15, which is a holiday for Israel.

"Rabbi, when the Final Redemption takes place, will we still read Eicha [Lamentations]?"

"Of course," he replied. "In fact we will even recite Shecheyanu over its reading!"

"How is that possible?" they asked.

He explained: "After the Final Redemption, we will read it in another way. Here is how we will read it: 'Alas! She sits in solitude' – until now the city was solitary, but henceforth she will be a 'princess among provinces,' for Jerusalem has rediscovered its days of glory. 'Has become a tributary' – all the nations will bring her tribute."

The tzaddik continued to detail and interpret other verses of Eicha, adding: "As such, we will read this entire scroll with a new meaning, and we shall experience true joy."

Without Any Pain

The holy Rav of Apt was always very moved by the suffering of any Jew.

One day at the Beit HaMidrash, the Rav was weeping bitterly and without end. Reb Zusha of Anipoli arrived at that point, and the chassidim asked him to look into why he was weeping.

Answering Reb Zusha's question, the Rav of Apt said: "I foresee the misfortunes that our people will experience before the coming of Mashiach, and this suffering is difficult to bear. That is why I cry!" Reb Zusha replied, "It is written in the Zohar, 'G-d never inflicts pain beyond man's ability to bear it.'"

However the Rav of Apt cried out and wept even more: "Does Reb Zusha know what a Jew can bear?"

He later changed his mind and concluded: "We are believers, children of believers; G-d can deliver us without inflicting any pain upon us."

Numerous Kindnesses

Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad, the author of Ben Ish Hai, explained the progression of Tehillim 126 ("A song of ascents. When Hashem will return the captivity of Zion").

"Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy" (v.5) – those who mourn and weep over the destruction of the Temple will participate in the consolation of Jerusalem.

"He goes along weeping" (v.6) – this is one who, along the path between his home and the Beit HaMidrash, prays, weeps, and suffers over the exile of Israel and the pain of the Shechinah.

"He will return with songs of joy" (ibid.) – the term bo ("return") is composed of the letters of av reversed, meaning that G-d will transform this month of Av into a time of rejoicing.

"Bearing his sheaves" (ibid.) – in the future, we will merit numerous kindnesses in compensation for all the misfortunes we endured during this month of Av.

At the Source

So They Do Not Hear

It is written, “These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel” (Devarim 1:1).

“To all Israel” means that all the Children of Israel heard Moshe’s voice, which could be heard over a distance of 12 miles.

Rabbi Eleazar HaKappar thinks that the expression “to all Israel” implies a restriction. In fact only the Children of Israel could hear Moshe’s voice, whereas Bilam’s voice filled the entire world when he blessed them. In regards to Bilam, it is written: “If one blesses his friend loudly from early in the morning, it will be considered a curse to him” (Mishlei 27:14). Why was Bilam’s voice heard? In order for all the nations of the world to hear him bless Israel (Bamidbar Rabba 20:21).

On the other hand, only those who found themselves in the camp of Israel could hear Moshe’s voice. As such, the nations did not hear the reprimands addressed to the Jewish people.

Men of Understanding

It is written, “Provide for yourselves men – wise and understanding and known” (Devarim 1:13).

In the term binah (understanding), the letter beit represents intelligence, which is essential for everyone. In fact without intelligence, the world could not endure for even a moment.

When G-d commanded Israel, “My sons, provide for yourselves understanding men and establish them as leaders,” Moshe went into the dwelling places of Israel in search of such men. However he was unsuccessful, as it is written: “I took the heads of your tribes, wise men and known” – but “understanding” men, he did not find.

This teaches us that understanding (binah) is more important for G-d than the entire Torah. In fact even if a person knows the Chumash, Prophets, and Writings – and even if he studies Mishnah, Midrash, laws and Aggadot, the oral tradition, the additions, maxims, ma’amadot, and the entire order of Creation – but he lacks understanding, his Torah has no value. Thus it is written, “The understanding [binah] of its sages will be concealed” (Isaiah 29:14).

– Otiyot D’Rabbi Akiva

We Turned Away

It is written, “So we passed from our brothers, the children of Esav... from the way of the Arabah, from Elath and from Ezion-geber, and we turned and passed on the way of the Moabite desert” (Devarim 2:8).

In this verse, Rabbi Yossi bar Hanina even sees the reasons why the children of Esav did not fall into our hands.

“[We turned away] from the way of the Arabah” – we did not follow the ways of G-d.

“From Elath” – we did not pay attention to the curses [eilotcha] and the affirmations of the Torah.

“From Ezion-geber” – we betrayed [atzinan] G-d by affirming, “All that Hashem has said, we will hear and we will do” (Shemot 24:7), without keeping our promise.

“And we turned” – which is why we were enslaved to foreign nations.

– Midrash Tehillim

Friendly Letters

It is written, “I sent messengers from the desert of Kedemoth to Sihon” (Devarim 2:26).

Earlier in the Torah we read: “Israel sent messengers” (Bamidbar 21:21). It was not Israel, however, but Moshe who sent this delegation! In fact Moshe said, “I sent messengers from the desert of Kedemoth to Sihon.”

In reality, upon seeing that G-d had decreed that he would not enter Israel, Moshe attributed the sending of messengers to the people.

Another explanation: Why is it written, “Israel sent messengers” (Bamidbar 21:21), since here Moshe says: “I sent messengers”?

Our Sages say that two messages were sent: One proposed peace and the other threatened war. The second was from Moshe.

However Resh Lakish states, “G-d forbid! The Children of Israel did not oppose Moshe. They sent one and the same message, which began with words of peace and continued with a threat of war.” In fact Israel told Sihon: “I am for peace. Yet when I speak, they are for war” (Tehillim 120:7). G-d assured them, “By your life, you will inherit their land in peace,” as it is written: “The humble shall inherit the earth, and they shall delight themselves in an abundance of peace” (Tehillim 37:11).

– Midrash Tanhuma

In the Light of the Parsha

It is written, “Moshe began to declare this [hazot] Torah” (Devarim 1:5).

In the Gemara (Menachot 53b), our Sages point out that the term zot designates the Torah, as it is written: “And this [vezot] is the Torah which Moshe set” (Devarim 4:44). Moreover, in the Zohar we often find that the Shechinah (Divine Presence) is referred to as zot. Out of love for these sacred words, I will recount them verbatim: “When Jacob desired to bless his sons, he said that his sons should be blessed with the bond of faith, as it is written, ‘All these are the tribes of Israel, twelve, and this [zot]’ [Bereshith 49:28]. Thus there were thirteen, the Shechinah being joined with them” (Zohar III:62a). Let us recount another passage that is very dear to me, and that I will also render faithfully: “In the verse, ‘and this [zot] also [is with them] when they are in the land of their enemies’ [Vayikra 26:44],’ Rabbi Abba sees proof of G-d’s infinite love for the Children of Israel. Although they are responsible for their own exile, the Shechinah never leaves them. We must not think that they are left alone in exile, since ‘this [zot] also [is with them],’ for ‘it [the Shechinah] is with them.’ This is the meaning of the verse, ‘and this also [is with them] when they are in the land of their enemies.’”

The Zohar continues: “A king had a son who provoked him so greatly that he sent him away to a distant land. Upon hearing this, the queen said: ‘Seeing that my son is going to a distant land, and that the king has cast him from his palace, I will not leave him. Either we will both return together to the palace, or both of us will dwell together in another land.’ In the course of time, the king sought the queen but did not find her, for she had left with her son. He said, ‘Since the queen is there, let them both return.’ It is the queen whom the king seeks first, and for her sake he seeks out his son, as it is written, ‘I have heard the groaning of the Children of Israel.’ Why? Because ‘I remember My Covenant’ [Shemot 6:5]” (Zohar III:297b).

In light of this allegorical explanation, the verse “Moshe began to declare this [hazot] Torah” can be interpreted to mean that due to the study of Torah, which is called zot, we will merit the Shechinah, which is also called zot.

The gaon Rabbi Haim Zaid of Bnei Brak, a prominent speaker for the Arachim organization, recounted a story that he had recently witnessed:

He found himself at a departure gate of Ben Gurion Airport, where passengers were being summoned to board a plane that was soon to depart. All the passengers arose and began heading towards the plane.

There was a young woman at this departure gate, and at the time she was praying the Amidah. Eventually everyone boarded the plane except for this young woman, who continued to calmly pray as if nothing was happening. A few people had approached her and pointed out that if she didn't hurry, she could delay the flight. Yet to their astonishment, she continued praying as if it didn't bother her at all. She was praying before the King, so who could disturb her?

When the pilot learned that a passenger was praying in the terminal, he decided to wait a few minutes, hoping that she would soon finish.

Upon seeing that the time was passing but that she continued to pray, he decided to close the doors of the plane and depart.

"All airlines have to respect schedules. We can't ruin our reputation because one young woman doesn't have a concept of time," the pilot thought.

The plane began to move across the tarmac when suddenly smoke began coming out of the cockpit. Obviously, the plane was immediately stopped and all the passengers were evacuated. Technicians were then brought in to determine the cause. They went through the entire plane with a fine-tooth comb, but incredibly they couldn't find the source of the smoke.

Not giving up, these professional technicians continued looking without ever finding anything wrong, something that hadn't happened in several years.

Nevertheless, they painstakingly continued their work, checking and rechecking all the systems aboard the plane before telling the pilot that everything was normal, meaning that he could continue with the flight.

Thus over the loudspeaker, passengers were once again summoned to board the plane. Rav Zaid, who was also among the passengers, took his suitcase and suddenly noticed the young woman who had been praying before the flight. This time, however, she had her bags in hand and was walking towards the exit.

Not aware of the incident aboard the plane, she thought that the plane had not waited for her, which is why she was leaving the airport.

The Rav told her what happened, and added that she could rejoin the flight if she wanted. The young woman rejoiced and then boarded the plane.

During the flight, one of the flight attendants sat near Rav Zaid and discussed what had happened with the young woman, as well as the smoke in the cockpit.

"How can you explain it all?" he asked. Without hesitating, the Rav said that he clearly saw Divine Providence in this: "Heaven saw how much she was ready to sacrifice for prayer, and G-d allowed her to board the plane."

The flight attendant, who was not observant, listened to these words with great interest. Seeing that it was a good time, the Rav suggested that he come and listen to lectures given by Arachim in order to strengthen his faith and religious observance.

He accepted, and after several months he had greatly progressed in the practice of mitzvot, becoming a true ba'al teshuvah.

A few months later, he contacted Rav Zaid to ask him a specific favor: "Someone suggested a young woman for a shidduch. Can you verify a few details about her?" As it turned out, this young woman was the very same one who had prayed for so long at the airport.

A few days later, the match was set.

Those who followed this shidduch recounted just how much difficulty the young woman had in finding the right person. She had therefore gotten into the habit of praying at length, beseeching G-d to help her find a spouse.

The efforts she made in prayer were so great that even missing a flight didn't bother her in the least. She didn't even think of weighing the pros and cons, but continued praying with diligence, after which she found a spouse.

Men of Faith

Returning Home to Make Kiddush Over Wine

The Rabbi Avraham Coriat, Rabbi Haim Pinto, and Rabbi David ben Hazan would usually study together, in a regular fashion. These holy tzaddikim, whose initials formed the word Echad, constituted the sole and exceptional rabbinic court of Mogador.

Rabbi Haim and Rabbi David had the custom, on the eve of every Shabbat, to delve into the commentary of the Alsheich on the parsha. In order not to break this immutable custom, these two rabbis agreed that the one called to the Celestial Academy first would return and reveal himself to the other so that together they could study the parsha and the commentary of the Alsheich.

As it happened, Rabbi David ben Hazan died first. The Shabbat following his passing, Rabbi Haim waited for Rabbi David, as agreed upon, but he did not reveal himself. Rav Pinto therefore summoned his assistant, asking him to go visit the widow of Rabbi David ben Hazan and to ask her why her husband had not come to study the Alsheich with him.

At first the servant thought that he had misheard. Yet when Rabbi Haim repeated his request, the servant realized that these things were beyond his comprehension, and so he proceeded to fulfill his master's request. The widow of Rabbi David ben Hazan welcomed him, but was stunned upon hearing his request: "How does he know that my husband is here?" she asked.

That same night, Rabbi Haim learned what had happened. Rabbi David ben Hazan revealed himself to him and said that he had promised his wife to return home to make Kiddush over wine every Friday night (as was the case with Rabbeinu HaKadosh). He therefore couldn't be in two places at the same time. Rabbi David added that from that day forth, he would reveal himself to Rabbi Haim while awake, whereas to his wife – who had divulged the secret – he would only reveal himself in a dream.

Guard Your Tongue

Benefitting from all its Goodness

If a man constantly warns his children not to slander people (nor to hurt or deceive them), and he accustoms them to behaving in this way, it will become firmly engrained in them. In that case, they will easily be able to maintain such sanctified conduct. As a result, they will merit life in the World to Come and benefit from all its goodness.

– Chafetz Chaim