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Devarim



The Deeds of the Forefathers Are a Sign for Their Children

“These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, in the Wilderness, in the Aravah, opposite the Sea of Reeds; between Paran and Tophel, and Lavan, and Chatzerot, and Di-zahav”

(Devarim 1:1)

These places mentioned by Moshe Rabbeinu were where Bnei Yisrael had angered Hashem. In order to protect their honor, however, he merely hinted to their sins, not declaring them overtly. The generation that angered Hashem perished throughout the forty years in the Wilderness. This generation, about to enter the Land, was a people who had not sinned against Hashem. Why, then, did Moshe rebuke them for sins committed previously, which they themselves had no part in? Their fathers had sinned. Did that mean that the sons had to pay the price?

“The deeds of the forefathers are a symbol for their children” (see *Tanchuma, Lech Lecha* 9; see *Ramban, Lech Lecha* 12:2). This is true for better or for worse. Sons inherit their fathers’ merits. This is referred to

as *zechut avot*. On the other hand, they also receive the impact of any sins their fathers may have committed, which is liable to affect them negatively. The Torah's prime example of this is the son of the beautiful woman (*eishet yefet to'ar*), who eventually becomes a wayward son (*ben sorer u'morer*). He had not been conceived in purity and sanctity. His parents are the ones ultimately responsible for his embracing foreign values (*Sanhedrin* 107a). Similarly, the son of Shelomit bat Divri blasphemed Hashem's Name. He came from a disreputable source. His mother, Shelomit, was outgoing and outspoken (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Vayikra* 657). She was molested by an Egyptian, and this son was the product of that union (*Shemot Rabbah* 1:28).

Elisha ben Avuyah is another example of someone who was rotten at the roots (*Yerushalmi, Chagigah* 2:1). With all of his wealth of Torah knowledge, he was called *Acher* (Other), for he ended up deviating from the path of Torah. This happened because, during pregnancy, his mother craved food and ate on Yom Kippur. Years down the line, this proved her son's undoing. Furthermore, Acher's father brought his young son to the Beit Hamidrash so that he should absorb the honor accorded to the Torah scholars. He had witnessed the fire surrounding the tzaddikim who had attended his son's *brit*. He was consumed with the desire that his son, too, should be honored in similar fashion. Since his father's intentions were not for the sake of Heaven, but merely for personal glory, Acher's Torah knowledge eventually forsook him, leaving him out in the cold, exposed to the winds of foreign cultures.

Children who are conceived and educated according to the ways of Torah and mitzvot imbibe their parents' positive attributes. Moreover, their parents' heartfelt prayers are effective for future generations to come. In contrast, the improper deeds of parents can influence their children negatively. For this reason, Moshe felt it was appropriate to rebuke the people for their parents' misdeeds. His reasoning behind this was twofold. First and foremost – so that they take his message to heart and not repeat their parents' offenses, like a dog which returns to its vomit. And secondly – in order to categorically sever them from their

fathers' faults, uprooting their sins completely, so that they would not affect them adversely.

"These are the words" refer to all the places and everything that transpired to their ancestors. The very act of admonishment carried an element of absolution, detaching the people completely from any wrong impression made by their fathers' acts in the Wilderness.

My holy grandfather, the tzaddik, Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto, zt"l, asks the following question in his sefer *Ein Yaakov*: Why does a father circumcise his son at eight days, before the child has any understanding? Wouldn't it be preferable for a person to be circumcised at an older age, through his own free choice, and knowing what he is doing? *Brit milah* is the sign of the covenant between man and his Maker. Doesn't it make sense that one should enter it when he has acquired sense, as opposed to being forced into it by his father, with no choice on his part?

Rabbi Yoshiyahu replies that a Jewish son is in need of the protection offered by the *brit* from a very young age. The *brit* is capable of shielding him from all harm. The foreskin is symbolic of the negative forces and the *kelippah*. It is fitting to remove this outer layer as soon as possible, so that it should not, *chalilah*, affect the child negatively. When this young man will grow up, he will be filled with gratitude toward his father who circumcised him while yet a newborn, providing him protection throughout his formative years. If this child grows into a true *ben Torah*, his father receives reward in retrospect, from the moment he circumcised his son, for with this act, he afforded his son the *zechut* to grow in Torah and *yirah*, for "sons bring merit to their fathers" (*Sanhedrin* 104a).

Similarly, sons can be punished on account of their fathers (see *Shemot* 20:5). Moshe's words were meant to sever any connection this generation still maintained with the wicked ways of their fathers. He tried to pave for them a path to the Land, a path of goodness, which would enable them to live in peace and tranquility.

In Summary

- ◆ Why did Moshe chastise the people for sins that their fathers, who had already perished, had done? The maxim “The deeds of the fathers are a symbol for their children” carries weight for better or for worse. Standing at the entrance of Eretz Yisrael, Moshe Rabbeinu wished to sever this generation completely from any adverse effects that their fathers’ deeds might have on them. He did this by his rebuke.
- ◆ Just as parents confer merit upon their children, so too, it is within the children’s capacity to bring merit to their parents. This is borne out by the saying “Sons bring merit to their fathers.” When a father circumcises his son at eight days old, he is providing him protection from *tumah*. The father will subsequently receive reward for his son’s good deeds, from the day he circumcised him.



Reproof Refines a Person

“These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, in the Wilderness, in the Aravah, opposite the Sea of Reeds; between Paran and Tophel, and Lavan, and Chatzerot, and Di-zahav”

(Devarim 1:1)

Chumash Devarim is called משנה תורה (*Mishneh Torah*, lit. Repetition of the Torah) (see *Chulin* 63b). In this sefer, Moshe repeated to Bnei Yisrael all the mitzvot he had received up until then (see *Rashi, Sanhedrin* 56b). This sefer also contains the rebuke of Moshe to the nation before they entered Eretz Yisrael. Rashi explains (*Devarim* 1:1), that Moshe mentioned Bnei Yisrael’s sins indirectly, by referring to the places where they committed these sins and angered Hashem. Bnei Yisrael must learn

the lesson not to repeat these sins, but in order to protect their dignity, their sins are merely hinted at by Moshe, and are not described at length.

There are two types of rebuke. One is learned from the pasuk (*Vayikra* 19:17), “You shall reprove your fellow.” It refers to the rebuke offered when one observes his fellow Jew sinning. And the second is the rebuke presented by the day of death. Chazal teach (*Berachot* 5a) that if a person feels an urge to sin, he should immediately think of the day he will die. This thought will defeat his *Yetzer Hara* and help him avoid sinning. Moshe rebuked his people before his death in order to remind them of the day of death, thereby keeping them on the straight and narrow.

Aside from the compelling question as to why Moshe saw fit to chastise the generation that had not committed the grave sins mentioned here, we face another difficulty. Why did Moshe begin the *Mishneh Torah* with rebuke at all? Wouldn't it have been more appropriate to open with the review of the mitzvot? Wouldn't that have been more appealing to Bnei Yisrael, making them all the more attentive to his words?

Moreover, why does Chumash *Devarim*, a synopsis of the Torah, not begin with the subject of Creation and the story of the miraculous Exodus from Egypt? These are the fundamentals of our nation, the secret of our survival.

In order for the Torah to exist among Bnei Yisrael, they must first make themselves into fitting vessels to contain it. Just as wine needs a suitable jug, and a home needs four supporting walls, so do Bnei Yisrael need the force of rebuke to mold them into a nation fitting to receive the Torah. Only afterward, can the Torah reside within them.

The people standing before Moshe were not the ones who had sinned in the Wilderness. Nevertheless, he felt it was worthwhile to offer them words of admonishment. He wished to impress upon them the understanding that one can contain the blessing of Torah only when he goes in the ways of Hashem. How, indeed, does a person succeed in doing Hashem's will? By realizing that he has done wrong. This will encourage him to cleave to the way of goodness. When Bnei Yisrael accepted

Moshe's words of reproof, they became fortified in their Avodat Hashem. This strengthening brought them atonement for their fathers' sins.

Rabbi Elimelech MiLizhensk, zy" a, author of the sefer *Noam Elimelech*, states the following (see *Noach Elimelech, Likutei Shoshanah*). Before a person stands in prayer to Hashem, he should do complete teshuvah. Otherwise, he will be like a servant who appears before his master in soiled garments. Aveirot are like stains on the *neshamah*. We begin the section of requests in Shemoneh Esrei with the supplication "Forgive us, our Father, for we have erred." Once our sins are expunged, we can hope that our prayers will be accepted.

Regarding the question as to why Chumash *Devarim* does not begin with the accounts of Creation and *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, we might suggest the following. These concepts were so engrained in the national consciousness that there was no need to repeat them. Also, a major facet of the Exodus was that the people circumcised themselves in order to offer the *korban* Pesach. Since Am Yisrael did not perform *brit milah* during the forty years in the Wilderness, due to the dangers of the road, the *korban* Pesach was not offered during this time. Thus, there was no reason for Moshe to mention this aspect of their history.

As stated above, the generation listening to Moshe's reproof was completely faultless. Nonetheless, Moshe's striking words struck a note of admonition for all future generations. Torah can exist only in one who constantly seeks ways to improve his deeds and make himself a vessel worthy of containing it. But one who refuses to repair his wayward ways, performing mitzvot simply out of habit, is missing the point, just like a person who immerses in a *mikveh* to purify himself while clutching an insect, which is impure (see *Alshich, Shir Hashirim* 5:5).

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Chumash *Devarim* is called *Mishneh Torah*. Moshe repeated all the mitzvot to Bnei Yisrael. He also reproofed them for their sins, before they entered the Land. There are two types of chastisement. One is based on

the pasuk, “You shall reprove your fellow.” And the other is the reproof of the day of death. Remembering that one will die will bring him to thoughts of teshuvah. Moshe employed this method of reproof by admonishing the nation close to his death.

- ◆ Why did Moshe first chastise the people, and only afterward repeat the mitzvot that he had taught them? This might have shamed and confused the nation, especially in light of the fact that they had not been the ones who had sinned. Furthermore, why aren't Creation and the redemption from Egypt mentioned at the beginning of Chumash *Devarim*? These are the foundations of our nation!
- ◆ Moshe's rebuke taught the nation that in order for the Torah to reside within a person, he must first make himself into a worthy vessel. Through words of admonishment, Am Yisrael would awaken to do teshuvah, atoning for their fathers' sins.
- ◆ There was no need to begin with the account of Creation, for it was accepted unequivocally by the people. It did not need repetition. Moshe likewise saw no reason to repeat the account of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, for a main aspect of the Exodus was offering the *korban* Pesach. Since they did not perform circumcision in the Wilderness, they were not permitted to bring this *korban* during the years they sojourned there. There was therefore no reason to mention the Exodus at this point.



Torah Brings Blessing

“These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, in the Wilderness, in the Aravah, opposite the Sea of Reeds; between Paran and Tophel, and Lavan, and Chatzerot, and Di-zahav”

(Devarim 1:1)

Moshe wished to leave Bnei Yisrael with words which would remain imprinted in their hearts forever. He was loath to leave his beloved flock, and wished to give them spiritual provisions for the long journey ahead. As they were sustained by these morsels, they would feel that Moshe still lived among them. The opening phrase in this Chumash, “These are the words,” indicates that they should make these words paramount in their lives. All else should be left by the wayside. Included in this injunction was Moshe’s death. They should not allow it to break their spirit and drive them to despair. Living by Moshe’s teachings would keep him alive at all times, for “tzaddikim are considered living even after death” (*Berachot* 18a). Chazal add (see *Tikkunei Zohar* 114a) that every generation contains a spark of Moshe Rabbeinu.

Moshe Rabbeinu wished to impart the following message to all generations. The Beit Hamikdash was destroyed on account of baseless hatred (*Yoma* 9b). The jealousy which raged during that generation was the catalyst for *lashon hara*, quarrel, and dissent. These are what led to the *churban*. Similarly, Am Yisrael was punished because the spies spoke derogatorily about Eretz Yisrael. They were slated to spend forty years wandering in the Wilderness instead of entering immediately (*Bamidbar* 14:21-35). Therefore, this Chumash begins with “these are the words.” Bnei Yisrael should see to it to speak only positive words. Words that harm and raise a ruckus should be avoided. Behaving in this manner provides the background for peace and brotherliness. Hashem’s Name would then descend upon them.

The sefarim state that the word אלה (these) is an acronym for the phrase אבק לשון הרע (*avak lashon hara* – lit. the dust of *lashon hara*). Moshe warned Bnei Yisrael that they should beware of speaking even words remotely resembling *lashon hara*. Such dust seems insignificant. But this is not so. These words, seemingly said in all innocence, have the power to plant seeds of destruction, causing untold damage. Although this type of speech is not overtly negative, something in the tone of voice transforms these words into *avak lashon hara* (*Chafetz Chaim* 2:2). One who makes light of the sin of *avak lashon hara* will eventually stumble in the sin of *lashon hara* itself. The road from there to the *churban* is very short.

One should forsake the “dust of *lashon hara*” and embrace the “dust of the [steps of] *talmidei chachamim*.” This is in line with the Mishneh in Avot (1:4), “Sit in the dust of their feet.” One should frequent the Torah Sages, listening to their words of wisdom and absorbing their attitudes. By cleaving to them, the “dust of their ways,” the residue of their lifestyle is sure to cling to him. This is no ordinary dust. It is like diamond dust, every grain of it precious. Chazal add (*Sukkah* 21b) that even the ordinary speech of *talmidei chachamim* is considered Torah. All the more so, their Torah talk.

The world saw two powerful prophets (see *Tanna d'vei Eliyahu* 28). Moshe Rabbeinu was the prophet of Am Yisrael and, *l'havdil*, Bilaam Harasha prophesied for the gentiles. They both had tremendous power in their speech (see *Rashi, Bamidbar* 22:4). Although Moshe had a speech impediment (*Shemot* 4:10), the pasuk states (ibid. 19:19), “Moshe would speak, and G-d would respond to him with a voice.” Moshe’s mission was to transmit Hashem’s message to Am Yisrael. Since his voice was essential for completing his task, Hashem assisted him, and his words of prophecy were well-received by Am Yisrael, who believed in him and trusted that he was the true emissary of Hashem.

Bilaam, too, had the power of speech. But he twisted his G-d-given talents to curse Am Yisrael. Moshe, on the other hand, used his words for blessing. Only when it was very necessary, as in the instance with Korach

and his followers, did Moshe see fit to curse. These two great men possessed the same quality, yet, while Moshe used it for positive purposes, Bilaam abused it for negative ends.

At the end of *Devarim*, we read the parashah וזאת הברכה (And This Is the Blessing). The word וזאת (and this) refers to Torah (*Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim* 757). Torah gives a person the ability to bless (see *Chazon Ish, Taharot* 299). Only one who is immersed in Torah and studies it thoroughly is capable of blessing. Although Bilaam recognized the truth in Torah, proven by his words (*Bamidbar* 24:5) “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel,” he chose not to cling to it. On the contrary, he attempted to thwart those who studied and supported Torah. Since he was so far removed from Torah, he was incapable of blessing, and could only curse. Whereas Moshe drew down blessing and bounty upon the world, Bilaam Harasha brought curse and imprecation to the world. He and his cohorts will find their ends in the depths of doom (*Avot* 5:19).

Now we can understand why Hashem approached Bilaam, asking him how he thought he had the power to bless Am Yisrael. A mouth which never studied Torah, but, instead, spoke inanities and consumed forbidden foods, is not capable of blessing those who are called blessed. On the other hand, a mouth that studied Torah draws from it the power to give blessings of significance. The fact that Bilaam did, indeed, end up blessing Am Yisrael stemmed from the fact that this was Hashem’s desire. Otherwise, he would never have succeeded in this.

A diamond left lying in the mud will never be recognized as the precious stone it is. Only after it is removed from the dirt and cleaned well, will it be able to shine. But until this happens, it resembles any other rock lying at the roadside. One’s mouth must be kept clean so that it has the power to bless. How? Only by learning Torah.

Man’s superiority over beast is in his power of speech (*Onkelos, Bereishit* 2:7). A person who misuses this power, through sinful speech, is inferior to the animals, which do not profane the power of speech. Since

the Torah influences a person to speak positively, it is man's obligation to be involved in Torah. This will promote positive talk. Pearls of wisdom will flow forth from the mouth of a man immersed in the sea of Torah.

The concept of Torah study is not exclusive to the Beit Hamidrash. Restraint from *lashon hara*, caution in *kashrut*, being careful with others' possessions, and love for one's fellow man, are all included in the category of Torah study. Torah is acquired only through good *middot*. One who lives in accordance with the dictates of the Torah is considered to be studying Torah. May it be Hashem's will that we and our progeny know Hashem's Name and study His Torah for its sake.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The phrase "These are the words" teaches us that Moshe asked the nation to focus on the words of Torah after his death. This would keep his spirit alive among them. Moshe's spark exists in every generation.
- ◆ Moshe reminded the people that the Beit Hamikdash would be destroyed on account of forbidden speech, like the *lashon hara* spoken by the spies. Baseless hatred, based on jealousy, would also contribute to its destruction. Bnei Yisrael should therefore fortify themselves with unconditional love for one another.
- ◆ The word אלה (these) is an acronym for the phrase אבק לשון הרע. The root of baseless hatred and *lashon hara* is merely the dust of *lashon hara*, which can grow to epic proportions, creating towers of destruction. Instead, one would do well to cleave to the dust of *talmidei chachamim*.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu and, *l'havdil*, Bilaam Harasha, were prophets who possessed tremendous powers of speech. But while Moshe used his speech for blessing, Bilaam misused his for curse.
- ◆ The words "And this is the blessing" refer to the Torah, the ultimate source of blessing. Hashem asked Bilaam how he thought he could bless Bnei Yisrael – his mouth was never involved in speaking words of Torah. Bilaam succeeded in blessing our nation only due to the spirit of Hashem which was with him.

- ◆ Man is superior to beast only due to his power of speech. But when a person utilizes his mouth for evil speech, the animals are manifold times superior to him.



Guarding One's Speech and Keeping One's Word

“These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, in the Wilderness, in the Aravah, opposite the Sea of Reeds; between Paran and Tophel, and Lavan, and Chatzerot, and Di-zahav”

(Devarim 1:1)

Chumash *Bamidbar* ends with the parshiyot of *Matot* and *Masei*. Parashat *Matot* opens with the words (*Bamidbar* 30:2-3), “Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Children of Israel, saying: ‘This is the matter that Hashem has commanded: If a man takes a vow to Hashem or swears an oath to prohibit a prohibition upon himself, he shall not profane his word; according to whatever comes forth from his mouth shall he do.’”

Moshe taught Bnei Yisrael how careful one must be with what he says. He should never, *chalilah*, speak falsehood, derogatory words, or swear falsely. Man is created in the image of Hashem. Hashem breathed into him a *neshamah* from on High. This is demonstrated in his power of speech (see *Onkelos, Bereishit* 2:7). Since man is superior to the beast by virtue of his power of speech, invested in him from Above, he must be careful in the matter of “these are the words” which come from his mouth. They must be words of truth, pure and effective. One should not squander his speech in frivolity and falsehood, thereby forfeiting the Heavenly spirit granted to him.

Since this teaching is so significant, Moshe first delivered it to the heads of the tribes. Only afterward, did he deem it fitting to share it with the rest of the nation. When Bnei Yisrael would see how much effort Moshe Rabbeinu expended in this matter, they would be aware of how careful they should be regarding speech, and would not profane their words.

Parashat *Devarim* is read close to Tishah b'Av, the day of the *churban*. Since, in those days, Bnei Yisrael failed to study Torah sufficiently, they sinned in *lashon hara* and baseless hatred. They banished the *Shechinah* from their midst and were therefore exiled from their land (see *Yoma* 9b). This should teach us a powerful lesson. Torah has the power to protect a person from sin and help him maintain the purity of his mouth. But when a person is negligent in Torah study, he utters words of inanity. He quickly spirals downward, sinning in all types of derogatory speech.

When Hashem offered the Torah to Bnei Yisrael, they cried out, as one (*Shemot* 24:7), “We will do and we will hear.” They accepted the Torah upon themselves wholeheartedly, undertaking to learn and uphold all of its words, even before knowing what was actually written in it. This statement was considered an oath. Therefore, it is our sacred obligation to uphold this oath, and not profane it, as we are warned (*Bamidbar* 30:3), “He shall not profane his word.”

Yirmeyahu *Hanavi* (34:8-22) relates that in the days of King Tzidkiyahu, Am Yisrael released their slaves in the seventh year, as they were commanded in the Torah. But not long afterward, they restored their slaves to their original positions. When Hashem observed their blatant disrespect for the Torah's teachings, as well as disregard for their own words, He punished them measure for measure, by allowing them to become enslaved by the nations.

How severe it is to desecrate the words of the holy Torah! Bnei Yisrael not only transgressed the words of the Torah, they violated their own words. Although they had originally decided to free their slaves, they quickly changed their minds and brought them back. Hashem dealt them the strict hand of justice for degrading His word, as well as their own.

The Gemara (*Sukkah* 20a) states that if not for Rabbi Chiya, Torah would have been forgotten among Bnei Yisrael, *chalilah*. Elsewhere (*Bava Metzia* 85b), the Gemara relates Rabbi Chiya's method in teaching Torah to the nation. He would begin with planting fields of flax. With the flax, he would weave nets with which he would trap deer. Rabbi Chiya would slaughter the deer according to halachah and distribute the meat among the poor. He would make parchment from the hides and hire scribes to write the words of Torah upon them.

Why did Rabbi Chiya go to all this trouble in order to teach Torah to the nation? Couldn't he have bought prepared scrolls?

He wished to impart the importance of Torah to the people. He wanted to make it precious in their eyes. When the people saw how much effort he invested in this endeavor, they indeed cherished the Torah and were careful to study it, and did not desecrate their words with improper speech.

The Gemara (*Eiruvin* 54b) describes another case of self-sacrifice for the sake of the Torah. Rabbi Preida had a pupil for whom he needed to repeat the lesson four hundred times. Once, as Rabbi Preida and his disciple were in the middle of their study session, Rabbi Preida was called away to do a mitzvah, and their learning was interrupted. When he returned, his pupil asked that they review from the beginning, for he had forgotten everything. Rabbi Preida, with utmost devotion, repeated the Torah lesson as though they had just begun its study. A Heavenly Voice called out that Rabbi Preida was guaranteed a portion in the World to Come. Rabbi Preida's dedication to his disciple stemmed from his love for Torah and his respect for "These words." Since the words of Torah were so precious to him, he made every effort to transmit them to his disciple, in spite of the difficulty involved.

The Torah uses the term **אלה הדברים** (These are the words). The word **דבור** (speech) refers to words of harshness (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit* 149). The road to Torah is paved with difficulty, to the point of self-sacrifice. Torah does not come easily. One must toil and sweat in

order to earn it (see *Tanchuma* 58:3). One merits *siyata di'Shemaya* by keeping his mouth pure of forbidden speech. Words of Torah cannot co-exist with words of vanity and nonsense (see *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 1:21; see *Rabbeinu Yonah* on *Mishlei* 6:24). When the Torah realizes that a person is involved in falsehood and *lashon hara*, it departs, leaving the person with a dirty and defiled tongue. Our Sages (*Zohar* II, 263b; see *Chafetz Chaim*, Introduction) go so far as to say that *lashon hara* acts as a screen between us and Hashem, preventing our tefillot from rising to Him. If a person sees that his prayers are unanswered, he should investigate his speech. It goes without saying that only a clean mouth can speak to Hashem.

The proven method of success and blessing in Torah study is by means of maintaining purity of speech. When Hashem sees that a person truly wishes to purify himself, He comes to his assistance (*Shabbat* 104a).

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Parashat *Matot* begins with the need to be careful with one's speech. Moshe said these words before the heads of the tribes, so that Am Yisrael should derive the correct lesson from them. Parashat *Devarim* opens with "These are the words" to teach us how careful one must be with his words.
- ◆ Parashat *Devarim* is read close to Tishah b'Av, the day our Temple was destroyed on account of baseless hatred. This teaches us that when one is not careful with his speech, he falls into the sin of baseless hatred, causing destruction.
- ◆ Am Yisrael's cry of "*Na'aseh v'nishma!*" was considered an oath. We must be careful, throughout the generations, to maintain this oath.
- ◆ דבור (speech) denotes harshness. Torah is a difficult undertaking. Often, it demands self-sacrifice. In order to merit *siyata di'Shemaya*, one must

be careful to keep his mouth pure and uphold the words that come from it. Words of Torah cannot co-exist with words of nonsense and inanity.



Reasons for the Destruction of Both Temples

“These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, in the Wilderness, in the Aravah, opposite the Sea of Reeds; between Paran and Tophel, and Lavan, and Chatzerot, and Di-zahav”

(Devarim 1:1)

This parashah is read close to Tishah b'Av. The word אלה (these) is an acronym for the phrase אבק לשון הרע (*avak lashon hara*, lit. the dust of *lashon hara*). Moshe warned the nation that their speech should be confined to words of Torah. When a person deviates from Torah topics and accustoms himself to speak nonsense, he can easily speak *avak lashon hara*, and from there, *lashon hara* itself. The *Yetzer Hara* drags a person into forbidden territory. He submerges him in an atmosphere of sin. The person considers *avak lashon hara* as insignificant, so he does not keep his distance from it. After his tongue becomes used to speaking this type of speech, he becomes sunk in the swamp of sin, falling into the quagmire of *lashon hara* itself. This is the meaning of the saying (*Avot 4:2*), “One sin leads to another.” When a person clings to a sin, small as it may be, his senses become dulled to transgression. He becomes accustomed to sin, and becomes further enmeshed in its net.

The last letters of the phrase אבק לשון הרע spell the word ענק (tremendous). Seemingly innocuous words of *avak lashon hara* can snowball into the terrible storm of *lashon hara* itself. Involvement in

lashon hara, obviously, causes much time wasted from Torah study. A double sin results. One has transgressed the prohibition against *lashon hara* and has caused *bitul* Torah.

Chazal tell us (*Eichah Rabbah*, Introduction 2) that the first Beit Hamikdash fell due to the sin of *bitul* Torah. After Am Yisrael examined their deeds, they came to this realization, through love of Hashem (see *Rashi, Shabbat* 88a). The prophets of Am Yisrael prophesied a *galut* of seventy years, corresponding to the seventy facets of Torah which they had damaged (see *Megillah* 11b). On the other hand, during the second Beit Hamikdash, the people were righteous and involved in Torah study. Yet, the length of their *galut* was not stated clearly. Why not? (See *Yoma* 9b.)

The second Beit Hamikdash was destroyed on account of baseless hatred. Only after Am Yisrael reach a level of unconditional love and brotherliness, will they merit the building of the third Beit Hamikdash. Centuries have passed since the time of the *churban*. Generations have come and gone. But the Temple remains in ruins. This indicates that we have not yet rectified the sin of baseless hatred. When we will reach the level of feeling true mutual responsibility and love of our fellow Jew, Hashem will hurry to return His children to their Land and build the third Temple.

This state of affairs blatantly proves that matters between man and his fellow man are more difficult to correct than matters between man and Hashem. Hashem foregoes His own honor and is quick to accept the teshuvah of His sons. But He is stringent in matters pertaining to His children's honor and will not forgo it as easily.

During the second Beit Hamikdash, Am Yisrael were involved in Torah study, but did not integrate the messages of the Torah. Torah is a guidebook of how to improve our character traits (*Zohar* II, 82b). Hashem bestowed the Torah upon us in order that we improve our actions. If not for the Torah, one man would swallow his fellow man alive (*Avot*). Am Yisrael knew that Torah prevails only in one who humbles himself before

it (*Derech Eretz Zuta* 8). But this knowledge remained in their minds and did not reach their hearts. Had they truly internalized this concept, they would have earned the traits of humility and submission, qualities which increase love and closeness between fellow men. In contrast, when people do not humble their egos, hatred and jealousy reign among them.

The allegation against Bnei Yisrael during the second Beit Hamikdash era was that they learned Torah with feelings of pride and superiority. This is akin to revolting against the Kingship of Hashem. The Midrash states (*Tanna d'vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 1), "Good character precedes Torah." Torah is meant to bring a person to perfect his actions (see *Kiddushin* 40b). If their Torah study did not accomplish this, they were obviously not learning in the correct way. Instead of according Torah its proper respect by living by its precepts, the nation scorned it by behaving diametrically opposed to its teachings. Therefore, the charges against them were much greater than those against the generation of the first Beit Hamikdash. During the first Temple era, the people neglected Torah study altogether. During the era of the second Temple, they learned Torah, but did not internalize its message.

At the end of the day, those who lived during the second Beit Hamikdash era were involved in Torah study, whereas those of the first Beit Hamikdash were not. How could the later generation be held so much more accountable, immersed as they were in the sea of Torah? How could their Torah study, the potion of life, not rub off on them, affording them the balm of positive character traits?

Am Yisrael's fault was that they were not careful in avoiding *avak lashon hara*. Many people fall into the sin of *avak lashon hara* because it seems insignificant in their eyes. It is man's nature to become accustomed to sin. Because Am Yisrael at the time of the Temple were negligent in seemingly small things, they eventually spoke *lashon hara* and committed other offenses between fellow Jews.

Moshe Rabbeinu was aware of human nature. Therefore, he warned Bnei Yisrael about sins of speech before his death. He pierced their

hearts with the sharp message that *avak lashon hara* must be categorically avoided. It may seem inconsequential, but this is not the case. Once a person accustoms himself to hear and speak *avak lashon hara*, he can easily fall prey to the sin of *lashon hara* itself.

“Not study, but practice is the main thing” (*Avot* 1:7). The entire purpose of Torah study is that it brings to practice (*Berachot* 17a). When a person does not study Torah in order to draw from its lessons, his Torah study is ineffective. This was the case during the second Beit Hamikdash era. Bnei Yisrael’s Torah study did not stand by them, and they fell in the sin of baseless hatred, for they had not learned Torah in order to practice its teachings.

Chazal relate (*Gittin* 55b) the incident of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, who contributed to the *churban*. The *Chachamim* of the generation sinned in *lashon hara*, and did not reprove the host for shaming his unwanted guest. The beginning of their end was listening to the host besmirch his guest with words of *avak lashon hara*. The *Chachamim* failed to make peace between them. At the very least, they should have silenced the diatribe of the host. However, they fell further and further in sin, listening to derogatory words against the guest.

This sin of *avak lashon hara*, seemingly small and insignificant, swelled to epic proportions, wounding our nation with the *churban*. The *Chachamim* were held responsible, for they could have squelched the *lashon hara* while it was still manageable. Had they swept away the dust of *lashon hara*, it would not have grown into the boulder of hatred and dissention which destroyed our Temple.

Merely a few grains of sand in the engine of a spaceship will prevent it from soaring into space. Only after the dust is removed and the engine is sufficiently cleaned, can it function appropriately, sending the spacecraft through the skies. Similarly, just a small amount of *avak lashon hara* is enough to damage the unity of Am Yisrael, to the extent that Hashem can no longer rest His Presence among His children (see *Tanchuma, Chukat* 4).

Hashem casts His wrath upon sticks and stones, instead of harming His children directly (see *Eichah Rabbah* 4:14). Am Yisrael are meant to see this and take the lesson that this is what should really be happening to them. Only out of love for His nation does Hashem keep them alive. He wants them to take the message to heart, correcting their wrong behavior.

A conflagration causes much dust and ash in the air. Hashem chose the method of burning the Beit Hamikdash in retribution for Am Yisrael's actions, to teach them the significance of *avak lashon hara*. During the first Beit Hamikdash, Am Yisrael were remiss in Torah, the Tree of Life (see *ibid.*, Introduction 2). Measure for measure, Hashem cast His fury upon the sticks and stones of the Beit Hamikdash. The second Beit Hamikdash was destroyed on account of baseless hatred (*Yoma* 9b). This sin has roots in *avak lashon hara*.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Parashat *Devarim* is read close to Tishah b'Av. It opens with the word אלה, an acronym for the phrase לשון הרע. Moshe warned the people that the beginning of *lashon hara* is merely in its dust, seemingly insignificant. But when it is not kept in check, it swells into *lashon hara* itself.
- ◆ The first Beit Hamikdash was destroyed on account of *bitul* Torah. The second Beit Hamikdash was destroyed on account of baseless hatred. Bnei Yisrael were made aware of the length of the first *galut*, but not the length of the second. Why not? Hashem foregoes His own honor, but will not forego the honor of His children. As long as Bnei Yisrael have not corrected the sin of baseless hatred, Yerushalayim will remain desolate. Moreover, sins between fellow men are more difficult to rectify. Therefore, we have not yet completed this mission.
- ◆ During the days of the second Beit Hamikdash, Bnei Yisrael learned Torah, but did not learn the messages contained in it. They lacked an appreciation for good character, which precedes Torah. Since they studied Torah with an air of arrogance, their learning did not stand by them, and they sinned in interpersonal matters.

- ◆ The *Chachamim* of the generation of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza were held accountable for the *churban*, for they heard *avak lashon hara* but did not decry it. They then fell into the sin of *lashon hara* itself, for “one sin leads to another.”
- ◆ Hashem cast His wrath upon sticks and stones, which raise ash and dust when they burn. This was meant to hint to the people that the *churban* was caused by the fire of *lashon hara*. The first *churban* was a result of *bitul* Torah, when the people disregarded the Tree of Life. Hashem, measure for measure, cast His wrath upon the sticks and stones of the Beit Hamikdash.



The Responsibility to Review

“These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, in the Wilderness, in the Aravah, opposite the Sea of Reeds; between Paran and Tophel, and Lavan, and Chatzerot, and Di-zahav”

(Devarim 1:1)

Why did Moshe review the mitzvot and words of Torah before Bnei Yisrael, when he was not making any innovations? They already knew these things. This question is strengthened by the fact that Moshe did not just verbally review these matters with Bnei Yisrael, but also wrote them down in Chumash *Devarim*, which is called *Mishneh Torah* (lit. Repetition of the Torah) (see *Chulin* 63b) for this very reason. However, all the details here are mentioned elsewhere in the Torah. What was Moshe’s purpose in repeating them and again transcribing them before the nation entered the Land?

Before Moshe's death, he wrote thirteen Sifrei Torah, designating one for each *shevet* (*Yalkut Shimoni* 950). That being the case, why did he find it necessary to repeat the *divrei Torah* to Bnei Yisrael before his death, and before they entered Eretz Yisrael?

Parashat *Devarim* is read close to Tishah b'Av, the day of the destruction of both Batei Mikdash (*Ta'anit* 26b). At the time of the first *churban*, the Sages asked Hashem why the Land was destroyed, to which He replied, "Because of their forsaking My Torah" (*Yirmeyahu* 9:2). Perish the thought that the nation which had hosted the *Shechinah* completely severed itself from Torah and abandoned it. It seems that Bnei Yisrael became weak in the mitzvah of Torah study. It is not enough to perform the mitzvot; one must exert himself in Torah study, as the pasuk states in parashat *Bechukotai* (*Vayikra* 26:3), "If you will go in My statutes." Rashi expounds, "That you should be laboring in Torah."

After Bnei Yisrael loosened their grip on Torah study, considering mitzvah performance alone sufficient, they eventually neglected the mitzvot, as well. Hashem commands us to study Torah, for learning about the mitzvot inspires and enables a person to keep them (*Kiddushin* 40b), not just perfunctorily, but in the best way possible. Bnei Yisrael did not absolutely abandon the mitzvot, but by lessening their Torah study, their mitzvot became tainted. They lost the enthusiasm and zest which add to the beauty of the mitzvot.

When a person does mitzvot like a robot, he automatically falls in his spiritual level. He is liable to fall into serious sin. This process does not happen overnight. Rather, over the course of time, there is a spiritual slipping, each day bringing a person lower than before.

This is why Moshe felt the need to review the words of Torah and to transcribe them before Bnei Yisrael. He thereby emphasized the weightiness of Torah and mitzvot, the foundation of the entire world. Without them, the world would collapse. Moshe hinted to the people that after entering the Land and building the Beit Hamikdash, they would loosen their grip on Torah, thereby weakening their mitzvah

performance, as well. He wanted them to take his words to heart, internalizing the importance of Torah, the precondition for their settling the Land and for Hashem's *Shechinah* to rest among them.

Whenever a Torah insight comes to my mind, I hurry to put pen to paper and write it down before I forget it. Whenever this happens on Shabbat, I repeat the thought a number of times, so that it is engraved on my mind. When one relates to words of Torah as pearls of wisdom, he accords them tremendous value and treats them with utmost care.

The Gemara relates (*Eiruvin* 54b) the following narrative. Rabbi Preida would review the Torah lesson with his disciple four hundred times. One day, as they were preparing to begin, Rabbi Preida received a message that he would soon be called away for an important matter. They learned the lesson four hundred times, as usual, and then Rabbi Preida took his leave. When he returned, he found his disciple with confusion written on his face. He asked him why he had not understood the material – four hundred times was the standard amount of review necessary for the information to penetrate. The pupil replied that since he knew that Rabbi Preida would leave in the midst of the learning, his concentration had become impaired, and he did not remember an iota of what they had learned. Rabbi Preida did not become angry with his disciple. He quickly sat down and repeated the lesson from the beginning. A Bat Kol emerged from Heaven, stating that Rabbi Preida and his entire generation were guaranteed a portion in *Olam Haba*.

See how important it is to review one's work! Rabbi Preida and his entire generation merited life in the World to Come because he reviewed Torah teachings without stop. Chazal tell us (*Sanhedrin* 99a) regarding this topic, "One who studies but does not review is like one who plants but does not reap." Reviewing is an integral part of learning. How can a person expect to keep the halachot properly when he does not review what he has learned?!

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai states that when Bnei Yisrael will observe two Shabbatot correctly, they will immediately merit the *geulah* (*Shabbat*

118b). What is so special about Shabbat that this is the mitzvah that will hasten the *geulah*?

One who keeps Shabbat indicates that faith in Hashem beats in his heart. His observance of Shabbat announces to one and all that he firmly believes that Hashem created the world in six days and rested on the seventh (see *Ritva, Pesachim* 106a). Since faith is the cornerstone of the Torah, whoever observes the Shabbat is considered to be keeping all of the mitzvot of the Torah (see *Yerushalmi, Berachot* 1:5). Rashbi's statement that Shabbat observance hastens the *geulah* is now very well understood. *Shemirat Shabbat* testifies to Bnei Yisrael's faith in Hashem's mastery over the world. This belief brings them the light of Hashem, illuminating the way for Mashiach ben David.

A man once approached me, telling me that an unbelievable business deal had come his way. But in order to close it, he had to pay his portion on Shabbat. He asked whether payment with a credit card was perhaps permissible on Shabbat. I replied that nowadays, credit cards are considered like cash, and are similarly forbidden on Shabbat. There is no doubt about it. *Shemirat Shabbat* demands great *mesirut nefesh*. One must exhibit tremendous self-discipline to turn down business deals, often at great monetary loss, in order to keep Shabbat. But even if we suffer financial loss, the spiritual gains are manifold times greater. They cannot be compared with the physical profits we may have enjoyed. When Hashem observes His children's loyalty, that they are prepared to forfeit fortunes for their faith, He will hasten the *geulah* and extricate them from their suffering.

The final redemption is contingent upon the observance of two Shabbatot. From one Shabbat to the next, there are eight days. Sifrei Kabbalah (*Maharal, Tiferet Yisrael* 2) state that the number eight indicates a level above nature. When Hashem sees how we rise above our nature and observe Shabbat with supernatural strength, no matter the cost, He hurries to bring the redemption, allowing us to live in a world beyond the laws of nature.

If we want to be redeemed from our suffering, we should be stringent regarding the mitzvot in general, and Shabbat, in particular. It is impossible for us to bring all Bnei Yisrael to Shabbat observance, but we are not completely absolved from this imperative. Let us, at the least, be more careful with regard to Shabbat observance, which is equivalent to all the mitzvot.

The method to remember the halachot is by constant review. This way, when a test comes along, one knows what is demanded of him. Regarding the act of Zimri and the Midianite woman, the Torah states that Pinchas arose from the nation and killed the two of them with his spear. The pasuk says, "Pinchas... saw." Rashi explains that he saw the incident and was reminded of the law which applied. He said to Moshe, "I have been taught by you that zealots may kill a person who has relations with a non-Jewish woman." Pinchas remembered the halachah and acted upon it. He had the presence of mind to do what needed to be done, at a time of national confusion, in merit of his constant review of the halachot he had learned from Moshe.

I was asked a number of times if Pinchas did not act recklessly. By the natural order, the tribesmen of Shimon would have put him to death. What drove Pinchas, with such force and fearlessness, to stand up to their entire tribe, bursting into the tent of Zimri and piercing him together with Kuzbi? I replied that not everyone is cut out to emulate the ways of Pinchas. Pinchas was on an extremely elevated level. He knew the halachah was on his side. He received particularly potent power to execute this mission. The Midrash relates (*Tanchuma, Balak* 21) that twelve miracles were performed on behalf of Pinchas, and therefore he merited killing Zimri and Kuzbi in such a remarkable, unnatural way. How did Pinchas merit these wonderful miracles? It was because all his actions were done according to pure, unadulterated halachah. For this reason, he received Heavenly assistance to remove shame from his nation.

When a person acts *l'shem Shamayim*, constantly reviewing the halachot, he is aided from Above, so that no mishap should occur through him. He will merit sanctifying Hashem's Name.

Moshe Rabbeinu did not suffice with reviewing the words of Torah orally, but recorded them in writing, as well. The number of *neshamot* in Bnei Yisrael corresponds to the number of letters in a Sefer Torah (*Shelah Hakadosh, Toldot Adam, Beit Chochmah* 11). Had Moshe not transcribed the Book of Devarim, some *neshamot* of our nation would have lost their connection with *kedushah, chas v'shalom*. By writing Sefer *Devarim*, Moshe connected all of the *neshamot* of Am Yisrael with each other and with the Torah.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why did Moshe review “the words of Torah” before Bnei Yisrael, even though they already knew these mitzvot? Moreover, he gave each tribe a Sefer Torah. What was the reason for this?
- ◆ Parashat *Devarim* is read close to Tishah b'Av, when Yerushalayim was destroyed due to the nation forsaking the Torah. Moshe wanted to impress upon the people that they must make sure to study Torah and review it constantly, so that they should not become weak in it and make light of the mitzvot.
- ◆ Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai states that when all Bnei Yisrael will observe two Shabbatot correctly, the *geulah* will arrive. *Shemirat Shabbat* testifies to the faith of its observer. Since faith is the foundation of the entire Torah, whoever observes Shabbat is considered to be keeping all of the mitzvot. Furthermore, between every two Shabbatot, there are eight days. Eight indicates a level above the laws of nature. Hashem tells us, “You keep the Shabbat with supernatural devotion, and I will bend the laws of nature and bring you the redemption.”
- ◆ Pinchas merited twelve miracles by his meritorious act. This was because he constantly sought the correct halachic opinion and always reviewed what Moshe, his teacher, had taught him.



Moshe's Words to Bnei Yisrael

“These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, in the Wilderness, in the Aravah, opposite the Sea of Reeds; between Paran and Tophel, and Lavan, and Chatzerot, and Di-zahav”

(Devarim 1:1)

Sefer *Devarim* is called *Mishneh Torah* (see *Chulin* 63b), for here, Moshe repeated to Bnei Yisrael the entire Torah. He delineated all that had transpired since they had left Egypt, the road they traversed from the miracles in Egypt through their sojourn in the Wilderness.

The phrase “These are the words” implies that only through observance of “these words” which emanated from Hashem Himself, would they merit entering the Holy Land and enduring there. But if Am Yisrael would not honor the words of the holy Torah and uphold them, they would not merit even entering the Land.

The Midrash states that on the day of Moshe's death, he wrote thirteen Sifrei Torah, one for each *shevet* (*Da'at Zekeinim MiBa'alei Tosafot, Devarim* 31:26). This in itself is nothing short of miraculous. How did Moshe manage to write so many Torah Scrolls, each replete with deep intentions, all in one day?

Rashi (*Parashat Ki Tavo* 29:3) says that originally, Moshe intended to write a Sefer Torah only for Shevet Levi. When the rest of Bnei Yisrael took note of this, they were up in arms. “Why should Shevet Levi be superior to the rest of us? Does Torah belong only to them? Do you want us to begin a war with them, in order to seize a portion of it for ourselves?” Moshe recognized the justification of their words. He therefore exerted himself to write thirteen Sifrei Torah in one day, in order to prove to the people that they all have a part in the holy Torah.

This writing was certainly done in a miraculous manner. Moshe was helped from Above to complete the writing in time. His investment of time and effort was meant to pay dividends in the form of Am Yisrael understanding that Torah demands exertion. Only through toil can it be acquired.

Parashat *Devarim* is read close to Tishah b'Av. The following concept connects the two. In Megillat *Eichah*, which is read on Tishah b'Av, Yirmeyahu *Hanavi* laments (*Eichah* 1:16), "Over these do I weep; my eye continuously runs with water." The word "these" is also used at the beginning of parashat *Devarim*, "These are the words." When our nation ignores "these words," the words of Torah, they succumb to the suffering of *galut* and destruction, depicted in the words, "Over these do I weep."

The famous Torah scholar, Rabbi Shimshon Pincus, zt"l, writes that each Jewish holiday brings with it a special spiritual illumination. Unfortunately, we are incapable of perceiving this wonderful light, whose source is in the six days of Creation, about which it is said (*Bereishit* 1:3), "And there was light." Nevertheless, there were giants of our nation, throughout the generations, who merited experiencing this light. Examples are the Arizal, the Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh, the Ba'al Shem Tov Hakadosh, and Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy"a. They perceived this limitless light, which shines upon the world on our festive days (see *Sichot HaGaon Rabbi Shimshon Pincus, zt"l, Chanukah*, pg. 68).

Chazal relate (*Chagigah* 12a) that Hashem created the light with tremendous powers. But then He decided to remove it and reserve it for the World to Come. He did this because He feared the resha'im would utilize this light for perverted purposes. Their sins would cause this light to produce forces of *kelippah*. Anyone who sins fortifies the negative forces in the world. This is how the powers of *tumah* increase (*Chessed L'Avraham* 3:11). The *kelippah* is pleased when wicked people sin. But this pleasure cannot be compared with the joy felt by the *kelippah* when tzaddikim sin. The *kelippah* is nourished and flourishes through the sins of the righteous. Transgressions of tzaddikim are rare, and that makes them all the more precious in the eyes of the evil forces.

This wonderful light is hidden away, reserved for the tzaddikim in the future (*Chagigah* 12a). But Hashem allows us a glimpse of this light during our festivals. This is bestowed upon the ones who have the ability to appreciate it. Rabbi Shimshon Pincus states that aside from the Jewish holidays, there is another time that this light illuminates the world. That is the day of Tishah b'Av. This is difficult to comprehend. Tishah b'Av is a day of fasting and sorrow, a day when we afflict ourselves as we mourn the *churban*. Why did Hashem choose to reveal this light specifically on this day of lamentation?

We might use the words of the *Navi* Zechariah to explain (8:19): “The fast of the fifth [month] will be to the House of Yehudah for joy and for gladness and for happy festivals.” Chazal derive from this pasuk (*Midrash Zuta, Eichah* 1) that this is an indication that in the future, Tishah b'Av will be transformed to a festival day. For this reason, *tachanun* is not said on this day. Hashem allows some of this light to be revealed on Tishah b'Av, for in some way, it is considered a holiday.

Chazal tell us (see *Eichah Rabbah* 1:51) that Tishah b'Av is a day auspicious for the arrival of Mashiach. All the days of *galut* preceding his arrival are the suffering we must endure before he arrives (see *Shabbat* 118a), like the labor pains a woman must suffer, heralding the birth of her baby (see *Rashi*, *ibid.*). The era immediately preceding Mashiach's revelation is filled with difficulties and hardships, each day more painful than the preceding one. But the joy of the arrival of Mashiach ben David will dwarf all the anguish we ever experienced. We will quickly forget the troubles and torment which we underwent, like the new mother who embraces her newborn, immediately forgetting all the pain she endured on his behalf. Hashem purposely gives us pain and affliction in the days preceding Mashiach's arrival, so that we yearn for the revelation of the *Shechinah*. If we would live on a bed of roses, what would prompt us to long for the redemption? It is the thorns that prod us to beseech Hashem for His salvation.

Yaakov Avinu, father of our nation, had two names. The name *Yaakov* alludes to the heel of the foot. This is the torment and suffering of our

people. The name *Yisrael*, on the other hand, is a name indicating royalty and respect (see *Rashi, Bereishit 32:29*). Only after Yaakov underwent the suffering implied in his name Yaakov, did Hashem bestow the name Yisrael upon him, signifying greatness and triumph over his adversaries. The Ben Ish Chai writes (*Shana Rishonah, Ki Tavo*) that in the future, Am Yisrael will not be called *Yaakov* any longer. Their official name will be the *Children of Israel* (Bnei Yisrael). They will no longer suffer from their enemies. On the contrary, they will stand at the head of the world, and all the nations will pay them obeisance.

On Tishah b'Av, we weep for Hashem's Divine light, which is concealed from us, and for the Beit Hamikdash, which we have not merited to rebuild. This is an indication that we have not yet rectified the flaw in "these words." Our Sages teach (see *Chagigah 2a*) that Hashem's *Shechinah* was visible in the Beit Hamikdash. Whoever sought the pure truth would go up to the Beit Hamikdash and see Hashem's holiness most clearly.

During the days of the first Beit Hamikdash, the Aron Hakodesh motivated Am Yisrael to observe the Torah and mitzvot, for the *luchot habrit*, together with a Sefer Torah, were kept inside it. But before the destruction, Yoshiyahu Hamelech hid the Aron Hakodesh (*Yoma 52b*). What aroused Am Yisrael to cling to Hashem during the days of the second Beit Hamikdash, when they no longer had the Aron Hakodesh? It was the *Even Hashetiyah*, upon which the entire world was founded during the days of Creation (see *ibid. 54b*).

There is a decree that the dead are eventually forgotten (see *Berachot 58b*). How, then, do we still mourn the Beit Hamikdash, which was destroyed nearly two thousand years ago? Surely a house of brick and stone would eventually be forgotten.

We are not mourning the actual structure which was the Beit Hamikdash. We are mourning the *Shechinah* which was there, and is now missing from our midst. Chazal teach (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim 886*) that every generation which did not see the building of the Beit

Hamikdash is considered to have seen its destruction. If we have not merited its rebuilding, that means that it was destroyed in our day. How can we keep quiet in such a situation? On the contrary, we must act upon “these words,” strengthening ourselves in Torah.

Napoleon the Great reached Russia on the day of Tishah b’Av. As all of the citizens went out jubilantly to greet him, the absence of the Jewish people was blatant. Napoleon was incensed at this overt show of disrespect and made his way to their Houses of Prayer to see firsthand what kept them away. Imagine his surprise to find the entire congregation sitting on the floor, bewailing the *churban*.

“Why do you weep?” he asked.

“We weep for our fallen Temple,” was their response.

“When did your Temple fall?” he continued.

“Over 1,500 years ago.”

“If you can still remember this House, and continue lamenting its destruction so many years later, I am certain that it will be rebuilt.”

We do not mourn only for the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. We lament our personal destruction, on account of which Hashem’s *Shechinah* is absent from us. When a person constantly contemplates his personal destruction, it makes no difference to him that the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed nearly two thousand years ago. His personal *churban* drives him to tears. He feels as though the destruction is taking place at this very moment. Only a Jew, who contains a spark of Divinity, can connect to the Beit Hamikdash within himself and truly feel its destruction.

There are two ways to merit the *geulah*: either in its time or sooner (*Sanhedrin* 98a). If we merit the redemption coming sooner, we will be spared untold anguish and suffering. But if our sins obviate this possibility, we are liable to suffer terribly, *rachmana litzlan*. Therefore, we should cling to Hashem’s Torah and fulfill all of “these words” which

Moshe told Bnei Yisrael, so that we will merit the final redemption sooner rather than later.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The phrase “These are the words” teach us that only by upholding the words of the Torah, will the nation merit entering the Chosen Land and living there securely.
- ◆ How was Moshe able to write thirteen Sifrei Torah in one day? Originally, he wanted to write one only for Shevet Levi. But Bnei Yisrael protested. He therefore wrote a separate Torah Scroll for each tribe. He was granted Heavenly assistance to complete this task in just one day. In spite of this, he exerted himself tremendously to do the job. In this manner, he taught Am Yisrael that Torah demands exertion and toil.
- ◆ Moshe explained the details of “These are the words” on the day of his death, which was in the month of Adar. The name אָדָר (Adar) is connected to the word דִּירָה (a dwelling place) indicating that if a person desires to make himself into a dwelling place for Hashem’s *Shechinah*, he must fulfill the words of Torah, expressed by “These are the words,” in humility and self-negation.
- ◆ Parashat *Devarim* is read close to Tishah b’Av, when we recite the pasuk in Eichah, “Upon these do I cry.” Neglecting the injunction of “These are the words” results in this lamentation.
- ◆ The phrase “He proclaimed a set time against me” indicates that in the future, Tishah b’Av will be transformed into a festive occasion. Hashem will illuminate the world then, from the light of the six days of Creation that He stored away for the tzaddikim in *Olam Haba*.
- ◆ Why do we continue to mourn the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash? Isn’t it a rule that the dead are forgotten from the heart? All the more so with regard to sticks and stones. We mourn our own personal destruction. If the Beit Hamikdash has not yet been rebuilt, it is an indication that we are still held accountable for its destruction. This has prevented us from experiencing Hashem’s *Shechinah* overtly. When a person truly feels his

personal *churban*, weeping bursts forth at any given day and hour, and is not limited to a specific time frame.

- ◆ The way to merit Mashiach's arrival sooner rather than later is by upholding the injunction in "These are the words," which Moshe told Bnei Yisrael before his death.



Mutual Responsibility

***“On the other side of the Jordan in Arvot Moav,
Moshe began explaining this Torah, saying”***

(Devarim 1:5)

Before his death, Moshe Rabbeinu repeated the entire Torah to Bnei Yisrael, in a place called Arvot Moav. Why did he review the Torah specifically there, of all of the stations where Bnei Yisrael encamped? Wouldn't it have been more appropriate to return to Har Sinai, repeating the *divrei Torah* where they had originally heard them?

The word ערבות, in the name ערבות מואב (the land of Moav), implies two opposite meanings. On the one hand, it refers to ערבות הדדית (mutual responsibility), on the other hand, it contains the same letters as the word עבירות (sins). Bnei Yisrael are responsible for each other (*Shavuot* 39a). But when they are not united, they are liable to fall into sin, *chalilah*. By choosing the location of Arvot Moav to repeat the Torah to the nation, Moshe was essentially telling them that the precondition for Torah study and fulfillment is the element of mutual responsibility. Without this, Am Yisrael are likely to sin.

Arvot Moav is the place where Bnei Yisrael had sinned with the daughters of Moav. The Torah describes (*Bamidbar* 25:6-7) how Zimri ben Salu, *Nasi* of Shevet Shimon, brought the daughter of the Midianite king to his tent and sinned with her before the eyes of the entire nation. This

caused a terrible plague, which claimed 24,000 lives. If not for Pinchas, who avenged Hashem's honor, Am Yisrael might have been completely annihilated, *chalilah*.

At this point, Moshe Rabbeinu was chastising Bnei Yisrael for sinning with the daughters of Moav, transgressing one of the three cardinal sins. This was a direct result of neglecting Torah study, as the pasuk hints (*ibid.* 25:1), "Yisrael sat in Shittim." They sat peacefully, failing to exert themselves in Torah study. This was an indication that they did not feel sufficient unity and mutual responsibility, for the merit of these traits, coupled with Torah study, would have protected them from all forms of sin.

When there is a lack of mutual responsibility, the nation is liable to sin in acts of immorality, which drive the *Shechinah* from their midst (*Aderet d'Rabbi Natan* 38). They also give the Destroyer free reign to wreak destruction (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 26:5). The place most conducive for Torah study and mitzvah observance is Eretz Yisrael, for the Land itself makes one wise (*Bava Batra* 158b). This is because it is the "Land that Hashem, your G-d, seeks out; the eyes of Hashem, your G-d, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year's end" (*Devarim* 11:12). But even when Bnei Yisrael find themselves outside Eretz Yisrael, they still have the wherewithal to uphold Hashem's word, if they maintain mutual responsibility among themselves. This will provide them with the strength to keep the Torah. But when they are not "as one man with one heart," they quickly become weakened in words of Torah, falling lower and lower in the quicksand of sin, doing the worst type of offenses, as was the case in Arvot Moav.

When Bnei Yisrael feel accountable for one another, then, when Reuven does a mitzvah which his friend, Shimon, cannot fulfill, the *zechut* of the mitzvah redounds to Shimon's credit, as well, and is considered as though he himself had done it. This is due to the power of mutual responsibility between them. The following example is a case in point. The Torah has a specific provision for giving one's wife a divorce. Although giving a divorce is considered one of the 613 mitzvot, everyone prays that he will

never fulfill it. When can he be considered as having fulfilled this commandment? Either if he studies the relevant halachot (see *Torat Chaim, Sanhedrin* 111a), or through the power of mutual responsibility which exists among Am Yisrael (*Teivat Gomeh, Vayishlach* 3). If even one man of Am Yisrael divorces his wife according to halachah, this *zechut* affects the entire nation.

An effective tool to protect oneself from sin and remain in a Torah environment is by ensuring the purity of one's eyes. The pasuk (*Bamidbar* 15:39) states, "You shall not spy after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray." Our *Chachamim* teach (see *Rashi, Bamidbar* 15:39) that the eye sees, the heart desires, and the body commits the sin. Bnei Yisrael's sin with the daughters of Moav proves that they did not protect their eyes sufficiently. This was because they had weakened their grasp of Torah, which protects one from sin (*Sotah* 21a). Conversely, when one is careful to shield his eyes from wrong "sites," Hashem prevents him from stumbling into foreign territory.

I like to repeat the following message at various occasions. In my many years, there were three incidents which left a lasting impression upon me. The first occurred when I was but a lad of about twelve years old. The Gaon and tzaddik, Rabbi Avraham Yaffen, zt"l, disciple and son-in-law of the author of *Madregat Ha'adam*, delivered a lecture at our yeshiva. I was mesmerized by the visage of this tzaddik, which was suffused with holiness and warmth. The second incident occurred when I visited the home of Rav Shach, zy"a. Our conversation was very short, but impacted me deeply. The third incident took place on a Motza'ei Shabbat, when I went to pay a shivah call at the home of the Baba Sali, zy"a. He was sitting shivah for his brother, Rabbi Yitzchak, zy"a, who had been killed in a car accident. I suddenly heard the Baba Sali shouting at a couple who were talking together. When he was told that they were husband and wife, he said that not everyone knew that, and whoever saw them, therefore, was liable to have sinful thoughts. When I observed the tzaddik's agitation at this sight, I realized just how far above and beyond our understanding is

the holiness inherent in the tzaddikim, who are constantly vigilant in protecting their eyes, their minds, and their hearts.

The following narrative demonstrates the virtue of tzaddikim, who shield their eyes from inappropriate things. Rabbi Achiya Cohen, z"l, related to me that he and Rabbi Pinchas Hakohen of Marrakesh were on their way to the *hilula* of Rabbi David Ben Baruch, zy"a. They had to pass through the city Essaouira. Rabbi Pinchas Hakohen had a long-standing custom of visiting my grandfather, the tzaddik, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy"a, giving him certain monies whenever he passed through his town. On this particular day, they were in a tremendous hurry, and decided, therefore, to forfeit this visit. Suddenly, their car stopped and refused to go. As they were considering their options, one of them said that he thought he saw Rabbi Chaim Pinto coming toward them. Rabbi Pinchas was afraid that Rabbi Chaim would be annoyed with them for not bringing him the money. Instead, Rabbi Chaim smiled broadly and extended them a hearty welcome. When Rabbi Chaim noticed that their car had stalled, he struck it with his walking stick, ordering it to go. The car sprang to life and roared forward.

Rabbi Pinchas Hakohen was flabbergasted at this turn of events. How did Rabbi Chaim know that they were in the neighborhood and that they needed help? And even more incredible, how did he return the car to life? They both came to the conclusion that because tzaddikim protect the purity of their eyes, they are able to see into the distance, much farther than ordinary people.

Moshe Rabbeinu spoke his words in Arvot Moav to arouse the people to the necessity of constantly acting with mutual responsibility toward one another. On the one hand, this protects one from sin, and on the other hand, it increases one's merits. When Bnei Yisrael feel accountable for one another, they have the power to protect their eyes, which constantly see the words of Torah before them. One should never allow his gaze to fall on improper sights, for this produces wrong actions, similar to the fate of Bnei Yisrael in Arvot Moav.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Why did Moshe repeat the words of Torah specifically in Arvot Moav (ערבות מואב)? The word ערבות implies two opposite meanings. On the one hand, it refers to ערבות הדדית (mutual responsibility), yet, on the other hand, it contains the same letters as the word עבירות (sins). As long as Bnei Yisrael have mutual accountability toward each other, their unity has the power to protect them from sin. But if they are disconnected, they will become weak in Torah, as well.
- ◆ Bnei Yisrael sinned in Arvot Moav with the daughters of Moav. This was because they had become negligent in Torah, for they were not bound sufficiently with each other.
- ◆ The way to protect oneself in Torah and mitzvot is by protecting one's eyes. The eye sees, the heart desires, and the body commits the sin. One who shields his eyes from inappropriate sights merits *siyata di'Shemaya* against stumbling in sin.



Building the Beit Hamikdash through Building Man

*“Hashem, our G-d, spoke to us in Chorev,
saying: Enough of your dwelling by this
mountain”*

(Devarim 1:6)

Sefer *Devarim* is called *Mishneh Torah* (see *Chulin* 63b), a repetition of the entire Torah up until this point. In this parashah, Moshe reviewed everything that had happened to Bnei Yisrael in the Wilderness, rebuking them indirectly for the sins they had committed there. Among his rebuke to his people, Moshe mentions how they departed from Har Sinai. After

receiving the Torah, Bnei Yisrael merited remaining in the area of Har Sinai for two years. When they were notified of their upcoming journey, they displayed no regret whatsoever at leaving this sanctified place, where the Torah had been given to them. On the contrary, they were relieved to depart from the place where commands and prohibitions were liable to be forced upon them. Chazal tell us (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 729) that Bnei Yisrael rushed away from Har Sinai like a child who is released from school. Bnei Yisrael had been anxious about the burden of mitzvot which was placed upon them.

This helps us understand why the mountain here was called *Chorev*, and not *Har Sinai*, or *Har Hashem*. Moshe was castigating Bnei Yisrael for their attitude of joy and liberation at their departure from Har Sinai, instead of expressing sorrow and regret at leaving the mountain from where Hashem spoke. This escape was actually the beginning of their personal *churban*. This is hinted to by the fact that חורב (Chorev) and חורבן (destruction) share letters. This personal destruction eventually led to national destruction, with the *churban* Beit Hamikdash. The roots of this can be traced to the way in which Bnei Yisrael left חורב since its letters can be transposed to spell the word ברחו (they fled).

Parashat *Devarim* is read close to Tishah b'Av. There is an intrinsic connection between the two. The *Navi Yirmeyahu* (9:11-12) relates that Bnei Yisrael asked Hashem, "For what reason did the Land perish?" To which Hashem replied, "Because of their forsaking My Torah." Chazal explain that Bnei Yisrael did not make a blessing prior to Torah study (*Nedarim* 81a). This fact proves that Torah was not uppermost in their minds (*Ran, ibid.* 81a). The source for this failure can be traced all the way to their tracks from Har Sinai. When they were told to leave the mountain, they did it all too happily, not exhibiting any sorrow whatsoever. This departure sowed the seeds of destruction, causing them to decrease their respect for the holy Torah. Generations later, this was expressed in their lack of making a blessing prior to learning Torah and the *churban* that followed.

The destruction of the Beit Hamikdash is a direct result of the destruction of man. When man is rotten inside, the Temple ceases to stand. Conversely, when one develops his spiritual side, the Beit Hamikdash stands staunch and steady. The erection of the Beit Hamikdash and the ultimate *geulah* are dependent upon one's self-construction.

Whenever I learn Torah and merit to reveal new insights, I experience tremendous happiness. It is an inner joy that has no counterpart. This joy derives from the knowledge that with every insight I reveal, *bisiyata di'Shemaya*, I am building another stone in my personal edifice and in the general edifice of Klal Yisrael. Since man is a miniature Sanctuary, building oneself spiritually results in the building of the Beit Hamikdash.

One, when I was accepting the public for audiences, two women approached me. Each one found it difficult to begin, gesturing to the other to talk first. Finally, one of them started and, amidst much weeping, related that her children had forsaken Judaism completely. They had abandoned Torah and mitzvot and went so far as to intermarry.

When she finished speaking, her friend took up the thread. With tremendous pain, she told her personal tale. She was the daughter of an illustrious Torah family, her lineage dating back to the holy *Tanna'im*! But her only daughter had been acquainted with a gentile boy and had chosen to marry him. Some time later, she participated in a Shabbat of *chizuk* and was introduced to a Jewish fellow, in the hope that she would leave her gentile companion, choosing to marry him instead. She indeed left the non-Jewish man, but, unfortunately, met another gentile and decided to marry him. This woman was bewailing her fate, declaring that she could find no solace, having a daughter who left the fold so drastically.

After they calmed down somewhat, I asked these women whether they observed Shabbat. They replied that apart from Kiddush, they observed nothing. When I asked whether they were strict regarding kosher food, they said only when it was convenient.

After hearing these responses, I told them, “Why are you so surprised that your children abandoned Judaism and married out? They never had an opportunity to absorb appreciation for Torah. Why do you think they should value Judaism and remain affiliated when they never saw a personal example in their childhood home?” What tremendous devastation one can experience when he distances himself from the true path, like a child escaping the confines of school.

A person directly influences his environment by the way he behaves (see *Rambam, Hilchot De’ot* 6:1). This is why our Sages adjure (*Avot* 1:7): “Distance yourself from a bad neighbor.” Similarly, Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma proclaimed (*ibid.* 6:10), “I would dwell nowhere but in a place of Torah.” When a person goes in the way of Torah and mitzvot, his spiritual achievements draw others to emulate him and seek Hashem. But when one mocks and scorns Hashem’s honor, *rachmana litzlan*, his neighbors are liable to pick up on his attitude and follow suit.

I clearly remember that on one flight, I was unexpectedly overtaken by negative thoughts. Try as I might, I could not shake them off. I wondered why this was happening to me. Why specifically on this trip did improper thoughts intrude on my mind? Suddenly, the Rambam’s advice came to me (*Issurei Biah* 21:19). He says that one who is assailed by negative thoughts should involve himself in words of Torah. This will banish all wrong thoughts from his mind. I followed his advice, and these wrong thoughts finally left me. After some time, I stood up from my place. It was then that I discovered that behind me sat a man who was behaving in a most inappropriate manner. I finally realized what the source of my negative thoughts was. I immediately decided to change my seat, as our Sages teach, “Distance yourself from a bad neighbor.” I was not interested in allowing this man’s depraved behavior to affect me any longer.

The stench of defilement of the sinner contaminates his entire environment, poisoning the atmosphere. All are affected, both the righteous and the wicked. This should motivate a person to conduct himself and his household according to Torah and mitzvot. He should constantly strive to add to his personal edifice, and in this manner, add

to the building of the Beit Hamikdash, as well. He should always instill in his children the belief that Torah is the best endeavor. One who is involved in the business of Torah never feels he was shortchanged.

The Ohr Hachaim asks (*Devarim* 1:1) why Moshe Rabbeinu rebuked Bnei Yisrael for various sins that they never committed. It was their fathers who had done these deeds. What was the point of pointing out these misdeeds to a generation that never did them? See his words for an explanation.

I would like to offer my own explanation. Just like a father bequeaths to his son certain features of his outward appearance, through his genes, so does he brand him with traits and tendencies. This is borne out in the Gemara (*Niddah* 30a), “There are three partners in the creation of a person... and each gives his share.” While Hashem grants the newborn with the gift of life, the parents provide him with his appearance and qualities. I have some photographs of my father, the tzaddik, Rabbi Moshe Aharon Pinto, zy”a. When I study them, I am astonished at the strong resemblance I bear to him. Nobody is perfect. We are all comprised of positive *middot* and negative *middot*. One confers both the positive and the negative upon his offspring. If a person does not exert himself to improve his negative character traits, they will continue existing within him, and be bequeathed to his future progeny.

The generation about to enter the Land was not the one that had sinned in the Wilderness. Nevertheless, Moshe admonished them. The purpose of this rebuke was to induce them to completely cast off the tradition of sin which they had inherited from their forebears. Since their fathers did not succeed in avoiding sin, for they failed to overthrow their *Yetzer Hara*, Moshe aroused them now to take up the mission with due diligence. This would prevent the *Yetzer Hara* from causing them to stumble, as well.

Conversely, *zechut avot* is not a given. One is obligated to refine his character in order to merit this gift. The above-related narrative is a case in point. The woman had a most prestigious lineage, dating back to the giants of Spain who had emigrated to Morocco. But she could go further

back. Her ancestry included *Tanna'im* and *Amora'im*, whose names I will not mention, out of honor for their memory. Nonetheless, her wonderful lineage did not protect her family from shame, for they never sought to shield their family's honor. It is self-understood that *zechut avot* has no power unless the sons continue the tradition of their holy ancestors.

When I was a young boy, in the year 1959, my father, zy" a, sent me to learn in a faraway yeshiva for nearly seven years straight! I hardly saw my family during those years. We corresponded by mail, as telephones were unheard of. All the Torah giants of the previous generations learned, for long years, in yeshivot far from home. They applied themselves to their Torah studies with tremendous *mesirut nefesh*, which eventually proved itself. I heard from the great Dayan, Rabbi Nissim Rebibo, zt" l, that in his youth, he learned away from home and did not see his family for many long years. This was due to the utter self-sacrifice of the students in the yeshiva world, where deprivation was their daily fare.

When I was learning at the yeshiva of Rabbeinu Gershon Liebman, zt" l, we experienced an especially cold winter. But our financial situation did not allow even for blankets. We covered ourselves with extra mattresses, as protection from the cold. During that period of time, the gas for heating was depleted, and we nearly froze from the cold. We warmed ourselves by the fire of Torah. Is it any wonder that Torah giants emerged from there?

I admit that at one point, I was very upset with my father for sending me to such a place. When I once complained about the terrible conditions, he answered me calmly, "This is how you speak now. When you will grow up, you will yet thank me." After growing up, there were many occasions that I considered entering the world of business, but my father's words always echoed in my mind, "You will yet thank me." The memory of these words brought me to the realization that my future did not lie in business or commerce. My calling was in the industry of Torah, to spread it throughout the world. To this day, as I contemplate the roads I have taken to reach the point where I am, my lips quiver as they mouth, "Thank you, Father."

Moshe Rabbeinu admonished the nation in a hidden way for the sins of their fathers. However, we are taught (*Mordechai* on *Bava Kama* 105) that one may not speak negatively about the dead. Since Moshe feared that they would go in the ways of their fathers, he admonished them through hints, calling upon them to consider what had happened to their ancestors, who did not heed Hashem's word. If they did not want to meet the same fate, they had to ensure that they would walk the road of Torah and mitzvot.

Moshe's words are as relevant today as ever, both to Torah scholars and others. Everyone is enjoined to build his personal spiritual edifice, one story at a time. Around each floor he should place a fence, so that he does not, *chalilah*, fall from the high level he erected with such toil and sweat. Only after one sets up a fence, establishing himself securely on the floor he has built, can he set his sights on the next story.

There is an allusion to this in the Showbreads, which the Kohanim would place before Hashem. Why is this bread called Showbreads? It hints to the Torah, called bread, as Scriptures states (*Mishlei* 9:5), "Come and partake of My bread." The Midrash explains this bread to refer to Torah (*Bereishit Rabbah* 54a). We learn from this that Torah must exist inside a person, not only superficially. He must practice what he preaches. Whatever one demands of his household and followers he must demand of himself. I remember once being served a most beautiful, intricately-baked challah. How great was the disappointment and embarrassment at finding it only half-baked, partially raw dough. I immediately thought that this is the state of one whose inside does not match up to his outside. He displays his split hooves, proclaiming to everyone, "I am kosher," but inside, he is rotten and rancid, an impure animal.

The primary aspect of a person is not his external features, but what he is like internally. All life long, one should attempt to perfect his inner essence. At least, it should correspond to the image he projects. This will avert any *chillul Hashem*, *chas v'shalom*. Constantly strengthening one's spiritual structure will add, stone by stone and row by row, to the

rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash and the hastening of the redemption (see *Berachot* 8a). But if a person does not behave this way, his misdeeds tear down the Beit Hamikdash and prolong the exile. Har Sinai is called Chorev, for it is similar to *churban*. Personal devastation contributes directly to the destruction of the Temple.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu chastised the people for fleeing Har Sinai like a child escapes school. Har Sinai is called Chorev (חורב) , indicating the future *churban* (חורבן) which was an outgrowth of how they departed from Har Sinai (ברחו) .
- ◆ Parashat *Devarim* is read close to Tishah b'Av, for there is a direct connection between the two. The Sages asked Hashem why the Land was destroyed, and He replied, “Because they forsook My Torah.” Bnei Yisrael failed to make a blessing prior to Torah study. This indicated that the Torah was not their top priority. The *churban* began when the nation fled Har Sinai.
- ◆ Why did Moshe rebuke Bnei Yisrael for their fathers’ sins? They had to arouse themselves to shake off the effects of these sins, so that they, the next generation, should not fall in them also.
- ◆ Everyone is required to build his personal edifice and confer a pure Jewish education upon his children. By erecting a strong spiritual structure, one adds fortification to the Beit Hamikdash.



Reviewing Torah Lessons

***“How can I alone carry your contentiousness,
your burdens, and your quarrels?”***

(Devarim 1:12)

This proclamation of Moshe to Bnei Yisrael, as they are about to enter the Promised Land, hints at a future date in history, when the word *Eichah* (How) was used again. At the *churban* Beit Hamikdash, Yirmeyahu Hanavi lamented (*Eichah* 1:1), “How could she sit in solitude, the city that was great with people?” Moshe’s use of the word *Eichah* was a warning signal for the nation. Hashem took Bnei Yisrael out of Mitzrayim in order to receive the Torah and enter the Holy Land. Settling the Land was contingent upon observing the Torah and its mitzvot. When the nation transgressed the Torah, the Land disgorged them, resulting in the *churban*. Indeed, in the days of Yirmeyahu Hanavi, the people perverted their ways, and Eretz Yisrael could bear them no longer. When the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed, Yirmeyahu lamented it with the word *Eichah*, the very same word used by Moshe so many years earlier.

Sefer *Devarim* is called *Mishneh Torah* (see *Chulin* 63b). In this Chumash, Moshe repeats all the mitzvot before Bnei Yisrael enter the Land (see *Chagigah* 6b). Since they had already been stated at Har Sinai and at Marah, why did Hashem instruct Moshe to repeat the mitzvot?

The generation that stood at Har Sinai was nearly gone, eliminated after the sin of the spies. They had been deprived of entering the Holy Land. The generation which stood before Moshe, about to enter Eretz Yisrael, was too young to recall the occasion of *Matan Torah*. Therefore, Moshe repeated the mitzvot now, awakening Bnei Yisrael to observe them. Although they themselves did not stand at the foot of Har Sinai, their *neshamot* had been there. For that reason, they were obligated to observe the mitzvot of the Torah, just as their fathers before them.

Hashem ordered Moshe to repeat the Torah so that if there was any doubt in the minds of anyone entering the Land, he would speak up at this point. All questions should be raised while they were yet in the Wilderness. Once they crossed the border of Eretz Yisrael, they would enter the territory of perfect mitzvah performance. Any decrease in their fulfillment of mitzvot would be cause for the Land to expel them. Moshe selected the heavens and earth as witnesses to testify that the nation had heard all the mitzvot. There was not one person who had any doubts as to the veracity of any mitzvah. What happened? The Satan entered the Land together with the nation. Slowly but surely, the nation sinned, eventually bringing the *churban* upon themselves. Moshe hinted to this in the word *Eichah*. He wanted them to take the underlying message with them into the Land.

“It was in the fortieth year, in the eleventh month, on the first of the month, when Moshe spoke to the Children of Israel according to everything that Hashem commanded him to them” (*Devarim* 1:3). Moshe reminded the people that if not for the sin of the spies, they would have entered the Promised Land a short time after leaving Egypt. But because they spoke ill of the Land, they were destined to wander in the Wilderness for forty years. Each year was in retribution for a day spent touring the Land (*Bamidbar* 14:28-34).

The word used here is וַיְהִי (It was). This word denotes pain and weeping (*Megillah* 10b). Hashem told Bnei Yisrael that because on Tishah b’Av eve they had cried for nothing, He would establish this day as a day of mourning and sorrow for future generations (*Sotah* 35a). This was the day of the *churban*, when Am Yisrael was banished from their Land. The Torah continues (*Devarim* 1:4), “After he had smitten Sichon, king of the Amorite, who dwelt in Cheshbon.” Chazal expound (see *Bava Batra* 78b; *Rashbam*, *ibid.*) that Sichon alludes to the *Yetzer Hara*. The rectification of the sin of *lashon hara*, which caused the sin of the spies, is to strike the *Yetzer Hara* and pulverize him to smithereens. From where does one draw the strength to fight the *Yetzer Hara*? From adherence to Torah and mitzvot.

One who finds it difficult to spend all day studying Torah, should, at the very least, set aside specific times each day for Torah study. Just as food is fuel for the body, so is Torah fuel for the soul. It is impossible to exist in this world without Torah. Since the *Yetzer Hara's* focus is on those who study Torah, the way to combat him is to strengthen one's resolve to support Torah and its mitzvot. Moshe's use of the word *Eichah*, in his statement, "How can I alone carry?" implies that the only hope of preventing the *churban* lies in the fortification provided by the Torah. Moshe himself felt incapable of precluding the *churban*, as long as the nation did not behave properly.

In Sefer *Bamidbar*, we read (14:25), "פנו וסעו לכם – Turn and journey." The commentaries suggest that one should never be in a situation where he is free (פנוי) from the yoke of mitzvot. Instead, he should journey (סעו) immediately upon the road of Torah and mitzvot. The letters of the word לכם can be transposed to spell the word מלך (king). Torah study and mitzvah observance allow one to rule over his *Yetzer Hara*, as the Mishnah states (*Avot* 4:1), "Who is strong? He who subdues his personal inclination." Strength is royalty. Chazal put it succinctly (see *Gittin* 62a), "Who are our kings? Our Rabbis."

Our Sages exhort us (*Avot* 2:4), "Do not say when I am free I will study, because perhaps you will not become free." One should never wait for the time when he is sufficiently free to study Torah. Just as soon as this moment arrives, the *Yetzer Hara*, represented by Sichon, will pounce upon him, hindering his Torah learning with a million and one other things. The word "journey" teaches us to keep on going, never stalling in our Torah study. This will keep the *Yetzer Hara* at bay, for he will never find an opportunity to hitch onto us. One who makes the effort to learn will be helped by Heaven, just as one who comes to purify himself receives Heavenly assistance.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Moshe's use of the word *Eichah* in the phrase "How can I alone carry?" serves as a warning signal to Bnei Yisrael. If they would be remiss in

mitzvot, they would be banished from the Land, as Yirmeyahu, indeed, lamented, “How does she sit alone?”

- ◆ Moshe repeated all the mitzvot to Bnei Yisrael. Most of the nation that had stood at Har Sinai was already gone. He was speaking to a new generation, who had not heard these mitzvot first-hand. Moreover, Hashem wanted anyone who had questions to speak up now, before they would enter the Land. Settling Eretz Yisrael demands whole-hearted fulfillment of the mitzvot, no questions asked.
- ◆ “It was in the fortieth year.” The word used here is וַיִּהְיֶינָה, a term of anguish. Moshe was reminding Bnei Yisrael of the sin of the spies, which caused them to wander in the Wilderness for forty years. They were also told that because on the ninth of Av they had cried for nothing, that day would be slated as a day of weeping for generations, with the fall of the Beit Hamikdash.
- ◆ *Lashon hara* about Eretz Yisrael caused the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. “After he had smitten Sichon” implies that the way to combat Sichon/the *Yetzer Hara* is through Torah and mitzvah observance.
- ◆ “Turn and journey” means that one should never allow himself to be in a situation where he is turned off from mitzvah performance. Bnei Yisrael should spend their days traveling the trails of Torah. The letters of the word לַכֹּחַ can be transposed to spell the word מַלְכָּה. “Who is strong? He who subdues his personal inclination.”



Gratitude

***“How can I alone carry your contentiousness,
your burdens, and your quarrels?”***

(Devarim 1:12)

Moshe’s words to Am Yisrael, upon their entry into the Land, allude to the lamentation of *Eichah*, “How does she sit in solitude?” (*Eichah* 1:1).

Bnei Yisrael accepted the derogatory report of the spies about Eretz Yisrael. Hashem told them, “You cried for nothing on the ninth of Av, the day of the spies’ return from touring the Land. This day will be converted into a day of weeping for generations to come” (*Sotah* 35a). Both Batei Mikdash fell on that day.

Had Bnei Yisrael accepted a negative report regarding a person who had feelings, we could understand the severity of their sin. But Eretz Yisrael is an inanimate object, with no feelings at all. Why was Hashem so strict regarding *lashon hara* spoken about it?

I would like to suggest that derogatory speech against the Holy Land, which Hashem supervises from the year’s beginning until its end (*Devarim* 11:12), is an overt display of ingratitude. *Hakarat hatov* is a major factor in Torah and mitzvah observance. When one has appreciation to his Creator for the good He has done to him, truly sensing that his cup runneth over, this feeling spills over onto all his actions, prompting him to cling to the Torah and fulfill the mitzvot.

In order to feel gratitude toward Hashem, one should train himself to appreciate what people do for him. Through recognizing the myriad acts of kindness which others bestow upon him, he will have feelings of gratitude toward Hashem Himself, Who created him and sustains him every moment of his life. The mitzvah of honoring one’s parents is also based on *hakarat hatov* (*Chinuch, Mitzvah* 33). And as one feels appreciation toward his parents, who do so much for him, he develops feelings of appreciation toward his Maker, Who fashioned him with wisdom, knowledge, and understanding.

Moshe Rabbeinu was exemplary in this wonderful quality of gratitude. He did not suffice with showing appreciation to his fellow men, but demonstrated gratitude even to inanimate objects. When the time came to bring the Ten Plagues, Moshe did not strike the Nile to bring about the plagues of blood and frogs, for the Nile had protected him when he was an infant (*Shemot Rabbah* 8:10, 10:14). Similarly, Moshe declined hitting the earth in order to bring the plague of lice, for it had done him a good

turn by burying the Egyptian whom he had killed. The Torah is sparing with words. Yet it mentions that Aharon, instead of Moshe, struck the river and the ground. This teaches us the greatness of gratitude, the root of all good *middot*.

Hashem was extremely critical of Bnei Yisrael, who unquestioningly accepted the evil report concerning the Land. He knew that if they would accustom themselves to speaking *lashon hara* about the Land that had been bestowed upon them as a gift, and which Hashem constantly supervises, they would eventually speak ill of themselves, the residents of the Land. In this way, they would fall deeper and deeper in this sin, until the Land would eventually expel them. Indeed, this was what happened. Chazal teach (see *Yoma* 9b) that Bnei Yisrael were exiled on account of *lashon hara* due to baseless hatred.

However, we are also taught (*Nedarim* 81a) that Bnei Yisrael deserved to be exiled, “because of their forsaking My Torah” (*Yirmeyahu* 9:12). This is not a contradiction. The two reasons go hand-in-hand. The prevailing atmosphere, which allowed for *lashon hara*, precluded feelings of mutual gratitude. This made inroads in their feelings of gratitude toward Hashem Himself. As a result, they became distant from Torah and mitzvot. When they exceeded the limit of sin, they were banished from their Land.

Hashem dealt our nation a heavy blow as punishment for the sin of the spies, in order to teach them the severity of the sin of *lashon hara*, which is diametrically opposed to the admirable quality of gratitude. *Lashon hara* is capable of pushing a person further and further, until he falls into the abyss below. How clearly I remember my father, zt”l, picking up pieces of bread from the floor, out of a sense of gratitude toward the food which provided him with nourishment! The prohibition of *bal tashchit* concerns conserving any item which can still serve a purpose. It is forbidden to destroy it on a whim, because we appreciate its value. By exhibiting respect toward seemingly insignificant objects, one will be scrupulous with things of consequence. He will honor the Sages and Torah scholars, and primarily, Hashem, Himself, Who created him and keeps him alive.

After the villainous act of Zimri ben Salu and Kuzbi bat Tzur, daughter of the Midianite king, Hashem commanded Moshe to do battle against the Midianite nation, in order to avenge the honor of Bnei Yisrael (*Bamidbar* 31:2). We find that Pinchas led Bnei Yisrael into war against the Midianites (*ibid.* 31:6). Why did Pinchas take Moshe's place at the head of the army? (*Rashi, ibid.*).

Rabbeinu Bachya (*ibid.*) explains that Moshe exempted himself from heading the battalions, for his wife, Tzipporah, hailed from Midian. When Moshe fled Pharaoh's henchmen after killing the Egyptian, the land of Midian provided him with shelter. For this, he felt gratitude. Although Moshe had a large score to settle with the Midianites, he could not bring himself to fight them directly. He therefore sent Pinchas in his stead. How wonderful is the quality of gratitude, which refines a person and elevates his soul!

Our *Chachamim* exhort us (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 22:3), "Do not throw stones into a well from which you drank." A well has no feelings. It cannot sense whether or not its drinker throws a stone in it. Nevertheless, this should not be done, because it damages the soul of the thrower. I once saw a man fiddling with a nail. When he was done, he went and ripped the upholstery of the seat he had been occupying. I approached him and asked, "Why did you do this? True, the chair has no feelings, but this type of behavior tears at your soul, damaging your quality of gratitude." If a person fails to habituate himself to feel appreciation to the inanimate objects which serve him, how can he expect to feel gratitude toward the One Whom he serves?!

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why did Hashem punish Bnei Yisrael so harshly for the sin of the spies? After all, they spoke only about an inanimate object.
- ◆ *Lashon hara* concerning the Land indicated a deficiency in the level of gratitude of the spies, who eventually spoke ill of Hashem Himself.
- ◆ Hashem commands us to feel gratitude to those who do kindnesses with us, primarily, our parents. This will accustom us in this good trait,

and enable us to eventually feel gratitude toward Hashem, Whom we cannot see.

- ◆ Moshe excelled in *hakarat hatov*, demonstrating gratitude even toward inanimate objects.
- ◆ The sin of *lashon hara* is diametrically opposed to the quality of gratitude. Hashem knew that allowing the sin of *lashon hara* to run rampant would eventually cause Bnei Yisrael to speak negatively about their fellow men. They would ultimately deserve to be exiled. He therefore punished them to the full extent of the law, so that they would open their eyes and learn this lesson early on.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu objected heading the nation in battle against Midian. His wife hailed from Midian, and it was the country that had sheltered him when he fled Egypt. We are enjoined, “Do not throw stones into a well from which you drank.”



Reasons for the Ruins

“How can I alone carry your contentiousness, your burdens, and your quarrels?”

(Devarim 1:12)

“How does she sit in solitude?! The city that was great with people has become like a widow. The greatest among nations, the princess among provinces, has become a tributary”

(Eichah 1:1)

The similarity in language between the pasuk in parashat *Devarim*, read close to Tishah b’Av, and the pasuk in Megillat *Eichah*, indicates

that there is a deep connection between this parashah and the *churban* Beit Hamikdash.

When Yirmeyahu Hanavi lamented the *churban*, he asked the following: How could it be that Yerushalayim, the city that stood in its full glory, that was a symbol for all the nations, and upon which all eyes were cast, could now sit alone and forsaken? How could Am Yisrael fall so low that Hashem felt it imperative to destroy His House, the splendor of His people?

Yirmeyahu Hanavi asked Hashem (9:11-12), “For what reason did the Land perish?” To which Hashem replied, “Because of their forsaking My Torah.” Our Sages find this difficult to comprehend (*Nedarim* 81a). Could we say that Bnei Yisrael actually abandoned the Torah? They were a generation of Sages and men of wisdom. How can we imagine that they forsook the Torah?

Hashem’s charge against them was that they did not make a blessing prior to learning Torah. The Ran expounds (*ibid.*) that this indicated a measure of disdain for Torah. Had they truly valued it, awarding it a place of prominence as their top priority, they certainly would have made sure to make a blessing prior to its study. Bnei Yisrael were surely involved in *divrei Torah*, but it was peripheral and minor in their minds. This being the case, they felt no inclination to make the prior blessing.

A hint to this can be found in the words “איכה אשא – How can I alone carry?” which, when adding one for the phrase itself, is numerically equivalent to the term “איכה אשב – How can I sit?” A person may think, “How can I sit down to study Torah, when my mind is occupied with so many other things, which take up my time and steal my sleep?” This type of talk is what resulted in “איכה ישבה בדד – How can she sit in solitude!” By failing to make Torah paramount, claiming that they were too busy to study, Bnei Yisrael eventually reached the point where Yerushalayim was destroyed and sat in solitude.

In truth, this assertion of not having enough time to study Torah is a ploy of the *Yetzer Hara*. He tries with all his might to implant improper thoughts into man’s heart, in order to prevent him from learning Torah.

Claiming that one does not have enough time for Torah study is invalid. If he would be approached with a business proposition which could net a tremendous profit, he would overcome any tiredness like a lion, flying off to the meeting. He would surely postpone all other matters for the sake of this deal.

Torah is the most lucrative, flourishing business. When a person puts aside all his affairs and carves a niche of time to meet with Torah, the benefits are inestimable. Chazal guarantee (*Avodah Zarah* 3a) that one who toils on Erev Shabbat will eat on Shabbat. One who toils in this world will receive his reward in the World to Come. The nation's complaints about carrying the burden of Torah led directly to the laments of the prophet as to how Yerushalayim could sit in solitude.

The word *איך* (how) has another meaning: it can also be read as *איין* (Where are you?). Observing Yerushalayim in its ruins, draws forth the cry, "*Ribono Shel Olam*, where are You? Why have You forsaken us, leaving us to wallow in our misery?!" Hashem replies with an *איך* of His own, "Where are *you*? Why have you forsaken My Torah, turning your back upon the mitzvot? Because you distanced yourselves from Me, I have hidden My face from you."

A widow, whose husband had passed away a month earlier, once approached me. She told me that she was happy that two of her husband's desires before his death had been met. He had wanted to die at home, which turned out to be the case. And he wanted to die on a full stomach, which also came true. He had managed to eat a full meal immediately before he died. When I heard her words, I was perplexed. I understood why a person would want to die in his own home. But why was it important to die well-sated? Was he afraid that hunger would gnaw at him in the grave?

Upon reflection, I realized that there is a *mussar* lesson for us in this incident. A person is obligated to spend all his life "killing himself in the tent of Torah." The House of Study should be considered his second home. He should not commit himself to study Torah only in his later

years, but spend all his life in this pursuit. Torah is acquired only by one who sacrifices himself for it (*Berachot* 63b). One should satisfy his appetite with words of Torah, so that he dies a sated man, not hungering for Torah. Woe to the person who leaves this world starving for Torah and mitzvot. In *Olam Haba*, he will not be able to fill this need. This is the world of satisfying oneself with words of Torah.

Chazal teach (*Avot* 6:10) that neither gold, nor silver, nor precious stones escort a person in the World to Come. His sole companions are Torah and mitzvot. A person should constantly concern himself with satisfying his spiritual cravings. He should ensure that when his time comes, he is not in a state of starvation. When one frees himself of the yoke of mitzvot, he feels no connection with the spirituality of the Upper Worlds. This will prove a double death – his physical demise, and his spiritual demise, as his soul has withered away from lack of sustenance.

A person is required to fill himself in all areas of Torah. The attitude of satisfying one's spiritual needs with sitting and saying Tehillim alone, does not sit well with me. This is not to minimize the importance of Sefer Tehillim, written by David Hamelech, the Sweet Singer of Israel (*Bava Batra* 14b). But Hashem has commanded us to place emphasis upon toil in Torah, as the pasuk says (*Vayikra* 26:3), "If you will go in My statutes." Rashi expounds, "That you should be laboring in the Torah." In order to know how to navigate this world, one must immerse himself in the sea of Torah, learning the halachot and Shulchan Aruch. Reciting Tehillim is not sufficient. One who fails to study the halachot will easily fall in sin. Our Sages state (*Avot* 2:5) that an unlearned person cannot be scrupulously pious. A person should therefore devote time for Torah study, becoming involved in the give-and-take of Abaye and Rava. Reciting Tehillim is fine, but it is not enough. Toil in Torah involves the study of Gemara, Shas, and Poskim, which demand tremendous amounts of exertion.

When one turns his back on Hashem and His Torah, he not only intensifies the *churban* of the Beit Hamikdash and delays its rebuilding, he destroys his own self, as well. Hashem created man with 248 organs and 365 sinews, corresponding to the 248 positive commandments and 365

prohibitions in the Torah (*Sha'arei Kedushah* 1:1). When a person detaches himself from Torah, he is essentially severing his connection to spiritual sustenance, both for body and soul. Without spirituality, the body cannot endure. Estrangement from the world of Torah and mitzvot brings devastation to one's physical being, and consequently the devastation of the Beit Hamikdash.

This is alluded to in Yirmeyahu Hanavi's lamentation (*Eichah* 1:1), "How could she sit in solitude, the city that was great with people?" A person's body is a "city great with people." It is a compilation of a multitude of organs, personality traits, and tendencies. All of this is contained within the body, the epicenter of so much activity. But when a person disconnects from his oxygen source, the holy Torah, his body becomes deprived of its sustenance and dries up. Many of our Torah leaders showed signs of age, like any other people, but they still maintained the fire of Torah, which energized them with the spirit of youthfulness, preserving their physicality, as well. Not so those who do not learn. When they reach old age, their spirits are depleted. They look like something that has seen its day, all used up and ready to be discarded (see end of *Masechet Kinnim*).

In *Masechet Avot*, we read (2:16), "You are not free to withdraw from it." A person is not given the free choice to decide whether or not he wishes to be involved in Torah. He is required to occupy himself with Torah at all times, and in every place. A person can choose whether to participate in a certain affair or go to a certain gathering, but regarding Torah study, this choice simply does not exist. Hashem commands (*Yehoshua* 1:8), "You should contemplate it (the book of the Torah) day and night." Man's main occupation should be the study of Torah.

I was once scheduled to deliver a *shiur* to a full Beit Hakeneset in Paris. When I arrived at the place, I found three people waiting for me. Upon investigation, I found that the organizers had made a mistake regarding the date and had written the wrong date on the announcements. I could have cancelled the *shiur*. But since Chazal teach (*Avot* 2:16), "You are not free to withdraw from it," I spent an hour and a half speaking to an

audience of three, ignoring my personal honor. If even only one person received inspiration from my words, my efforts were not in vain. Hashem does not deprive anyone of his due reward (*Pesachim* 118a).

Even during the days of Bein Hazmanim, one should never say, “How can I alone carry?” the equivalent of saying, “How can I be expected to sit and study Torah?” Then he will not, *chalilah*, reach the stage of “How does she sit in solitude?!”

Chazal tell us (*Yoma* 9b) that the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed on account of baseless hatred. This is hinted at in parashat *Devarim* (2:4-5), “You shall command the people, saying, ‘You are passing through the boundary of your brothers, the children of Eisav, who dwell in Seir... You shall not provoke them.’” Eisav was a brother who did not exhibit brotherly love. On the contrary, he sought to kill Yaakov, so that Yaakov had to flee from him. Yaakov lived in constant fear that his brother might attack at any time. Is this the brother whom Hashem does not allow Bnei Yisrael to provoke? We find a similarity concerning the Moabite nation. We are told (*ibid.* 2:9), “You shall not distress Moav, and you shall not provoke war with them.” These very Moabites caused us untold harm. Their king, Balak, hired Bilaam to curse our nation (*Bamidbar* 22:5-6). Due to his devious advice, 24,000 people fell in an epidemic (*ibid.* 25:9). Why does Hashem have compassion on this nation, forbidding Bnei Yisrael from provoking them?

We might resolve this issue according to the statement of the Gemara (*Chulin* 44b): “Distance yourself from anything ugly.” Baseless hatred is an ugly trait. One should distance himself from it completely. Although the nations of Eisav and Moav stalked our people, constantly seeking ways to torment us, Hashem forbids us from holding a grudge against them and making war with them. We should train ourselves to keep away from hatred, justified as it may be. Hatred is a trait which can result in unwarranted animosity, which is severely discouraged. It was this trait that caused the *churban*.

Our holy Avot teach us not to bear a grudge, even against those who bear hating. Avraham Avinu held no grievance toward Lot, father of the Moabite nation. Although Lot could not tolerate Avraham and his G-d (*Bereishit Rabbah* 41:7), Avraham demonstrated love and compassion for him, asking him to separate from him in a pleading tone (*Bereishit* 13:9). Moreover, Avraham risked his life in order to save Lot from the five kings. Similarly, Yaakov behaved pleasantly with Eisav, in spite of Eisav's intentions to murder him as soon as their father passed on (*Bereishit* 27:41).

Hashem has arranged that Mashiach will come forth from Rut Hamoaviah. This is to teach us that we may not feel anger or enmity toward anyone. The Moabites, who caused so much anguish to our nation, will produce Mashiach, who will redeem us from our suffering. Certainly, we must distance ourselves from their negative traits and keep away from them. But this does not mean that we must hate them.

Parashat *Devarim*, which is read before Tishah b'Av, contains the reasons for the destruction. One reason is the sin of *bitul* Torah, alluded to in the words, "How can I alone carry?" similar to, "How does she sit in solitude?" Another cause of the *churban* is the sin of baseless hatred, learned from Hashem's command not to hate Eisav and Moav. If Hashem warned us not to hold hatred in our hearts against the gentiles, how much more so should we beware of hating our fellow Jews, literally our flesh and blood?! Let every person accustom himself to love his friend as himself, with all his heart and soul. In this manner, we will correct that which we have damaged, and Hashem will shower us with His mercy and bring the final redemption.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Parashat *Devarim* is closely connected with Tishah b'Av. The words "איכה אשא – How can I carry?" are numerically equal, adding one for the phrase itself, to the words "איכה אשב – How can I sit (and learn Torah)?" During the era of the Beit Hamikdash, Bnei Yisrael wondered how they could find time for Torah study, when they were

so involved in worldly affairs. This was the cause of “איכה ישבה בדד” – How does she sit in solitude!” The *churban* came as a direct punishment for *bitul* Torah.

- ◆ The word אייכה (how) can also be read as אייפה (Where are you?). Observing Yerushalayim in its ruins draws forth the cry, “*Ribbono Shel Olam*, where are You? Why have You forsaken us, leaving us to wallow in our misery?!” Hashem replies with an אייפה of His own, “Where are you?”
- ◆ Man’s body contains 613 parts, corresponding to the 613 mitzvot. When one distances himself from Torah, he is essentially destroying his body, as well as causing the *churban* of the Beit Hamikdash.
- ◆ In parashat *Devarim*, Hashem forbids Bnei Yisrael from waging war against Eisav and Moav. Weren’t these the very nations that constantly sought to torment our people? This commandment seemed to protect Bnei Yisrael, since even justified hatred can produce baseless hatred, one of the causes of the *churban*.



Safeguard and Remember – In a Single Utterance

“Safeguard the Shabbat day to sanctify it, as Hashem, your G-d, has commanded you”

(Devarim 5:12)

In this pasuk we are told to “safeguard” Shabbat, whereas in the first version of the Ten Commandments, we are told to “remember” it. Rashi explains that both words were said in the same utterance and as a single word, and they were heard as a single hearing.

My disciple, Yonatan Lugasi, asked me to explain the significance of saying “safeguard” and “remember” in a single utterance. I replied that in

order to safeguard something, it must first be committed to memory. As soon as one has forgotten the thing, he can no longer safeguard it. For instance, one can invest his energies into learning the halachot of Pesach, but if he does not do an act to remember these halachot, they will easily be forgotten. He cannot rest assured that when the holiday arrives, he will act according to halachah. In order to fulfill the halachot as he should, he must review them over and over again, until they are familiar to him. In this manner, he will celebrate Pesach as he should.

One's body is comprised of two parts. His physical being is made up of visible organs. The other part is his *neshamah*, created on High. It resides within his body, but is invisible to the human eye. In order for a person to remember his *neshamah*, and guard it from the harm of sin, Hashem crafted a body to house it. When one analyzes the myriad wonders of his body, he remembers his *neshamah* and protects it from all harm. In order to maintain its purity, one must remember it, even though he cannot see it. The body parts which we can see remind us of the *neshamah*. Without a body, the *neshamah* cannot exist.

Man is enjoined to remember his day of death one day before he dies (*Shabbat* 153a). Since no one knows when he will die, he must constantly think about the day of death. Keen observance of Torah and mitzvot will sharpen the awareness of his purpose in this world and clarify to him the fleeting nature of this transient world, which merely leads to eternity.

Safeguarding and remembering are interdependent. At times, remembering brings to safeguarding, and at times, the opposite is the case. For this reason, "safeguard" and "remember" were said together. Only by remembering the mitzvot and safeguarding them, can we hope to fulfill them to perfection.

During the war with Lebanon (in the year 2006), the Prime Minister of Israel spoke before the masses, extolling the bravery of an army officer who threw himself upon a grenade. He sacrificed his life for the sake of his fellow men. One moment before his life was snuffed out, he cried out, "*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad*" (*Devarim* 6:4).

This account echoed throughout the world. On the one hand, everyone was impressed by this man's selflessness. On the other hand, they could not fathom how, at these critical moments, he had the presence of mind to accept upon himself the yoke of Heaven and to justify his fate. I thought that maybe this officer's life of Torah and mitzvot was what prompted him to remember Hashem in his last moments, as it says (*Rosh Hashanah 27a*), "Safeguard and remember in one utterance."

When I heard these words coming from the mouth of the Prime Minister, I realized that Hashem was granting those far from Torah and mitzvot the chance to awaken to the reality of Hashem's existence. He was opening for them a window of opportunity to remember their purpose in this world and observe mitzvot.

In Summary

- ◆ My disciple asked me to explain the significance of the injunctions to "safeguard" and "remember" Shabbat being said at the same time. The answer is that they are interdependent. Without remembering, safeguarding is of no value, and safeguarding is cause for remembering. In a similar vein, Hashem created man's body parts so that by seeing them, one is reminded that his *neshamah* resides within him. Remembering one's day of death is also an effective method to induce mitzvah observance.



Gems on Parashat Devarim



Connections between Masei and Devarim

“These are the journeys of the Children of Israel who went forth from the land of Egypt according to their legions, under the hand of Moshe and Aharon”

(Bamidbar 33:1)

“These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, in the Wilderness, in the Aravah, opposite the Sea of Reeds; between Paran and Tophel, and Lavan, and Chatzerot, and Di-zahav”

(Devarim 1:1)

The parshiyot of *Masei* and *Devarim* are read close to Tishah b’Av, the day of the *churban* and exile from our Land. The initials of the words **מִטְעִי דְבָרִים** spell the word **דָּם** (blood). By not keeping “These words,” the opening words of parashat *Devarim*, and weakening their Torah study, Bnei Yisrael went on a “journey.” This was the long exile, fraught with wandering and flowing with blood. The majority of our nation’s travails

began on Tishah b'Av, including the Spanish Inquisition and the Crusades, bloody dates in our history.

Chapter 83 in Tehillim opens with the words, "A song, a psalm of Asaph. O G-d, do not hold Yourself silent; be not deaf and be not still." It continues (vs. 5) with the nations saying, "Come, let us cut them off from nationhood so Israel's name will not be remembered any longer." The nations constantly seek to wipe us off the map. We ask Hashem to not remain silent (אל דמי לך) at the accusations of the nations, who constantly seek our blood (דם).

When Hashem observes how His children suffer in *galut*, particularly in the month of Av, He turns to them beseechingly, "My beloved sons! Return to Me. How long will you wander in the blood-drenched lands of exile? Don't you yearn to return to your own Land, and once again nestle under the wings of the *Shechinah*?"

The month of Av (אב) reminds us of אבינו אב הרחמן, our merciful Father. This is the month in which we paid for distancing ourselves from our Heavenly Father, by accepting *lashon hara* regarding the Chosen Land. Let it be the month when we correct this fault and come back to Him, for He awaits our return.

Chazal teach (*Yerushalmi, Yoma* 1:1) that any generation in which the Beit Hamikdash was not rebuilt is considered to have witnessed its destruction. We should do everything within our power to hasten the redemption, by increasing love and peace in Klal Yisrael, increasing our level of *ahavat Hashem*, and studying the Torah.



Moshe's Responsibility toward Bnei Yisrael

“Hashem, our G-d, spoke to us in Chorev, saying: Enough of your dwelling by this mountain”

(Devarim 1:6)

Why did Moshe veer from his usual manner of speech by including himself in his statement, “Hashem... spoke to **us** in Chorev?”

Moshe was afraid that over the course of time, the Jewish nation would begin to believe that it was he who released Bnei Yisrael from Egypt, led them in the Wilderness, and granted them the Torah on Har Sinai. He was merely Hashem's emissary in these events. In order to obviate this mistake, he told them here, “Hashem... spoke to us in Chorev.” He stressed that Hashem spoke to him, just as He addressed all of the rest of the Jewish nation. The Tree of Life was not the fruit of his creation. It was Hashem Who commanded him to bring it down from Heaven and bequeath it to the nation.

How great was Moshe's humility! All his life, he knew his place. He always took pains to ensure that Bnei Yisrael would not err in thinking he was their leader instead of Hashem. He constantly emphasized that he was merely the messenger appointed to take them out of Egypt, lead them in the Wilderness, and grant them the Torah.



Va'etchanan



Miracles Past and Present

“I implored Hashem at that time, saying: My Lord, Hashem/Elokim, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your strong hand, for what power is there in the heaven or on the earth that can perform according to Your deeds and according to Your mighty acts?”

(Devarim 3:23-24)

After Bnei Yisrael's victories over Sichon and Og, Moshe offers this prayer to Hashem. He opens with the words, “You have begun to show... Your greatness...” Did Moshe perceive Hashem's great miracles only during the war with Sichon and Og? Throughout the miracles of Egypt and the Wilderness, Hashem constantly demonstrated His powers. Why did Moshe say, “You have begun...” only now?

People find a certain connection to relics of the past. Old-fashioned items evoke feelings of nostalgia. The older an antique, the greater is its monetary value. For instance, an earthenware vessel crafted centuries ago is worth much more than one made nowadays.

But when it comes to traditions, people tend to write them off as ancient and outmoded. They prefer to relate to modern attitudes, fresh

and futuristic. This was why the founders of Zionism stated that they would demolish the old world down to its foundations. As they raised a new generation, devoid of Torah, they attempted to raze any vestige of the “*Galut Jew*.”

If one desires to connect to the rich past of our people and to the spiritual substance which is the foundation of our nation, to the miracles of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* and the Wilderness, he must first discover the wonder in his everyday life. Hashem sustains his body and *neshamah* with kindness and compassion. We have become accustomed to view our survival as part of the laws of nature. But if we contemplate our beings, we will realize that we live above nature. There is a supernatural Being Who conducts nature and supervises every aspect of nature. He manages our bodies so that they can function optimally. In the blessing of *Asher Yatzar*, we state, “If but one of them were to be ruptured or but one of them were to be blocked, it would be impossible to survive and to stand before You, for even a short time.” This *berachah* refers to small body parts in the lower part of the body. All the more so is it relevant to the central systems, containing the vital body parts, such as the heart and the other respiratory organs.

Reflecting upon the seemingly small miracles, as well as the great, which occur to us daily, will allow us to appreciate the greatness of the miracles of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* and the Wilderness. But if a person remains indifferent to the myriad miracles that he experiences every day, he is lacking the tools with which to recognize the tremendous national miracles of our past. When we pray, we call Hashem “Our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers.” Only after a person feels that Hashem is his G-d, can he appreciate that He is the G-d of our holy ancestors. With this knowledge, he will draw sanctity to serve Hashem, just as our forefathers did.

With the words “You have begun,” Moshe was saying that the miracles with Sichon and Og awakened within him an appreciation for the previous miracles, and now he grasped their significance all the more.

One of our followers traveled to Eretz Hakodesh in order to perform a certain mitzvah. As he was crossing the street, a car careened toward him. The driver slammed on the brakes, losing control of the car. The car overturned, and its two passengers were killed. The man walked away unscathed. When I heard this story, I was shaken. Whenever we leave the house and merit to return in peace, it is a fantastic miracle. For this fact alone, one must thank Hashem endlessly.

A family once came to me, telling me their son was in Morocco, in critical condition. In order to save his life, he had to be flown to France, but the doctors were afraid that he wouldn't survive the flight. I told the family to donate charity on his behalf (*pidyon nefesh*), and *b'ezrat Hashem*, his condition would improve, obviating the need to fly him to France. Within two hours after they did this process, the boy got up, completely healthy. The doctors could not medically explain how he overcame his ailment and recovered.

As we accustom ourselves to regard with awe the miracles which occur to us every day, we will come to appreciate and thank Hashem for the mighty miracles He has wrought with our forefathers. Memories of these miracles bind us to our splendid dynasty.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Why did Moshe state “You have begun to show... Your greatness, etc.?” after the war against Sichon and Og? Was it only after this war that he recognized Hashem's miracles? He had been witness to them all along, from the time of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* and during the days in the Wilderness.
- ◆ By contemplating the miracles in the war with Sichon and Og, Moshe was able to appreciate the great miracles of the past even more.
- ◆ This teaches us that by studying the seemingly small miracles which occur to us daily, we come to an appreciation of the great miracles which

Hashem wrought for our forefathers, the memory of which connects us with our heritage.



The Sanctity of the Land

“I implored Hashem at that time, saying”

(Devarim 3:23)

The *Ba'al Haturim* writes that the word ואתחנן (I implored) is numerically equivalent to the word שירה (song), which has the *gematria* of 515. Moshe offered 515 songs to Hashem, in order that He should accept his prayer to allow him to enter Eretz Yisrael.

Moshe implored Hashem with 515 prayers. Moshe wanted Hashem to bring the final redemption, similar to the salvation from Egypt. Were this to be the case, Moshe would be granted permission to enter the Land. Just as he had sung a song of praise after the redemption from Egypt (*Shemot* 15:1), so did he yearn to sing about the ultimate redemption. But Hashem did not accept this prayer. He knew that the time was not yet ripe for the final redemption. Bnei Yisrael still had to make certain rectifications before meriting the future redemption.

After the Splitting of the Sea, Moshe and Bnei Yisrael burst forth in song, as the pasuk testifies (*Shemot* 15:1), “Then Moshe and the Children of Israel chose to sing.” But here, Moshe sang alone. Hashem wants the entire nation to sing during the final *geulah*. He therefore did not accede to Moshe’s request and told him that the time for the future salvation had not yet come. In the future, when Hashem will redeem His children, returning them to their land, they would all participate in Moshe’s song.

The sum of the digits comprising the number 515 is eleven. *Sifrei Kabbalah* state that there are ten *sefirot* of *kedushah*, while there are eleven forces of *kelippah*. Since Moshe wished to subdue the impure

powers of the *kelippah* of Ba'al Peor, he offered 515 prayers. When Bnei Yisrael had left Egypt, these eleven evil forces adhered to them. Together with Moshe, Bnei Yisrael offered song, in order to peel these layers of impurity from themselves. Now, once again, at the brink of the border of Eretz Yisrael, Moshe tried, with his 515 prayers, to weaken the power of the eleven *kelippot* of Ba'al Peor, by praying for the final redemption.

Why, indeed, didn't Bnei Yisrael join Moshe in this prayer, as they had done at the Song of the Sea? If all that was lacking in order to bring the final redemption was their input, why didn't Moshe call them to join him in song?

The reason for this is found in the Song of the Sea (ibid. 15:2): "This is my G-d and I will build Him a Sanctuary." At *Kriyat Yam Suf*, Bnei Yisrael saw Hashem's *Shechinah* most clearly. Chazal state (*Mechilta, Beshalach* 3) that a maidservant perceived greater revelations at the sea than the prophet Yechezkel ben Buzi saw. The overt display of Hashem's Presence at the sea allowed the nation the wherewithal to participate in Moshe's song of praise. But here, poised to enter the Land, they did not perceive Hashem's *Shechinah* openly, due to their many sins. They were therefore prevented from joining Moshe in song, which would have brought the final redemption. In the future, with the arrival of Mashiach, Hashem's *Shechinah* will once again reside among Bnei Yisrael. In this manner, we will all merit saying songs of praise to the Creator.

Our Sages relate that Moshe's desire to enter the Land was so strong that he was willing to enter as a bird (see *Likutei Halachot, Yoreh De'ah, Hilchot Beitzim* 5). This is perplexing. If he wanted to enter in order to fulfill the mitzvot of the Land, how would being a bird help him?

Moshe had spent time in Heaven and recognized the veracity of the Torah, with utter clarity. Therefore, he had a tremendous desire to fulfill the mitzvot which depend on the Land, the quintessential commandments of the Torah. Moshe knew that a messenger has the same status as the one who appoints him. When Bnei Yisrael would perform the land-related mitzvot, it would be considered as though he himself were performing

them. They were like his messengers, for he was their leader. Similarly, the Torah studied by a student redounds to the credit of the teacher, for he has granted him the tools with which to acquire Torah. All the Torah which Bnei Yisrael would study in Eretz Yisrael, as well as their performance of the land-related mitzvot, would be to his credit. Nevertheless, Moshe craved entering the Land and performing the mitzvot himself, so great was his appreciation for them.

But after Moshe realized that he had no chance of entering as a person, he asked to enter in the form of a bird. At least in that form he would be able to absorb the holiness of the Land. Even the animals in Eretz Yisrael are superior to their counterparts in *chutz la'aretz*, due to the holiness that permeates the Land. Moshe always aspired to be close to Hashem, imbibing greater levels of *kedushah*. He did not want to expire in the Wilderness, but to enter the Land, even at the cost of becoming a bird.

The establishment of the cities of refuge bears testimony to the holiness of the Land and its intrinsic power to protect against sin. Moshe designated three of these cities across the Jordan (*Devarim* 4:41), and Yehoshua designated three in Eretz Yisrael. The land in Eretz Yisrael was manifold times larger than the area east of the Jordan. Where is the proportion here? It was done this way purposely. The sanctity of the soil of Eretz Yisrael had the power to protect its inhabitants from sin. Therefore, there were far fewer people who murdered unintentionally in Eretz Yisrael than east of the Jordan, where they were lacking this special sanctity.

Moshe wanted to enter the Holy Land, even if it meant becoming a bird. He knew that settling the Land was a great *zechut* for man or beast. When he realized his fate was sealed and the borders of Eretz Yisrael would be closed to him, he asked to go in as a bird. All that mattered to him was that he merit absorbing the *kedushah* there. Moshe also wanted to show Am Yisrael how much he loved the Land, so that they should not denigrate it, as they had done in the past.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The word וַאֲתַחֲנֶנּוּ (I implored) is numerically equivalent to 515, like the word שִׁירָה (song). Moshe offered 515 prayers, in the form of a song to Hashem, in order that He should accept his entreaties. He told Hashem, “Just as You redeemed us from Egypt, so should You bring us the final redemption. In this manner, I will merit entering the Land.” But Hashem refused his request, for He saw that the time was not ripe for the ultimate salvation.
- ◆ The sum of the digits which comprise 515 is eleven. This is an allusion to the eleven impure forces of Ba'al Peor. Moshe prayed 515 prayers in order to subdue the eleven *kelippot* of Ba'al Peor. This would hasten the ultimate redemption.
- ◆ Bnei Yisrael joined Moshe's Song at the Sea, for they had perceived Hashem's Presence there. Whereas here, Moshe alone sang the song of *Va'etchanan*. Bnei Yisrael did not merit Divine revelation at this time, due to their sins. When Bnei Yisrael will eventually repent their sins, they will merit Hashem's *Shechinah* once again and will participate in Moshe's song.
- ◆ Moshe wanted to perform the land-related mitzvot in the most perfect way. But once he saw that entry to the Land was barred, he asked to go in like a bird. He wanted, at least, to absorb the *kedushah* of the Land. He also wanted to demonstrate how much he cherished Eretz Yisrael, so that the nation should not denigrate it, as they had done in the past.



The Message in Moshe's Prayers

“I implored Hashem at that time, saying”

(Devarim 3:23)

Moshe offered numerous prayers to Hashem, in order to be granted the opportunity to enter the Holy Land. The Ba'al Haturim writes that

the word וְאֶתְחַנַּן (I implored) is numerically equivalent to the word שִׁירָה (song), which has the *gematria* of 515. Moshe offered 515 songs to Hashem.

How could Moshe's entreaties be called "song"? There is an intrinsic difference between song and prayer. We find that some of David's psalms are called song and praise of Hashem, while others are prayers and entreaties, in which he supplicates Hashem regarding his suffering. Why are Moshe's prayers referred to as song, when Hashem had not yet responded to him, necessitating his repeated pleading? Moshe had such a burning desire to enter the Land that he was prepared to enter even as a bird (see *Likutei Halachot, Yoreh De'ah, Hilchot Beitzim* 5). Why were Moshe's prayers called "song" when Hashem did not accept them? Doesn't song burst forth from a person who has already had his desires met, not beforehand?

The Gemara relates (*Sotah* 14a) that Moshe wanted to enter Eretz Yisrael not to partake of its fruits, but to fulfill its mitzvot. When a person is prevented from fulfilling a specific mitzvah, he is considered to have fulfilled it if he either learns about it or teaches it to others (see *Torat Chaim, Sanhedrin* 111a; see *Shelah, Assarah Ma'amarot, Ma'amar Shishi* 186-189). As an example, the Torah contains the mitzvah of giving one's wife a kosher *get*, when the need arises. Most people, *Baruch Hashem*, will never perform this mitzvah, for they live peacefully with their wives. How, then, can they fulfill this mitzvah? By learning the halachot involved, and teaching them to one's disciples, it is considered as though one has fulfilled this mitzvah.

Similarly, those who reside in *chutz la'aretz* are considered to fulfill the mitzvot dependent on the Land by learning the halachot involved, in all their intricate details. The pasuk states (*Vayikra* 7:37), "This is the law (Torah) of the burnt-offering (עולה)." This teaches that one who studies Torah is considered (עולה לו) to have fulfilled the mitzvot he was involved in learning.

Our Sages teach (*Menachot* 110a) that after the *churban*, Bnei Yisrael were prevented from bringing the burnt-offering. When one learns the halachot involved in this offering, he is considered to have brought it. Why, then, did Moshe plead so much to be allowed entry into Eretz Yisrael? Couldn't he have been satisfied with merely learning the halachot of the land-related mitzvot? Why was he so bent on actually entering the Land, pleading in 515 different ways, until Hashem finally told him (*Devarim* 3:26), "It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter"?

Let us ask another question. Why did Hashem ask Moshe to stop praying? Why did it matter whether or not he prayed? On the contrary, aren't the prayers of the righteous precious to Hashem?

We can answer based on the pasuk (*Shemot* 15:1), "Then Moshe and the Children of Israel chose to sing." Chazal state (*Sanhedrin* 91b) that this is a hint to the resurrection of the dead. The word "then" refers to the future, to a forthcoming song, which Moshe and Bnei Yisrael will offer to Hashem at *techiyat hameitim*. The additional song which Moshe would have offered, beyond the 515 that he prayed, is the song reserved for the future. Hashem did not yet want to bring the final redemption with the coming of Mashiach, and therefore commanded him to cease his singing. His singing would have forced the Hand of Heaven, so to speak, to send the *geulah*. But the world was not yet ready for this, and Am Yisrael was not yet worthy. Do not imagine that Hashem could not tolerate Moshe's prayers. Certainly they were cherished and precious in His eyes. But his additional song would have to wait until the right time, at the resurrection of the dead. I once heard that the final redemption will come in the merit of Moshe Rabbeinu. It will be considered in his merit, for his prayer will herald it.

Regarding the question why Moshe prayed so hard to be allowed to do the land-related mitzvot, when he could just as well have sufficed with learning about these mitzvot, I would like to say the following. Although Hashem considers a good thought as a good action (*Kiddushin* 40a), one cannot compare the reward for thinking of doing a good act to the reward

for actually doing it. It is self-understood that physically doing a mitzvah, through cleaving to Hashem and with joy, awards one manifold times more reward than merely thinking about doing a mitzvah. Moshe knew this and therefore wished to perform the land-related mitzvot, thereby fulfilling Hashem's word in the best way possible. Moshe sanctified his entire life to Hashem and His people. He even separated from his wife, Tziporah, so that he would constantly be on call for the *Shechinah* (*Shabbat* 87a). Thus, it is easy to understand that when it came to observing the mitzvot of the Land, Moshe would certainly desire a part in it.

We can support these words with a quote from Chagai (2:9), "The glory of this latter Temple will be greater than [that of] the first." The Gemara explains (*Bava Batra* 3a) this pasuk in two ways. The second Beit Hamikdash was forty *amot* taller than the first Beit Hamikdash, and it stood for ten years longer than the first.

How could the second Beit Hamikdash be considered more glorious than the first? It lacked the *kedushah* of the Aron, which had been hidden by Yirmeyahu, and the level of prophecy of the era of the second Beit Hamikdash was lower than that of the first. Thus, the second Beit Hamikdash was seemingly inferior in spirituality.

However, the second Beit Hamikdash contained an element which the first did not have. It had an increased measure of Torah (*Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen, Resisei Leila* 56, *Pirkei Hayecholet*). Although the *Shechinah* did not dwell in the second Temple, the main facet of Torah was there (*ibid.* 27). Our nation refused to build the second Beit Hamikdash until Hashem swore to reveal secrets of the Torah to them. The Oral Torah has its origins in the second Beit Hamikdash. The Men of the Great Assembly, who organized the Oral Law, were the ones who constructed the second Beit Hamikdash (*Yerushalmi, Shekalim* 5:1).

An additional ten years' worth of *kedushah* of Torah, which the second Beit Hamikdash enjoyed, granted it an immeasurable amount of added glory.

Moshe was aware of the tremendous sanctity of *Shechinah* in the Beit Hamikdash. He was terribly pained at the thought that this holiness would disappear together with the Temple. He therefore asked to enter the Land, for his presence would prevent the *churban*. But Moshe was not aware of the fact that Hashem preferred to pour His wrath upon sticks and stones rather than upon His children. Hashem forbade him from entering Eretz Yisrael, so that when Bnei Yisrael would sin in the future, His home could be destroyed instead of His nation.

Let us learn from Moshe that one should never suffice with merely thinking of doing good things. He should not be an easy-chair mitzvah man, but should make the effort to bring his thoughts of doing mitzvot to fruition. Regarding the question as to how Moshe's prayers could be considered song when Hashem had not accepted them, I would like to suggest the following. Moshe stood in supplication before Hashem, with full knowledge that whatever Hashem does is good. Even if Hashem would turn down his request, this is what was best for him. For this, Moshe found reason to sing. Since Hashem is the only One Who really knows what is good for a person, one must thank Him for the seemingly bad just as he thanks for the overt good. Armed with this realization, Moshe was full of song and praise from the moment he began his prayer, even before knowing how he would be answered.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The word *ואתחנן* (I implored) has the same *gematria* as the word *שירה* (song): 515. Moshe offered 515 songs to Hashem. Why did he sing to Hashem before his entreaties were fulfilled? Don't people usually sing after they receive what they requested?
- ◆ Why did Moshe implore Hashem to be allowed to fulfill the land-related mitzvot? Merely learning about mitzvot is considered fulfilling them. Why, then, didn't Moshe suffice with studying these mitzvot? And why did Hashem halt him in the middle of his prayer?
- ◆ The phrase "Then Moshe and the Children of Israel chose to sing" contains an allusion to *techiyat hameitim*. Hashem stopped Moshe from

further song, for another song would be the harbinger of *techiyat hameitim* and the future redemption, which they did not yet merit.

- ◆ Moshe begged to enter the Land, for one cannot compare a good thought to a good deed. He wanted to do the land-related mitzvot to perfection, and not make do with merely studying their details.
- ◆ “The glory of this latter Temple will be greater than [that of] the first.” The second Beit Hamikdash had two added features: It was forty *amot* taller, and it stood ten years longer. Moshe knew this, and he therefore wished to preserve the House of Hashem. He also knew that were he to enter Eretz Yisrael, he would be able to prevent the *churban*. But Hashem preferred to pour His wrath upon the sticks and stones of the Beit Hamikdash rather than upon His children. This would provide them with atonement for their sins. He therefore did not allow Moshe entry into the Land.
- ◆ Moshe sang to Hashem, even before his entreaties were fulfilled. He knew that whatever Hashem decided was best, deserving of song and praise.



He Who Ruins Is Required to Repair

“Let me now cross and see the good Land that is on the other side of the Jordan, this good mountain and the Lebanon”

(Devarim 3:25)

Moshe offered numerous prayers to Hashem, in order to be allowed to enter the Holy Land. The Ba'al Haturim writes that the word ואתחנן (I implored) is numerically equivalent to the word שירה (song), which has the *gematria* of 515. Moshe offered 515 songs to Hashem so that He would permit him to enter Eretz Yisrael. In spite of his entreaties, Hashem

replied, (*Devarim* 3:26), “It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter.”

This pasuk teaches that Moshe had a strong desire to see the Holy Land. Although Moshe had heard of the uniqueness of the Land, one cannot compare hearing with seeing. He wanted to enter the Land and see it with his own eyes, and not just through *ruach hakodesh*.

“Seeing is believing,” as the saying goes. Seeing something creates a connection between the one who sees and the thing which he sees. On some level, the item seen has become a part of the one who looked at it. If this is the case in matters of materialism, all the more so is it true regarding the spirituality of Eretz Yisrael. Merely seeing the dust of the Land and its stones awakens the Jewish heart to connect to Hashem, to study His Torah, and observe His mitzvot. Moshe knew that the mitzvot dependent on the Land demand tremendous self-sacrifice. Looking at the Land and absorbing its *kedushah* energizes a person with the ability to observe its mitzvot.

Moshe yearned to enter Eretz Yisrael in order to gaze at its unsurpassed beauty and sanctity. The very atmosphere of the Land makes one wise (*Bava Batra* 158b). Living in this elevated environment would enable him to do the land-related mitzvot with renewed energy, in the most perfect way possible.

Regarding the mitzvah of tzitzit, the pasuk states (*Bamidbar* 15:39), “It shall constitute tzitzit for you, that you may see it and remember all the commandments of Hashem and perform them; and not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray.” Our Sages teach (see *Menachot* 43b) that merely looking at the tzitzit protects a person from sin and causes him to cleave to Hashem and His Torah. The Gemara relates (ibid. 44a) the case of a man who was driven to sin with a woman who was known for her beauty. Just as he was preparing to sin, his eyes fell upon his tzitzit. He was so overcome with remorse that he simply lifted his feet and fled. The woman was shocked at his actions. “Did you find any flaw in me that caused you to run away?” He replied, “There is

nothing lacking in your beauty. But my tzitzit aroused me to do teshuvah and resist sin.”

How great is the strength of sight in one's service of Hashem! We are therefore enjoined to wear tzitzit as a protection from sin. Bnei Yisrael are commanded (ibid. 15:38), “And they shall place upon the tzitzit of each corner a thread of turquoise blue.” The Gemara explains that blue is the color of the sky, the dwelling place of Hashem. When one studies his tzitzit, which remind him of the sky, he will reflect upon Hashem and His mitzvot.

Just as tzitzit arouse a person to observe mitzvot, seeing the Holy Land arouses one's heart to observe the mitzvot in general, and specifically those related to the Land, which demand self-sacrifice.

Our Sages teach (*Sha'arei Kedushah* 1:1) that Hashem created man with 613 organs, corresponding to the 613 mitzvot. Each organ corresponds to a separate mitzvah. Just as one who is missing an arm or a leg is considered maimed, so too, one who fails to fulfill all of the mitzvot, including the land-related mitzvot, is incomplete, for he has not rectified the organs which correspond to those mitzvot. Moshe longed to enter the Land, in order to observe the mitzvot that are land-related, thereby rectifying the mitzvot which correspond to the organs of the body.

Moshe had an additional objective. Due to his tremendous responsibility toward his flock, he wished to enter Eretz Yisrael and perform as many mitzvot there as possible. One cannot compare observing mitzvot in foreign lands to mitzvah observance in the Holy Land. His observance of the mitzvot in their quintessential form would atone for Bnei Yisrael's sins in the Wilderness. Due to their transgressions, Hashem's Throne became split, as the pasuk states (*Shemot* 17:16), “כִּי יָד עַל כִּסֵּא יְהוָה – For the hand is on the throne of G-d.” The word used for throne is the shortened version of כִּסֵּא instead of the word כִּסֵּא. This implies that Hashem's kingdom is incomplete. When will it become complete? Only after Bnei Yisrael destroy Amalek from their

midst (*Rashi*, *ibid.*) and cleave solely to Hashem and His Torah. This will bring the world to its ultimate rectification.

Moshe's motives in desiring to enter the Land were the purest possible. He desired to enter it solely to observe Hashem's mitzvot to perfection and thereby bring atonement for Am Yisrael. Why, then, did Hashem refuse his request, telling him instead (*Devarim* 3:26), "It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter"?

Not only did Hashem forbid Moshe from entering the Land, but He told him something which seems cruel and selfish. He said (*ibid.* 3:27), "Ascend to the top of the cliff and raise your eyes westward, northward, southward, and eastward, and see with your eyes, for you shall not cross this Jordan." This is like showing candy to a child, but not allowing him to have it. Better he should not see it at all than be tempted to taste this "forbidden fruit." Didn't showing Moshe the Land from afar, but barring him from actually entering, merely arouse his longing to enter? Did Hashem intend to cause Moshe pain, *chalilah*?

Moshe thought that by entering Eretz Yisrael, he would be able to fulfill the mitzvot to perfection, just as he had received them from the mouth of Hashem. This would rectify the deficiencies of Bnei Yisrael throughout their years in the Wilderness. But Hashem knew that it was better that Am Yisrael should "clean up after themselves." They had sinned; they needed to correct these sins. There is no comparing one who rectifies his own faults with one whose faults are repaired by others. Yerushalayim is parallel to the Heavenly Gate (*Bereishit Rabbah* 69:7), and Torah study there is most similar to the Torah study of Hashem with Moshe while in Heaven. Nevertheless, Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael to enter the Land and make proper restitution for their offenses. This would afford them the most perfect and worthy atonement.

Had Moshe entered Eretz Yisrael, there is no doubt that Am Yisrael would have relied on him completely to rectify their mistakes. But this would not have been the ultimate type of atonement. Through the good deeds of Bnei Yisrael, and not of Moshe, the world would reach

perfection, and Hashem's kingdom would be complete. By Hashem showing Moshe the Land, He provided him with some form of consolation. Moshe was made aware that Am Yisrael would enter Eretz Yisrael and repair what they had ruined during their years in the Wilderness. This was not an act of cruelty whatsoever. Moshe already knew his fate was sealed, for the greater benefit of his beloved nation.

Before Yaakov Avinu's death, he gathered his sons in order to reveal the End of Days (*Bereishit* 49:1). But Hashem did not want this and therefore removed his prophetic vision (*Pesachim* 56a). Didn't this make Yaakov feel embarrassed? Instead of saying what he had planned, other words came out of his mouth.

Hashem did not want the End of Days to be revealed to Am Yisrael, so that they should not regard it as a given, a free gift which they will get no matter what. Rather, they should feel that much effort and exertion is necessary to warrant salvation. The fact that Yaakov did not succeed in revealing the *geulah* is a message to us to work hard so that we will, indeed, merit seeing it.

Similarly, Hashem prevented Moshe from entering the Land, in spite of his strong desire and good intentions. Hashem knew that Am Yisrael would deserve the *Shechinah* in their midst only after toiling in His Torah and observing His mitzvot. This will bring the world to perfection.

Had Moshe been granted entry into the Land, Am Yisrael were likely to prevent him from rectifying all that needed repair, just as they had angered Hashem in the Wilderness. Had this been the case, Hashem's anger toward Am Yisrael would have been too great to bear, depriving them of having the *Shechinah* in the Beit Hamikdash.

The obligation to correct one's deeds and do teshuvah rests squarely upon the shoulders of the sinner. When Hashem observes His sons correcting their deeds and returning to Him, he fulfills the pasuk in the *haftarah* of this parashah (*Yeshayahu* 40:1), "Comfort, comfort My people."

In Summary

- ◆ “Let me now cross and see the good Land” implies that hearing cannot be compared with seeing. Moshe wanted to enter the Land and see it with his own eyes. Even merely seeing the dust and stones of the Holy Land connects a person to its sanctity and to a heightened level of mitzvah observance, specifically the land-related mitzvot, which demand self-sacrifice.
- ◆ The 613 mitzvot correspond to the 613 organs of the body. Moshe wanted to do the mitzvot of the Land in order to perfect his body parts. He also wished to do all mitzvot on a higher level, thereby repairing Bnei Yisrael’s sins in the Wilderness. One cannot compare mitzvah observance in foreign lands to mitzvah observance in the Holy Land.
- ◆ Why did Hashem forbid Moshe from entering the Land? Moreover, why did He command him to climb the mountain and gaze at the Land, when He had no intention of allowing him entry? Wasn’t this an act of cruelty?
- ◆ One cannot compare correcting a sin by the sinner himself to the correction made by others. When the sinner himself does teshuvah, it is on a much higher level. Therefore, Hashem wanted Am Yisrael themselves to make restitution for their sins. Were Moshe to enter Eretz Yisrael with them, they would cast this burden on his shoulders.
- ◆ Yaakov Avinu was prevented from revealing the ultimate *geulah*. The *geulah* does not come easily. It demands much exertion.
- ◆ Hashem was afraid that if Moshe would enter Eretz Yisrael, Bnei Yisrael would revert back to their sinful ways. The *Middat Hadin* would then have the upper hand, preventing the *Shechinah* from residing among them.
- ◆ Hashem told Moshe to ascend the mountain only after telling him he was barred entry into Eretz Yisrael. Seeing the Land was a form of consolation.



The Gift of Life

“Let me now cross and see the good Land that is on the other side of the Jordan, this good mountain and the Lebanon”

(Devarim 3:25)

Moshe begged Hashem to forgive him for his sin and allow him to live so that he might enter Eretz Yisrael. In spite of his numerous entreaties, Hashem refused him, stating (ibid. 3:26), “It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter.”

Is this fair? Didn't Moshe Rabbeinu, who brought us the Torah, deserve another few years of life so that he could live in the Holy Land? Moshe dedicated his life to lead his people and teach them the Torah. His sin at Mei Merivah was only on account of granting them water to quench their thirst. Why didn't Hashem acquiesce to Moshe's pleadings and allow him to enter, even in the form of a bird? (see *Likutei Halachot, Yoreh De'ah, Hilchot Beitzim 5*).

Hashem grants every person exactly the amount of time he needs in order to accomplish his purpose on this earth. Hashem knew that Moshe had reached his spiritual peak in his 120 years on this earth. Had he continued living, he might have lost a measure of the perfection he had achieved. Hashem had only Moshe's best interest in mind. He wanted Moshe to ascend to the World of Truth when he was at the pinnacle of perfection. He therefore prevented him from continuing to live.

Family members of a sick girl once came to me, relating that this girl was hovering between the living and the dead, after experiencing a serious accident. They offered to do anything necessary to save her life. I told them that although they could increase her merits, her ultimate recovery was only in the hands of Hashem, Who allots life as He sees fit.

We often bewail the passing of people who die young. But we would do well to internalize the belief that if Hashem sees fit to take a person when

he is young, this is for his benefit. Were he to continue living, who knows if he wouldn't later lose the levels of spirituality which he had gained.

It is not the length of days which defines the value of a person's life, but the quality of his days. Often, a person can accrue tremendous merit in a mere twenty years, which another person will not attain in eighty years. Many spiritual giants, in spite of their short lives, filled their every moment with Torah study, bequeathing their insights for future generations. Their lives may have been short, but their legacy lives on.

The Midrash states (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit 41*) that Adam Harishon wished to give seventy years of his life to David Hamelech, who was originally destined to die on the day of his birth. After 930 years, when Adam was notified of his imminent death, he asked what had happened to the other seventy years. He had initially been promised a lifetime of one thousand years. Hashem called the Angel Gavriel to present Adam with the contract which he himself had signed, stating that he was giving David Hamelech a gift of seventy years.

How do we understand that, at first, Adam magnanimously conferred years of his life to David Hamelech, but then demanded these years back? This, despite knowing that David's *neshamah* was destined for greatness and had the capacity to influence all future generations. When Adam granted David these years of life, he did not yet have an appreciation for life. But after living a few hundred years on this earth, he understood the value of each moment of life, and how it should be channeled to serve the Creator. When it was time for him to expire, he did not want to leave this world, and asked for another seventy years.

Chazal continue (*Shabbat 30a*) that when it came time for David to pass on, he asked Hashem on which day he would die. He was told it would be a Shabbat. Since David did not want the nation to mourn him on Shabbat, decreasing their joy on this day, he asked for his death to be postponed to the next day. Hashem answered that this was impossible, for his son, Shlomo, would begin his rule on that day, and one kingdom may not impinge on another. David Hamelech would not give up. "Then I am

prepared to pass away on the day before Shabbat.” But Hashem refused this as well, stating that He was not prepared to decrease his life by even one day, for David was such an exalted individual.

How precious is life! Each day provides an opportunity to prepare for *Olam Haba*. In order to enter the great banquet hall, we must first pass through the long corridor that is our life in this world. Each step along the way must be calculated precisely, so that we do not miss the chance to arrive at our final destination (*Avot* 4:16). Each hour of each day of a person's life is allocated and measured, like the sands of an hourglass, falling downward, in perfect precision. As we recognize the value of life, we will learn to utilize it in the most appropriate manner – for the sake of Torah.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ How could Hashem deny Moshe the opportunity to enter Eretz Yisrael – is this the reward for all he did in his life? Hashem knew that Moshe had already reached the summit and had become as perfect as he possibly could on this earth. Any additional days of life were liable to lower his level.
- ◆ A person's life is allotted to him in order to fulfill his mission. Everyone is capable of achieving their purpose, whether they are given many years or few.
- ◆ When his time came, Adam Harishon did not want to die. This was after he granted seventy years to David Hamelech. When he had originally conferred these years of life upon David, he did not appreciate their true value. But after hundreds of years of life in this world, he had acquired an appreciation for the value of every moment of life. He wanted more of it, in order to serve Hashem.

- ◆ Hashem took David's life on exactly the day He had decided, not one day earlier or later. This demonstrates the significance of life. Either a dearth or surplus of days is liable to damage a person.



Reaching Perfection in Avodat Hashem

“But Hashem became angry with me because of you, and He did not listen to me: Hashem said to me: It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter”

(Devarim 3:26)

The Gemara states (*Sotah* 14a) that Moshe's sole intention in desiring to enter Eretz Yisrael was in order to be able to fulfill the land-related mitzvot. Why did Hashem deny this to him?

According to the Zohar, Hashem told Moshe that he had already reached perfection in Torah and mitzvot. Entering the Land was liable to cause his downfall.

We cannot fathom how entering Eretz Yisrael could damage Moshe. But we know that Hashem had his best interests at heart, and therefore refused to allow him entry, bringing him, instead, into the Next World.

Let us use an analogy to illustrate. An infant sees a bottle of milk and wants to have it. His mother knows that he is already full, and overeating will be harmful to him. She denies him this pleasure, in spite of his cries, so that his health should not be damaged. To the onlooker, it may seem that the mother is cruel toward her child. But in truth, it is her compassion which motivates her to deprive him of his desire.

Similarly, Hashem, our merciful Father, wanted only what was best for Moshe. Therefore, He denied him entry into Eretz Yisrael, for this might have decreased the perfection he had already attained.

Where did Moshe merit perfection? In *chutz la'aretz*. This fact should encourage all those who live outside the borders of Eretz Yisrael. They, too, are capable of reaching perfection in Avodat Hashem. Of course, once the Beit Hamikdash will be rebuilt, all Am Yisrael will be required to live in the Chosen Land. But as long as we are in *galut*, many of us are forced to live in *chutz la'aretz*. Let us not think this obviates us from reaching our full potential. It all depends on one's aspirations, and the efforts he invests in this endeavor.

We must beware of losing all that we have achieved through sweat and toil. One small measure of arrogance can gnaw away at the good character traits which a person established for himself, bringing to a crash his magnificent edifice of *middot*. Regarding Pinchas, Hashem stated (*Bamidbar* 25:12), “הנני נותן לו את בריתי שלום – Therefore, say: Behold! I give him My covenant of peace.” The word שלום (peace), alluding to שלמות (perfection), is written with a broken letter ו' (*Kiddushin* 66b). In order to reach true perfection, one must break his pride, the source of all sin. Who is the truly perfect person? One who feels that he has not yet achieved perfection and always has some area in which to improve. As the Kotzker Rebbe was wont to say, “There is nothing as whole as a broken heart.”

Although Moshe Rabbeinu merited reaching perfection, he always felt he had more to do in this world. For this reason, he yearned to enter the Holy Land, in order to accrue the mitzvot dependent on the Land.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why did Hashem deny Moshe his wish of entering Eretz Yisrael?
- ◆ Hashem told Moshe that he had already reached perfection in Torah. Living longer and entering Eretz Yisrael would pose a spiritual threat to him.

- ◆ The fact that Moshe succeeded in achieving perfection in *chutz la'aretz* should encourage all those who live outside Eretz Yisrael to strive for perfection. Even in *galut*, it is possible to become complete.
- ◆ We must beware not to lose our spiritual level due to arrogance, the source of all sin.
- ◆ Moshe constantly sought to elevate himself spiritually. He yearned to enter Eretz Yisrael in order to fulfill the land-related mitzvot.



The Severity of Slanderous Speech

“But Hashem became angry with me because of you, and He did not listen to me: Hashem said to me: It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter”

(Devarim 3:26)

Two parshiyot mention *Kabbalat HaTorah* – parashat *Yitro* in Chumash *Shemot* (19-20), and parashat *Va'etchanan* in Chumash *Devarim* (5). Parashat *Va'etchanan* begins with Moshe's request to enter Eretz Yisrael and Hashem's refusal. Moshe does not merely state that Hashem refused his request, but he spoke to Bnei Yisrael harshly, saying, “Hashem became angry with me because of you.” We know that Moshe was denied the privilege to enter the Holy Land because he struck the rock to obtain water from it instead of speaking to it, thereby disobeying Hashem's command. Moshe was punished by being denied entry into Eretz Yisrael (*Rashi, Bamidbar* 20:12). In spite of Moshe's entreaties to set foot in the Land, Hashem refused, even adding, “It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter.”

Some questions press for our attention. Why did Moshe say, “Hashem became angry with me because of you”? Was he casting blame for his own fault upon Bnei Yisrael? Furthermore, why does this parashah open with this conversation? Wouldn't it have been more fitting to begin with *Kabbalat HaTorah* and mention Moshe's punishment afterward? Receiving the Torah was such a monumental event; shouldn't it have been accorded the opening pesukim, instead of being mentioned further on in the parashah?

Moshe was worthy of entering Eretz Yisrael. But Hashem, in His infinite kindness, denied him this pleasure. Whatever Moshe crafted endured forever. Had he been allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael, he would certainly have built the Beit Hamikdash. In his merit, it would never have fallen. What would happen when Bnei Yisrael would sin? Hashem would, so to speak, be forced to strike at them, for the Beit Hamikdash would be indestructible.

But Hashem has mercy on His children and does not want to harm them. He therefore preferred to cast His wrath on the sticks and stones that were the Mikdash and preserve His people (*Eichah Rabbah* 4:14). Hashem purposely arranged for Moshe to sin at Mei Merivah. This would prevent him from entering Eretz Yisrael. Bnei Yisrael would pay the price of sin by having their Temple destroyed, but they themselves would remain intact. In effect, Moshe was punished at Mei Merivah on their account. Because Bnei Yisrael would sin in the future, Moshe could not enter the Land and build the Beit Hamikdash.

When the spies were sent to scout the Land, they returned with a negative report. They caused Bnei Yisrael much weeping that night. This weeping was completely for nothing, disconnected with the truth. Hashem had promised them that He would take them into a land flowing with milk and honey. They should have believed with perfect faith that they would enter a blessed land, and not have believed the slanderous report of the spies. The day the spies returned from scouting the Land was Tishah b'Av. Hashem told the nation, “You cried a cry for nothing. This day will be designated as a day of weeping for generations” (*Sotah*

35a). The two Batei Mikdash were destroyed on Tishah b'Av (*Ta'anit* 26b). Therefore, it is a day of mourning and grief.

The *lashon hara* of the spies caused the nation to weep for nothing, which eventually resulted in the future weeping over the *churban* Beit Hamikdash on Tishah b'Av. Moreover, Bnei Yisrael's acceptance of the spies' slanderous report necessitated Moshe's sin at Mei Merivah. This was in order that he would be forbidden from entering the Holy Land and building a Beit Hamikdash that would stand eternally. Had that been the case, when Bnei Yisrael would sin in the future, Hashem would have "been forced" to annihilate them.

A person can learn Torah with excitement and enthusiasm, but if he speaks *lashon hara*, his Torah is worthless in Hashem's eyes. Hashem foregoes His own honor, but will not forego the honor of His children. Yom Kippur atones for sins between man and Hashem, but not for sins between man and his fellow man (*Yoma* 85b). This teaches us just how precious the honor of Yisrael is in Hashem's eyes.

We learn how critical this matter is from the series of events in this parashah. Moshe's punishment, on account of *lashon hara*, is written prior to the Giving of the Torah. *Derech Eretz* precedes Torah (*Tanna D'Vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 1). A mouth defiled by slanderous speech cannot speak words of Torah. Firstly, one must rinse his mouth of inappropriate speech and, only afterward, can he utter words of the Torah. This is why the sin of Mei Merivah precedes the mention of *Matan Torah*.

— In Summary —

- ◆ Why did Moshe place the blame for his sin at Mei Merivah on the shoulders of Bnei Yisrael? Why does parashat *Va'etchanan* open with Moshe's request to enter Eretz Yisrael and Hashem's subsequent refusal? Wouldn't it have been more appropriate to begin with the magnificent event of *Matan Torah*, instead of mentioning it later in the parashah?
- ◆ Hashem arranged for Moshe to sin at Mei Merivah in order to prevent him from entering Eretz Yisrael. Hashem knew that Bnei Yisrael would sin in

the future. Had Moshe been granted entry into Eretz Yisrael, he would have built the Beit Hamikdash, which would have endured forever. Hashem would then have had to cast His wrath upon His people, *chas v'shalom*, when they would subsequently sin. Due to His tremendous love for His nation, He led Moshe to sin, so that he would not enter the Land. This is what Moshe meant by saying, "Hashem became angry with me because of you."

- ◆ The sin of the spies, which occurred on Tishah b'Av, was a harbinger of the future *churban*. The nation had cried for nothing; Hashem established that day as a day for weeping for generations. This sin prevented Moshe from entering the Land. Moshe's prayer to enter Eretz Yisrael is recorded before mention of *Kabbalat HaTorah* in order to impress upon us that *derech erez* precedes the Torah. Only a mouth unsullied by slanderous speech is capable of speaking words of Torah.



Reasons for Moshe's Retribution

"But Hashem became angry with me because of you, and He did not listen to me: Hashem said to me: It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter"

(Devarim 3:26)

Chazal state (*Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim 940*) that the word *Va'etchanan*, which is numerically equal to 515, alludes to the 515 tefillot that Moshe pleaded before Hashem in order to be granted entry into Eretz Yisrael. But Hashem did not accede to his request. On the contrary, He ordered him to stop praying.

The pesukim relate (*Bamidbar* 20:12; *Rashi*, *ibid.*) that Hashem denied Moshe entry into Eretz Yisrael in retribution for striking the rock at Mei Merivah instead of speaking to it. Why was Hashem so stringent with Moshe regarding this?

Moshe was told to speak to the rock. But he was also aware of the fact that Hashem is the only One Who “speaks and does.” Only Hashem’s word can effect immediate action. Moshe did not want Bnei Yisrael to believe that he was some sort of deity. Therefore, he struck the rock in order to obtain water instead of speaking to it.

Moshe had pure motivations in striking the rock. He wanted to increase Hashem’s glory in this world and to prove that there is none other besides Him. Only Hashem, Who is omnipotent, can command Creation to act according to His word. Moshe realized that he was merely flesh and blood. The Torah testifies that Moshe was the most humble of men (*Bamidbar* 12:3). Since humility was part and parcel of his makeup, he chose to deviate from Hashem’s command and strike the rock, thereby proving to all Who is the Master of the world.

They say the following about my grandfather, the tzaddik, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy”a: Once, when he had prepared a *hilula* feast in memory of his grandfather, there was not enough *mechayeh*, a strong drink similar to arrack. He asked for a hammer and nail. He then hammered the nail into the wall. When he removed the nail, this drink spurted from the hole.

Similarly, they say that the Ba’al Shem Tov once needed water in order to wash his hands before the Minchah prayer. When he did not find any water, he stuck his walking stick into the ground. Lo and behold! Water began flowing from the hole he had made. To this very day, water flows in that spot. Even the gentiles admit that this was a miracle. In both of these instances, the sages did not suffice with mere words, but did an act to effect a miracle. Causing something to happen simply by speaking is attributed solely to Hashem.

For this reason, Moshe refrained from speaking to the rock. He did not want the people to idolize him, especially after he had spent time on High

and had become elevated to the level of the angels themselves. The angels had already mistaken him for a deity, similar to the instance with Adam Harishon. The angels had wished to praise Adam with the words, “*Kadosh, kadosh,*” until Hashem showed them that he slept, proving that he was only human, after all (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit 23*).

But Hashem was not pleased with Moshe’s act of striking the rock. He should have recognized his true greatness. Existing among the angels on High had elevated him and sanctified him above the level of ordinary humans. He should have spoken to the rock as he had been commanded, thereby proving to all that the Torah draws a person upward.

Hashem did not, *chalilah*, want Moshe to have personal pride. Rather, He wanted him to take pride in his Torah, which elevated him to the extent that even the elements of nature did his bidding. Water flowing from the rock through Moshe’s word would have drawn a tremendous lesson for the nation regarding those who study Torah and cleave to it. The elements themselves change their course to fulfill a tzaddik’s command. We are taught, “Just as He (Hashem) is, so should you be.” The method to resemble Hashem is by emulating His *middot* and cleaving to His Torah. Reaching greater heights in Avodat Hashem is a means of acquiring His qualities. Then nature itself will comply with his bidding, with no effort necessary on his part.

The charge against Moshe was that he deprived the nation of this message. For this, he was punished with being denied entry into Eretz Yisrael. Our Sages say that Moshe’s sin at Mei Merivah did not warrant such a great reprisal (see *Kedushat Yom Tov, Parashat Vayera*). But this sin was compounded with Moshe’s role in the sin of the Golden Calf. Although Hashem acceded to Moshe’s request for forgiveness for that sin (*Shemot 32:11*), Moshe was still held to account for allowing the Eirev Rav to join our nation. It was they who caused the nation to sin with the Golden Calf.

The combination of the sin of the Golden Calf and the sin of Mei Merivah sealed Moshe’s fate. Only after he sinned at Mei Merivah, did he

exceed the limit and deserve this punishment. As it is known, Hashem is exacting with tzaddikim to a hairsbreadth (*Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim 760*). Hashem was stringent with Moshe, based on his great level.

Moshe's sins do not indicate any reduction in his status. All his life, he strived to serve Hashem to perfection. From *Shamayim*, it was arranged that he would sin and be deprived entry into Eretz Yisrael. Had he been granted entry, his presence would have brought the Land to its perfection, and Hashem would have been forced, so to speak, to bring Mashiach. But the world was not ready for that yet. Hashem wants Bnei Yisrael to serve Him to the best of their ability, and not rely on their leader to do the work for them. This is why He denied Moshe entry into Eretz Yisrael. By means of their own exertion, they would merit the final redemption.

Our sefarim teach that originally, Hashem wished to confer *techiyat hameitim* only on those who were buried in Eretz Yisrael. But He saw that with time, Bnei Yisrael would be exiled to the four corners of the earth, buried in various places. For this reason, He orchestrated Moshe's burial in *chutz la'aretz*, as well. In this manner, when Moshe would arise at the resurrection of the dead, they would, too (see *Tanchuma, Va'etchanan 6*; see *Rosh al HaTorah, Devarim 34:6*; see *Rabbeinu Bachya, Devarim 33:21*).

Hashem could have sent Moshe back down to earth before the nation sinned with the Golden Calf. Postponing Moshe's return indicated that Hashem wanted the nation to sin. How can that be? By sinning and then repenting, they would receive atonement for the sin of Adam Harishon, as well.

Likewise, Yom Kippur was established in the wake of the sin of the Golden Calf, as were sacrifices (*Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Zuta 4*). Moshe's part in that sin was arranged by Hashem. Therefore, He did not charge him for it. But one sin adds to another, and eventually, his credit was depleted. At Mei Merivah, Hashem settled the debt for this sin, as well as the previous one. Moshe was refused entry into the Land for the benefit of the nation. It was not yet time for the final redemption.

Why did Hashem arrange for Moshe to sin and be barred from entry into Eretz Yisrael as a punishment? Couldn't He have denied him entry without him having to sin? This teaches us that there is no such thing as sin without reprisal. If a person is experiencing hard times, he would do well to search his soul to find the reason for his suffering. Whereas most people suffer for their own sins, the tzaddikim suffer for the sins of the generation. Moshe Rabbeinu was sacrificed on the altar of his people, for they were not yet ready to greet Mashiach.

Moshe certainly was duly compensated for serving as an example to his people. He had to sin in order to teach them that every sin carries a consequence.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ In striking the rock, Moshe wished to impart the message that only Hashem can affect nature through speech. He did not want the people to believe he was a deity. Why, then, was he punished so severely?
- ◆ Hashem felt that Moshe had deprived the nation of the lesson that one who sanctifies himself through Torah receives supernatural powers, which can even change the course of nature.
- ◆ Aside from the sin of Mei Merivah, Hashem added on the sin of the Golden Calf. Moshe had allowed the Eirev Rav to join the nation, and they were the ones who initiated this sin.
- ◆ Hashem arranged Moshe's sin in order to prevent him from entering Eretz Yisrael, which would have proven detrimental to the entire nation. Hashem had originally planned that only the dead of Eretz Yisrael would arise at *techiyat hameitim*. With Moshe's burial outside the borders of Eretz Yisrael, he allowed even those buried outside its borders to merit resurrection of the dead.
- ◆ Why did Hashem arrange for sin to be the cause of Moshe's denial to enter the Land? He wanted to teach us, through Moshe's experience, that

there is justice and there is a true Judge. Whoever sins, regardless of his stature, will pay the price.



Personal Involvement in Mitzvot

“But Hashem became angry with me because of you, and He did not listen to me: Hashem said to me: It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter. Ascend to the top of the cliff and raise your eyes westward, northward, southward, and eastward, and see with your eyes, for you shall not cross this Jordan”

(Devarim 3:26)

Moshe begged and pleaded with Hashem to be allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael. The Ba'al Haturim (3:23), among others, explains that the word וַאֲתַחֲנֶנּוּ, numerically equaling 515, alludes to the 515 tefillot that Moshe offered in the hope of being granted permission to enter the Land. But Hashem did not accept his supplications. Moreover, He ordered him to cease his prayers. Is this the payback for one so dedicated to Torah? Didn't Moshe deserve to enter Eretz Yisrael, after devoting himself for the sake of Bnei Yisrael, putting his life on the line as he ascended to Heaven to bring them the Torah from the mouth of Hashem Himself?

We would think, at the very least, that Hashem would grant Moshe his last wish, and permit him to enter Eretz Yisrael, especially in light of his numerous supplications. But Hashem did allow Moshe to ascend the cliff and view Eretz Yisrael from afar. Why couldn't Moshe make do with that? He wanted to enter Eretz Yisrael at any cost, even in the form of a bird.

He wanted to experience being in the Land, not sighting it from a distance. What was the reason for this?

Hashem denied Moshe the privilege to enter the Land for reasons which only He knows. He knew that ultimately, it would be beneficial neither for Moshe nor for the nation were he to enter Eretz Yisrael. As previously explained (see *Ohr Hachaim, Devarim 1:37*), had Moshe entered the Land, he would have built the Beit Hamikdash and pleaded with Hashem to maintain it. Hashem would not have wanted to refuse him. Instead of destroying His Temple on the day of His wrath, He would have, *chalilah*, destroyed His people. But Hashem loves His nation and preferred to destroy His Home rather than to annihilate His nation.

Our vision is short-sighted. Often, we fail to see Hashem's mercy. But we must know that all He does is good. We would do ourselves a great justice by seeking the kindness of Hashem in everything we experience, even if it is difficult to comprehend. Chazal exhort us (*Berachot 54a*), "One is obligated to bless for the (seeming) bad just as he blesses for the good." Even though things may seem unfair, this is never the case. One who knows Heavenly calculations sees the good that comes from everything that occurs.

Many people can relate instances which seemed difficult to accept. They nearly had grievances toward Hashem, wondering why they deserved such suffering. But, after some time, the cloud lifted. The picture became clear, and they realized that specifically by means of their suffering, their salvation sprouted forth. It was only their short-sightedness that obscured their vision from seeing the purpose in what had occurred (see *Niddah 31a*).

No prayer ever goes unanswered. Even if, at the time, it seems that Hashem is not accepting one's prayers, they do not go lost, but are stored under the Heavenly Throne for a future time. There are numerous instances of people who were far from Torah observance. Their hearts were suddenly aroused to return to their Heavenly Father. When they were asked what the turning point in their life was, they could not

pinpoint a specific incident. But they were certain that their ancestors, noted for their piety, had prayed on their behalf. These prayers were now being answered, in the form of their children returning to their roots.

Moshe's tefillot surely did not go lost. Although Hashem did not grant him his wish to enter Eretz Yisrael, we firmly believe that his prayers effected great things in Heaven, bringing blessing upon Bnei Yisrael throughout the generations.

Moshe teaches us an important lesson in insisting on seeing the Land up close and not satisfying oneself with seeing it from afar. With regard to Torah study and mitzvah fulfillment, one should have a "hands-on" experience. He should not satisfy himself with superficial pretenses, but he should be thoroughly involved in his Avodat Hashem. Moshe knew full well that merely learning about the land-related mitzvot is considered observing them. Nevertheless, he aspired to actually do them physically. One cannot compare the reward for literally doing a mitzvah to that of "virtually" doing it, by learning about the mitzvah.

A perfect support for this is found at the beginning of parashat *Eikev* (*Devarim* 7:12), which follows this parashah. The pasuk states, "This shall be the reward when you hearken (עֲקֹב תִשְׁמַעוּן) to these ordinances." Rashi explains that this refers to the relatively light mitzvot that a person tramples with his heel (עֲקֹב) . We learn from Moshe that even the seemingly small mitzvot must be valued and performed in the most perfect way possible. In order to connect to Hashem and His Torah, one must be in His proximity. Distance breeds coldness and separation between Hashem and His nation. Looking at a breathtaking drawing of a scenic landscape cannot be compared with actually being in that glorious location. Actually being in a magical environment is a much more profound experience, for all of one's senses are involved in it.

The parashah continues (*Devarim* 4:41), "**Then** Moshe set aside three cities on the bank of the Jordan, toward the rising sun." We might interpret these words with a novel approach: The word "then" hints to the future, as we find in the pasuk (*Shemot* 15:1), "**Then** Moshe and the

Children of Israel chose to sing,” which refers to the future song of *techiyat hameitim* (*Sanhedrin* 91b). Moshe was hinting that if Bnei Yisrael did not fulfill the mitzvot properly, they might in the future descend to the level of becoming unintentional murderers, having to flee to the cities of refuge. An accidental murder indicates a lack in the perpetrator’s mitzvah observance. This is because keeping mitzvot punctiliously, with all of their details, protects one from sinning, even unintentionally. Conversely, when one is not careful in keeping mitzvot, Hashem removes His supervision from him, and he eventually sins, albeit unintentionally, like the unintentional murderer who was forced to flee to the city of refuge.

Moshe yearned to enter Eretz Yisrael. He wanted to return the glory to the seemingly insignificant mitzvot, thereby bringing pleasure to his Creator.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ How could Hashem deny Moshe the right to enter the Land after he had dedicated his life for Am Yisrael? Moreover, Hashem told him to cease his supplications. Also, why didn’t Moshe suffice with gazing at the Land from afar, but wanted to see it up close, agreeing to enter even in the form of a bird?
- ◆ Hashem refused Moshe’s request, for He knew it was neither to his benefit nor to the benefit of the generation that he enter. Hashem knew that were Moshe to enter the Land, he would build the Beit Hamikdash, which would be indestructible. When Am Yisrael would sin, He would have no recourse but to cast His wrath upon His children. In His infinite mercy, He denied Moshe this right. Whatever Hashem does is good, even if we cannot perceive it as such. Therefore, one must thank Hashem for the seeming bad as he thanks for the good. No tefillah goes lost; each one accomplishes great things.
- ◆ Moshe requested to enter the Land and to see it up close. One cannot compare the reward for actively doing a mitzvah with the reward for

merely learning about the mitzvah. Moshe aspired to do everything in the best way possible. Therefore, he longed to enter the Land and physically perform the land-related mitzvot. The words “עקב תשמעון – When you hearken to these ordinances” refer to the relatively simple mitzvot which one tramples with his heel (עקב). Moshe told Bnei Yisrael that by being punctilious even in the seemingly small mitzvot, they would appreciate their value and perform them to perfection.

- ◆ “Then Moshe set aside three cities (of refuge).” Moshe was hinting that if Bnei Yisrael were not careful in their mitzvah performance, Hashem would remove His supervision from them, and they would sin, albeit unintentionally, like the unintentional murderer, who was not careful enough in his mitzvah observance.



Why Was Yerushalayim Destroyed?

“Now, O Israel, listen to the decrees and to the ordinances that I teach you to perform, so that you may live, and you will come and possess the Land that Hashem, the G-d of your forefathers, gives you”

(Devarim 4:1)

Parashat *Va’etchanan* is read immediately after Tishah b’Av, the day we mourn the destruction of the two Temples and lament the exile as we read Megillat *Eichah*.

Hashem made a condition with Bnei Yisrael. As long as they go on the path of Torah and mitzvot, they will merit living in the Holy Land in security and tranquility. But if, *chalilah*, they stray after the ways of the nations, weakening their Torah study, their end will be grave, and the land will disgorge them. Not only must we be scrupulous to keep the mitzvot

in all their intricacies, but it is forbidden to add or detract from any mitzvah, as the pasuk states (*Devarim* 4:2), “You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor shall you subtract from it.”

Torah is the potion of life. Just as a sick man takes his medication according to his doctor’s orders, never daring to increase or decrease the dosage, so too, must we adhere to the Torah’s instructions, the remedy for all ills, without deviating one iota in either direction.

After the first Beit Hamikdash was destroyed, the Sages asked Hashem (*Yirmeyahu* 9:11; see *Nedarim* 91a), “For what reason did the Land perish?” Hashem replied, “Because of their forsaking My Torah.” How could this be? This was a generation of prophets and tzaddikim, an era when the Sanhedrin sat in the *Lishkat Hagazit* and held court according to Torah law. How is it possible to attribute the *churban* to *bitul* Torah?

As long as the Beit Hamikdash stood, ten miracles were apparent. Whoever observed them was filled with pure faith in Hashem. Some of these miracles were (*Avot* 5:5): No woman miscarried because of the aroma of the sacrificial meat; the sacrificial meat never became putrid; no fly was seen in the place where the meat was butchered, even though there was an abundance of meat and blood; the rains did not extinguish the fire on the altar-pyre; the wind did not disperse the vertical column of smoke from the altar; no snake ever bit a person in Yerushalayim. The aroma of the incense was carried throughout Yerushalayim, to the extent that women found perfume superfluous (*Yoma* 39b). When Bnei Yisrael made their festival pilgrimages to Yerushalayim, they would stand crowded together and bow with ample space between them. No one ever said, “The space is insufficient for me to stay overnight in Yerushalayim.”

It is mind-boggling to contemplate how Bnei Yisrael could abandon the Torah in spite of the great miracles they experienced.

Certainly they were connected to Hashem’s Torah. But Hashem had a grievance toward them. According to their exalted level, they should have adhered to the Torah even more closely, for they were given the power to do this. If a person fails to utilize his G-d-given strengths to advance in

his Avodat Hashem, he is charged seriously. Hashem demands to know why he did not employ the energies he was given to reach the level he was capable of reaching.

Ovadhah Hanavi is a prime example of one who was surrounded by wickedness. He lived during the days of Achav and Izevel, who encouraged the nation to worship idols. But he remained steadfast in his faith. In contrast, Eisav is called a rasha because he was raised in an environment of *kedushah*, living in the proximity of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, yet he defected, refusing to learn from their ways (see *Sanhedrin* 39b).

A rasha who lives among tzaddikim is held more culpable than one who lives with his ilk. Conversely, the reward reserved for the tzaddik who remains righteous in spite of his wicked neighbors is much greater than that of the tzaddik who lives with G-d-fearing individuals. When Hashem told the Sages that the *churban* came on account of neglect of Torah, it was relative to their potential. These people had witnessed tremendous miracles on a daily basis. They should have come closer to Hashem than they did. But because they did not aspire to reach greater heights in Torah and *yirah*, they were held accountable.

There is no remaining stagnant in Avodat Hashem. If one is not climbing uphill, he is slipping precipitously downward.

In the days of old, the strongest *Yetzer Hara* was the pull toward idol worship. Even great and wise people were drawn to serve all types of foreign gods (see *Sanhedrin* 102b). It is difficult for us to comprehend how someone with a minimum of common sense could feel fulfillment from bowing to a dead piece of wood. But in those days, the *Yetzer Hara's* magnetic pull lured them from their logic and good sense. The only way to extricate themselves from its net was through clinging to Torah and mitzvot. Hashem alone manages the world, with no assistance whatsoever. As soon as Bnei Yisrael slackened in their Torah study, they were enticed to serve foreign deities. Their allegiance to Hashem had become adulterated.

We do not have the *Yetzer Hara* for idol worship. But the streets are full of temptations. People pursue money, honor, and women. Kohelet states (7:14), "G-d has made this one as well as the other." Just as there is a strong pull toward sin, so is there a pull toward purity, manifest in the plethora of kollelim and yeshivot. This is a relatively new phenomenon, uncommon in previous generations. Batei Midrashot are sprouting up in the most unlikely of places, like Alaska and Japan, where one can find a minyan for the daily tefillot. Conversely, venues and "sites" promoting immorality are rampant. There is a constant battle between the forces of good and evil. Our adherence to Torah study loosens the grip of the powers of evil. But when there is a weakening in Torah study, *chalilah*, the negative forces gain strength to continue their malevolent machinations.

Before the Iron Curtain was pulled down in Communist Russia, women had to go to the frozen rivers to immerse themselves. With utmost *mesirut nefesh*, they had to steal outside and literally break the ice to submerge in the freezing waters. In contrast, nowadays, we are blessed with beautiful *mikvaot*, which contain every type of luxury and convenience. No longer is tremendous exertion and self-sacrifice demanded of the Jewish woman in this area. No longer do women worry lest they contract pneumonia from the icy waters. Immersing in a kosher *mikveh* is one of a woman's three primary mitzvot (see *Shabbat* 32a, b). One who is lazy or negligent in this area is held accountable. Let every woman see to it that she does not forfeit this important and precious mitzvah, one of the basic foundations of our nation.

In the days of the Beit Hamikdash, Bnei Yisrael were held culpable. They were expected to employ their powers for the sake of elevating themselves. They should have advanced their service of Hashem by utilizing their spiritual gifts for Hashem's sake. Their decision to remain in place tore them away from the Torah and lured them after *avodah zarah*.

After one dies, he will be called to the Heavenly Court, where he will have to give an accounting for all of his deeds on earth. A handsome man

who followed his evil inclination will be questioned, “Were you handsomer than Yosef Hatzaddik? In spite of being away from his father’s home, and all of the challenges he faced, he remained steadfast to his faith.” A wealthy man, who claims that his business pulled him away from Torah study, will be told, “Were you richer than Rabbi Elazar ben Charsum? The glitter of his gold never blinded him to Hashem’s Torah.” A pauper who resorted to stealing will be asked, “Were you poorer than Hillel Hazakein, who lived in dire squalor? He kept his hands and heart unsullied with others’ money, and dedicated all of his days to Torah” (see *Yoma* 35b).

If he will respond, “Do you think I was on the level of Yosef Hatzaddik, Rabbi Elazar ben Charsum, and Hillel Hazakein? They were tremendous tzaddikim, pillars of the world, much greater than I could ever imagine becoming,” Hashem will have a ready reply: “Did you ever endeavor reaching their lofty heights?” How could someone claim he was not on the level of the giants of our nation, if he never strived to reach it? If a person does not aspire to reach the peak of the mountain, he certainly will not even touch its base.

Chazal relate (*Yerushalmi, Yoma* 1:1) that every generation which did not see the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash is considered to have experienced its destruction. How can we understand this? Had we been worthy, Hashem would have built the Beit Hamikdash. If Yerushalayim remains in ruins, it is an indication that we still have sins on our hands. Had the Beit Hamikdash been standing, Hashem would surely have destroyed it. Therefore, we must comply with the exhortation (*Eichah* 3:40), “Let us search and examine our ways.” It is incumbent upon us to investigate why we have not yet merited Hashem’s *Shechinah* in our midst.

I was once asked why previous generations would lament the *churban* with abundant weeping, whereas we seem to have hearts of stone, unable to extract a few tears over it. Our generation is, unfortunately, familiar with suffering and sickness. Wouldn’t it seem natural for us to mourn the Mikdash, crying copiously for Hashem’s salvation?

I think the reason for our indifference rests in the fact that Tishah b'Av is followed immediately by the days of Bein Hazmanim, days of leisure and relaxation from the daily grind of regular routine. We are very organized and like to plan our activities in advance. Therefore, from Rosh Chodesh Av, each family is deep in preparation for this period. How can we mourn the *churban* in the proper frame of mind, when our minds are on airline tickets, and the road maps to the resort hotel are in our pockets? How can we feel the suffering of the *Shechinah* when our heads are filled with all types of programs and projects?

Let's face the facts. We cannot change the world. But let us at least attempt to focus on the sorrow of the *churban* and remove our minds from all thoughts of the upcoming vacation. If we concentrate solely on the suffering of the day, we will be able to feel the tremendous anguish of the *churban* and the exile of the *Shechinah*.

There is a source (*Orach Chaim* 559) for reading the parashah of *Ha'azinu* instead of *Az Yashir* on Tishah b'Av. *Az Yashir*, the Song of the Sea, expresses deep joy at Bnei Yisrael's crossing the sea on dry land, when their enemies perished before their eyes. Parashat *Ha'azinu*, on the other hand, is read on the High Holy Days, for it arouses the heart to do teshuvah. For this reason, it is read on Tishah b'Av as well. Contemplating this parashah, on the one hand guaranteeing wealth and blessing for going in the way of Torah and mitzvot, and, conversely, promising sorrow and suffering for going astray, will awaken us to repent our sins. Tishah b'Av will be transformed into a festive day, as the *Navi* says (*Eichah* 1:15), "He proclaimed a set time (מועד) against me." The term "a set time" (מועד) refers to festive days. Additionally, just as on the festivals, we do not recite *tachanun* on Tishah b'Av (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 559:4). May we merit seeing the fulfillment of these words in our day.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Parashat *Va'etchanan* is read immediately after Tishah b'Av. Hashem delineates all the mitzvot which Bnei Yisrael must be punctilious in observing.

- ◆ The Sages asked Hashem why Eretz Yisrael was destroyed. He replied that it was because the people forsook His Torah. How can we understand that a generation of prophets and tzaddikim weakened their Torah study, especially when they witnessed all the wonderful miracles of the Beit Hamikdash?
- ◆ Hashem held Bnei Yisrael accountable for not sufficiently adhering to the Torah. They should have utilized all their resources for the sake of Torah study, the antidote for the *Yetzer Hara*. Because they did not, they stumbled in the sin of idolatry.
- ◆ Parashat *Ha'azinu* is read on Tishah b'Av, instead of *Az Yashir*. It is also read during the High Holy Days, for it can arouse the heart to do teshuvah. Likewise, it can awaken us to do teshuvah on Tishah b'Av, converting this day into one of joy.



Clinging to Hashem

“But you who cling to Hashem, your G-d – you are all alive today”

(Devarim 4:4)

Chazal ask (*Sotah* 14a) how Hashem can ask us to cling to Him, as He is compared to an all-consuming fire. What Hashem wants of us is to emulate His *middot*. Just as He is merciful and compassionate, so should we be. Just as He is long-suffering and kindly, so should we be. A human being, by definition, is limited both by his physical condition and the *Yetzer Hara* beating inside of him. In contrast, Hashem is omnipotent and unbounded. His qualities, too, are quintessential and perfect. How, then, can we, a mixture of spirituality and materialism, be expected to cling to His ways, which are purely holy and spiritual?

Let us answer with an examination of *Matan Torah*. The pasuk states (*Shemot* 19:20), “Hashem descended upon Har Sinai.” Hashem came down, in His full glory, to Har Sinai, in order to grant Am Yisrael the Torah. Why wasn't it enough for Moshe to ascend to Heaven in order to bring down the Torah?

It is to teach us that Torah is no longer in Heaven. Although Moshe had to ascend in order to obtain it, after he brought it down to us, it became our acquisition. Whoever wishes, may partake of it. In order to implant this knowledge into our consciousness, Hashem Himself descended upon the mountain. Torah's residence is now on earth, no longer Above. As Hashem descended to tell the nation the Ten Commandments, Moshe would deliver the entire Torah into their hands.

After 120 years, a person will be asked why he did not study Torah (*Yoma* 35b). All of his excuses will be challenged, for there were others more challenged than he, who succeeded admirably in upholding the Torah (see above, *Why Was Yerushalayim Destroyed*).

By giving the Torah on Har Sinai, Hashem gave over the following message. Each and every Jew is capable and expected to study Torah, everyone according to his level. By descending to the mountain Himself, together with the Torah, Hashem connected the Lower Worlds with the Upper Worlds, bequeathing to us the ability to cling to His ways by emulating Him. Thus we are able to optimally fulfill the injunction, “But you who cling to Hashem, your G-d – you are all alive today.”

After Hashem proclaimed (*Shemot* 20:2), “I am Hashem,” the *neshamot* of Bnei Yisrael departed heavenward. Hashem revived them with the dew of life (*Shabbat* 88b). In those moments of death, their *neshamot* returned to their sources, cleaving to the *Shechinah*. They had an out-of-body experience, literally clinging to their Creator.

The letters of the word ואתם (but you) can be transposed to spell the word ואמת (and truth). The way to fulfill the command of cleaving to Hashem is by means of clinging to the Torah, the pure truth. Commensurate with one's steadfastness to Torah is his adherence to

Hashem. Torah is a smelting furnace, purifying one's *middot* and fusing them with Hashem's. One who takes care to be of those "who cling to Hashem, your G-d," will merit, "you are all alive today." He will live in this world and will gain a portion of eternity in the World to Come.

One who remains aloof from Torah has no life in this world. People come to me from all over the world. Time and again, they pour their hearts out to me. These are people who seem to be graced with all the blessings available in this world. But as soon as the veil of externality is removed, their lives are unmasked for what they really are. Their marriages are in shambles, and they cannot enjoy their wealth. Our Sages state (*Avot* 2:7), "The more possessions, the more worries." I have heard of wealthy individuals who shower their money on psychologists and psychiatrists, who try as hard as they can to extricate them from their state of depression.

Conversely, one who deals with the merchandise of Torah, which is more precious than gold and pearls, casts his worries upon Hashem and trusts Him to sustain him. He is free of all concerns. He has the means with which to live life in this world to the hilt, not to mention reserving a place for himself in the World to Come, together with the tzaddikim of old.

When Moshe ascended to Heaven, the angels wished to burn him alive (*Shabbat* 88b). He asked Hashem for protection. Hashem replied, "Grasp My Throne, and respond to them." How was Moshe unafraid of touching the Heavenly Throne? Hashem was hinting to him that when one "grasps the Heavenly Throne," with the image of Yaakov, the symbol of Torah, engraved upon it, he has nothing to fear. All prosecutions fall by the wayside, and no force can harm him. The words, "But you who cling to Hashem, your G-d – you are all alive today" teach us that the road to life is the path of clinging to Torah. Moshe understood this message and was therefore filled with confidence as he held onto the Heavenly Throne. One whose aspiration is to acquire Torah is not afraid to hold on to Hashem's Throne, the Torah of protection.

When the angels saw Moshe grasping the Heavenly Throne, they grasped that he possessed the power of Torah, and they would be unable to harm him in any way. Not only did they do him no damage, they revealed to him secrets of the Torah. Even the Angel of Death revealed to him the secrets of the *ketoret*, which is capable of halting an epidemic (*Shabbat* 99a).

Moshe transmitted the message that in order to attach oneself to Torah and the *middot* of Hashem, one must grasp His Heavenly Throne. In this manner, he is spared from all harm. If Moshe managed to be saved from the angels of destruction in the merit of Torah, all the more so will we be saved from all who rise against us if we cling to Torah and mitzvot.

Every person who comes into this world is gifted with specific skills, which enable him to cling to Hashem. Everyone has the ability to connect to Torah and is given the conditions to actualize this potential, whether through wealth or poverty, health or illness. After a person dies, he will be called by Hashem to examine whether or not he delivered the goods. Did he study Torah to the extent of his ability? If one merited to reach his potential in this world, he will deserve the accolade (*Pesachim* 50a), "Fortunate is the man who arrives here with his learning in hand." But if, *chalilah*, he defected from his duty, involving himself with materialism instead of spiritual matters, he will pay the price.

Hashem descended on the mountain to transmit the message to one and all: Torah is here, belonging to all of Am Yisrael alike. Therefore, everyone is obligated to cling to Torah, according to his ability. Those who grasp hold of Hashem's Throne will merit life in this world as well as in the World to Come, as we are told, "You are all alive today."

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The pasuk says, "But you who cling to Hashem." How can a person cling to Hashem, Who is an all-consuming fire? We are obligated to emulate His *middot*. It is still difficult to understand how we can be expected to

be like Hashem, Who is completely holy, when we are a mixture of the holy and the mundane.

- ◆ This question can be resolved in the words preceding *Matan Torah*, “Hashem descended upon Har Sinai.” Hashem brought His Presence down to the mountain to prove to everyone that Torah is no longer in Heaven. We have the Torah with us; whoever wishes, may partake of it. Each person is required to utilize the tools at his disposal in order to advance in spiritual matters, not dodging his duty with all types of excuses.
- ◆ Hashem’s descent upon the mountain enables us to emulate His *middot*. Furthermore, when Hashem proclaimed, “I am Hashem,” the *neshamot* of the nation departed and cleaved to Hashem. This, too, injected us with the ability to cling to His *middot*.
- ◆ The letters of the word **וְאַתָּם** (but you) can be transposed to spell the word **וְאִמְרָת** (and truth). One who clings to the truth of Torah fulfills the verse, “But you who cling to Hashem, your G-d,” and merits the promise of “You are all alive today.” He will merit life in this world as well as in the World to Come.
- ◆ The angels wanted to burn Moshe with the steam of their mouths. Hashem told Moshe to grasp His Holy Throne and respond to them. He was not afraid to do this. He understood that whoever holds on to the Holy Throne, the symbol of Torah, merits the Torah’s protection from all harm.



It Is Forbidden to Forget Torah

“Only beware for yourself and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have beheld”

(Devarim 4:9)

From here we learn that one who forgets what he learned transgresses two prohibitions (*Menachot* 99b).

This is very puzzling. How can one be forbidden from forgetting? Isn't forgetting a natural process? Is it a crime to forget something over time? There is a specific command to remember what Amalek did to our people. The pasuk states (*Devarim* 25:17), “Remember what Amalek did to you.” Hashem understands that we need a command to remember, for man's natural inclination is to forget. There are other mitzvot to which this applies.

I would like to explain with the words of Rav Shach, zy”a, which he delivered in his yeshiva before the *chag* of *Matan Torah*. Hashem, so to speak, reduced His glory in this world, thereby hiding His reality from us. He is called שדי, an acronym of the phrase שאמר לעולמו די (He said “Enough” to His world) (*Chagigah* 12a). Rav Shach explained that although Hashem reduced His glory in this world, He did not minimize His existence in Torah. In Torah, Hashem is generally not called by the name שדי, because He never said “Enough” to Torah.

There is no limit to the obligation to study Torah, for the Torah cannot be measured. The tzaddikim throughout the generations dedicated their days as well as their nights to Torah study. The Maharsha would immerse his feet in a bucket of cold water to keep himself from falling asleep. Rabbi David ben Chazan, zt”l, the *chavruta* of my grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy”a, would tie his *payot* to two nails in the wall of the Beit Hamidrash, to keep his head erect.

Torah is limitless and cannot be measured. Something which is significant is not easily forgotten. A person does not forget the names of his wife or children. The importance of Torah warrants remembering it. Torah is paramount; certainly one would not naturally forget it. Only one who makes light of it, *chalilah*, or does not appreciate its value, is liable to forget it, thereby transgressing a prohibition.

Torah is our very essence. Our Sages teach (see *Tanna D'Vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 26) that before praying for Torah to enter him, one should ensure that delicacies stay out. A person never forgets his name. The truth is that the Torah that one ingests provides a lining of sorts for him. It protects him from overindulgence, which is likely to pull him to the depths of doom (see *Kiddushin* 30b).

Once on a flight, I sat near a gentile. When the meal was being served, my kosher meal did not come. Of course, I wouldn't touch the non-kosher food that everyone else was enjoying. My seatmate looked at me somewhat perplexed. He asked why I wasn't eating, and I told him that I am a Jew, and Jews eat only kosher food. He still could not fathom why I wouldn't go near the non-kosher food. It was very tasty, he assured me. I realized that a gentile, accustomed to chasing every pleasure and temptation, could not understand what force was holding me back from eating. But I am a Jew. Every Torah-observant Jew teaches himself that there are forbidden fruits which may not be eaten or enjoyed. The Torah shields us from these things, providing help in overcoming various inappropriate desires.

I heard of a prominent scientist who lives in England. His entire body is paralyzed, save for one pinky. With this finger he types his insights and thoughts. A new investigation of his was recently released. He states that it is dangerous for man to live on Earth. Man's natural habitat, he opines, is on one of the stars in outer space. When I heard this, I was greatly shocked. How can a distinguished scientist spout such nonsense?! This world contains air, water, and food, all necessary for man's survival. If it is dangerous to live here, how much more dangerous is it to live in outer space, where the basics of life are not met. But this is the opinion of a

gentile who never tasted the taste of Torah and has not relished its sweetness. He is incapable of appreciating the wonders this world has to offer. Only here is one able to observe Torah and mitzvot, as the *Tanna* so eloquently states (*Avot* 4:17), “Better one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than the entire life of the World to Come.”

On another trip, from Argentina to New York, an Argentinean priest found his seat near mine. In general, I sit together with my escort, but the Satan arranged for our seats to be apart, and no one agreed to change their seat for us. For the duration of the ten-hour trip, this priest touched me, as if to defile me. Not interested in rubbing shoulders with such travel companions, I tried to think in words of Torah and spend time in prayer. Every so often, I would glance his way, finding him steeped in offensive literature. Whenever a stewardess passed, he interacted with her. I thought to myself of the duplicity of it all. Priests do not marry because they allegedly abstain from the pleasures of this world. Here before me was a man of the cloth, pursuing physicality in a most ignominious and shameful manner. We Jews do not even touch a strange woman when passing something to her. The Torah protects our bodies as well as our souls from low and lewd lusts. For this reason alone, it paid for me to sit near the priest. This experience taught me (*Shmuel* II, 7:23), “Who is like Your people, Israel, a unique nation on earth.”

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ There is a specific prohibition against forgetting words of Torah, which we learn from the pasuk “Only beware for yourself... lest you forget.”
- ◆ How can one be commanded not to forget? Isn't forgetting a natural tendency?
- ◆ Rav Shach, zt"l, said that Hashem is called **יְדוּשׁ**, because He said “Enough” to His world. But He did not say “Enough” regarding the Torah. There were Torah giants who learned during the night, as well as the day. The Maharsha would immerse his feet in cold water, and Rabbi David Chazan, zy"va, would tie his *payot* to the walls, to keep from falling asleep.

- ◆ Torah is limitless and is therefore immeasurable. Something significant is not forgotten, like the names of one's wife and children. Torah should be paramount in our lives. Therefore, we should never forget it.
- ◆ A great scientist claims that it is dangerous to live on Earth. But he never tasted the sweet taste of Torah, so he cannot fathom that "better one hour... in this world than the entire life of the World to Come."
- ◆ I once sat next to a priest on a flight. He sought physical pleasures in a most shameful way. In contrast, "Who is like Your people, Israel, a unique nation on earth?!"



Profits of Penitence

"When you are in distress and all these things have befallen you, at the end of days, you will return unto Hashem, your G-d, and hearken to His voice"

(Devarim 4:30)

"One who covers an offense seeks love; but one who harps on the matter alienates a ruler [from himself]"

(Mishlei 17:9)

Hashem seeks the love of His Chosen Nation. Since man sins, according to the strict letter of justice, love cannot rest between Hashem and His nation. What does He do? He waits patiently, covering up their sins, so that peace and love can reign between them. A person will be judged for every single moment of his life (see *Rosh Hashanah* 16a). In the Heavenly Court, one will be shown everything he did throughout his life. This will

not be an overall scanning of his days and weeks, but a detailed account of every single second of his life. Whoever says that Hashem overlooks will have his life overlooked (*Bava Kama* 50a). Hashem punishes those who transgress His word. But because He yearns for closeness with His nation, He does not penalize them immediately after they sin. He holds back His anger, in the hope that they will repent their ways and return to Him.

A person who has an open wound will bandage his arm. This does not remove the wound, but hides it. Only after applying ointments and allowing the wound to heal, will it return to its former state. This is the meaning of the phrase, “One who covers an offense.” Hashem, so to speak, looks away from our sins. In this manner, love can rest between Him and His nation.

Whoever wishes to return to his Maker can easily do so. The ways to teshuvah are known to all. All one needs is the desire to do it. My teacher, the Gaon, Rabbi Shammai Zohn, zt”l, once asked the following: The Torah describes the cities of refuge at length and impresses upon the nation the importance of maintaining the roads and signs leading to these cities, in order to expedite the trip of the unintentional murderer, to spare him the dangers of the victim’s relatives (*Makkot* 10b). However, why does the Torah go to such lengths regarding the cities of refuge, while not explaining or guiding the nation on the road to Yerushalayim? The Torah commands us to make a pilgrimage to the Beit Hamikdash three times a year. Yerushalayim is the place where the *Shechinah* dwelt.

We might say that the cities of refuge were more significant than Yerushalayim, as they were delineated clearly, whereas Yerushalayim is merely hinted at, as the pasuk states (*Devarim* 12:5), “Rather, only at the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose from among all your tribes to place His Name there shall you seek out His Presence and come there.”

I would like to suggest the following: Whoever seeks to cling to *kedushah* does not need directions. Within every Jew beats a wise heart, directing him to the proper place of sanctity. He cannot claim that he

does not know how to get there. The holiness of Yerushalayim draws all who wish to come close to it with its magnetic force. Conversely, the Torah warns Bnei Yisrael regarding the need to repair the roads leading to the cities of refuge in order to prevent future bloodshed.

Hashem tells His children that He loves them, and therefore delays their punishment. But those who hold on to their sins, neglecting to do complete teshuvah, stating that Hashem overlooks faults, or that the road to teshuvah is unclear to them, will incur His wrath. The keys to teshuvah were placed in the hands of mankind, who are therefore capable of doing teshuvah whenever they wish.

A wealthy magnate, with holdings throughout the world, once asked me where it would be worthwhile for him to invest his money. He had various options and wanted to know which the best one was. I told him that his coming to me for advice was a farce. He was acting as though he sought counsel with me, when, in truth, only a businessman could know what would be the best investment. Even if I would advise him one way, I was sure he would end up doing what he saw fit, feeling that he was more knowledgeable.

The *neshamah*, with its source on High, knows full well what the best investments are. Even though the *Yetzer Hara* constantly tries to make man veer from the proper path, the *neshamah* knows which road to take. One must overthrow his *Yetzer Hara* with the understanding that the *neshamah*, carved from on High, knows its place in this world.

In the *Kedushah* of Tefillat Musaf, we say, "Where is the place of His glory to venerate Him?" The entire world is filled with His glory (*Yeshayahu* 6:3). Whoever wishes to return to Him is invited to do so. Hashem is found everywhere. Nobody can evade teshuvah, claiming that he does not know how to repent. There are days more auspicious for teshuvah, when Hashem is closer to those who call out to Him in truth (see *Yevamot* 49b). But this does not mean that teshuvah is impossible during the rest of the year. It just indicates that immediately before Yom Kippur, Hashem does a special kindness with His people and grants them

a unique opportunity, which cannot be exchanged for all the gold in the world. It is the opportunity of teshuvah. A Jew who shows no interest in doing teshuvah will pay the price with interest.

The *Navi* Amos proclaims (3:8), “A lion has roared; who will not fear?” A visit to the zoo is incomplete without visiting the lion’s cage and watching it roar. One may enjoy this roar, since it is the sound of an animal behind bars. On the other hand, were a person to hear a lion roaring outside his front door, he would be paralyzed with fear. As the Day of Judgment approaches, the feeling of fright must enter our hearts, as though a lion was crouching outside our front door.

A man once asked me what he had to rectify in his lifetime. He thought Hashem was pretty pleased with him; after all, He sustained him and provided all his needs. Had He been displeased with him, wouldn’t He have his life cut short? I told this man he was making a serious mistake. True, Hashem is long-suffering and is now covering up his sins. But the day will come when this man will exceed the limit. Hashem’s wrath will then boil over, and he will be seriously scalded. Therefore, I told him, he should hurry to improve his ways now, before it is too late.

The correct way to repent is through the study of *mussar*. Even a few minutes a day of *mussar* study will subdue man’s heart and point him in the right direction. When I was a young man, my teacher, the Gaon, Rabbi Gershon Liebman, zt”l, said that the trait of arrogance is the source of all sin. He would weep as he repeated to himself (*Mishlei* 16:5), “Every haughty heart is the abomination of Hashem.” Arrogance removes the feeling of being in Hashem’s hands and the obligation to fulfill His wishes. As soon as a person feels, “Only I and none but me,” (*Yeshayahu* 47:8), he has no room in his heart for his Father in Heaven.

Chazal tell us (*Makkot* 10b), “Man is led in the way he wishes to go.” If one demonstrates that he wishes to come close to Hashem, this desire will bring him there.

In Summary

- ◆ Hashem yearns for our love. He covers up our sins in the hope that we will repent. Only after one has exceeded the limit of sin, is he punished.
- ◆ Why were the paths to the cities of refuge publicized, whereas the paths to the holy city of Yerushalayim, the center of the world, where we were commanded to ascend three times a year, were not? The *kedushah* of Yerushalayim is felt by the heart of every Jew. Whoever wishes to ascend can simply follow the stirrings of his heart. We do not need signs to point us to Yerushalayim.
- ◆ Just as the road to Yerushalayim was known to all, so is the road to teshuvah. Therefore, no one can exempt himself from the command to do teshuvah, claiming he does not know the way.
- ◆ One should fear his sins as one fears a lion crouching outside his front door. He should hurry to do teshuvah as soon as possible, so that he does not, *chalilah*, exceed the limit of sin.



The End of Days

“When you are in distress and all these things have befallen you, at the end of days, you will return unto Hashem, your G-d, and hearken to His voice”

(Devarim 4:30)

This pasuk indicates that the End of Days will prove a difficult time for our people. Through suffering and sorrow, Am Yisrael will return to Hashem and merit the ultimate redemption. The *Nevi'im* describe this era as a most difficult time (*Yechezkel* 38-39; *Zechariah* 14). Before the ultimate redemption, we will undergo the Battle of Gog and Magog. Here

is not the place to describe this battle in detail. But I will just mention that at this war's end, the world will change drastically. Hashem's glory will emerge, as the pasuk states (*Zechariah* 14:9), "Hashem will be King over all the land; on that day, Hashem will be One and His Name will be One."

The word וּשְׁבַת (you will return) contains the letters שְׁבַת (Shabbat). Chazal (*Shabbat* 118b) tell us that were Bnei Yisrael to observe only two Shabbatot, they would immediately be redeemed. The roots of the words תְּשׁוּבָה (teshuvah) and שְׁבַת (Shabbat) are similar. When Bnei Yisrael will repent completely and observe Shabbat properly, the light of Hashem will shine in the world, and He will bring the final redemption.

The world was created in six days, and Hashem rested on the seventh (*Bereishit* 1). The Zohar expounds (II, 161a): Hashem looked into the Torah and created the world. Just like a contractor, *l'havdil*, looks at the architect's blueprint before beginning to build, so does life in this world demand planning. Our blueprint is the holy Torah. The foundation of a building and its skeleton need cement made of sand and water. The cement holding up the world is made of the waters of Torah.

The Zohar states (III, 288b) that Hashem created the world in six days, corresponding to the six thousand years that the world would endure. Each day of Creation is parallel to one thousand years.

One of the tenets of our faith is that Hashem created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, as the pasuk states (*Shemot* 31:17), "On the seventh day He rested and was refreshed." Our Sages teach that after six thousand years, at the beginning of the seven thousandth year, the final *geulah* will come, lasting like one long Shabbat of peace.

There are two methods in which Mashiach can come (*Sanhedrin* 98a). He will either come at the right time, or earlier. If Bnei Yisrael will merit, Hashem will bring the redemption earlier than planned. But if they, *chalilah*, cling to sin, and do not hurry to repent, Mashiach will come only at the time appropriated for it during the six days of Creation, at the beginning of the seven thousandth year.

The significance of the number seven is expressed in many ways in the Torah (*Vayikra Rabbah* 29:11). The festivals of Pesach and Sukkot are celebrated for seven days. A woman counts seven clean days in her purification process. There are seven *berachot* made before a *chatan* and *kallah*, and, *l'havdil*, seven days of mourning the deceased. The *shemittah* year, when the fields remain fallow, is the seventh year. The Jubilee year is the seventh *shemittah* year.

I was once asked why the seventh day of Pesach is called by the special name of Shevi'i Shel Pesach, whereas the other days of this festival are not called the first, second... day of Pesach. This day seems to have a unique feature, for on this day the sea split. Our nation walked on dry land to their status of liberated men. As they observed their enemies floundering in the tumultuous waves, they finally felt the full flavor of freedom. Bnei Yisrael had been so accustomed to the slavery of Egypt that even as their enemies were stricken with plagues, and they themselves were extricated amidst mighty miracles, they still suspected that they might be called back to their backbreaking labor. Only after Hashem drowned the Egyptians, together with their angel, in the depths of the sea, did Bnei Yisrael feel fully free (see *Shemot Rabbah* 21:5). They were even elevated to the level of meriting *ruach hakodesh* (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 240) and crowned Hashem as their King, as we say in the Song of the Sea (*Shemot* 15:18), "Hashem shall reign for all eternity."

The seventh day is a symbol of rest and tranquility, repose for the body and mind. In order to appreciate repose, one must first feel the imposition of labor. This is borne out in the pasuk (*Kohelet* 5:11), "Sweet is the sleep of the laborer." Only one who put in a hard day's work can enjoy the respite that follows. On the other hand, one who seeks to constantly relax gains nothing from his rest. On the contrary, it brings him to idleness and boredom, which impact negatively on him, as Chazal teach (*Avot* 2:2), "Idleness brings to boredom, and boredom brings to sin."

By giving us Shabbat, Hashem granted us an invaluable gift. After six days of sweat and toil, one can relax, enjoying Hashem's world. Having peace of mind on this day, one can earnestly analyze himself. He can

examine his character traits, resolving to improve in those areas that are necessary. This will bring him closer to Hashem. The benefit, then, of Shabbat observance is tremendous. Not only does one indulge his body and his *neshamah*, but he cleaves to Hashem through teshuvah, as the pasuk states (*Devarim* 30:2), “You will return unto Hashem, your G-d.”

Chazal tell us that whoever observes Shabbat is considered to be upholding the entire Torah. This statement needs qualification. Can we say that whoever drinks a cup of water is considered to be drinking all of the waters of the world? Is it correct to postulate that one who donates a coin to charity is considered to be donating all his possessions?

Let us quote another saying of our Sages (see *Shabbat* 119b): “Whoever observes Shabbat is a partner with Hashem in the creation of the world.” This, too, requires explanation. A partnership, by definition, means that two or more people run a business together. Each partner has a holding of a certain percentage of the business. Often, one partner brings the know-how, and the other contributes the funding. By each one contributing his share, the business can succeed. If only one partner supplies the expertise, as well as the backing, we would hardly call that a partnership.

Hashem created the world with wisdom and understanding. How dare we say that one who observes Shabbat becomes a partner with Hashem in Creation, when he has had no part in Creation whatsoever? Moreover, it was Hashem Who created him. It is like saying that a sculpture of clay takes credit for sculpting itself.

Our Sages teach (*Berachot* 33b), “Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven.” All of a person’s feelings and sensations, and whatever happens to him in the course of his life, are directed from Above. Hashem alone decides what will transpire to a person. This is the case regarding all areas of life, except for the level of one’s *yirat Shamayim*. This is left in the hands of a person himself. It is up to him to choose his path in life. Will he increase his fear of Heaven, or, *chalilah*, choose the path of heresy, *rachmana litzlan*? One who observes Shabbat

testifies that *yirat Hashem* and *emunah* beat in his heart. He believes with perfect faith that Hashem created the world in six days and rested on the seventh.

Thus, one's *yirat Shamayim* is his contribution to the partnership called Creation. Now we might resolve our question as to why one who observes Shabbat is considered as upholding the entire Torah. Hashem created the world according to the instructions of the Torah (*Bereishit Rabbah* 1:1). Shabbat is a concentration, as it were, of all the six days of Creation. Therefore, when one observes Shabbat, he is attesting to the fact that the Torah is the blueprint of Creation. He is therefore considered to be observing all of the Torah.

When Hashem sees a person intent on keeping Shabbat, He wishes to fortify this partnership. He does this by means of hastening the *geulah*. Shabbat is actually the beginning of the *geulah*. This is borne out by the saying of Chazal (*Shabbat* 118b), "Were Bnei Yisrael to keep but two Shabbatot, they would be immediately redeemed."

We began by stating that before the arrival of Mashiach ben David, the Battle of Gog and Magog will take place. The commentaries have different opinions of the meaning of this battle, but they all agree that it will occur at the End of Days. We see the stirrings of this in our day. Money is scarce, chutzpah is abundant, a *kallah* rises up against her mother-in-law, and a son rebels against his father. Things that were unheard of just a few generations ago are transpiring before our eyes. Our *Chachamim* have unequivocally stated that we are living in the End of Days.

The initials of the phrase **אחרית הימים** (End of Days), adding one for the phrase itself, is numerically equivalent to seven. This is the seven thousandth year, when Mashiach ben David will appear. The last letters of the phrase **אחרית הימים** spell **תם** (ended). These difficult days are coming to an end. After this era, Hashem will reveal His great light and rest His *Shechinah* among Am Yisrael. Just as the seventh day comes after six days of work and sweat, so too, after six thousand years of exile and

evil decrees, the seven thousandth year will herald the *Shabbat Shabbaton*, a Shabbat purely for Hashem.

The *Navi* Amos says (8:11), “Behold, days are coming – the word of the Lord Hashem/ Elokim – when I will send hunger into the land; not a hunger for bread nor a thirst for water, but to hear the words of Hashem.” This prophecy is being fulfilled before our very eyes. People who are obviously not affiliated with the camp of Torah-observant Jews approach me. Their *neshamot* are parched, and they seek the revitalizing waters of Torah. A deep feeling of repentance overcomes them. This is in line with the pasuk in parashat *Va'etchanan* (4:30), “You will return unto Hashem, your G-d, and hearken to His voice.” Whenever I initiate a mitzvah that they should take upon themselves, something which will draw more mitzvot in its wake, they respond positively, without hesitation. This attests to their strong thirst for Hashem’s word.

Looking back thirty years, I remember that in Lyon, France, there was one small kosher grocery. Only one small school provided religious education in the spirit of Torah. Today, a mere few decades later, there are fifteen Batei Midrashot in Lyon, three Torah schools, twenty *mikvaot*, and more Jewish institutions. Examining various locations in the world will reveal that Hashem’s light is spreading across the globe. There is no place untouched. Even faraway Alaska boasts a new *mikveh*.

Just like perfume can be smelled from a distance, the scent of Mashiach is in the air. One who does not smell it has a stuffed nose. There is a distinct separation between truth and falsehood. Whereas truth is compared to a sturdy chair with four solid legs, falsehood is like a rickety chair, leaning on one or two legs. For this reason, the pasuk begins (*Devarim* 4:30), “When you are in distress and all these things have befallen you, at the end of days,” and ends, “you will return unto Hashem, your G-d, and hearken to His voice.” The sorrow and suffering, an intrinsic part of the End of Days, will awaken Am Yisrael, wherever they may be, to return to Hashem. This will hasten the arrival of Mashiach ben David.

In Summary

- ◆ The word **ושבת** (you will return) is similar to the word **שבת** (Shabbat). Chazal guarantee that if all Bnei Yisrael would observe two Shabbatot, they would be redeemed immediately. Shabbat and teshuvah are intertwined.
- ◆ Hashem created the world in six days, corresponding to the six thousand years of the world's existence. He rested on the seventh day, corresponding to the seven thousandth year, in which Mashiach ben David will arrive. The entire world will be one long Shabbat. If Bnei Yisrael observe Hashem's will, they will merit an early redemption, as promised by the *Navi*, before the seven thousandth year.
- ◆ Chazal tell us that whoever observes Shabbat is considered to be upholding the entire Torah. He is also considered a partner with Hashem in the Creation of the world. What does this mean? "Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven." When one observes Shabbat, he testifies that he has *yirat Shamayim* and *emunah* that Hashem created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. This *yirat Shamayim* is his contribution to the Creation of the world.
- ◆ Shabbat is a concentrated form of the six days of Creation. Whoever observes the Shabbat is considered to be observing the entire Torah, the blueprint of the world. Man's overture at upholding his end of the partnership, by keeping Shabbat, encourages Hashem to keep His part of the deal, by means of accelerating the *geulah*.
- ◆ The initials of the phrase **אחרית הימים** (End of Days), adding one for the phrase itself, are numerically equivalent to seven. This is the seven thousandth year, when Mashiach ben David will appear. The last letters of this phrase spell **תם** (ended). These difficult days are coming to an end. After this era, Hashem will reveal His great light and rest His *Shechinah* among Am Yisrael.



See Who Created These

“You shall know this day and take to your heart that Hashem, He is the G-d – in heaven above and on the earth below – there is none other”

(Devarim 4:39)

Scientists spend so much time in their false practices! They investigate all aspects of Creation – when it took place, how it happened, and the central point from which everything came into being. They waste time and fortunes on resolving these questions. Although their quests and pursuits are an exercise in futility, they have the audacity to call their occupation by the honored title – Science. They succeed in discovering worlds, but just as soon as they feel that they have reached their goal, and know unmistakably exactly when and how the world came into being, they are confronted with and confounded by evidence to the contrary, challenging the premises that they acquired with so much work and sweat. They no longer have a sound basis for their theories.

The world is endless. The more scientists investigate, the more layers they will uncover. The depth of wisdom in the world is as deep as the sea. There is no end to the potential for investigation. But they will never put their finger on the central point, from which life began. These very scientists declare emphatically that the world was created over twelve million years ago. But they have nothing to prove it. As soon as they discover a thread of justification for their ludicrous allegations, it slips from their hands. The endless power of Creation keeps revealing new testimony, time and again, contradicting their previous presumptions.

Their words are nothing but falsehood; at best, hypothesis, with no solid basis. When a person observes the beauty of Hashem's Creation, full of miracles and meaning, he cannot, with all of his wisdom, fathom even the tiniest facet of Creation. The more he tries to understand

Creation, the stronger is his realization that he is so small in comparison with the greatness of Hashem, Who created all this in six days. Why, then, do the scientists refuse to believe that there is a Manager to this world? Why don't they announce before all that their knowledge is limited and that they are incapable of understanding the secrets of Creation? Why don't they admit to a Higher Force, Who created the world and manages it with utmost compassion?

The scientists make themselves into a laughing stock with their contradictory declarations. This happens so often that people have stopped trusting them. It is difficult to understand why they don't just announce before the public that they are too limited to comprehend the secrets of the world, and it is clear that there is a secret Power behind it all.

I had occasion to speak with a top doctor. In the course of the conversation, I mentioned examples of the Torah opinion on scientific issues. As I was talking, I used expressions like, "*Baruch Hashem*," and "*B'ezrat Hashem*," as a matter of habit. The doctor was astounded at the things I told him, amazed at the proofs I brought from Scriptures, regarding various scientific studies. When he heard me mention the Name of Hashem time and again, he turned to me and stated the following. Although he has Jewish roots, he does not believe one iota, and considers himself secular. But I noticed that after I spoke, something didn't sit well with him. I thought that in a short time, he'd own up to his mistaken belief. To my dismay, his *Yetzer Hara* got the better of him. Even though he saw clear evidence to the truth of Torah, as opposed to the emptiness of science, he stood his stance, not agreeing to withdraw any of his previous statements.

Although he has a gentile name and shows no hint of being Jewish, my words made an impression on him, and he admitted it. Originally, he had denied this fact. *Baruch Hashem*, whenever I meet up with him, I see changes in him. He is approaching Judaism. At this point, I discuss the holidays with him, but the road is still long.

I asked myself from where this doctor gets the strength to be so stubborn in his ideas, without admitting to his mistakes. This is similar to all those scientists who often waste enormous amounts of time studying diverse subjects, instead of the Scriptures, from where they could draw absolute truth. Certainly, we owe tremendous thanks to the scientists whose discoveries reveal healing and remedy to the world. Nonetheless, let us not forget that they did not create anything from nothing. Hakadosh Baruch Hu, Who created the world, created the basis for their inventions. Without the knowledge He implanted in them, they could not succeed in any of their endeavors.

While we declare, "How great are Your works, Hashem, You have made all of them with wisdom," the majority of the world of science, locked in their arrogance, is not ready to participate in this proclamation. They raise varied and bizarre notions, without compelling evidence. They have multitudes of proposals, with not even one being founded on absolute truth. Avraham Avinu preceded all scientists. When he was yet a young boy, he explored the world, seeking the Master of it all. Initially, he assumed the sun, which lights up the entire universe, was in charge. But then the sun set at the end of the day, being replaced by the moon. Avraham thought the moon was in authority, having so many forces of light to chase away the gloom of night. As he began serving the moon, he noticed the myriad stars, warriors of the heavens, each with its own name and orbit. He thought these stars were the ones to worship. As he was turning over all these alternatives in his mind, he came to the conclusion that the world, which is so complex and wondrous, could not possibly run itself. There must be a higher, hidden force, which created everything and continues managing it.

Avraham stood before his Creator in tefillah. When Hashem saw that he wanted to recognize the truth, and not deny it, He revealed Himself to him, appointing him as the father of many nations. Why don't scientists do likewise, when they arrive at a dead end in their investigations? Why don't they seek the absolute truth, realizing Who created it all? We see that a person can invest all of his time and energy,

indeed, all of his life, researching the secrets of the world. If he denies the truth that Hakadosh Baruch Hu created the world, his work is of no value, and he will not come to any sound conclusion. In contrast, David Hamelech states (*Tehillim* 8:4), “When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You have set in place.” Further, he states, “How great are Your works, Hashem, You have made all of them with wisdom, the earth is filled with Your acquisitions.” Likewise, Yeshayahu Hanavi (40:26) calls out, “Raise your eyes on high and see Who created these.”

In our day, many scientists contest the words of the charlatan, Darwin. He maintained that man came from the monkey. As evidence, he stated that monkeys and man are similar in genetic makeup, and there is no other creature so like man. This proves that man originated as a monkey. He asserted that in the beginning, the world was swarming with monkeys. Slowly but surely, over the course of many generations, these monkeys developed into people. A very simple question begs to be asked. If the monkey evolved into a person, how is it possible that in our day there are tens of types of monkeys of different breeds and structure that have never progressed further?

There are probably scientists who will claim that not all monkeys evolved into people, only the most important types. The rest remained as they were. Obviously, the entire theory of evolution contradicts, in no uncertain terms, the opinion of the Torah, which states that Hashem created man in His image, and blew into him the breath of life from the Upper Worlds. From the first man, Adam, and his wife, Chava, all of mankind came forth.

Avraham Avinu did not seek **how** the world was created, but, rather, **who** created the world. He did not, for a moment, think that the world was created by itself, or runs on its own. We understand from this that the basis of our belief must be that the world was made by a greater force. The big bang theory or other such nonsense is out of the question. Conversely, modern day scientists do not look for **who** created the world, but rather, **how** it came into being. If they were to admit to a Creator, they

would have to submit to a higher force, one which will take all the credit for any further knowledge gleaned. The Creator is the One Who made it all; they are merely discovering it.

Since scientists crave glory and honor as though they themselves produced that which they discover, they shy away from the question “Who created the world?” This question pulls the rug out from under their feet, when they come to make investigations. Proof of this is the fact that every so often, a new star is discovered, named after the one who discovered it. They portray it as though they were the ones to create it in the first place, when, in actuality, it has been sitting there since the six days of Creation. Only now did man manage to notice it. On the other hand, the Gemara refers to specific stars as “this star,” without giving acclaim to the *Tanna* who discovered it. He knew that the star is a creature of Hashem, not a creation or invention of his own. For what reason should he put his name upon it, when the honor belongs to Hashem?!

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Scientists waste much time asking how the world came into being, when they should, instead, focus on **who** created the world. Every day, new evidence is discovered, contradicting that which was stated previously. Still, they deny a Higher Being, Who manages Creation.
- ◆ Conversely, Avraham Avinu knew, from the beginning, that there is a Master of the world. He went out to search for Him. Hashem saw his earnestness, and revealed Himself to him, appointing him the father of many nations.



I Am Hashem

“I am Hashem, your G-d, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery”

(Devarim 5:6)

When Hashem appeared before Bnei Yisrael on Har Sinai at *Matan Torah*, He began with the words, “I am Hashem, your G-d.” What novel thing was He transmitting to the nation? They had already seen His strength as He struck the Egyptians with the Ten Plagues and redeemed His nation with a mighty arm. After He split the sea, the entire nation proclaimed, “This is my G-d and I will make Him a Sanctuary” (*Shemot* 15:2). Chazal relate (*Mechilta, Parashat Hashirah* 3) that a handmaiden saw at the sea greater revelations than those experienced by the great prophet, Yechezkel ben Buzi. Each member of the nation without exception, from the significant to the simple, recognized the awesome nature of Hashem.

Wandering through the Wilderness was a journey through a world of miracles. Pillars of cloud and fire alternately led the nation, smoothing the bumps in the road and lighting up the darkness. Bnei Yisrael were fed food from heaven, ready and waiting for them to partake of it.

Why did Hashem present Himself before the nation at Har Sinai with the words “I am Hashem, your G-d,” as if introducing Himself for the first time? Bnei Yisrael were well-acquainted with Him and His miracles. Furthermore, they had spent fifty days in preparation for receiving the Torah, each day removing another layer of defilement and entering a gate of purity, coming closer to their Creator, until they merited seeing Him, so to speak.

Let us ask another question regarding the Ten Commandments. Why is the mitzvah to “honor your father and your mother” (*Shemot* 20:12) included here? Only those mitzvot which are central to our nation were

chosen to be written on the Tablets. What role does the mitzvah of honoring one's parents play in our national existence?

With the words "I am Hashem," Hashem was delivering a message, not only to the people gathered there, but for all future generations: Hashem is the King of the world. The Chafetz Chaim states that when a person truly feels the reality of "I am Hashem," all his problems diminish and are perceived in a new light. When a person senses Hashem's Presence with him, he tends to accept whatever happens to him with love, even when times are difficult. When one honestly believes that everything comes from Hashem, he has no complaints. When one understands that Hashem is the true King, he realizes that He does only what is good for him, even when it is incomprehensible.

All our doubts and questions stem from the fact that we are deficient in internalizing the truth of "I am Hashem." Had we taken this statement as a given, we would never have any questions. We would accept all that transpires in our lives with love and tolerance. One should try to keep in mind the first commandment "I am Hashem." Reiterating these words will cause him to incorporate them into his being, and perform mitzvot with greater devotion and depth.

One who blesses Hashem for the seemingly bad just as he blesses for the good demonstrates his understanding that Hashem is in control and knows what is best. Parents know what is best for their children. Although parents must punish their children at times, it is for their benefit, in order to educate them correctly. A child might wonder or even become angry at the smacks that he gets, but when he grows up, he understands the extent of his parents' kindness with him. They did not take pity on him when it was not in place, but put him in his place when it was called for.

My teacher, Rabbi Shammai Zohn, zt"l, was once directed to a certain address in Africa. He was shocked to find a Jew in the midst of learning, with no head-covering. He wondered how a person could behave in such a self-contradictory manner. When asked about this, the man replied, "I do not study Talmud as a Heavenly-mandated mitzvah, but rather as an

intellectual pursuit.” Had this person a trace of feeling for the command “I am Hashem,” he would not have been capable of opening a Gemara without a *kippah* on his head. It is far preferable to keep the Gemara closed than to insult it so brazenly.

When the sense of “I am Hashem” is lacking from one’s Torah study, it is very easy to lose everything. What is the point of studying Torah when one is lacking basic *emunah*? This can be compared to a teacher who preaches to deaf students. He might be the best educator around, but the student’s deafness precludes them from understanding and absorbing the lesson. One who lacks simple faith is a blemished person. Even if he would want, he could not learn Torah properly. Chazal encapsulate this thought in the saying (*Eichah Rabbah* 2:13), “You may believe there is knowledge among the nations; you may not believe there is Torah among the nations.”

In the Shemoneh Esrei, we say, “Blessed are You, our G-d and the G-d of our fathers, G-d of Avraham, G-d of Yitzchak, and G-d of Yaakov.” The Rambam explains (see *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:51) that the Avot merited Hashem’s Name being attached to their own for the reason that they constantly felt His Presence with them. Throughout the generations, we mention their unique connection with Hashem. There is a question, though, regarding the wording. Why do we begin by saying, “Our G-d,” and only afterward say that Hashem is “the G-d of our forefathers”? Isn’t this a lack of respect for our Avot, who were the first to discover Hashem and served Him most devotedly? The answer is that before a person makes all kinds of grandiose statements about Hashem and the forefathers, he must first recognize that Hashem is his G-d. What is the purpose of remembering the bonds of the Avot with Hashem if one does not feel his own bond with Him?

We asked what great role the mitzvah of honoring one’s parents plays in the fabric of our nation. A person is naturally inclined to take for granted the kindnesses that he receives, not feeling any obligation to display gratitude. When Bnei Yisrael stood at the foot of Har Sinai, having witnessed Hashem’s mighty wonders, there was a strong possibility that

they would become accustomed to this type of existence and feel no inclination to thank Hashem for His kindnesses. He therefore proclaimed, "I am Hashem," so that they should recognize Who redeemed them from their enemies, led them in the Wilderness, and would bring them to the Chosen Land.

For the same reason, Hashem integrated the mitzvah to honor one's parents into the Ten Commandments. A child is used to his parents doing kindnesses for him; it is most natural in his eyes. Nevertheless, the Torah commands children to honor their parents, and not fall into the rut of habit, which is liable to numb a person from the sense of gratitude he should feel toward them. Respecting one's parents brings one to appreciate and acknowledge the good that Hashem does for him. By breaking the habit of taking from one's parents, by giving them words of thanks, one will come to thank Hashem and fulfill the injunction implied in the statement "I am Hashem."

David Hamelech states (*Tehillim* 27:4), "One thing I asked of Hashem, that shall I seek: Would that I dwell in the House of Hashem all the days of my life, to behold the sweetness of Hashem and to visit in His Sanctuary." David wanted nothing more than to spend his days in the Beit Hamidrash. But how would he feel the freshness of novelty without the force of habit creeping in? By "visiting His Sanctuary." A visit is an infrequent event. It arouses excitement and encourages a person to take advantage of every moment. Who knows when the next visit will be? David felt that if every stay in the Beit Hamidrash would be regarded as a visit, he would never become accustomed to it. All of his senses would be alert, as he would attempt to make the most of his time, utilizing every moment properly.

We recite this chapter of *Tehillim* in the month of Elul, asking Hashem to remove from us the roots of negative habits. In this manner, we will be capable of regarding our Avodat Hashem as a new venture that we are embarking upon.

In Summary

- ◆ The Ten Commandments begin with “I am Hashem.” Why was it necessary to state this? Bnei Yisrael had observed Hashem’s might in Egypt as well as at the sea. Also, why is the mitzvah to honor one’s parents included in the Ten Commandments?
- ◆ Hashem wanted to transmit the message behind the words “I am Hashem” as a lesson for generations. The Chafetz Chaim states that the more one integrates this message into his mindset, the more his faith in Hashem will increase, and he will more easily accept life’s vicissitudes.
- ◆ The main aspect of *emunah* is that one recognize Hashem’s kindnesses with him. But one must beware of the power of habit. Internalizing how much Hashem does for him will help him overcome the habit of taking things for granted. Similarly, the mitzvah of honoring one’s parents was included in the Ten Commandments. By working on feeling gratitude toward one’s parents for all they have done for him, one will feel gratitude to Hashem, as well.



Bilaam’s Jealousy

“I am Hashem, your G-d, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery”

(Devarim 5:6)

The Midrash relates (*Shemot Rabbah* 29:9) that when Hashem gave Bnei Yisrael the Torah at Har Sinai, the entire world stopped functioning. Cows did not low, and birds did not chirp. They all realized something special was happening. The nations of the world saw that the entire Creation halted, while thunder and voices were heard from the mountain, and a shofar sounded throughout the world. They could not ignore this state of

affairs and approached their prophet, Bilaam, for an explanation. Had the world come to an end? they wondered. He reassured them that the world was not coming to an end; rather, Hashem was giving the Torah to His nation (*Zevachim* 116a).

The nations of the world felt something stupendous was taking place. Why weren't they moved to join the Jewish nation? If they were roused to the extent that they approached their prophet, why didn't they go until the end, coming under the wings of the *Shechinah*?

Once, when I was in Mexico, a young man approached me and asked if I remembered him. When I replied in the negative, he reminded me that the last time I had visited that country, he had been engaged. Between the engagement and the wedding, his fiancée became seriously ill. His parents begged him to break the engagement. But he felt such great love for his fiancée that he agreed to marry her, notwithstanding her illness. His parents would not hear of it. He faced a terrible dilemma. If he were to become a young widower, his parents would blame him for it. In his distress, he turned to me for advice. He added that if his fiancée were to recover, he would go from place to place and publicize the miracle, sanctifying Hashem's Name.

I asked him why wait until she recovered. It would be worthwhile to undertake sanctifying Hashem's Name already now. A pauper also has an obligation to give *tzedakah*. He shouldn't say that when he becomes a rich man, he will begin giving charity. This young man took my words to heart. He became stronger in his Torah observance. Two years later, he approached me, with his healthy wife and two children, the third on its way.

This story teaches us that when Hashem sends a signal to awaken a person, he should immediately take action in the proper direction. He should not wait for the "right time" to come along. Who knows when that will be?

The nations of the world took note of something spectacular occurring as Hashem gave Am Yisrael the Torah. They asked Bilaam to explain. Why didn't he grasp the occasion to arouse them to the word of Hashem, instead of merely calming their conscience by stating that Hashem was giving His nation the Torah? This moment provided a window of opportunity, a rare chance for the gentiles to convert and accept the Jewish religion upon themselves. Why didn't Bilaam ignite the fire of faith in their hearts, instead of extinguishing it? Furthermore, why did the nations satisfy themselves with Bilaam's explanation, remaining indifferent? Why didn't they seek an action that would connect them, as well, to Har Sinai?

The first of the Ten Commandments will elucidate. Hashem began with the words "I am Hashem, your G-d." He did not suffice with merely saying, "I am Hashem." When does one truly feel that Hashem is his G-d? When he believes with complete faith that "I am Hashem." Hashem is the Manager of the world. Nothing occurs without His consent. This fills a person with the feeling that Hashem is his G-d, and there is nothing besides Him.

Bilaam, always the rasha, wanted to prevent the nations from having this feeling of closeness with Hashem. He therefore detached them from the first Commandment of "I am Hashem." The nations, indeed, remained unchanged, for Bilaam had cooled off their former enthusiasm. He exempted them from any type of commitment by brushing them off with the statement that Hashem was giving the Torah to His people, but it had nothing whatsoever to do with them. He thereby created a dividing wall between the nations of the world and Bnei Yisrael. He asserted that although Hashem was the G-d of the Jews, this had no ramification for them at all. They had nothing to get excited about regarding *Matan Torah*.

Chazal state (*Avot* 4:21), "Jealousy, lust, and glory remove a person from the world." Moshe merited seeing the *Shechinah* and speaking with it face-to-face, so to speak. Bilaam was also a prophet. But his prophetic vision was limited, and he never perceived the *Shechinah* directly. Being the astute person he was, Bilaam understood that Moshe's level of

prophecy surpassed his own. For this, he was grievously jealous of Moshe. When Moshe ascended to Heaven in order to receive the Torah, Bilaam realized that the Torah of Hashem is eternal, the perfect truth. But his arrogance, coupled with his envy, prevented him from admitting this.

Bilaam's jealousy of Moshe gnawed away at him. He could not bear the thought that the nations, under his jurisdiction, would connect themselves to the Torah and accept Moshe's authority. This would prove to one and all that Moshe Rabbeinu, leader of the Jewish nation, was supreme. Where would this leave him? Bilaam therefore decided to quiet the qualms and questions of the nations, rebuffing their inquiries by claiming that *Matan Torah* did not concern them at all. It was only a bond between Am Yisrael and their Hashem. If their prophet was not encouraging them to connect with the Jews, even going so far as to cool off their interest in *Matan Torah*, the nations were not going to pursue the matter. They returned to their former concerns, without investigating the matter further.

The following tale emphasizes just how severe is the trait of envy. I don't vouch for its veracity, but its message is all too true.

Many Jewish communities have the custom of holding elections every few years, in order to elect a president. Some members of the community endorse one candidate, whereas others support another. But the Rabbi's word always carries weight regarding who will win the election. During one such election, when one of the candidates saw that the Rabbi was endorsing his adversary, he left his position in order to avoid a painful blow. Even though he was no longer involved, he harbored resentment toward the Rabbi for his lack of support. Moreover, he had tremendous jealousy toward his adversary, who had won the Rabbi's support.

With his jealousy eating away at him, this man decided to take revenge on the Rabbi. One day, he called up the Rabbi, asking him to come to his store with a pair of tefillin, as he had not yet donned tefillin that day. The Rabbi happily agreed to come. This man hired a photographer and a lewd woman for his diabolical plan. He told the woman that as soon as she

saw the Rabbi approaching his store, she should rush toward him and embrace him. The photographer should eternalize this moment with a snapshot. This is exactly what happened.

This embarrassing photograph was plastered all over the streets. The Rabbi was demoted from his position in the synagogue, and even his wife abandoned him. The Rabbi was at a loss as to how to respond. He did not know how to retrieve his trampled reputation and explain himself. In spite of all his efforts to remove the stain on his name, the picture of defamation would not allow him to clear his character.

The story ends on a woeful note. The Rabbi lost his congregation and his wife. After a short time, he died of a broken heart. How painful and dangerous is the trait of jealousy! Even if we were to say that this hard-hearted man had no idea how things would result, Chazal tell us (*Avot* 4:21), “Jealousy, lust, and glory remove a person from the world.” Not only did this man pay for his jealousy, but he also brought untold anguish upon the Rabbi of the community.

I was once in a certain neighborhood on Shabbat, in order to deliver words of *chizuk*. Before I even entered the synagogue, the Rabbi approached me. He said, “I know you might not like hearing what I am about to tell you. Last year, you spoke here. In your merit, many women were encouraged to go to the *mikveh*, and their husbands began observing Shabbat and donning tefillin. Nevertheless, you must change your style. Focus more on the *parashat hashevuah*, and don’t dwell on the private lives of our congregants.”

I told him that I have no problem speaking about the parashah, and I would do as he requested. He added that a seat had been reserved for me in the Beit Hakeneset, not near where he himself sat. I remained silent, not seeing any reason to reply.

As I approached the entrance, I was scanned for security purposes. I was even told to remove my shoes. In spite of the protests of the congregants that I am a Rabbi and should be treated with respect, I was searched most scrupulously. The thought stole into my mind that

someone “higher up” had ordered this check. When I finally entered the synagogue, I found that I was placed at the very rear of the room. All of the congregants, including the president, were shocked to see this. I can testify that I never look for personal glory, but I had a suspicion that the Rabbi of the synagogue was very wary of my presence, afraid I would seize his position. How foolish to think this way! I live in a different country and come to visit this place only once a year. Why should he entertain such an absurd notion, which brought him to treat me in such a humiliating way? I have no doubt it was jealousy that aroused him to behave so contemptuously.

I spoke piercingly. During my entire discourse, I did not look in the direction of the Rabbi even once. But I made sure that my message penetrated. Although I was slated to speak only for half an hour, I spoke to my heart's content, even longer than an hour and a half. My listeners enjoyed every moment and lined up afterward to receive *berachot*.

How sad it is to observe people from our circles who grasp the trait of Bilaam! Instead of looking for ways to increase Hashem's honor and spreading His Torah among all fellow Jews, they are driven by the narrow-mindedness of personal glory. We must know that Hashem arranged a specific place for each and every one of us in this world. No one touches that which is designated for his friend (*Yoma* 38b). Just as a Rabbi has his place of honor, apart from his disciples, so too, does each of us have his reserved spot, assigned to him by Hashem, which no one can take from him.

Bilaam was consumed by worry for his glory and therefore quelled the flames of fire that had begun to burn in the hearts of the nations. He did all in his power to avoid deferring to Moshe and remaining in his shadow. The Torah states (*Devarim* 34:10) that no prophet ever equaled Moshe. Bilaam's tactics were ineffective. Moshe's position remained steady and stable, above all others, for Hashem Himself had allocated it to him.

The Ten Commandments begin with “I am Hashem,” and end with “You shall not covet your fellow's wife.” What is the connection between the

two? When a person fully believes that Hashem is his G-d, he knows his place and understands that he has whatever Hashem desires for him. If he is lacking something his friend has, it is because Hashem wants it to be that way. He has complete faith that Hashem gives each person the tools necessary to accomplish his task in this world. This understanding will obviate all thoughts of jealousy.

In Summary

- ◆ Why didn't the gentiles of the world become encouraged to join the Jewish nation when they realized that the Torah was being given? Why did they suffice with Bilaam's rebuff, without pursuing the matter? The answer is based on the First Commandment, "I am Hashem your G-d." When does a person feel that Hashem is his G-d? When he is fully aware of "I am Hashem." Bilaam deprived the nations of the feeling that Hashem is their G-d, by cooling their enthusiasm toward the belief in "I am Hashem." He did this by telling them that *Matan Torah* did not apply to them at all.
- ◆ Bilaam recognized Moshe Rabbeinu's superior level of prophecy. He was eaten up with jealousy and therefore prevented the nations from connecting to the Jews.
- ◆ The First Commandment is to believe in Hashem, and the last is to resist coveting one's friend's possessions. When a person truly believes that Hashem is his G-d, and all that transpires with him and all that he has, are due to His desire, he feels no inclination to covet his fellow man's possessions.



The Harkening of the Heart

“Hear, O Israel: Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is the One and Only”

(Devarim 6:4)

There are two types of listening. There is the hearing of the ear, and there is internal listening, hearkening of the heart. The ear receives sound waves and interprets the invisible words of the speaker, whereas the hearkening of the heart is deeper, powerful enough to effect a drastic transformation within a person. When Hashem told Am Yisrael the words of the Shema, He intended for them to aspire to hear with their hearts. When a person hears with his heart, he quickly reaches the level of, “You shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources”(ibid. 6:5). When is a person’s heart awakened to love Hashem? When it is tuned in to hearing His word. When the heart hears Hashem’s word, one can undergo a complete transformation.

A Jew by the name of Rabbi Azarzar fought in the Yom Kippur War in the area of Bar Lev. On the first day of the battle, army officials came to his wife, relating to her that her husband had died at the front. They even presented her with his dog tag. This woman approached my father, zy”a, requesting that he do a *hashkavah* procedure for her husband. He replied that he could not do this, for he did not have evidence that he had, indeed, died. I would like to insert here that although army officials notified this woman of her husband’s death, they did not produce his body, claiming it was in enemy territory.

When Mrs. Azarzar observed Father’s staunch belief that her husband was still alive, she traveled to Tel Aviv and asked the authorities there to investigate the matter. After a thorough search, they told her that they had no doubt that her husband had fallen in battle. If the tzaddik claimed he was still alive, well, that was his responsibility. But the representatives of the agency did not suffice with that. They traveled to Father in Ashdod,

and told him he was wrong to place false hopes in the heart of the new widow. Father asked if they could provide proof of his death. They said that his dog tag had been found near the battle ground. Upon investigation, they discerned that he had, indeed, been killed. His body was in the hands of the Egyptians. Father did not respond to their words, merely stating that time would tell.

Approximately two weeks after the war ended, there was talk of a prisoner exchange. Suddenly, the army officials were informed that Rabbi Azarzar was on the list of live soldiers located in Egypt. How great was the wonder at Father's vision! He had perceived that this soldier still lived and therefore had refused to perform a *hashkavah*. This story became famous and caused a great *kiddush Hashem*. Since then, every year after Yom Kippur, Rabbi Azarzar prepares a *seudat hodayah* for the miracle Hashem performed on his behalf. I heard this story from him.

Although this story became known in all circles, secular and religious alike, people remained indifferent, not seeking ways to strengthen their Avodat Hashem and return to Him completely.

Conversely, regarding Yitro, the pasuk states (*Shemot* 18:1), "Yitro heard." Rashi expounds, (quoting *Zevachim* 116a), "What report did he hear that had such a great effect on him that he came? He heard about the dividing of the Sea of Reeds and the war with Amalek." Certainly, there were many others besides Yitro who heard about Hashem's miracles, which had made waves throughout the world. Why was Yitro the only one who chose to shelter under the wings of the *Shechinah*, abandoning his position as High Priest of Midian? He was a man of stature and means, lacking nothing in the physical sense. The entire gentile world respected him. But upon perceiving these miracles, he could not remain unchanged. He made a personal accounting and chose to join the Jewish nation.

The difference between Yitro and everyone else was that they heard with their ears, while he heard with his heart. The message entered such a deep place within him that it effected a revolution in his lifestyle. The rest of the world remained indifferent. Any impression caused by the

miracle of the sea floated right by them, never given the chance to effect any real change in their lives.

When we hear of miracles, we gasp in awe, exclaiming, “How abundant are Your works, Hashem” (*Tehillim* 104:24). But let us be honest with ourselves. Does this statement change us in any way? Does this wonder extricate us from the sleepiness of our monotony, causing us to be better people? If we truly desire to allow Hashem’s miracles to rouse us, we must be attuned to the stirrings of the heart, not only the sounds of the ear.

As the nation contributed toward the Mishkan, Hashem wanted the donations of their hearts, as the pasuk says (*Shemot* 35:5), “Everyone whose heart motivates him shall bring it, as the gift for Hashem.” Giving their heart would merit the protection of the *Shechinah*.

A tzaddik once crossed a frozen river with his disciples. They noticed children drawing pictures of idols in the ice. The tzaddik turned to his disciples, “When the heart is frozen, all sorts of thoughts can enter, even those of idol worship.”

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ There are two types of hearing. The hearing of the ear is superficial, whereas the hearkening of the heart is internal. When a person hearkens with his heart, as we are exhorted in the Shema, he reaches the level of loving Hashem with all his heart.
- ◆ Rashi explains that Yitro heard about the war with Amalek and the Splitting of the Sea. These miracles made such an impression upon him that he was drawn to join the Jewish nation. Hadn’t the entire world heard of these wonders? While they merely heard with their ears, Yitro heard with his heart. He changed his entire lifestyle, joining the Jewish people.
- ◆ When a person hears about a miracle, he should let it enter his heart. It will permeate his entire being and leave a lasting impression upon him.



The Contentions of the Nations

“You shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources”

(Devarim 6:5)

Before giving the Torah to Bnei Yisrael, Hashem offered it to the nations of the world (*Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer* 40). When He came to the sons of Yishmael, they asked what it says in it. He replied, “You shall not steal.” The tribes of Yishmael said, “Our lives revolve around robbery and plunder. The Torah is not for us.” Hashem then went to the children of Edom, asking if they would like the Torah. They, too, first asked what is written in it. Hashem replied, “You shall not murder.” They said, “We cannot abide by this law, for we live by the sword.” In this manner, Hashem went from nation to nation. After describing merely one mitzvah, they categorically refused to accept the Torah.

Hashem knows all of man’s thoughts. He knew that the nations would decline the Torah. Why, then, did He offer it to them?

This question is strengthened by the fact that all the nations observed the miracles that Hashem performed for His people. This is stated clearly in the pesukim (*Shemot* 15:14), “Peoples heard – they were agitated; terror gripped the dwellers of Pelishtim. Then the chieftains of Edom were confounded, trembling gripped the powers of Moav, all the dwellers of Canaan dissolved. May fear and terror befall them...” All the nations were frozen with fear when they witnessed Hashem’s mighty miracles. They saw how He had struck Egypt, redeemed Bnei Yisrael from their midst and led them through the sea on dry land, drowning their enemies. How could these nations now, when offered the Torah, have the audacity to ask what was written in it, and moreover, dare to refuse it?

Let us picture a mighty, supreme ruler. Would his subjects dare to disobey his edicts? Whoever defies his rulings can expect to have his

head handed to him on a silver platter. All of the king's people, therefore, rush to do his bidding. If this is so for a king of flesh and blood, all the more so is it true regarding the King of kings. How, then, could the nations of the world have the boldness to challenge the Torah, in spite of their recent trembling and fear, and afterward, refuse it?

Of course the nations wanted to have the Torah. But this desire did not come from a place of love for the Torah. They wanted it out of fear of Hashem. When they asked what was written in it, they were really saying, "What will be demanded of us once we accept the Torah? What quality is required to observe the mitzvot properly?" Hashem replied, "Do not steal... Do not murder... Do not commit incest," etc. Even if a man is starving, he may not steal a slice of bread. Even if a man is injured by his fellow man, he may not kill him. Even if a man is seduced by a strange woman, he must guard himself from sin. Hashem was telling them that the mitzvot demand self-sacrifice. Only those who don the cloak of self-sacrifice can merit the mantle of Torah.

The nations, one by one, refused the Torah. They were lacking this quality of self-sacrifice, essential in upholding the Torah. Chazal teach (see *Eichah Rabbah* 2:13) that one may believe there is knowledge among the gentiles, but not that there is Torah among them. Torah demands untold *mesirut nefesh*. The pasuk states (*Bamidbar* 19:14), "This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent." Chazal expound (*Berachot* 63b) that Torah exists only in one who sacrifices himself for it. Torah is not a textbook which one casts aside after reading. It is a blueprint for life. One must be one with Torah. He should be occupied only with it. The pasuk states (*Devarim* 6:7), "You shall speak of them (words of Torah) while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you retire and when you arise." One's entire day should revolve around the axis of Torah. Even a short rest from exertion in Torah should be regarded as an opportunity to renew his strength in order to learn Torah with greater vigor.

When the nations heard that Torah demands *mesirut nefesh*, they would have none of it. They had no connection with this quality.

Ask any observant Jew if he loves the Torah. Certainly he will answer in the affirmative. He will even be insulted at the very question. Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto, zy”a, said that one’s love of Torah can be measured according to his love of money. If a person can attest about himself that he loves the Torah as much as he loves money, true love of Torah resides in his heart.

This is a very lofty level. Wouldn’t anyone jump out of bed in the middle of the night, in order to make a big profit? But who would forego precious sleep to delve into the intricacies of Torah? People dedicate tremendous portions of their lives to closing more and more business deals, in order to inflate their bankbooks. Would they consider investing so much time increasing their Heavenly accounts?

The Torah enjoins us (*Devarim* 6:5), “You shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources.” On these words, Rashi explains “with all your heart” means with both of your drives, the drive toward good and the drive toward evil. Alternatively, “with all your heart” means that your heart should not be divided concerning the Omnipresent. “With all your soul” means even if He takes your soul. “With all your possessions” refers to a person whose money is more precious to him than his body. Apart from sacrificing one’s body and soul for the sake of the Torah, one is required to dedicate his money in order to fulfill Hashem’s will.

The nations were willing to accept the Torah on their own terms. They were ready to fulfill the mitzvot when it was convenient. But they would not accept the Torah in its entirety. A Torah which demands self-sacrifice in order to uphold it was not their cup of tea. They lacked the essence of self-sacrifice.

But when Hashem approached Bnei Yisrael with the prospect of accepting the Torah, they did not demand a prospectus or sample. As one, they cried, “We will do and we will hear!” (see *Shabbat* 88a). They expressed their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the Torah, happily fulfilling all of its commandments, even before hearing or

understanding what they were all about. Completely accepting Hashem's will without questions or doubts, simply because this is His will, demonstrates self-sacrifice.

The family members and disciples of Rav Shach, zt"l, saw that one day, he had suddenly quit smoking. Until then, he had been in the habit of smoking large numbers of cigarettes a day. This was a relic of the days of deprivation when money was tight and he would still his hunger with a cigarette. When asked how he could kick this habit, cold turkey, he answered the following: The previous night, he was looking for matches to light a cigarette. Afterward, he noticed that this had taken him a very long time, time which could have been wisely spent learning Torah. When he discovered this, he decided, on the spot, that if cigarettes could lead to such *bitul* Torah, it was time to burn his bridges with them. He categorically quit smoking then and there. See how great is the *mesirut nefesh* of our Torah giants. They are willing to sacrifice their desires upon the altar of our holy Torah. They are constantly afraid of wasting even one precious moment from Torah study.

This story reminds me of the scenario which plays itself out in our kollelim every day. The morning session ends at 1:00 p.m. At that time, the avrechim go home for lunch. This is the hour which indicates who are the true lovers of Torah. Those who are connected to it with ropes of love will remain for another fifteen minutes or so, for they simply cannot tear themselves away. And those who are not really attached to Torah are already turning the pages at 12:30, eagerly anticipating the end of the session.

Only the sweetening agent of *mesirut nefesh* allows one to enjoy the pleasant taste of Torah.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why did Hashem offer the nations the Torah, when it was known to Him that they would decline it? And how did they have the boldness to refuse it after they had witnessed Hashem's mighty miracles?

- ◆ The gentiles would have originally accepted the Torah. By asking what it states, they were asking which quality would be required of them in order to uphold it. Hashem's reply that keeping the Torah requires *mesirut nefesh* was too much for them; they lack this essential *middah*.
- ◆ One should not believe that the nations have Torah. They simply do not possess the requisite tool necessary for accepting the Torah. In contrast, Bnei Yisrael said, "We will do and we will hear," attesting to the fact that they were prepared to accept it, with all the *mesirut nefesh* involved.



A Servant of Hashem

“Bind them as a sign upon your arm and let them be ornaments between your eyes”

(Devarim 6:8)

“Bind them as a sign upon your arm” – these are the tefillin of the arm. “And let them be ornaments between your eyes” – these are the tefillin of the head.

In Egypt, Bnei Yisrael were enslaved to the Egyptians. After taking note of their outcries, Hashem rescued them from their bondage, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. Only after Bnei Yisrael were released from slavery to Pharaoh, could they become wholehearted servants of Hashem.

Bnei Yisrael were so oppressed by the yoke of bondage that a large portion of the people did not even wish to leave the land. The pasuk states (*Shemot* 13:18), “And the Children of Israel were armed when they went up from Egypt.” According to Rashi, the word חמושים (armed) is derived from the word חמש (five). Rashi asserts that only one-fifth of the population actually left Egypt. The other four-fifths perished in the plague of darkness.

The following fact proves just how slave-oriented the Jewish nation was. When the Egyptians pursued them, Hashem had to change the course of nature by splitting the sea. The Ibn Ezra asks (*Shemot* 14:13) why Hashem could not simply have ordered Bnei Yisrael to fend off the Egyptians by fighting against them, just as they would, in the future, battle the other nations who would stand in their way. He replies that it is human nature for one who has served a master for a length of time to develop a slave mentality. It is this mindset which prevents him from rising against his master. At the sea, Bnei Yisrael still felt a measure of bondage toward the Egyptians. Therefore, they did not have the stamina to stand up against them. Hashem had to change nature for their sake, splitting the sea. Moreover, Hashem Himself fought on their behalf, as Moshe proclaimed (*ibid.* 14:14), “Hashem shall make war for you, and you shall remain silent.”

Hashem commanded Bnei Yisrael to lay tefillin on the arm and the head (*Shemot* 13:16). The tefillin of the arm is wrapped around the left arm, opposite the heart, whereas the tefillin of the head corresponds to the mind (*Menachot* 37a). [See *Ben Ish Chai*, *Shanah Rishonah*, *Chayei Sarah*]. The tefillin correspond to the heart and the mind, indicating purity of the heart and the mind, helping one remove all foreign thoughts. Why were we commanded to wrap the tefillin upon our arm and head, and not merely place it there? The straps of the tefillin remind us of the straps of slavery. We were once slaves to the Egyptian nation. After Hashem extricated us, amidst miracles, we became bound to Him Alone.

Servitude to Hashem is the greatest virtue we can hope to attain. Moshe was called by the highest accolade: “the servant of Hashem” (*Devarim* 34:5). We affirm this in our Shacharit prayer on Shabbat, “You called him a faithful servant.” In *Navi*, the pasuk states (*Malachi* 3:22), “Remember the Torah of Moshe, My servant.”

The Gemara relates (*Berachot* 34b) that once the son of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai became deathly ill. Rabbi Yochanan immediately began supplicating Hashem for mercy. But the situation did not improve.

Then Rabbi Yochanan turned to his disciple, Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, and asked him to pray on behalf of his son. Rabbi Chanina's prayers were known to be effective. Rabbi Chanina did as his master had instructed him, praying from the depths of his heart for the boy's recovery. Lo and behold! When they returned to the boy's room, they found him sitting up in bed, his condition constantly improving.

Rabbi Yochanan's wife was somewhat chagrined that her husband's pupil managed to bring about the boy's recovery, when his teacher could not. She turned to her husband and asked if his disciple was more worthy than he. He replied, "I am like one who is granted permission to see the king when he is invited. But Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa is like a servant of the king who serves him on a steady basis and does not require a special invitation to come before him."

This teaches that the title "Servant of Hashem" is one of greatness, indicating a close connection to Hashem. The command to wear tefillin allows us to feel this connection. The binding of the straps hint to servitude. After we left Egypt, we became connected with Hashem, servants to Him and none other.

A man once forgot his tefillin at the airport. When he discovered this, he rushed back to the airport in order to retrieve them. To his horror, he discovered that the police had detonated his tefillin bag, suspecting it contained a bomb. The man burst into sobs. But then his sobs of sorrow turned into cries of joy. When his tefillin bag was returned to him, he found his tefillin whole and intact. Everything else in the bag was completely destroyed. I have a photograph of this man with his perfect tefillin. I was told this story by the man himself. I took the tefillin and kissed them. This incident can be attributed only to a miracle. Hashem saw how much the tefillin meant to this man, demonstrating his connection with his Creator. He therefore performed a miracle, and the tefillin remained complete.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Hashem had to remove Bnei Yisrael from the slavery of Egypt in order to transform them into His servants. The Ibn Ezra asks why it was necessary to split the sea for Bnei Yisrael. Why couldn't they fight the Egyptians as they would fight the other nations in the future? It is not natural for a slave to rise up against his master. Since Bnei Yisrael still felt the impact of slavery, they did not have the stamina to stand up against the Egyptians.
- ◆ Tefillin of the arm and tefillin of the head correspond to the heart and the mind. Bnei Yisrael were instructed to don tefillin in order to remove the remnants of Egyptian slavery from their minds and their hearts. Servitude to Hashem would take its place. Tefillin must be bound, not merely placed upon the arm and the head. The tying reminds one of the straps of slavery, from which Hashem desires to release us, in order that we may serve Him Alone.
- ◆ The most exalted title any Jew could aspire to is being called a servant of Hashem. Moshe Rabbeinu merited this tribute, as the pasuk states, "Remember the Torah of Moshe, My servant." In Shacharit of Shabbat, too, we assert, "You have called him a faithful servant."



Prayer – A Tool to Acquire Fear of Heaven

“Hashem, your G-d, shall you fear, Him shall you serve, and in His Name shall you swear”

(Devarim 6:13)

The word **את**, the first word in this pasuk, **“את ה' אלוקיך תירא”** – You shall fear Hashem, your G-d,” always denotes adding. Chazal teach (*Kiddushin 57a*) that it adds the point that one must have respect for *talmidei chachamim*. Just as we are instructed to fear Hashem, so are we adjured to fear Torah scholars and accord them honor.

Regarding the mitzvah of *yirat Shamayim*, we are taught (*Berachot* 33b), “All is in the hands of Heaven except for Fear of Heaven.” *Yirat Shamayim* is the single trait placed under man’s jurisdiction. Hashem does not afford him assistance in this area, as He does in other areas of life. In matters of matchmaking, healing, sustenance, wisdom, and the like, Hashem grants man Divine help. How can a person hope to attain *yirat Shamayim* without assistance from Above?

Regarding the plague of hail, the pasuk states (*Shemot* 9:20) that those who feared Hashem brought their cattle indoors to protect them from the hailstones. Conversely, those who did not fear Hashem left their animals outside, where they perished. Here, too, we are plagued by the question: How could there still be Egyptians who doubted the word of Hashem, and despite being warned, chose to leave their cattle outdoors? They saw how Moshe’s warnings regarding Hashem’s word came true, time and again. How did they have the audacity to ignore Hashem’s warning in this case?

When Pharaoh observed the severity of the plague of hail, he sent messengers to Moshe and Aharon (*ibid.* 9:27), stating, “This time I have sinned. Hashem is the Righteous One, and I and my people are the wicked ones.” Pharaoh finally admitted that he and his nation had sinned, and Hashem was righteous. He asked Moshe and Aharon to pray to Hashem to remove the plague, and he would set Bnei Yisrael free. Moshe replied that he was prepared to pray on his behalf, but he first had to leave the city. It is unfitting to pray before Hashem in a city reeking with idolatry. Moshe added (*ibid.* 9:30), “And as for you and your servants, I know that you are not yet afraid of Hashem, G-d.” The Ohr Hachaim explains that Moshe was, in essence, saying, “I know that while you are suffering from the plague, you fear Hashem and call Him righteous, but after the plague leaves and you breathe a sigh of relief, you will continue rebelling against Him as before.”

Why did the *yirat Shamayim* acquired by Pharaoh and his men as they called out “Hashem is the Righteous One” disappear with the plague, never to return to them?

The disciples of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai asked him to bless them before his death (*Berachot* 28b). He said, "May your fear of Heaven be like your fear of humans." Would that they would fear Hashem as they feared people. This is no easy task. People can be seen and therefore make an impression by their actions and reactions. But how can one fear Hashem when He is invisible, all the more so when one is not given Heavenly assistance in this realm?

One final question. In Chumash *Devarim*, the pasuk states (*Devarim* 10:12), "Now, O Israel, what does Hashem, your G-d, ask of you? Only to fear Hashem." The Gemara asks (*Megillah* 25a), "Is it a small thing to fear Hashem, as Moshe seems to indicate?" The Gemara explains that concerning Moshe, *yirat Shamayim* was a simple matter. But how could he demand it from the public at large, who were far from his level? Certainly they had to exert themselves tremendously to acquire *yirat Shamayim*. If *yirat Shamayim* is not as simple as Moshe made it seem, but demands strong faith and great effort, with no Heavenly assistance, how could the nation be commanded to acquire it? How can a person, with his own powers and prowess, attain this *middah* of fearing Hashem and fearing *talmidei chachamim*?

We can answer with an analogy. A newborn is sustained by his mother's milk, which contains all the vitamins and minerals necessary to build up his body and strengthen him until he becomes independent enough to decide for himself what foods he prefers. After he matures, he has the intelligence to choose those foods that contribute to his development, and resist foods which will prove detrimental to his health. Moreover, when a newborn nestles in his mother's arms, nursing from her, he gazes at her lovingly, and she reciprocates with love and warmth. This dependence creates a strong bond between them. When the baby does not want to eat, the mother worries and seeks creative means to encourage him to eat, knowing his health depends on it.

We find two seemingly contradictory pesukim (*Berachot* 35a). Tehillim states (115:16), "As for the heavens, the heavens are Hashem's, but the earth He has given to mankind." Yet, in another place, it states (*ibid.* 24:1),

“Hashem’s is the earth and its fullness.” Whereas the first pasuk indicates that the earth belongs to mankind, the second pasuk seems to imply that the earth belongs to Hashem. The Gemara explains that by making a blessing upon his food, a person acquires it. The earth is considered his. But when he eats without a prior blessing, he is considered a robber, who has stolen from Hashem, Master of heaven and earth.

Berachot and tefillot connect a person to his Creator without limits. He thus becomes a partner in owning the land. The act of making a *berachah* enables a person to realize that everything comes from Hashem. He thus realizes that he must ask Hashem for permission to enjoy that object. Torah study is also a form of pleasure. Therefore, we are enjoined to make a blessing before learning Torah, which we do in the *Birchot HaTorah*, recited in Shacharit.

However, why do we not make a blessing on breathing air? We breathe air every moment of our lives. Doesn’t it deserve a blessing?

Air is a complete gift from Hashem. Therefore, we don’t need to ask permission to partake of it. Moreover, we make a *berachah* only on those things that have starting and end points. Air is a constant; we breathe it from the moment of birth until we die, without stop. Thus, we do not need to make a *berachah* on it.

A person acquires *yirat Shamayim* through praying to Hashem and making *berachot*. This is in line with the statement (*Tehillim* 16:8), “I have set Hashem before me always.” In *Avot* we read, “Know before Whom you stand.” When a person accustoms himself to stand before his Maker in prayer, with utmost concentration, he is similar to a nursling, looking lovingly at his mother. She regards him with compassion and is prepared to grant him all of his desires. Just as mother’s milk contains all the necessary nutrients for growth, so does *yirat Shamayim* penetrate the innards of one who prays whole-heartedly and becomes part and parcel of his makeup.

Regarding Pinchas, the Zohar (III, 57b) quotes the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 25:7), “Pinchas... saw... and took a spear in his hand.” It expounds on the

name Pinchas, written here in its full version, as פִּינְחָס. This indicates that he acted *l'shem Shamayim*. He had true *yirat Shamayim*, enlisting all his body parts to participate in this act. Perish the thought that Pinchas performed his act from a desire to present himself as greater than Moshe. Fear of Heaven was his only motivating factor. Tehillim (106:30) relates that Pinchas prayed for the decree against Bnei Yisrael to be rescinded, involving his entire being in this supplication.

One merits *yirat Shamayim* only when he feels himself as dependent on Hashem as a babe in his mother's arms. This then, is the meaning behind Moshe's injunction to the nation to fear Hashem. Is *yirat Shamayim* a simple matter? Not at all. It is a relationship between a person and Hashem, as self-understood and clear as the connection between a mother and her infant. Moshe acquired all of his great traits, including his *yirat Shamayim*, through praying to Hashem at all times. The more one habituates himself to pray to Hashem, the more reliant he feels upon His kindness. This increases his *yirat Shamayim*.

In parashat *Va'era*, we read (*Shemot* 6:2), "G-d spoke to Moshe, and said to him, 'I am Hashem.'" Didn't Moshe know it was Hashem Who spoke to him? What was the reason for this introduction? Rashi provides one explanation. I would like to suggest the following: This statement comes on the heels of Moshe's complaint to Hashem (5:22), "Why have You done evil to this people, why have You sent me?" As Moshe bewailed that Pharaoh had hardened his heart as a result of his visit, he beseeched Hashem to take note of the suffering of Bnei Yisrael and lighten their burden. When Hashem heard this prayer, He hurried to respond, "I am Hashem," using the Name ה-ו-ה-ו which denotes compassion. By doing so, he was assuring Moshe that He would act with compassion toward Bnei Yisrael and redeem them. Hashem also indicated that the more Moshe would pray, the more he would understand Hashem's qualities and His unending trait of compassion.

Since the Egyptians did not possess the power of prayer, they could not experience true *yirat Shamayim*. Many, therefore, felt no inclination to bring their cattle indoors, as Moshe had instructed. A small group of

gentiles did feel some measure of fear of Heaven, thanks to the miracles they had witnessed. But Pharaoh was a completely different story. He did acknowledge the power of prayer, as proven by his request to Moshe and Aharon to pray on his behalf. Yet he refused to use the power of prayer to acquire *yirat Shamayim*. For this, he was punished with the strict hand of justice.

The more one habituates himself to speak to his Creator in prayer, the more Fear of Heaven he will attain. If one feels he has no need for prayer, and can obtain his desires through his own resources, he would do well to remember David's words (*Tehillim* 11:10), "The beginning of wisdom is fear of Hashem."

One who increases his fear of Hashem, by means of his prayers, will certainly have fear of his Torah teacher. Torah scholars are masters of the craft of prayer. They are therefore intimately close to Hakadosh Baruch Hu, to the extent that Hashem fulfills the decrees of the tzaddik (see *Moed Katan* 16b). The Torah commands us to fear *talmidei chachamim*. They are the ones who teach us to connect with Hashem and fear Him by means of tefillah. Our Avot established three standard prayers each day (see *Berachot* 26b). This is so that a person is surrounded by prayer throughout his day. This intensifies his *yirat Shamayim*. The merit of our forefathers, steeped as they were in *yirat Shamayim*, will influence him positively to become sanctified in this trait, as well.

Moshe was correct in asserting that *yirat Shamayim* is a simple matter (see *Megillah* 25a). One who accustoms himself to pray acquires this trait fairly easily. *Yirat Shamayim* becomes part of his essence, prompting him to be meticulous with all mitzvot and halachot in their finest details. But if a person allows foreign thoughts to enter his mind at the time of prayer, they are capable of wreaking havoc, literally endangering his life. Imagine an infant ingesting a milk formula which contains all types of rancid ingredients. His health is in serious jeopardy.

How well I remember my father, a”h. He was constantly immersed in prayer on behalf of the Jewish people. He would lift his arms in supplication before Hashem. I believe that his prayers never went unanswered. His extraordinary level of *yirat Shamayim* afforded him *siyata di'Shemaya*, which sent his prayers heavenward.

Akeidat Yitzchak is a prime example of the power of *yirat Shamayim*. Yitzchak Avinu exemplifies the pillar of prayer (see *Zohar Chadash* 51a). Avraham was prepared to sacrifice his son, Yitzchak, to Hashem, with utmost joy (*Pesikta Rabbah* 40). He did this task through love of Hashem and tremendous faith. When Hashem observed this, He sent His angel to tell Avraham (*Bereishit* 22:12), “Do not stretch out your hand against the lad nor do anything to him, for now I know that you are a G-d fearing man.” Tefillah has the capacity to enable a person to attain *yirat Shamayim*. It all depends on how the person prays. A person has all of the tools necessary to pray properly. But there is one stipulation. He must overcome his *Yetzer Hara* and arise like a lion to serve Hashem, beginning his day with prayer.

The Ba'al Shem Tov writes that we often find prominent *bnei Torah* who lack *yirat Shamayim*. This is because they have their priorities confused. As they arise in the morning, the first thing they think of is fulfilling their own needs, instead of thinking about Hashem and hurrying to pray (*Ba'al Shem Tov al HaTorah* 58:31). The pasuk states (*Shemot* 8:19), “I shall make a distinction between My people and your people – tomorrow this sign will come about.” The Ben Ish Chai (*Shanah Rishonah, Va'era*) expounds. Love and fear of Hashem mean that a person does every mitzvah with all his body parts. This is alluded to in the word מחר (tomorrow), whose letters can be transposed to spell רמ"ח (248). This refers to man's 248 limbs. One who does mitzvot with vitality, using all of his organs, indicates that he has *yirat Shamayim*.

One who observes the positive commandments, corresponding to his 248 limbs (*Makkot* 23b), will never come to transgress the negative commandments, corresponding to the 365 sinews (*Sha'arei Kedushah* 1:1). The limbs, having become sanctified through the acts of mitzvot,

will never allow the sinews to transgress. The *kelippah* has fallen under his dominion.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Chazal teach, “All is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of Heaven.” How can we be commanded to fear Hashem when we are not given *siyata di'Shemaya* in this area? Also, how could there be Egyptians who were not afraid to leave their cattle outdoors even though they had seen Hashem’s mighty hand in the past? Hadn’t Pharaoh proclaimed that Hashem is the Righteous One? Where did his fear of Heaven disappear to?
- ◆ Moshe said that all that Hashem asks of us is to fear Him, indicating that *yirat Shamayim* is a simple matter. Is this so?
- ◆ When a person accustoms himself to speak to Hashem and pray for everything in his life, he acquires *yirat Shamayim*. Moshe Rabbeinu was constantly praying to Hashem for everything. Therefore, he considered *yirat Shamayim* an easily-obtained trait.
- ◆ Prayer is a tool in the hands of Bnei Yisrael. The Egyptians had no concept of it. Pharaoh asked Moshe to pray on his behalf. He recognized the power of prayer, but denied putting it into practice. He preferred to believe he was a deity, above such things. Therefore, he and his nation lacked *yirat Shamayim*. For this, they were punished. Moshe stressed the fact that he had to leave the city in order to pray. He was emphasizing that the city was full of idolatry, further proof that it lacked fear of Heaven.
- ◆ The word **תא** in the first pasuk includes *talmidei chachamim* in the commandment to fear Hashem. When one realizes that these Sages are bound to Hashem by the ties of their tefillot, he will respect them, for “a tzaddik decrees, and Hashem fulfills.”



Gems on Parashat Va'etchanan



Moshe's Song

“I implored Hashem at that time, saying”

(Devarim 3:23)

Chazal teach (*Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim 940*) that the word ואתחנן (*Va'etchanan*) is numerically equivalent to 515, the number of prayers Moshe offered in order to be granted entry into Eretz Yisrael. The Ba'al Haturim writes (*Devarim 3:23*) that the word שירה (song) has the same *gematria*. Moshe's prayers were unique in that they emanated from the depths of his heart, with tremendous ecstasy, to the point that they were like songs of joy.

In general, people sing songs of praise to Hashem as a means of gratitude for actualizing their desire. It is a form of thanksgiving for some kindness or blessing from Above. But we find that although Moshe prayed so fervently, Hashem refused his request. What, then, was he singing about?

Chazal testify that just as Moshe's first tefillah was said with joy, full of hope and anticipation that Hashem would grant him his wish, so was his last prayer said with joy and ecstasy. He never despaired or became frustrated that his prayers were refused. His sole motivation was love of Hashem, spurring him to sing ever louder.

Not only did Hashem rebuff his request, but He told him (*Devarim* 3:26), “It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter.” Nevertheless, Moshe remained in a state of joy, taking pleasure in the opportunity to serve Hashem with joy and song in all times and under all circumstances, even when his wish was not fulfilled.



Whoever Adds, Detracts

“You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor shall you subtract from it”

(Devarim 4:2)

Moshe Rabbeinu reviewed all the mitzvot immediately before his death. He warned Bnei Yisrael that they must do as they were commanded, never adding or detracting from Hashem’s word. This instruction is difficult to understand. Detracting from a mitzvah, for instance, sitting in the sukkah for five days instead of seven, or taking two species instead of four, is understandably forbidden, for it reflects a deficiency in the observance of the mitzvah. But why doesn’t the Torah allow us to add to a mitzvah? What’s wrong with sitting in the sukkah for ten days, or taking seven species? Wouldn’t adding to the mitzvah enhance it? Why is adding to a mitzvah forbidden in the same way as detracting from a mitzvah?

Hashem created man with 613 limbs, corresponding to the 613 mitzvot of the Torah (*Sha’arei Kedushah* 1:1). Each mitzvah corresponds to a different limb of the body. By performing a mitzvah, the corresponding organ of the body becomes sanctified. One would balk at the prospect of adding an appendage to his body. A person with an added pair of hands or an extra eye, for example, is considered a maimed man. So, too, is adding a mitzvah to the Torah considered defacing the Torah (*Sanhedrin* 29a).

Hashem created man with His own two hands, so to speak (see *Aggadot Bereishit* 11), and breathed into him a *neshamah* from on High (see *Kohelet Rabbah* 6:6). Just as one who blows up a balloon blows into it air from his lungs, so did Hashem blow into mankind from Himself (see *Zohar* II, 124a; *Ramban, Introduction to the Torah*). The sanctity of Hashem's Names was implanted in man, together with the breath of life. Just as Hashem's Names are eternal, and nothing can be added to them, so too, must the Torah remain unchanged.



The Sound of Study

“Hashem spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you were hearing the sound of words, but you were not seeing a likeness, only a sound”

(Devarim 4:12)

I know a young man who lives on the French island, Guadeloupe, off the United States coastline. He told me that he wanted to go to a certain place. When I heard where it was, I tried discouraging him from going there. It is a place of immodesty and liable to pose a spiritual hazard. Since he had his heart set on going there, he tried presenting his wish from various angles, hoping I would relent. In spite of his great desire to go there, I explained to him that this place is devoid of spirituality. How would he find kosher food and keep Shabbat, not to mention avoid the promiscuity which was rampant there?

I could not get the image of this boy out of my mind. The next day, I called him up, attempting to dissuade him from taking this trip. He told me that just that morning, he had gone to his office and held some significant meetings. At one of the meetings, a young lady entered the room. As he spoke with her, he felt he was being tempted to sin.

Suddenly, our conversation of the previous day came to his mind. Recognizing the truth in my words, he hurried to exit the room, thereby sparing himself from serious sin.

I think this is fulfillment of “You were hearing the sound of words.” Often, when a person hears something, he is in the category of אַתָּם (you), as described in this parashah, the letters of which can be transposed to spell אמת (truth). The truth penetrates his consciousness and prevents him from sinning. At the time of our talk, I had no idea that this man would be tempted to sin the very next day. But Hashem orchestrated things so that I should say what I said, and even go so far as to call him up afterward, in order that he would remember the truth of my words, and thereby be rescued from sin.

When Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce Yosef to sin, the image of his father appeared before him (see *Sotah* 36b). Yosef remembered the Torah that they had learned together. Yosef’s “hearing the sound of the words,” i.e., remembering the words of Torah, enabled him to overcome his *Yetzer Hara* and control his inclination. In this manner, he was saved from sinning.

How crucial it is to learn Torah and cling to *talmidei chachamim*! Certainly it is the merit of “hearing the sound of the words” of Torah which protects a person from his greatest enemy, his own *Yetzer Hara*.



Reviewing Words of Torah

“I am Hashem, your G-d, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. You shall not recognize the gods of others in My Presence”

(Devarim 5:6-7)

Chumash *Devarim* is called *Mishneh Torah*, because it is here that Moshe reviewed all the Torah with Bnei Yisrael, immediately prior to his death (see *Alshich, Devarim 4:44-49*). Chazal relate (see *Nefesh Hachaim 3:14*) that at that time, Hashem’s voice emanated from Moshe’s throat, and it was as if Hashem Himself was reviewing the Torah with the nation.

Parashat *Va'etchanan* contains a repetition of the *Asseret Hadibrot*, which had originally been said at Har Sinai. When we read them the first time, in parashat *Yitro*, we are filled with joy. We feel the sensation of salvation after the long years of slavery in Egypt. The entire purpose of Bnei Yisrael’s redemption from Egypt was in order that they would receive the Torah. Had they refused to accept the Torah, we and our offspring forever after would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. In contrast, at the reading of the Ten Commandments the second time, we are shrouded in mourning, as parashat *Va'etchanan* is read during the period of Tishah b’Av, the day of the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, when Bnei Yisrael went into exile.

After the *churban*, the Sages asked Hashem the reason for the destruction. He replied it was “because of their forsaking My Torah” (*Yirmeyahu 9:12*; see *Nedarim 81a*). Any generation which has not seen the restoration of the Beit Hamikdash is considered as having witnessed its destruction (*Yerushalmi, Yoma 1:1*). If we have not merited the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash, we obviously have some flaw in our Torah study and mitzvah performance.

When I read the *Asseret Hadibrot* in parashat *Va'etchanan*, I am overcome with sorrow over the fact that we have not yet merited to see Mashiach. Since all Am Yisrael are responsible for one another (*Shavuot* 39a), each and every one of us has an obligation to search his deeds and investigate what needs improvement. Just as a great edifice is built brick by brick, so is character refinement and strengthening of one's mitzvah performance done one step at a time. Everyone is capable of contributing his share to hastening Mashiach's arrival.

Bnei Yisrael fell to the level of "forsaking My Torah" because they were not careful to review what they had learned. Moshe's effort to gather the people before his death in order to repeat the words of the Torah teaches us how imperative it is to review one's learning. When one lacks the element of review, his Torah knowledge is in jeopardy of being forgotten. Chazal tell us (*Sanhedrin* 99a) that one who studies but does not review is like one who plants but does not reap. If we truly desire to see the Beit Hamikdash rebuilt and merit the ultimate redemption, we would do well to review our Torah studies time after time. This review will cause us to intensify our overall mitzvah observance and increase our merits.



Greeting Shabbat amidst Restfulness and Joy

"Safeguard the Shabbat day to sanctify it, as Hashem, your G-d, has commanded you"

(Devarim 5:12)

Chazal teach (*Shabbat* 119b) that the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed because Bnei Yisrael desecrated Shabbat. Bnei Yisrael had many great tzaddikim in their midst. How can Chazal say that they did not observe Shabbat?

Shemirat Shabbat can be divided into two categories: observing Shabbat and preparing for Shabbat. Bnei Yisrael were lax in properly preparing for the arrival of Shabbat. Just as observing Shabbat includes many intricate halachot, so does preparing for Shabbat involve properly preparing oneself to greet the Shabbat Queen: cooking special foods and welcoming the Shabbat with calmness and tranquility. Even if someone has cooks and helpers who prepare all his Shabbat needs, he is obligated to do some act himself in order to prepare for Shabbat (*Rambam, Shabbat* 30:6). This demonstrates that he holds the Shabbat dear and honors it. On Shabbat, we say “Shabbat Shalom,” for Shabbat brings peace upon mankind.

When a person does not prepare properly for Shabbat and falls into it tired and irritable, his angry voice heard loudly throughout the house, he has missed the main ingredient of Shabbat, which is peace. This mood of anger, with which one enters Shabbat, is liable to continue throughout the day, as “one sin leads to another” (*Avot* 4:2).

The Beit Hamikdash was destroyed because Bnei Yisrael did not properly anticipate the Shabbat. They did not rid their hearts of the ugly trait of anger, and thereby missed out on the perfection one can attain with the arrival of Shabbat. Adam Harishon was created on the sixth day and was meant to reach perfection when Shabbat arrived. When one greets the Shabbat with holiness and purity, removing all traces of anger and resentment, he is capable of reaching untold heights on Shabbat, enjoying its influence throughout the coming week.

One who does not ready himself properly before Shabbat not only loses the sanctity of the day, but ruins the next week for himself, as well. He, so to speak, falls from the frying pan into the fire.

Preparing for Shabbat lends significance to the sanctity of the day. Many *Tanna'im* and *Amora'im* would exert themselves in preparation for

Shabbat (see *Shabbat* 119a). Sensing the sanctity of Shabbat impacts a person not only on this day, but throughout the week, as well.



Energizing Ethics

“And these matters that I command you today”

(Devarim 6:6)

Rashi expounds that the Torah should not be in your eyes like an old edict to which a person does not attach importance, but rather, they should be like a new one, toward which everybody runs. We are enjoined to view the Torah each day as new, having just been given at Har Sinai. Regarding this, Chazal state (*Avot* 6:2), “Every single day a Heavenly Voice emanates from Mount Chorev, proclaiming and saying, ‘Woe to them, to the people, because of their insult to the Torah!’” What insult is this referring to? It is the fact that people are capable of renewing insights in Torah, each day evoking the experience felt at receiving the Torah at Har Sinai, yet desist from doing so.

Each holiday, we savor the flavor of that festival anew. Every Yom Kippur and subsequent holiday, I feel a sensation of novelty that I never sensed before. The Satan does not get involved in our *chagim*. The sanctity of these special times protects us from him, and he is afraid to prosecute then. But immediately with the departure of the festival, our inspiration departs, as well. The *chagim* were given to us in order to strengthen our commitment to Torah. But as soon as they leave, the *Yetzer Hara* worms his way back into our lives once again. What is the solution? The study of *mussar*. Learning ethics will put us back on an even kilter. *Mussar* rejuvenates us with the energy needed to continue in our

service of Hashem. Torah is a delightful dish, and *mussar* is the condiment which brings out its tasty flavors.



Fixing Times for Learning Torah

“And these matters that I command you today shall be upon your heart. You shall teach them thoroughly to your children and you shall speak of them while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you retire, and when you arise”

(Devarim 6:6-7)

Everyone is obligated to set aside specific times for Torah study.

I once visited the great Gaon, Rabbi Elazar Menachem Man Shach, zt”l, together with my friend, may he live long, the Gaon and tzaddik, Rabbi Chaim Walkin, shlita. Rav Shach spoke in simple terms, but his words were laden with wisdom. He said that contemplating our daily lives will bring us to greater levels of faith. How we breathe, how we move our limbs, how we can see – these are inestimable gifts from Hashem, every moment of our lives. This obligates us to believe in Him and demonstrate gratitude. I think that one method of showing gratitude toward Hashem is by setting aside fixed times to study His Torah.

David Hamelech sanctified all his life for Torah. He testified about himself (*Tehillim* 119:97), “All day long it is my conversation.” He did not just study the halachot of Torah, but also the ethics contained therein. “My conversation” refers to the *mussar* talks involved in Torah study. Furthermore, he states (*ibid.* 119:62), “At midnight I arise to thank You.”

One year, shortly before Pesach, I found myself in Mexico. I met a distinguished man who stated that he wished to contribute nine thousand dollars towards *kimcha d'Pischa*. I contacted our manager, Mr. Moshe Gopez, who reacted joyfully, saying that this was exactly the sum they needed for this purpose. In the meantime, this wealthy benefactor's brother arrived. After hearing of his brother's contribution, he pledged to donate another nine thousand dollars, stating that this would total eighteen thousand dollars, the numerical equivalent of *chai* (life). This is an auspicious amount to donate to charity, as the pasuk states (*Mishlei* 10:2), "Charity rescues from death."

That evening, Mr. Gopez related that after we had spoken to the brothers, they were traveling in their helicopter, which suddenly fell and was smashed to smithereens. There were many injuries and deaths. We became very frightened, and immediately tried to contact the brothers. They excitedly told us that they had been miraculously saved. They added that their salvation was surely in the merit of the *tzedakah* they had given that morning. But they still felt obligated to give something to Hashem for the miracle He did for them.

I told them that they were surely thinking along the lines of contributing even more charity. But this would not be considered a gift to Hashem, since He gave them wealth in order to distribute it among the needy. I asserted that a fitting gift to Hashem would be to sanctify a portion of their time each day and dedicate it for Torah study, for Torah shields and protects from harm (see *Sotah* 21a).



Learning in Order to Teach

“You shall teach them thoroughly to your children”

(Devarim 6:7)

Rashi explains that this verse refers to teaching Torah to disciples. The Maharal MiPrague states (see *Derech Hachaim* 6:7) that Torah studied for one's own sake is not as meritorious as that studied in order to teach others.

The Gemara states (*Sanhedrin* 90a), “All of Yisrael has a share in the World to Come.” “All of Yisrael” have an intertwined portion in each other's Torah study. The disciples of Rabbi Akiva perished for not according honor to one another (*Yevamot* 62b). “Honor” is a reference to Torah (see *Avot* 6:3). They were deficient in helping one another succeed in his studies. Each one concerned himself only with his own studies. For this, they were severely punished. Bnei Yisrael merited receiving the Torah only when they were as one man with one heart at the foot of the mountain (*Rashi, Shemot* 19:2). Each was ready to share his Torah knowledge with his fellow Jews.

Ten years ago, an awful tragedy occurred in Lyon. This is what happened. A Jew approached me. He was married to a gentile woman, who was on the verge of death. He asked that I pray on her behalf and visit her in the hospital to lift her spirits. She yearned to meet me. I replied that I was afraid to bless her, lest others think I give approval to a mixed marriage. This could, *chalilah*, lend credence to marrying out. He said that his wife wanted very much to convert to Judaism and, at the very least, to die as a Jew. I agreed to accompany him to the hospital and pray on her behalf. There, she complained that her husband did not encourage her conversion, and now she would die as a gentile. I prayed for her recovery. She indeed recovered.

Her faith in Hashem was so strong that she desired to come under the wings of the *Shechinah* and do teshuvah immediately. I told her husband to help her convert according to halachah. But he kept rejecting my overtures, time after time. Exactly one year later, her illness returned, and she died. She never merited converting to Judaism. She died and was buried like a regular gentile. I think she might be considered a righteous gentile, who is required to observe the seven Noachide laws. But the saddest part of this drama was the husband's end. A few months after his wife passed on, he contracted the same illness and also died. His children stubbornly insisted on burying him beside their mother, in the gentile cemetery. This was measure for measure. He had prevented his wife from dying as a Jew, and here he was buried like a gentile.



Bondage and Freedom

“Bind them as a sign upon your arm and let them be ornaments between your eyes”

(Devarim 6:8)

Why did Hashem command us to wrap tefillin around the head and the forearm? Wouldn't it have been sufficient to merely place them there, without tying them?

The tefillin of the arm correspond to the heart, located on a person's left (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 25:5*), whereas the tefillin of the head correspond to the mind. Binding the tefillin to these body parts alludes to man's obligation to subject his heart and his mind to his Maker. The knot symbolizes binding oneself to Hashem's will, through subservience. This subservience allows one to serve Hashem in the best way possible. Likewise, one is enjoined to bind up his negative thoughts which impede his Avodat Hashem, and subordinate them, too, to His will.

When Bnei Yisrael were in Egypt, they were completely enslaved to the Egyptians. When Hashem expressed His desire to redeem His children, He informed them that their servitude would now be channeled toward Him, by means of Torah study and mitzvah observance. The binding of the tefillin to the arm and head signifies bondage to Hashem. This bondage is, in reality, the quintessential form of freedom, as in the song of Rabbi Yehudah Halevi, “A servant of Hashem is the truly free man.” In *Avot*, we are taught (6:2), “You can have no freer man than one who engages in the study of the Torah.”



Eikev



The Greatness of Humility

“This shall be the reward when you hearken to these ordinances, and you observe and perform them; Hashem, your G-d, will safeguard for you the covenant and the kindness that He swore to your forefathers”

(Devarim 7:12)

The word עֵקֶב (reward/outcome) literally means “heel.” One is adjured to subject his ego, making himself as humble as the heel, for the sake of Hashem and His Torah. Only in this manner can the Torah find a resting place inside him, and Hashem’s Name be called upon him. Chazal say (*Derech Eretz Zuta* 8), “Torah endures only in one who humbles himself before it.” Hashem exemplifies the trait of humility. The very fact that He holds back His anger and does not hurry to take retribution for the sinners, proves how long-suffering He is. We are instructed (*Devarim* 28:9), “And you go in His ways.” Chazal explain this pasuk as a command to emulate Hashem by adopting His qualities (see *Rabbeinu Bachya*, *Shemot* 15:3; see *Sotah* 14a). Since Hashem is humble and modest, we are required to emulate these traits.

The Midrash relates (*Shemot Rabbah* 8:1) that when Shlomo Hamelech wished to bring the Aron through the gates of the Beit Hamikdash, the space was too narrow. He immediately said the pasuk (*Tehillim* 24:7), “Raise up your heads, O gates, and be uplifted, you everlasting entrances, so that the King of Glory may enter.” But the gates remained sealed. Moreover, they wished to consume Shlomo, for they assumed he was referring to himself with the words “King of Glory.” Only after Shlomo added the caveat (*ibid.*, vs. 10), “Who is He, this King of Glory? Hashem, Master of Legions, He is the King of Glory, Selah!” were the gates finally mollified, and they desisted from swallowing him.

But the gates remained closed. Then Shlomo cried out (*Divrei Hayamim* II, 6:42), “Remember the righteousness of Your servant David!” The gates finally agreed to open wide, allowing the Aron entry. By mentioning his father’s name, Shlomo reminded the gates of his humbleness before his illustrious father. The gates then realized, so to speak, that Shlomo was not referring to himself at all when he called out “King of Glory.” His intention was to praise Hashem. Had his heart indeed swelled within him, he would never have humbled himself to the point of mentioning the kindnesses of his father, David.

The exact measurements of the Beit Hamikdash and its utensils were delivered by David to Shlomo. Why weren’t the gates originally planned to accommodate the Aron, obviating the need for a miracle to open them wide enough to allow it entry into the *Kodesh Hakodashim*? Hashem arranged it this way so that Shlomo would find it necessary to mention his father’s attributes. The give-and-take between Shlomo and the gates teaches us how crucial it is to espouse the trait of humility. If Shlomo Hamelech, wisest of all men, saw fit to humble himself by mentioning his father’s merit, all the more so should we, small of stature, cling to this exalted trait.

Why was it specifically the mention of David’s merit which caused the gates to open? David dedicated his life for the sake of his nation. Chazal relate (*Berachot* 4a) that David’s hands were constantly soiled with blood. He always attempted to permit women to their husbands. David likewise

felt deep concern for his fellow Jews. For instance, when they were undergoing financial difficulties, he told them (ibid., 3b) to support one another. He was exemplary in the trait of loving-kindness, due to his great humility. He felt it his mission statement to concern himself with the needs of his nation, never lording over others.

In *Avot* (1:2), we are taught, “The world depends on three things – on Torah study, on the service of G-d (*korbanot* or *tefillah*), and on kind deeds.” This Mishnah helps us understand why the gates were mollified at the mention of David’s merits. Shlomo Hamelech had built a home for the Torah, contained inside the Aron (*Bava Batra* 14b). The *korbanot* were an intrinsic part of the service in the Beit Hamikdash. The only thing lacking, then, was the third pillar, the pillar of loving-kindness.

Shlomo, in his humility, recognized his mistake. He did not hesitate to mention the representative of the third pillar, his father, David. The gates then hurried to do his bidding. The Beit Hamikdash, like the world, was also established upon these three foundations.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The word עֵקֶב (reward/outcome) literally means “heel.” One is adjured to subject his ego for the sake of Hashem and His Torah. Torah endures only in one who humbles himself before it.
- ◆ The gates of the Beit Hamikdash were too narrow for the Aron to fit through. This was purposely arranged in order to teach us a vital lesson.
- ◆ When Shlomo pronounced, “Raise up your heads, O gates, and be uplifted, you everlasting entrances, so that the King of Glory may enter,” the gates were ready to swallow him alive. They assumed that Shlomo was referring to himself as the King of Glory. Only after he said, “Hashem, Master of Legions, He is the King of Glory, Selah!” did they open wide, for they discerned his humility.
- ◆ The world stands on Torah, Avodah, and loving-kindness. When Shlomo built the Beit Hamikdash, he incorporated the first two components into its construction. But the pillar of loving-kindness was lacking. With

mention of David's *chessed*, the gates opened wide. David would seek ways to permit women to their husbands, and concerned himself with sustaining the nation. In his humility, Shlomo realized his mistake. He rectified it by mentioning David's name. The Beit Hamikdash had finally reached perfection.



Alacrity in Action

“This shall be the reward when you hearken to these ordinances, and you observe and perform them; Hashem, your G-d, will safeguard for you the covenant and the kindness that He swore to your forefathers”

(Devarim 7:12)

Since the word עקב literally means “heel,” Rashi explains that this verse refers to “the relatively light commandments that a person tramples with his heels.”

People naturally belittle the seemingly easy mitzvot, because they are so accustomed to doing them. Once-a-year mitzvot, though, such as sukkah, Pesach, Yom Kippur, etc., are done with alacrity and much thought. But mitzvot which are done on a weekly basis, all the more so, many times a day, seem to be relegated to insignificance, met with disparagement and disdain. The *Yetzer Hara* has a way of injecting laziness into our attitude toward these mitzvot. Once a person has a lackadaisical approach to a mitzvah, he may easily lose out on the mitzvah altogether.

Therefore, our Sages state (*Pesachim* 4a), “The quick ones hurry to do mitzvot.” The value of the mitzvah depends on the level of alacrity

involved. When a person is swift like a deer to do the will of his Heavenly Father, the mitzvah is improved in quality and is done in the most perfect way possible. This is unlike a mitzvah done with laziness and lack of enthusiasm. When Hashem commanded Avraham to take his only son, Yitzchak, and sacrifice him on the altar, Avraham hurried to do Hashem's bidding, as the pasuk states (*Bereishit* 22:3), "So Avraham woke up early in the morning." Rashi expounds that due to his tremendous love for the mitzvah, Avraham could not wait for his servants to saddle his donkey. He awoke early and prepared everything himself.

Chazal tell us (*Avot* 2:4), "Do not say, 'When I am free, I will study,' for perhaps you will not become free." When a person procrastinates over learning Torah, with the excuse that he has no time or strength for it at the moment, he can be sure that the right moment will never come. The *Yetzer Hara* will constantly convince him that he is too busy or tired at any given time. Conversely, enthusiasm in fulfilling Hashem's will and studying His Torah ignites a spark of vitality, enhancing the mitzvah and bringing it to a new level. Doing one mitzvah draws a person to do more, as we are told (*Avot* 4:2), "One mitzvah leads to another."

On a visit to the city, Marseille, I received the public for two days straight. I returned to my home in Lyon at 2:00 a.m. My driver, observing my tremendous tiredness, asked whether he should come for me at 7:00 a.m. for the Morning Prayers, as he usually does. I replied that I was extremely tired and did not think I would be able to arise then. We agreed that he would arrive at that time and check to see if I was awake. As I was getting ready to retire, the following thought struck me. If I were told that at 7:00 a.m., I had an important meeting with the philanthropist, Edmond Safra, z"l, would I continue sleeping, claiming I was too tired to get up? Wouldn't I gather all my strength, and run with alacrity in order not to miss this opportunity, even though there was a chance that he would give me nothing?

At 7:00 a.m., I had a meeting arranged with my Creator Himself, the One Who holds the hearts of kings and officials in His palm. How could I

hesitate waking up on time for this meeting? Hashem grants vision to the blind, straightens the bent, and dresses the naked. Our problem is that prayer has become light in our eyes. Due to its repetition, we have become habituated to it and view it with indifference. But if we would contemplate how precious prayer really is, we would be strong as a lion and run to do this mitzvah before it slips from our fingers.

When a person begins his day with prayer with a minyan, his whole day looks different. A spirit of purity envelops him, and his *Yetzer Hatov* encourages him to continue doing mitzvot. But when one awakens lazily, his lethargy escorts him throughout the day. As he slides through the day, he allows opportunities for mitzvot to slither away.

Upon the grave of my holy grandfather, Rabbi Yehudah Pinto, zy”a, is written, among other praises, that he excelled in the quality of alacrity and was famous for his humbleness. These two traits are entwined. When a person possesses the quality of humility, it impels him to do mitzvot with alacrity, both those regarding man and Hashem and those between man and his fellow man. My holy grandfather, Rabbi Yehudah Pinto, zy”a, passed away on the 15th of Av. The numerical value of the word גאוה (arrogance) is 15. In order to acquire the attribute of humility, one must first eradicate arrogance from his heart.

Chazal relate (*Ta’anit* 26b) that the 15th of Av was unique among the Yamim Tovim. On that day, the Jewish daughters would dance in the vineyards. All would dress alike, in the clothing of the wealthy, so that no one would be ashamed by her dress. The wealthier girls could have boasted over the poorer ones, refusing to lend them their clothes. But because they removed all traces of conceit from their hearts, they were able to don the trait of humility. They did kindness with their friends and gladly shared their clothes with them. Hashem took note of the humility and alacrity of these wealthy girls, and He granted them blessing. They merited finding their appropriate matches, based on their good qualities.

In Summary

- ◆ Since the word עקב literally means “heel,” Rashi explains that this verse refers to “the relatively light commandments that a person tramples with his heels.”
- ◆ Mitzvot which are done only once a year are done with excitement. But everyday mitzvot, such as praying, are often met with lethargy. Let us learn from Avraham Avinu to do all mitzvot with eagerness. He awoke early and saddled his donkey himself in preparation for *Akeidat Yitzchak*.
- ◆ The traits of alacrity and humility are closely related. The humble one hurries to fulfill Hashem’s wish. On the 15th of Av, the wealthy Jewish daughters would willingly share their beautiful clothes with those of lesser means.



Stipulation for Settling the Land

“This shall be the reward when you hearken to these ordinances, and you observe and perform them; Hashem, your G-d, will safeguard for you the covenant and the kindness that He swore to your forefathers”

(Devarim 7:12)

Hashem tells Bnei Yisrael that they are eligible to settle Eretz Yisrael on condition that they observe the Torah and mitzvot. But if they turn their backs to Hashem and His Torah, the Land will no longer be able to tolerate their presence and will hurry to disgorge them.

For decades after the *churban*, Eretz Yisrael lay in ruins. No nation wanted to rule over it. Occasionally, wars were fought over it, but in general, it was an abandoned country, where wild animals prowled.

When our nation returned to the Land of their forefathers, the Zionists began gaining a foothold, and the battles began in full force. Am Yisrael was not able to sit peacefully. This is the actualization of the words in this parashah. Inheriting the Land is dependent upon keeping the conditions of the contract. When these conditions are not met from within, the people are met with opposition from without, and the Land simply ejects them.

Eretz Yisrael does not allow her sons to sit within it peacefully. Each day brings new troubles, threatening to annihilate us, *rachmana litzlan*. When the army espouses the doctrine (*Devarim* 8:17) “My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth,” drawing the populace after them, Hashem demonstrates how inappropriate this attitude is. Arrogance has no place in this humble country. Even before we manage to celebrate a victory, new troubles befall us. After the Six Day War, the nation was euphoric. They excessively extolled the Israeli army. However, their intoxication with triumph did not last long. They were quickly sobered up by the Yom Kippur War, when they finally understood how very limited their army really was.

Approximately twenty years ago, I was acquainted with Rav Yaakov Ezrachi, a”h, who had lost a son in the army. When a high-ranking dignitary came to console him, Rav Ezrachi turned to him and requested that after a moment of silence in the Knesset, he should mention the tremendous power of Hashem and proclaim (*Iyov* 1:21), “Hashem has given, and Hashem has taken away, blessed be the Name of Hashem.” This eminent personage turned to the Rav and told him there was no way that he could convey this message in the Knesset. It contradicted their entire world outlook, based completely upon the might of the army. Then Rav Ezrachi reprimanded him, “Do you think that with this approach, you will succeed in creating a country?!”

Throughout the second Lebanese War (Tammuz-Av 2006), I was involved in helping bring a number of soldiers to burial. Their photographs in the newspapers depicted good-looking young men, bearing no likeness with the picture I met in the morgue at Tel Hashomer

Hospital. It is clear that these soldiers, who died in combat while protecting our Land, were sanctified in their deaths and will receive a great portion in the World to Come. They have not sinned in adopting the attitude of “My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth.” Anyone with a measure of common sense understands that if not for their sacrifice on behalf of Am Yisrael, we were liable to experience another Holocaust. Nevertheless, we may never lose sight of the belief that all is in Hashem’s hands. Only with His blessing can Am Yisrael claim victory in battle.

Before Am Yisrael entered the Land, which they were destined to conquer from the natives there, the two *shevatim* of Reuven and Gad approached Moshe. They requested permission to remain east of the Jordan, due to their multitude of cattle. Moshe was enraged at this request. How dare they ask to sit in peace and tranquility with no inclination to help their fellow Jews conquer the Land?! These tribes accepted Moshe’s rebuke and asserted that they would come to the aid of their brothers in battle, and only afterward, return to this section east of the Jordan (*Bamidbar* 32:1-19). Moshe’s message rings throughout the generations. Am Yisrael must feel accountable toward all Jews. Those who reside outside the borders of Eretz Yisrael must feel the pain of *galut* and pray for the redemption.

While the soldiers protect the front, the yeshiva boys and avrechim must intensify their Torah study, thereby protecting the country from within. Slackening in their Torah study is similar to the attitude of the two tribes who wished to rest in peace while their brethren fought for the Land. They needed Moshe to awaken them to the importance of mutual responsibility among our nation.

Yerushalayim was destroyed, but not forever. Hashem has promised us that the third Beit Hamikdash will yet be built and stand in full glory. Our Sages state (see *Pesachim* 54b), “It is a decree upon the dead that they are forgotten from the heart.” One forgets only when the loss is complete. When a person is missing, the pain is manifold times more intense than when one knows that his friend is definitely dead. Hope wells up in the

heart time and again. Maybe today will be the day of his discovery? Yerushalayim was not destroyed forever. It will rise once again. Therefore, the anticipation of the *geulah* is constantly with us, as we pray that this be the day of the final redemption.

Since the destruction, there have been many who could find no solace for their grief. Rabbi Yehudah Halevi, zy”a, cried over the Kotel stones, weeping profusely for the *geulah*. A passing Arab could not tolerate this and smashed his skull. The nations cannot bear the thought that Am Yisrael mourns the *churban*. It should be an event relegated to the annals of history, they claim, unrelated to our daily lives. But we, who believe in the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash, cannot carry our pain in silence. Every day, we pray thrice (*Tefillat Shemoneh Esrei*), “May our eyes behold Your return to Zion in compassion.”

The word *Eikev* is interpreted by Chazal (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim* 870) as referring to bending down. If a person wishes to “hearken to the ordinances,” he must first humble himself. In contrast, envy, lust, and the pursuit of honor are in contradiction to humility, and therefore drive a person out of this world (see *Avot* 4:21). A heart swollen with pride has no room for words of Torah (see *Ta’anit* 7a). One who is arrogant is not capable of serving Hashem to perfection. In order to merit a life of peace and tranquility in Eretz Yisrael without the fear of our enemies, we must first lower our egos. This will allow us to hearken to Hashem’s Voice and observe His word. When Am Yisrael cleave to Hashem and His mitzvot, they merit the fulfillment of the verse (*Devarim* 7:12), “Hashem, your G-d, will safeguard for you the covenant and the kindness that He swore to your forefathers.”

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The precondition for enduring in the Land is Torah and mitzvah observance. When Am Yisrael turn their backs upon Hashem and His Torah, the Land disgorges them.

- ◆ The Israeli army is based on the maxim “My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth.” The fallacy in this mistaken faith is proven time and again. Before completely recovering from one blow, they are struck again. But when Am Yisrael is smart enough to attribute their victory to Hashem, they create a *kiddush Hashem* and are exalted by the entire world.
- ◆ Two tribes requested portions outside the borders of Eretz Yisrael, east of the Jordan. Moshe was greatly angered by this. He rebuked them for wishing to dwell in peace while their brothers fought bloody battles to conquer the Land. Moshe’s message to the generations is that we must all feel mutual accountability toward each other. Those who reside in *chutz la’aretz* must pray for the redemption. While the soldiers fight physical battles, the Torah scholars must involve themselves in the battle of Torah.
- ◆ We are guaranteed that Yerushalayim will be restored to its former glory. Since the Beit Hamikdash was not destroyed forever, we will never find complete consolation, thus we constantly bemoan the *churban*.
- ◆ Before hearkening to Hashem’s word, one must humble himself like the heel of the foot. Only in this manner can he observe Hashem’s word and merit the *geulah*.



The Hazards of Habit

“This shall be the reward when you hearken to these ordinances, and you observe and perform them; Hashem, your G-d, will safeguard for you the covenant and the kindness that He swore to your forefathers”

(Devarim 7:12)

Rashi explains that this pasuk warns us in regard to the mitzvot which one tends to take lightly. We must believe that every mitzvah given to us

by Hashem is precious and important. If Hashem chose to include it in the 613 mitzvot, we must observe it unconditionally, beautifying it as we would the seemingly more significant mitzvot. People are punctilious regarding Shabbat observance, the prohibitions of *niddah*, mixing milk and meat, etc., but mitzvot like washing one's hands in the morning or *mayim acharonim* are done off-handedly, or omitted altogether. Constantly reminding ourselves that we are obligated to keep the small mitzvot just as we are the great ones will certainly help us keep them more stringently.

One often makes light of mitzvot which he has become accustomed to keeping. They fail to arouse a sense of excitement within him. Imagine someone flying for the first time. The experience certainly leaves a strong impression on him, as he recalls, time after time, the magical moments when he became detached from the ground. He was literally floating on air. But with the increase in plane trips comes a decrease in enthusiasm. Flying eventually becomes routine. At times, the mere thought of flying brings on a headache and symptoms of travel-sickness. How could the event which once brought him so much pleasure and delight become a thing of disgust with no trace of enjoyment? Habit, which has taken residence in his heart, has extinguished the fire of excitement which was once there.

In a similar vein, people become excited over mitzvot which are rare. A mitzvah which is kept only once a year, or once every few years, warrants ecstasy and elation. But mitzvot which repeat themselves, sometimes many times a day, become dulled through habit. We tend to "tread upon them with our heel" and we plod through the motions. The Torah knows our natural instincts. Therefore, there is a special directive to arouse ourselves specifically in regard to these mitzvot. We are enjoined to observe them as though they are rare and unique.

Parashat *Eikev* is read on the heels of Parashat *Va'etchanan*, which, in turn, is read on the Shabbat following Tishah b'Av. Hashem wishes to indicate that the cause for the *churban* was a nonchalant attitude toward mitzvot. How did Bnei Yisrael become weak in their mitzvah observance?

They regarded the mitzvot as routine and therefore did not observe them with a full heart. The Torah enjoins us to beware in the execution of the seemingly simple mitzvot. They are not simple at all! See what happened to the Beit Hamikdash when Bnei Yisrael scorned the mitzvot that repeat themselves on a daily basis.

During the times preceding the *churban*, Bnei Yisrael scoffed at the mitzvot. They had become so habituated to doing them that they lost all taste for them. When the sweet flavor of mitzvot is lost, the mitzvah itself is in danger of being forgotten. The Torah therefore adjures us (see *Rashi, Shemot 19:1*; see *Yalkut Shimoni, Mishlei 937*) to view the words of Torah as new every day. This will allow us the feeling of novelty and freshness in Torah study. Only in this way can we keep the mitzvot perfectly, including the easy ones which are often repeated.

Tishah b'Av was designated as the day of mourning the *churban* (see *Ta'anit 30a*). In commemoration of the *churban*, tzaddikim observe *Tikkun Chatzot* every night, lamenting the House of the *Shechinah* (see *Sha'arei Teshuvah, Orach Chaim 1:6*). These giants do not take the *churban* for granted. As they arise at midnight, they indicate that they do not allow the years of exile to cast slumber upon them, by getting used to our present situation. Rather, they keenly feel the loss of the Beit Hamikdash as though it happened today. In contrast, ordinary people save their tears for Tishah b'Av, in the best of circumstances. Immediately after the fast, they return to their routines as though nothing happened. They have become so accustomed to *galut* that they feel no inclination to hasten the redemption. Here, too, we see how routine and habit dull the senses, dimming one's eyes to stark reality.

The days of Sefirat Haomer are days of mourning the passing of the 24,000 disciples of Rabbi Akiva during this time period. Why were they punished? For not sufficiently honoring one another (*Yevamot 62b*). How could the disciples of Rabbi Akiva, perfect people, be deficient in regard to their fellow man's respect? Aren't we taught (see *Tanna D'Vei Eliyahu Rabbah 1*), "Good character precedes Torah"? They certainly possessed good character. What was the accusation against them?

According to their elevated status, they should have demonstrated more respect toward one another. How did they become remiss? By the force of habit. They became so used to seeing their friends' virtues that they were no longer impressed by them, letting this lessen their respect toward each other. See how powerful is habit, bringing havoc in its wake!

In parashat *Shoftim*, we read (*Devarim* 16:20), "Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue, so that you will live." What is the reason for the double language? All too often, we presume that righteousness lies with us, and we immediately use this assumption to our advantage. The Torah uses the word righteousness twice to teach us to give a second thought to the matter. "Maybe, on this occasion, I am at fault." Habit compels us to believe that we are always in the right. Only climbing out from its rut will enable us to get to the heart of the matter, bringing justice to light.

Parashat *Chukat* relates the give-and-take between Bnei Yisrael and Edom. Bnei Yisrael asked Edom for permission to travel through their land, but Edom refused them passage (*Bamidbar* 20:14-29). Hashem had forbidden Bnei Yisrael from waging war with Edom. Therefore, they had to take a long, circuitous route instead. Before making this long journey, the nation rested near the land of Edom. There, Aharon Hakohen passed away and was buried on Mount Hor. The commentaries explain (*Rashi*, *ibid.*, vs. 23) that Aharon passed away as punishment for Bnei Yisrael choosing to encamp across from the Edomites. Bnei Yisrael observed the perverted practices of Edom and were negatively influenced by them.

How could Moshe allow Bnei Yisrael to remain in the presence of Edom, realizing just how detrimental this could prove? Despite his understanding of the negative ramifications of staying at that place, and even with the knowledge that Aharon would perish here, Moshe did not prevent them from doing so. He wanted to teach them a clear lesson. How important it is to distance oneself from a bad neighbor, whose improper ways become the norm and are no longer met with disdain by their onlookers. Chazal enjoin us (*Avot* 1:7), "Distance yourself from a bad

neighbor,” so that we should not become used to his evil ways and begin to imitate them.

But Bnei Yisrael did not learn this vital lesson. Later on, they encamped across from Moav (*Bamidbar* 25:1-9). This resting proved even more perilous than the previous one. The daughters of Moav caused Bnei Yisrael to sin and brought a terrible epidemic upon the nation. The twin encampments across from Edom and Moav taught Bnei Yisrael how much care must be taken to beware of bad company. It is human nature to become accustomed to anything, the good as well as the bad. This was a crucial message for the nation before entering the Land. Settling Eretz Yisrael is contingent upon the observance of mitzvot. But if, *chalilah*, Bnei Yisrael would become habituated to mitzvot, they would begin neglecting the easy ones altogether. The seemingly significant ones would come next. Eventually, the Land would disgorge them.

Moshe wanted his people to take a lesson from what took place in the Wilderness. When they would take note of the dire ramifications of routine, they would make sure never to fall into the rut of habit. Habit is hazardous even regarding good things. It can cause a person to lose interest even in exalted matters, causing him, eventually, to trample the mitzvot.

A man wrote to me that he invested a huge amount of money to purchase a home in a prestigious neighborhood. But when he moved in, he was dismayed to find a non-observant Jewish family living across the street. He was very concerned over his children’s upbringing and therefore asked me what to do. I advised him to move out as soon as possible, in spite of the financial loss involved. The threat of spiritual loss was far greater.

When people observe actions that oppose the Torah, they are at first shocked and appalled. But with time, these feelings are dulled. They become accustomed to this type of behavior, blind to anything that is wrong with it. Slowly but surely, they are drawn into it. Just as one must distance himself from a bad neighbor, so is he enjoined to seek a good

neighbor, who will have a positive effect upon him. By observing those who cling to Torah and mitzvot and are punctilious in mitzvah observance, he will follow in their ways, becoming as elevated as they are.

In Summary

- ◆ We are enjoined to observe the easy, common mitzvot which people usually tread upon, just as we are careful to keep the rare mitzvot. Why is it that we scorn mitzvot? It is because they have become second nature, eliciting no excitement or enthusiasm.
- ◆ Parashat *Eikev*, read after parashat *Va'etchanan*, following Tishah b'Av, teaches us that the *churban* was a result of a lethargic attitude toward the seemingly simple mitzvot, which spilled over to the significant mitzvot, as well.
- ◆ Rabbi Akiva's disciples were held accountable for refraining from sufficiently honoring their colleagues. They were accustomed to their friends' greatness, which no longer evoked feelings of respect.
- ◆ Aharon Hakohen passed away in the vicinity of Edom and was buried on Mount Hor in retribution for the nation's conduct. By setting camp opposite Edom, Bnei Yisrael placed themselves in a position of peril. They learned from the ways of this nation and were negatively influenced thereby. Later, resting near Moav was cause for a tremendous epidemic. One must distance himself from bad company.



Internet – Modern-day Idolatry

“And you shall not bring an abomination into your home and become banned like it; you shall surely loathe it and you shall surely abominate it, for it is banned”

(Devarim 7:26)

Moshe Rabbeinu commands Am Yisrael, before they enter the Land, to completely eradicate all the idols of the nations who resided there. These idols were considered an abomination. But demolishing them was not enough; Am Yisrael were commanded to destroy them and feel utterly repulsed by them. From this mitzvah we see just how disgusting and repulsive *avodah zarah* is in the eyes of Hashem.

In our day and age, there are not many nations who still serve idols. We do find Eastern religions which worship the constellations or the holy cow of India. In the past, idolatry was widespread. Nowadays, with the advent of technology, idol worship has decreased, reserved for a few backward, primitive cultures.

But let us not fool ourselves into thinking that *avodah zarah* has really disappeared. Although serving idols is out of style, there is a very real version of idolatry, and it has claimed many sacrifices.

This modern-day idolatry is the Internet. In spite of all its efficiency, its curse is greater than its blessing. We cannot deny or ignore its benefits. With the mere click of a key, universes open up before one's eyes. Instead of running around from place to place, by tapping on the keyboard and moving the mouse, one can bring the entire world to his screen. Due to its wide usage, the computer has penetrated thousands upon thousands of households and offices, and has become a vessel for disseminating Torah lessons and Jewish thought. In the past, there were those who declined attending Torah lectures with the excuse that they did not have

time for it. But with the advent of modern technology and the availability of the media, it has become much simpler to hear words of Torah. During their free time, people can tune in and hear *shiurim* on any Torah topic, thereby strengthening their *yirat Shamayim*.

I have not come to downplay the effectiveness of this tool, which has proven so beneficial and valuable. But, by the same token, I cannot ignore its tremendous danger. Because I am involved with the public on a daily basis, I hear all about their problems. I know for a fact that Internet poses a real threat to the harmony in the home and the education of our youth.

I have heard many cases of adults who were caught in the Web. They were enticed by its sweetness, but quickly became stuck in its seductive allure. A large percentage of married couples complain about infidelity. They may think that their age immunizes them from the depravity of the streets, yet they fall captive to the Internet. Failing to employ a filter as they work on the computer, they are exposed to all forms of corruption and promiscuity.

To my shame, I will admit the following. During the days of the first Intifada, I had to travel to Eretz Yisrael. But since there was no direct flight, we had a stopover in London. In all airports, huge screens depict the news. As I awaited my flight, and with worry over my brethren in Israel, I found myself drawn to the newscasts, delivered by a woman. Unfortunately, the image of this woman was etched in my mind. Even five years later, as I stood up to pray the Shemoneh Esrei, her image would pop up before my eyes and distract my mind from prayer. Only after doing complete teshuvah and weeping bitterly for Heavenly assistance, was this woman's image deleted from my mind. She finally stopped haunting me.

No one is immune to the perils of the *Yetzer Hara*. Since the "eye sees and the heart desires" (see *Rashi, Bamidbar 15:39*), every person must beware of gazing at improper sights. There is no one who can claim to be protected from the dangers of the street. Chazal instruct us (*Avot 2:4*), "Do not believe in yourself until the day your die." Even I, considered a

Rabbi who brings merit to the public, fell into the trap of the *Yetzer Hara*. All I had intended to do was find out the news. Woe to me on the Day of Judgment and the day of rebuke! I sincerely hope that Hashem accepted my teshuvah, and has forgiven me completely.

The Internet is the idol of the 21st century. A person can be drawn to the most immoral sites, without any form of supervision. Whose heart does not shudder at the thought of the dangers which lurk at the doorstep of our fellow Jews? This abomination has taken permanent residence in their homes. Because of its untold benefits, their eyes are blinded to its innate peril.

I remember a case in which a couple came to me, weeping bitterly. They bemoaned the fact that their four children wasted all their time and energy on the Internet, until they had no time left to do their schoolwork. I rebuked the parents, stating that the blame rested with them. They should have foreseen the danger in advance and prevented their children from becoming entangled with this destructive machine before it was too late. Even the gentiles have publicized urgent warnings, appealing to parents to safeguard their children from the Internet, which draws the hearts of the young like a magnet and causes them to spiral downward.

In parashat *Terumah*, we read (*Shemot* 25:8), “They shall make a Sanctuary for Me so that I may dwell among them.” The words *among them* are used instead of *in it*. We learn from this that each and every Jew is enjoined to make himself into a sanctuary in which the *Shechinah* can dwell (see *Nefesh Hachaim* 1:4). The Mishkan was fashioned from forty-eight beams. The word for beam is קרש, whose letters can be transposed to spell the word קשר (connection). The beams of the Mishkan connected Bnei Yisrael with Hashem. Each person, likewise, is capable of connecting with his Maker, becoming a home for the *Shechinah*.

The way to accomplish this is by adopting the forty-eight levels by which one acquires Torah (as listed in *Pirkei Avot*), corresponding to the forty-eight beams of the Mishkan. What does the Internet do? It shorts the

circuit between us and Hashem. As soon as Hashem discerns immodesty among us, He removes His *Shechinah* from our midst. This is in line with the pasuk (*Devarim* 23:15), “Your camp shall be holy, so that He will not see a shameful thing among you and turn away from behind you.” In order to draw the *Shechinah* upon oneself, he must first and foremost withdraw from the Internet. When his heart is free from abomination, he is able to soar via the forty-eight methods of acquiring Torah, binding himself to Hashem in the tightest way possible.

Just as Hashem commanded Moshe to order Bnei Yisrael to despise and destroy the idols of the nations, we are enjoined to hate and eliminate this modern-day *avodah zarah*. We are taught (see *Shabbat* 104a) that one who wishes to purify himself is helped by Hashem. Certainly, when Hashem observes one’s real desire to come close to Him by removing this dastardly device from his possession, he will receive Divine blessing. He will become sanctified and be blessed with all things good. He will reap much *nachat* from his children and have peace and harmony reign in his home.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Bnei Yisrael were ordered to destroy the idols of the gentiles and hate them in their hearts. How loathsome is *avodah zarah* in Hashem’s eyes!
- ◆ Nowadays, idolatry is no longer popular. Internet has taken its place. One should take heed and realize that the Internet is more dangerous than it seems. Whoever is concerned for his soul will distance himself from it.
- ◆ “Do not believe in yourself until the day you die.” Even adults, Rabbis among them, are liable to fall into the trap of the Internet. They, as well as children, must beware of this destructive tool.
- ◆ “They shall make a Sanctuary for Me so that I may dwell among them.” Each of us is adjured to make himself into a fitting vessel to contain the *Shechinah*. The Mishkan was fashioned from forty-eight beams. This alludes to the forty-eight ways of acquiring Torah. But this cannot happen until one removes the abomination of the Internet from his home, as the

pasuk says, “Your camp shall be holy, so that He will not see a shameful thing among you and turn away from behind you.”

- ◆ Just as Moshe ordered the nation to abhor and destroy *the avodah zarah* of the gentiles, so are we adjured to remove and despise the *avodah zarah* of our day, which is the Internet.



Mutual Responsibility

“Then Hashem said to me: Arise, descend quickly from here, for your people that you took out of Egypt has become corrupt; they have strayed quickly from the way that I commanded them; they have made themselves a molten image”

(Devarim 9:12)

Moshe remained in Heaven for forty days and nights. According to Am Yisrael’s calculations, he should have descended earlier. When they noticed his delay, they formed a Golden Calf to replace him. They believed this calf would bring them out of the Wilderness.

The sefer *Ashmerot Da’at* quotes Chazal (*Shemot Rabbah* 42:4), who state, in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak, “When Hashem told Moshe to descend, Moshe became so aggrieved by the report that Bnei Yisrael had fashioned an idol that he was blinded and did not know how to descend. The Ministering Angels wished to put him to death.” Upon seeing this, Hashem carved an opening under His Throne and instructed Moshe to descend through it.

The author of that work continues, asking how Moshe did not know the way down. Didn’t he ascend just before? Why couldn’t he retrace his

steps and take the same route back to Earth? In a similar vein, Chazal tell us (*Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin* 10b) that when Menashe wished to do teshuvah, the angels were opposed to Hashem accepting it. They locked all the gates of Heaven before the man who had sinned and caused the masses to sin, as well. What did Hashem do? He carved a special aperture under His Heavenly Throne, just as He had done for Moshe.

Moshe ascended to, and descended from, Heaven, a total of three times. We don't find that at any other time he needed help finding the way out. Why was this time different? Furthermore, what did Moshe do that incited the wrath of the angels? When Moshe arrived on High, the angels asked Hashem what a man of flesh and blood was doing among them. Moshe replied that he had come to receive the Torah, for the world cannot exist without Torah. Chazal tell us (see *Shabbat* 89a) that this response was accepted by the angels. They were mollified, and even the Angel of Death taught Moshe the secrets of the *ketoret*. Why, now, did the angels wish to strike him? Bnei Yisrael's serving the calf only served to intensify the principle that without Torah, they cannot stand up to their *Yetzer Hara*. They were in critical condition and needed the Torah urgently!

Why didn't Hashem just silence the angels with a fitting reply instead of carving for Moshe an opening under His Heavenly Throne? His act would seem to give credence to their words, for otherwise, He would surely have replied.

Moshe ascended to Heaven by the directive of Hashem. Hashem knows that "seeing is believing" and therefore felt it would be more effective for Moshe to take a trip heavenward and see with his own eyes the source of Torah and the reward for those who walk in its ways. Moshe dwelled on High through tremendous self-sacrifice. He abstained from food and drink for the duration of forty days and nights. His body became a spiritual entity, like an angel (see *Da'at Tevunot* 72). Moshe feared the reaction of the angels. Therefore, Hashem promised him protection, for those who are sent on a mission to do a mitzvah are not harmed (see *Pesachim* 8b). It was this promise that provided him protection from the angels.

The first time that Moshe ascended to Heaven was in order to bring down the *luchot* to Bnei Yisrael. But Bnei Yisrael did not utilize the days of his absence for spiritual ascent. This was because they had not originally accepted the Torah perfectly. True, they had cried out “*Na’aseh v’nishma*” (*Shemot* 24:7), but their proclamation was deficient. It did not contain the elements of self-sacrifice and joy, so central to the acceptance of Torah. This is proven by the fact that Hashem held the mountain over their heads like a barrel, compelling them to accept the Torah (*Shabbat* 88a). Later, Moshe had to force them away from the calf, for they had become so attached to it.

It was only generations later, in the times of Mordechai and Esther, that Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah willingly (*Esther* 9:27). The factor of force was finally removed. Their sole inclination was toward Torah.

It was this deficiency, at the time of accepting the Torah, which brought our nation to fashion a Golden Calf. A small crack in one’s Avodat Hashem is capable of opening the dam, allowing sins to flow forth. A precious, polished diamond plummets in value because of the smallest speck. Bnei Yisrael, who were the Generation of Wisdom, fell from the heights to the depths because of their fault at *Matan Torah*.

A sick man is ordered to take a specific medication. As long as he does not see results, the only taste he has of this medicine is its bitter flavor. There are likely to be days when he won’t even bother taking his medication altogether. On the other hand, one who was healed by the medicine will make sure to take it dutifully in spite of its bitter taste.

The Torah’s ordinances are sometimes difficult to uphold. One who has not experienced its sweetness is liable to fall into despair. But as soon as he tastes its honey-like qualities, he will not be able to pull himself away from it. David Hamelech expresses this in his statement (*Tehillim* 119:97), “O how I love Your Torah! All day long it is my conversation.” Am Yisrael were able to fall so low as to fashion the Golden Calf so soon after accepting the Torah, because their acceptance of the Torah was faulty from the start. They were forced into it and had

not yet tasted its sweetness. It was easy for them to become lax in it and follow foreign gods. But in the days of Mordechai and Esther, they re-accepted the Torah, this time through will and love, with the knowledge of what it contains.

Seemingly, our generation should be at the apex of good attributes. Unfortunately, this is far from the case. With the years, the moral level of the generations has declined. Chazal go so far as to say (see *Shabbat* 112b) that if the previous generations were like angels, we can be compared to mere humans. But if the previous generations were like humans, we are nothing but donkeys, and not like the donkey of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair (which was unusually perceptive). Who is responsible for the degeneration of each generation? It is the *Yetzer Hara*, who becomes wiser with the passing of time. He waits in ambush and pounces upon a person, turning him away from the proper path. The only solution is the remedy called Torah, as Chazal state (*Kiddushin* 30b) that Hashem informs us, “I created the *Yetzer Hara*; I created Torah as its antidote.”

In his famous dream, Yaakov saw a ladder with angels ascending and descending (*Bereishit* 28:12). This was a portent for the future kings who would ascend to power and rule over Am Yisrael in *galut*. After some time, these powers would eventually descend, dissolving into oblivion (*Bereishit Rabbah* 68:14). But the angel of Edom seemed to ascend higher and higher. Yaakov saw no sign of his descent. In tremendous fear, Yaakov turned to Hashem and asked when Edom’s end would come. Hashem replied that the exile of Edom would be the most difficult of all, but the long arm of justice would ultimately reach this nation, as well. Hashem will throw them down from the pinnacle of their success with such force that they will meet a grisly end (*Tanchuma, Vayeitzei* 2).

We, who find ourselves in the *galut* of Edom, so full of challenges and temptations, must gird ourselves with inner strength to overcome this obstacle course. This will weaken the power of Edom’s angel. He will lose his footing and come crashing downward. Hashem will thus bring the end to our suffering, once and for all.

Let us return to those wonderful days of Mordechai and Esther! Let us, too, accept the Torah with love and desire. Let us do perfect teshuvah, rectifying the sin of the Golden Calf.

Our sefarim teach that even the perfectly righteous repent and confess sins before Hashem that they never dreamed of doing. It is eminently clear to all that the tzaddikim do not murder or commit adultery. But since all Bnei Yisrael are mutually responsible, the tzaddikim, too, admit to these faults. Perhaps their soul is entwined with the soul of a rasha, who is guilty of these crimes. The tzaddik is obligated to atone for the sins of the wicked by confessing these sins and thereby bringing rectification to his soul.

When Moshe Rabbeinu was in *Shamayim* and Bnei Yisrael were involved with the Golden Calf, Hashem told him (*Devarim* 9:12), “Descend quickly from here, for your people has become corrupt.” Moshe, as Bnei Yisrael’s leader and redeemer, was responsible for their spiritual decline. He had to descend from his greatness on account of their sin. Due to the closeness he felt toward his people, Moshe sought ways to defend them. He begged Hashem to forgive them, for they had not yet learned the details of the Torah, and therefore did not understand the severity of idol worship. Hashem had spoken to him regarding mitzvot in the singular form. Moshe countered that the nation understood this to mean that only he was obligated in this commandment, as the pasuk states (*Shemot* 20:3), “You (sing.) shall not recognize the gods of others” (*Shemot Rabbah* 47:9).

When the angels heard Moshe’s justifications for Bnei Yisrael, they wished to put him to death. Although the nation had not yet been explicitly warned regarding molten images, they had already heard the command “I am Hashem, your G-d” (*Shemot* 20:2). This commandment alone should have prevented them from fashioning the Golden Calf. Just as Bnei Yisrael warranted the death sentence for their transgression, so too, did their leader bear the consequences of their actions. Moshe desperately sought ways to defend his nation. But because he did not defend Hashem’s honor, the angels felt he deserved to die.

Tzaddikim are responsible for the sins of the generation (*Shabbat* 33b). They have to pay the price for their nation's sins. If the people transgress, it is an indication that their leader did not infuse them with sufficient faith and fear of Heaven. For instance, if a Torah teacher notices that his pupils are derelict in their Torah studies, he must know he is at fault and will pay the price. Had he properly instilled the importance of Torah study in their hearts, they would never have dared digress from this path.

Moshe heard the angels' accusations and felt they were well-founded. If Am Yisrael fell to the level of fashioning an idol, it was an indication that he had been remiss in his duty. He became terribly afraid and did not know where to turn. Hashem desisted from responding to the angels, for they were correct. Furthermore, by allowing Moshe to face the music on his own, He was transmitting a message to us for all generations. How great is the power of mutual responsibility among Am Yisrael! Each of us must feel like a crucial link in the chain of Am Yisrael. We must feel the pain of the public at a time of crisis. Hashem therefore carved an aperture for Moshe under His royal Throne, but did not silence the prosecution of the Heavenly angels.

The Torah orders us (*Shemot* 23:5), "You shall help repeatedly with him." This broad commandment refers to all areas of life where a person is in a position to lend a helping hand. If Moshe, who refrained from assisting his fellow Jews when he was in Heaven, was nonetheless accused of wrongdoing by the angels, how much more will one be charged with not helping his fellow man when he had the ability to do so. Only Hashem could rescue Moshe from his perilous position. Moshe was on a mission of bringing Bnei Yisrael to repentance. This would raise his level all the more. His descent would actually be for the purpose of ascent.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ When Bnei Yisrael sinned with the Golden Calf, Hashem ordered Moshe to descend. But Moshe became blinded and could not find the way down. The sefer *Ashmerot Da'at* asks the following questions: Why couldn't

Moshe simply retrace his steps, returning the way he had come? Why were the angels irked by his presence; weren't they previously mollified, when notified that he had come to receive the Torah? And why didn't Hashem silence the angels, preferring, instead, to carve an aperture for Moshe under His Throne, by which he could escape?

- ◆ Am Yisrael fell into sinning with the Calf because their original acceptance of the Torah had been through force. Only in the days of Mordechai and Esther did they accept the Torah willingly.
- ◆ Moshe attempted to defend Bnei Yisrael. But the angels wished to strike him, for he had not stood up for Hashem's honor. Bnei Yisrael had already heard "I am Hashem." Moshe became terribly afraid. He heard the truth in the angels' words and had no response. He was desperately in need of Hashem's help.
- ◆ Hashem allowed Moshe to fend for himself, to inject the sense of mutual responsibility into the makeup of the nation. If a student sins, it is an indication that the teacher did not inculcate him with sufficient *yirat Shamayim*.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu was held accountable for not coming to the aid of his nation, although he was in Heaven at the time of their sin. This teaches us a valuable lesson. One who withholds help from his fellow man will be severely punished.



The Golden Calf

“Then I saw and behold! you had sinned to Hashem, your G-d; you made yourselves a molten calf; you strayed quickly from the way that Hashem commanded you”

(Devarim 9:16)

In parashat *Eikev*, Moshe relates the sins that the nation transgressed in spite of Hashem’s overwhelming kindness toward them. One of the most severe sins in the Wilderness was the sin of the Golden Calf. *Avodah zarah* is one of the most serious transgressions, and we suffer the consequences of this sin to this very day (*Sanhedrin* 102a). After the sin of the Golden Calf, Hashem wished to annihilate Bnei Yisrael, establishing another nation in their stead. Only through Moshe’s unremitting supplications for Heavenly mercy was he able to placate Hashem’s anger and annul the decree that had hovered over their heads.

What is so severe about the sin of the Golden Calf, warranting punishment throughout the generations? Moreover, why did Bnei Yisrael opt to form a molten image of a calf, instead of just taking a live one from among their many flocks? And the most pressing question of all: How could Bnei Yisrael, the Generation of Wisdom, who witnessed Hashem’s miracles and saw His *Shechinah*, fall to the lowest level possible and sin in this way? Hashem had performed countless miracles on their behalf. They were literally carried on clouds during their sojourn in the Wilderness. Their clothes never wore out, and they never felt the need to relieve themselves. Bread rained down from Heaven and Miriam’s Well accompanied them everywhere. How could Bnei Yisrael display such ingratitude, completely blinded to the goodness of Hashem, and anger Him with the Golden Calf?

Chazal teach (*Sanhedrin* 97a) that Mashiach will come only when money is scarce. What is the connection between the redemption and the

financial state of the world? Can't Hashem bring us the salvation when wealth is widespread?

Perhaps we can explain in the following way. When Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, they were drawn after wealth. This was demonstrated by their actions after *Kriyat Yam Suf*. They were so intent on gathering the spoils of the Egyptians, who had drowned in the sea, that they had to be forced away from the seashore, as it says (*Shemot* 15:22), "Moshe caused Yisrael to journey from Yam Suf" (see *Rashi*, *ibid.*).

However, Bnei Yisrael had left Egypt with great wealth, as they had been commanded by Hashem to request expensive vessels from the Egyptians, in order to fulfill the promise to the Avot that their children would leave Egypt with much wealth. The fact that they had to be driven away from the shores of the sea indicated how precious and significant wealth was in their eyes. Certainly, money is necessary for man's daily sustenance. Even Chazal state (*Avot* 3:17), "If there is no flour, there is no Torah." The question is: how much importance does a person place on his finances? Is money everything?

Money should be granted its rightful place. It should not be wasted on frivolities. Only fools fritter away their hard-earned funds. But one should never allow his money to cause him to be arrogant, feeling that his prowess and proficiency brought him his wealth. He should constantly reiterate that all he has is directly from Hashem, Who Alone decides who should be rich and who should be poor. When a person always thinks about materialism and how he can expand his assets, he becomes a slave to the silver, exactly like one who worships idols.

Bnei Yisrael respected riches excessively when they emerged from Egypt. It was this extreme emphasis on affluence that caused them to serve idolatry. Their glorifying gold and silver was considered a form of *avodah zarah*. This led them to coronate a false god upon themselves, the Golden Calf. Bnei Yisrael's idolizing of materialism was, in essence, the beginning of their downfall. It was what brought them to serve foreign deities.

The nation did not suffice with taking an actual calf and worshipping it. The glitter of gold beckoned, and they could not resist its magnetic pull. They insisted on fashioning a calf made (im)purely of gold. Aharon was involved, instructing the people to bring him their gold. His motives were pure; he intended to delay the forming of the Calf. He was sure the righteous women would refuse to contribute their jewelry for it (see *Tanchuma, Ki Tisa* 19). Aharon did not realize to what extent the nation was swept up in this diabolical plot. The men did not ask their wives for their gold; they took it by force. Aharon's plan to forestall them was met with failure.

Another reason, perhaps, for why Aharon ordered the people to donate gold was to prevent them from taking a living animal for idol worship. This act would spoil Hashem's Creation, since the calf was one of the permitted animals. Had Bnei Yisrael worshipped a live calf, Hashem would have forbidden its consumption. Moreover, the mere existence of calves in this world would arouse tremendous prosecution against Bnei Yisrael. This would be much worse than an idol of gold, which Moshe burned up, ground to a fine powder, and sprinkled upon the water.

If a Jew has relations with an animal, the animal must be put to death, even though it is completely innocent in this shameful act (*Vayikra* 20:15). Chazal explain (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 768) that were the animal to remain alive, its mere existence would arouse accusation against Am Yisrael for producing such a person. Likewise, had the nation sinned with a living calf, all future generations would suffer terribly. Aharon prevented this by asking them to bring their gold, which was held highly in their eyes.

However, we all pay the price for the sin of the Golden Calf, for we still tend to deify the dollar, granting it pride of place in our hearts. When a person's mind is occupied with money, he cannot serve Hashem whole-heartedly. Torah study demands nullifying oneself and negating materialism. How can this mindset co-exist with a plethora of possessions, the symbol of materialism and arrogance? This is why the sin of the Golden Calf is mentioned in parashat *Eikev* (עִקֵּב) . It is in this

parashah that we are enjoined to make ourselves humble as the heel (עֲקֹב). Only when a person is prepared to lower his ego and sacrifice himself for Torah by being satisfied with a small amount of materialism, can he serve Hashem whole-heartedly.

Those who feel that they can increase their holdings while, at the same time, intensify their level of Torah study, are sorely mistaken. As stated above, these two concepts are mutually exclusive. When materialism occupies one's mind, the Torah loses all luster in his eyes. He is driven to augment his assets to a far greater extent than increasing his Torah study and mitzvah observance.

Chazal predict that Mashiach will arrive only after money is scarce. Perhaps this can be explained in the following way: Hashem does not want to reveal His light upon us and rule over the entire world as long as people venerate money and materialism. Only after the hearts of mankind are cleared of this obsession, and their pockets are cleared of coins, will Hashem reveal His *Shechinah*, "and His kingdom will reign over all" (*Tehillim* 103:19).

My saintly grandfather, Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto, zy" a, titled all of his sefarim with names that contain the word כֶּסֶף (silver or money). He explained that people naturally love money, desiring much more than what is necessary for living. Just as one realizes that he cannot live without money, so should he appreciate that he cannot endure without Torah. Would that he would love his Creator at least as much as he loves his money!

A businessman once approached me with an interesting proposal. If I would bless him that he succeed in a specific deal and my blessing would materialize, he would share the profits with me, estimated at millions of euro. The truth is that, initially, I was ready to sign on the deal. But after some thought, I changed my mind. I told him I was prepared to bless him without splitting the profits. I am afraid of the challenge of wealth, which is liable to throw a person off course and cause him to transfer his love of Hashem to the shiny coin. Those

present were shocked at how I could forego the possibility of gaining such huge profits so easily. Why, with the money earned, I could establish countless yeshivot, increasing Hashem's glory manifold. I explained to them that it is true that the money could be used as a tool for spreading Hashem's Name throughout the world, obviating the need, every month, to look for ways to support my institutions. But I prefer to be involved in collecting funds to the difficult test of wealth. My family and I are not accustomed to such a life; who knows if we could stand up to it?

In Summary

- ◆ Why is the sin of the Golden Calf so severe that we are still punished for it to this very day? Why did Bnei Yisrael decide to form a calf out of gold instead of using a live one? And how could Am Yisrael sin so terribly, after experiencing Hashem's kindnesses at the Exodus from Egypt and at the Splitting of the Sea?
- ◆ When Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, they were obsessed with wealth, which they worshipped. This eventually resulted in the *avodah zarah* of the Golden Calf. The excitement over money was the beginning of their downfall.
- ◆ Aharon instructed the people to bring him their gold. He assumed that the women would resist, and thereby the sin would be forestalled. He also wished to prevent them from worshiping a live animal. This would degrade Hashem's Creation as well as become a cause of constant prosecution against us.
- ◆ All generations suffer the consequences of the sin of the Golden Calf. Therefore, Mashiach will come only when money is scarce.



The Benefit of Contemplation

***“Now, O Israel, what does Hashem, your G-d,
ask of you? Only to fear Hashem”***

(Devarim 10:12)

Moshe implies, in these words, that he is asking only a small thing from us. He is only demanding *yirat Shamayim*. This is quite astounding. We know that fear of Heaven is one of the most difficult traits to acquire.

The truth is that *yirat Shamayim* is not all that hard to attain. But we have so many obstacles obstructing the path to Avodat Hashem, preventing us from obtaining this priceless possession. The greatest deterrent to *yirat Shamayim* is the fact that people live a mixed-up existence. They have their priorities so skewed that they cannot differentiate between good and evil, between straight and slanted. When a person is not sold completely to Torah, but has holdings in fleeting pleasures, the power of the Torah eludes him. He will suffer setbacks in *yirat Shamayim*, the trait so necessary in the battle against the *Yetzer Hara*.

As mentioned above, my grandfather, Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto, zy”a, called all of his sefarim by a variation of the word כסף (silver or money). Two examples are: כסף נבחר (Chosen Silver) and כסף מזוקק (Refined Silver). When asked about this, he said that he wished to teach a basic principle for success in Torah. People are naturally drawn after gold and silver. Even after amassing fortunes, they do not sit still, always seeking ways to increase their assets.

In order to succeed in Torah, one must first and foremost appreciate its value. Then he must take all his love for this world, all his investments in materialism, and all his desires, and transfer them to Hashem and His Torah. He should be able to sincerely proclaim, “My soul yearns, indeed, it pines for the courtyards of Hashem.” The word נכספה (yearns) has the same root as כסף (silver or money). Once one understands the value of

Torah, is he capable of successfully studying it. Only after he genuinely feels that he is prepared to forego all earthly pleasures for the sake of Torah, can he merit acquiring it, as Chazal have said (see *Berachot* 63b), “Torah endures only in one who sacrifices himself for it.”

I once had occasion to walk into a tall building. I discovered an interesting phenomenon. The entrance level was full of dirt. The next story was less filthy. The higher I went, the cleaner the area. The reason for this is understood. All of the residents walk through the main entrance, including those who live on upper floors. But the higher the floor, the less people populate the place, and therefore the area is cleaner.

This taught me a lesson. The more one is attached to physicality and earthliness, the filthier is his *neshamah*. The more one elevates himself spiritually, disconnecting from the fleeting pleasures of this world, the cleaner is his soul. One must know that the frivolities of this world are meaningless. The pleasures of *Olam Hazeih* are given to man only in order to help him serve Hashem. They have no intrinsic value. Contemplating this point will bring a person to Torah and *yirat Shamayim*.

David Hamelech declares (*Tehillim* 8:4), “When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You have set in place...” Even the simplest element of nature should teach us *mussar*. A person becomes elevated by means of contemplation. When one is not in the habit of analyzing his actions, he is liable to fall from his level, *chalilah*. This is in line with the words (*ibid.*, 82:5), “They do not know nor do they understand; they walk in darkness.”

Megillat Rut provides us with a case in point (1:7-18). It was the contemplation of Rut, who analyzed her every action, which spelled the difference between her destiny and that of her sister, Orpah. The two of them followed their mother-in-law, Naomi, leaving behind the land of Moav for life in Eretz Yisrael. But at the crossroads, their paths diverged. Orpah returned to Moav, the home of her father and hotbed of defilement, whereas Rut clung tenaciously to Naomi. She undertook a life of Torah and did not surrender to any difficulty.

What were the results of these women's choices? Orpah produced Goliath, who fought Bnei Yisrael and blasphemed the Holy Name (*Shmuel* I, 17:10), whereas Rut, who lived a Torah lifestyle, produced David Hamelech (*Rut* 4:22). She constantly evaluated her chosen path and knew to appreciate the value of Torah. She believed that all of her travails were a small price to pay for acquiring the truth. To her, the materialism of Moav had no value. She never turned back, in spite of the hardships of life as a Jewess. She was the daughter of the king of Moav (*Sanhedrin* 105b), accustomed to luxuries, but willingly exchanged it all for a life of suffering and poverty. Orpah, on the other hand, could not fathom such a thing. She valued this world with all its allure. She did not contemplate the future and returned to her former lifestyle.

If one does not disdain the attractions of this world, he cannot rise to greater heights. He will never fulfill his purpose, which is acquiring *yirat Shamayim*. Fear of Heaven comes only through Torah study and contemplation of Hashem's world on a daily basis.

Let us make a study in contrasts between Nevuchadnezzar and the emperor, Neron. Both were bent on destroying the Beit Hamikdash. Nevuchadnezzar was the one who ultimately did the job. When Neron had reached the gates of Yerushalayim, he had a change of heart. He escaped and converted. The great *Tanna*, Rabbi Meir, *zy"l*, came from him (*Gittin* 51a).

Nevuchadnezzar had also honored Hashem's Name. When Merodach Baladan, king of Bavel had heard of the wonderful miracle performed for Chizkiyahu, he penned a letter of admiration. At first, he opened it with the words, "In honor of King Chizkiyahu, in honor of Hashem, and in honor of Yerushalayim." He sent a messenger to bring it to Chizkiyahu. Suddenly, Nevuchadnezzar, who, at that time, was the king's scribe, realized that a mistake had been made. It was appropriate to put Hashem's Name first. In order to retract the letter and correct the mistake, Nevuchadnezzar took four steps toward the messenger. In merit of these four steps, Hashem granted him sovereignty over the entire world (*Sanhedrin* 96a).

How, after this episode, could Nevuchadnezzar go ahead and burn down the Beit Hamikdash? And in what merit did Neron deserve the reward of being the ancestor to Rabbi Meir?

Nevuchadnezzar did a great act by correcting the phraseology of the letter. But he failed to analyze his action. Although he received tremendous reward for what he had done, he did not become elevated by it. In contrast, the emperor Neron contemplated his actions when coming to fight Am Yisrael and destroying the Beit Hamikdash. He thought, “Does Hashem want me to destroy Yerushalayim? He will surely take revenge and punish me severely.” This thought aroused feelings of regret, and he escaped the place. He secretly converted, and Rabbi Meir was one of his descendants. This is the reward for one who scrutinizes and evaluates his every act, not living like the unthinking animals. One who repudiates the transient pleasures of this world merits clinging to the Torah and acquiring *yirat Shamayim*.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ “Now, O Israel, what does Hashem, your G-d, ask of you? Only to fear Hashem.” Moshe implies that *yirat Shamayim* is a relatively simple matter. Why, then, do we have such difficulty acquiring it? The way to do so is by contemplating one’s actions and renouncing the pleasures of this world. Many Torah scholars lack *yirat Shamayim*, for they are rooted in the pleasures of this world. Only by contemplating Hashem’s wonderful world can the Torah effectively detach a person from the frivolities of this world.
- ◆ My grandfather, Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto, zy”a, said that in order to succeed in acquiring Torah and *yirat Shamayim*, one must eradicate his natural love of money and material pursuits. All of his interests should be directed heavenward.
- ◆ The more one is drawn by the magnetic force of earthliness, the filthier is his *neshamah*. It is all the harder for such a person to rise in spirituality. The lower levels of a high-rise building are dirtier, for everyone walks

there. But the more one elevates himself, repudiating the transient pleasures of this world, the closer he is to Hashem, and he merits acquiring both Torah and *yirat Shamayim*.

- ◆ In order to ascend, one must live with constant contemplation, not like the unthinking animals. David Hamelech said, “When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers...” We must always contemplate Hashem’s wonderful world, and allow this study to bring us to a new level of greatness.
- ◆ Rut and Orpah parted for eternity. Rut merited producing David Hamelech, whereas Orpah produced Goliath. Orpah failed to evaluate her actions, and did not disdain earthly pleasures. She therefore returned to a life of promiscuity.
- ◆ How did Neron merit producing the *Tanna*, Rabbi Meir? It was through contemplating his actions and understanding that there is no value to anything in this world when it is disconnected from Torah.



Fear of Heaven

“Now, O Israel, what does Hashem, your G-d, ask of you? Only to fear Hashem, your G-d, to go in all His ways and to love Him, and to serve Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul”

(Devarim 10:12)

Rashi teaches us, in the name of the Rabbis, that everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven.

Moshe was telling Bnei Yisrael that whatever Hashem demanded of them was dependent on *yirat Shamayim*. With the power of *yirat Shamayim*, they would succeed in acquiring all good character traits.

The Gemara relates (*Berachot* 33b) that from the way Moshe tells this to the nation, it sounds like *yirat Shamayim* is a relatively easy trait to master. Is this actually the case? Chazal teach that this trait is given over solely into man's hand. Doesn't that make it all the more difficult to acquire? They reply that for Moshe, *yirat Shamayim* was, indeed, not difficult. This is why he spoke the way he did.

Moshe merited attaining *yirat Shamayim*. But he was now speaking to the nation, on an entirely different plateau. Why didn't he speak to them at their level, intimating that *yirat Shamayim* is, indeed, a difficult trait to acquire?

All the blessing which man wishes for himself, such as a good marriage partner, a livelihood, health, marital harmony, *nachat* from children, abundance of blessing, success, etc., are in the hands of Heaven. Regarding matches, the Gemara states (see *Sotah* 2a), "Making matches is as difficult as splitting the sea." Just as Hashem rescued His nation by splitting the sea, so it is with the matter of matrimony. Only Hashem splits a person's personal sea, removing all obstacles and presenting him with his intended. Regarding earning a living, the Gemara says (see *Pesachim* 118a; *Avodah Zarah* 3b) that Hashem supports all living creatures, from the eggs of the lice to the mighty *re'em*. We are enjoined (*Tehillim* 55:23), "Cast upon Hashem your burden and He will sustain you." One might easily believe that it is his strength and prowess that brings him profit. But this is far from the case. Hashem is the One Who decides how one should fare in his business.

In my lifetime, I have seen fantastically wealthy people who lost everything at once. In contrast, I have come across pitiful paupers, who hardly had food on their table, become instantly wealthy. Endeavoring to understand the wheel of fortune according to logic is futile. There is no natural way to interpret the laws of finance. The key to sustenance is only in His hand.

When one is in need of healing, he prays to Hashem (*Shemoneh Esrei*), "Heal us, Hashem – that we may be healed, save us – that we may be

saved.” Hashem alone decides who will merit recovery and live, and who will die. Chazal (*Kiddushin* 82a) go so far as to say that even the best of doctors deserves Gehinnom. How can we rely on a doctor to provide the cure? Many cases of malpractice have been discovered as having contributed to the deaths of patients. The doctors certainly did not intend to harm their patients. But the mere fact that they are human means that they are limited. Instead of curing the sick, they have, at times, shortened their lives.

This is the case in every area of life. Whatever happens to us is decreed by Hashem, Who created the world and manages everything, except for *yirat Shamayim*, which was placed squarely in our hands. How could Moshe imply that *yirat Shamayim* is one of the easiest attributes to attain?

As soon as a person awakens each morning, he says the *Modeh Ani* prayer (*Mishnah Berurah* 1:8). He proclaims, “I gratefully thank You, O living and eternal King, for You have returned my soul within me with compassion – abundant is Your faithfulness!” One concedes that as he was sleeping, his soul ascended to Heaven and was kept in Hashem’s possession. Out of His great compassion, Hashem returned it the next morning. Reciting this prayer each morning anew infuses us with the recognition that it is Hashem Who created us with wisdom, intellect, and knowledge. All that happens to us is by His power. This is in line with the words of the *Navi*, Yirmeyahu (*Eichah* 3:23), “They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness!” Each morning, when we receive our *neshamah* anew, our *emunah* in Hashem, Who returned our *neshamah* with utmost compassion, is also renewed.

The repetition of this prayer, day in and day out, is liable to dull our sense of wonder at the wonderful gift we receive anew. But if we stop to think of how we merited receiving our *neshamah* back after a night’s sleep, considered one-sixtieth of death, our faith in Hashem and love toward Him will be strengthened.

This faith is the catalyst for *yirat Shamayim*. Saying *Modeh Ani* each morning, with concentration, delving into the meaning of the words, will

bring us to such great levels! This is not such a difficult thing to do. Moshe was correct; *yirat Shamayim* is an easily-acquired attribute.

The Ba'al Shem Tov says that there are many people who outwardly look like Torah-observant Jews, but if we would search their roots, we would see that they are lacking the basic element of *yirat Shamayim*. What rests at the core of their rotten insides is the fact that they do not make Hashem their top priority. This results in a lack of *emunah*, which, in turn, causes a deficiency in their fear of Heaven. When a person arises and his head is already full of personal, materialistic matters, he is accompanied all through the day by such thoughts. He is too preoccupied to pay much attention to Hashem. Conversely, when one opens his eyes with the words of *Modeh Ani* on his lips, this initial thought will escort him all day long. His actions will be infused with *yirat Shamayim* and the desire to do Hashem's will.

Everything is dependent on first impressions. Does one's day open with an impression of his own desires and other mundane matters, or does he impress his morning with mention of Hashem's Name, thanking Him for returning his *neshamah* with great mercy? Man alone decides what his first thought for the day will be, for only he is in control of his thoughts.

The Torah relates that Bnei Yisrael rested in Refidim (*Shemot* 17:1). The Gemara (see *Sanhedrin* 106a) finds the name Refidim (רפידים) difficult to comprehend. Our Sages say that it was called by that name, for Bnei Yisrael were lax (רפו ידיהם) in Torah study there. Had Bnei Yisrael been involved in Torah as they should have been, Amalek would never have had a chance to plant doubts in their hearts. When the mind is unoccupied, there is room for doubt to creep in.

The pesukim continue, relating first that the nation arrived at Har Sinai, and only afterward, that they traveled from Refidim. The Ohr Hachaim points out that this seems to be written in the wrong order. He explains that by attaching themselves to the Torah, which they had received at Har Sinai, Bnei Yisrael succeeded in detaching themselves from the lethargy which had controlled them in Refidim.

The Gemara teaches (*Berachot* 5a) that if a person is beset by troubles, he should examine his deeds and attempt to find the source of his suffering. If he did not find anything, he should attribute his suffering to *bitul* Torah. The sin of *bitul* Torah is a serious offense. When a person is not ignited by the fire of Torah, streams of doubt begin to flow into his mind, cooling off his level of faith. His fear of Heaven, too, becomes dampened. Torah study is the foundation of our faith, which awakens us to intensify our *yirat Shamayim*. When there is a deficiency in Torah, *chalilah*, one's *yirat Shamayim* suffers, as well. Such a situation is likely to bring one to a spiritual nadir.

On the other hand, if someone encounters a slight doubt creeping into his mind, he is able to remove it by means of improving his Torah study. One's *emunah* and *yirah* will become strengthened through intensified Torah study. There will be no room in his heart for thoughts of doubt. When one studies Torah, His eyes and his heart are open to learn about the One Who created everything. This is borne out in our prayer (*Shacharit, Ahavat Olam*), "Enlighten our eyes in Your Torah." The Torah lights up the eyes of those who study it and brings *yirat Shamayim* in its wake.

Man is presented with *yirat Shamayim* at birth. But he must employ the light of Torah in order to recognize it. A room full of treats is not appreciated as long as it is cast in darkness. Only after switching on the light, is one aware of the treasures at his disposal. In order for us to succeed in connecting to our innate *yirat Shamayim*, we must first turn on the light inside us. This is done with the fire of Torah, by sanctifying the first moments of the morning to Hashem Alone, by proclaiming, with utmost concentration, "I gratefully thank You... abundant is Your faithfulness!"

The Torah writes the phrase "Hashem, your G-d" three times in one pasuk (*Devarim* 10:12), although it could be understood by using the Name, Hashem, alone. This teaches that Hashem is already our G-d, for fear of Him exists in our hearts. All that we must do is switch on the light in order to recognize this inherent *yirat Shamayim*. Whoever is part of

the Jewish nation contains this Divine spark within him. His job is to ignite this spark, by means of the Torah.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Moshe seems to imply that *yirat Shamayim* is an easily acquired attribute. But Chazal tell us that this matter rests solely in our hands. Even if it is easily acquired by someone of Moshe's caliber, he was speaking to the nation on their level. What did he mean by implying that it was easy to acquire?
- ◆ One is enjoined to say *Modeh Ani* immediately upon awakening. This strengthens his *emunah* and causes him to have greater *yirat Shamayim*. By sanctifying his first moments of the day for Hashem's sake, all of his actions will follow suit. He will merit acquiring *yirat Shamayim*. This is certainly within everyone's grasp! Therefore, Moshe referred to it as a simple matter.
- ◆ When Bnei Yisrael encamped in Refidim, Bnei Yisrael were lax in Torah. This gave Amalek the courage to attack them and instill doubt in their minds. When Bnei Yisrael arrived at Har Sinai in order to receive the Torah, the pasuk tells us that they traveled from Refidim. They abandoned laxity in Torah by cleaving to it. When one weakens in Torah study, all types of doubt gnaw at his mind. These doubts in *emunah* eat away at his *yirat Shamayim*. When even a small doubt enters one's mind, he should immerse himself in Torah, thereby removing the doubt and strengthening his *yirat Shamayim*.



I Have Set Hashem before Me Always

“Now, O Israel, what does Hashem, your G-d, ask of you? Only to fear Hashem, your G-d, to go in all His ways and to love Him, and to serve Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul”

(Devarim 10:12)

Before his passing, Moshe gathers the nation and tells them that the most important thing in Hashem’s eyes is fear of Heaven. Torah and mitzvah performance is contingent upon one’s level of *yirat Shamayim*. Without it, who is to guarantee that one will avoid temptation, even in his innermost chamber?

Moshe did not tell the nation to learn Torah, saying, “If not for My covenant [being studied] day and night, I would not have established the laws of the heavens and the earth.” (*Yirmeyahu* 33:25). He makes no mention of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*. Obviously, *yirat Shamayim* is the number one priority for every Jew, whatever level he is on.

Yirat Shamayim involves much effort on one’s part. In all other areas of life, he receives *siyata di’Shemaya* in order to succeed, but regarding *yirat Shamayim*, it is all up to him. Only development of his inner self, coupled with the genuine desire to grow, will put him on the path of *yirat Shamayim*. “Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven” (*Berachot* 33b). Moshe’s choice of wording: “Only to fear,” implies that this trait is easily acquired. How do we understand this, based on the above-mentioned points? It would seem simpler to build an opinion or refute a difficulty in Gemara than to acquire this difficult attribute.

An episode that happened to me as a boy will help clarify this matter. My father, zy”a, was of the habit of wearing two head-coverings. He

usually wore two large *kippot*, but sometimes, he would wear a *kippah* covered by a hat. As a young child, I would often ridicule this custom. When I asked him to explain this unusual habit, he replied, “The second head-covering is certainly an encumbrance, especially when I wear a hat all day long. But when I feel the discomfort, I am reminded of the Creator, Whom it is fitting to serve at all times and in all situations.”

Now that I have grown older, I understand that Father sought signs, throughout the course of the day, which would be constant reminders of his *raison d'être*. An alarm clock, with its shrill ring, is certainly a nuisance. But it is only a temporary inconvenience. Ultimately, one sets his alarm clock because he appreciates its benefits. It is what causes him to make it on time to work. I once found my daughter with scribbles on her hand. When I asked her to explain, she told me that she had to remember something important. She wrote it on her hand so that whenever she looked there, she would remember it.

This, then, was Moshe's meaning in minimizing the concept of *yirat Shamayim* by use of the word *only*. When a person makes for himself road signs in every step he takes, and truly feels “I have set Hashem before me always” (*Tehillim* 16:8), living with *yirat Shamayim* is the most natural thing. He does not need to exert much effort to achieve it. This is borne out by Chazal (*Avot* 3:1) “Know whence you came, whither you go, and before Whom you will give justification and reckoning.” Internalizing the truth about man's mission in life affords him the ability to live easily with *yirat Shamayim* as his guiding light. He will never feel burdened by it.

My grandfather, Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto, zy”a, named his sefarim with words referring to money. In his introduction, he explains the reason for this. He wished to transmit the message that just as one is lured by the glow of gold and the sparkle of silver, and is unable to exist without money, so should he feel attracted to Hashem. He should love Him at least as much as he cherishes wealth. When this is the case, *yirat Shamayim* is not difficult to attain.

One of our students, whom we merited to bring back to the fold, became engaged to a young lady who was not Torah-observant. I told him he could not expect a happy marriage, since his fiancée did not observe mitzvot and lacked basic *yirat Shamayim*. This was a perfect recipe for dissension in the home. I begged my disciple to send his betrothed to seminary classes, where she would be given a taste of Torah. Afterward, we would see whether it was fitting for him to marry. We also agreed that she would spend two Shabbatot at my home, during which time we would scrutinize her, examining to see if she was open to change and coming closer to true Judaism.

That first Shabbat, we made Kiddush, sang *zemirot*, danced a bit with the children, and said *divrei Torah*. On the outside, it was an ordinary Shabbat, like any other. But then I noticed a gleam in the girl's eyes as tears began streaming down her face. She suddenly cried out, "How sweet is the Torah!" As the meal progressed, I saw that she was very excited. "Is this what Judaism is about?" she asked, in surprise. She explained that she thought that as a Rabbi, I would be strict and stern, disinclined to sing and harsh with my children. She was stunned to find the exact opposite of her expectations. I told her that when I left my house, I donned the cloak of Rabbanut, wearing the mantle of royalty as befits a representative of Torah. But inside my home, I am first and foremost a loving father, sporting goodwill and softness toward my children, so that I can successfully transmit to them the message of Torah.

At the meal's end, this young lady said that she hopes and prays that Hashem will forgive her sins. Immediately after Shabbat, she changed into more appropriate attire. This entire episode proved to me how simple it is to acquire *yirat Shamayim*. It all depends on whether or not the heart is open. This girl had come to absorb a Torah consciousness. Therefore, one Shabbat was enough to effect a transformation in her soul.

I always wondered how Rabbi Akiva succeeded in raising himself from the lowest level to such heights as to become the Torah giant of the generation. Moshe Rabbeinu, who saw all future generations, observed Rabbi Akiva expounding upon the crowns of the letters of the Torah. He

became so enthused by Rabbi Akiva's love for Torah that he asked Hashem to appoint Rabbi Akiva as the transmitter of Torah in his stead (*Menachot* 29b). How, indeed, did Rabbi Akiva reach this remarkable level? Not only did he feel a need to study Torah, but he venerated it above all else. This brought him to great heights. From where did he draw his tremendous love for Torah?

Chazal relate (see *Ketubot* 62b) that after Rabbi Akiva married Rachel, she constantly encouraged him to study Torah. When he observed how the water wore down even the strongest stone, he took a lesson. Certainly the words of Torah, compared to water, could penetrate his heart, which was hard as stone (*Avot D'Rabbi Natan* 6b). Rabbi Akiva left home for twelve years. These were years of flourishing in Torah. He had numerous disciples. He studied with self-sacrifice, not entering his home even once during this time.

After twelve long years, Rabbi Akiva headed home. As he entered the courtyard of his house, he overheard his wife telling her neighbor that she would be happy if her husband would learn for another twelve years. Upon hearing these words, Rabbi Akiva turned on his heel and returned to the study hall for another set of twelve uninterrupted years. His name spread far and wide, and he amassed twenty-four thousand disciples.

When Rabbi Akiva had turned homeward the first time, after twelve years, he did not even enter his home to see his wife and children before leaving them once again. From where did Rabbi Akiva and Rachel draw the strength of character for this?

When I was but a lad of ten, I was sent away to a distant yeshiva, and I did not see my mother for three years. I did not see my father for seven years. I was so overcome with homesickness that I thought I would collapse. I know the difficulty of separation. How did Rabbi Akiva overcome it?

When a person is overflowing with *yirat Shamayim*, he puts his personal interests aside. Hashem's will takes top priority. Since Rabbi Akiva and Rachel were saturated with pure *yirat Shamayim*, they were able to

minimize their personal desires for the sake of Torah study and establishing disciples. As an example, we may cite the case of the prohibition for a father to kiss his child in the Beit Hakeneset (*Sefer Chassidim* 255). The Beit Hakeneset is the home of the *Shechinah*. One who kisses a child is displaying greater affection for his son than for Hakadosh Baruch Hu (*Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 13:1). At times, one's desire is so strong to just plant a kiss upon his young child. But he overcomes this desire in the name of the halachah. He sacrifices his own will for that of Hashem. Rabbi Akiva and his righteous wife, Rachel, offered their entire beings to Hashem. They did not even feel the burden of Rabbi Akiva's absence from home. Pure *yirat Shamayim* demands self-nullification. It all depends on the person.

The Maharil Diskin explains the Mishnah (*Avot* 1:17), "Action, not study, is the main thing." Torah studied for its own sake, without concern for teaching it to others, is deficient. One who studies with the intention to pass on his knowledge to others, though, internalizes the concepts he has learned and exerts himself in delving into the subject. He attempts to understand as much as possible, so that his listeners, too, will comprehend the lesson. In contrast, one who studies only for himself is limiting the scope of his study. His study is not in-depth, for he feels no need to examine every topic from its roots.

When Rabbi Akiva went off to study Torah, he intended to share his knowledge with others. He had such innate love for his fellow men that he called the pasuk (*Vayikra* 19:18) "You shall love your fellow as yourself" a main tenet of the Torah (*Bereishit Rabbah* 24:7). Rabbi Akiva merited scaling the heights because he studied Torah for the sake of the public, exerting himself to the depths of the matter so that he could comprehend it fully.

During the days of Sefirat Haomer, twenty-four thousand of Rabbi Akiva's disciples perished. Rabbi Akiva buried seven hundred students each day. This is frightening to imagine, simply unfathomable. During our time, in the course of one week, we lost three Torah giants: the holy Admor of Satmar, zt"l; the Gaon, Rabbi Moshe Halberstam, zt"l; and the

Gaon, Rabbi Moshe Shmuel Shapiro, zt”l. We all felt orphaned. How could the world cope with the deaths of seven hundred Torah scholars each day?!

Furthermore, is this the reward for Rabbi Akiva for all the effort and toil he invested in Torah? Did he deserve the death of his disciples after displaying such self-sacrifice in leaving his home for such extended periods? Chazal state (*Yevamot* 62b) that Rabbi Akiva’s disciples perished on account of not respecting one another sufficiently. This is hard for us to understand. Would we ever say that the Torah scholars of our day were remiss in their respect for their fellow man?

I will bring an anecdote to illustrate my point. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, zt”l, once noticed a man breathing in the fresh air by the window of the Beit Hamidrash. “Thief!” he called out to him. When the man showed surprise at this negative appellation, Rabbi Yisrael explained that by standing in front of the window, he was effectively blocking the air from everyone else in the room (see *Hameorot Hagedolim* 18:46). How careful were the tzaddikim with the honor of every person!

Let us return to our original question: How could the disciples of Rabbi Akiva, *Tanna’im* and men of the highest caliber, fail to demonstrate sufficient respect for one another?

It was because their Torah study was for their personal benefit, not in order to teach others (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 61:3). This limited the scope of their study and resulted in a flaw in their interpersonal relationships. In contrast, we find that Rabbi Akiva himself studied Torah in order to teach others. This is what brought him such greatness. But he neglected transmitting this message to his disciples. He was punished for this by the death of his disciples. One who studies Torah for his own benefit is considered a thief. Torah is not only his possession, but the possession of the entire community. “There is no honor aside from Torah” (*Avot* 6:3). The disciples were considered remiss in honoring their colleagues by the fact that they did not share their Torah insights with them.

It is difficult to understand how these men of stature were blind to their faults. Many commentaries ask how it was possible that Rabbi Akiva did not rebuke them for their inadequate method of Torah study, and steer them on the right road. It must be because this was Hashem's decree. This dark period in our history enlightens us to the consequences of one who refuses to share his Torah knowledge with others.

As Rabbi Akiva observed his disciples dying each day, he made a personal accounting for the plague. Then he gathered his few remaining disciples, and told them, "My previous students died because they were stingy with their Torah knowledge. Make sure not to repeat their mistakes" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 61:3). These disciples were commissioned with the task of studying Torah and spreading it to others. Indeed, the students who remained, such as Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes, wrote sefarim, gathered groups for Torah study, and established numerous disciples. If not for them, Torah would have been forgotten, *chalilah*.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu turns to the nation before his death and says, "What does Hashem, your G-d, ask of you? Only to fear Hashem." By the fact that *yirat Shamayim* is stated, we understand its primary importance. Why did Moshe minimize the difficulty of acquiring this trait, by using the word *only*?
- ◆ When a person lives by the dictum "I have set Hashem before me always," placing signposts throughout his day which awaken him to the realization of his purpose in this world, *yirat Shamayim* is all the easier to acquire. Man should love his Creator at least as much as he cherishes his money, *l'havdil*.
- ◆ Rabbi Akiva merited reaching his tremendous level on account of sanctifying himself completely for Torah study. He was capable of separating from his family for the duration of twenty-four years because he sacrificed his personal interests on the altar of Hashem's will, due to his great *yirat Shamayim*.

- ◆ Rabbi Akiva's disciples did not learn in order to teach others. This type of learning is limited. For this, they were punished. In contrast, Rabbi Akiva himself studied Torah in order to share his knowledge with others. This was what brought him to his elevated level.
- ◆ Why didn't Rabbi Akiva rebuke his disciples? It was most likely pre-ordained in Heaven that they should sin and subsequently die. When Rabbi Akiva did observe the reason for the plague, he gathered his remaining disciples and warned them to spread their Torah knowledge and not repeat the mistakes of their predecessors.



Learning in the Land

“A land that Hashem, your G-d, seeks out; the eyes of Hashem, your G-d, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year's end”

(Devarim 11:12)

Hashem constantly supervises Eretz Yisrael, from the beginning of the year, Rosh Hashanah, until the last day of the year. Then the cycle begins again. There is no day when Hashem is not watching over this country.

The influence of the *Yetzer Hara* is weaker in Eretz Yisrael than in other countries. The sefer *Chessed L'Avraham* (3:5) implies that the main thrust of the power of the *Yetzer Hara* is in *chutz la'aretz*.

Eretz Yisrael is unique among all the lands due to its intense level of *kedushah*. Moreover, there are specific mitzvot which are dependent on the Land, such as *terumot*, *ma'asrot*, coronating a king, *bikurim*, etc. Only residents of Eretz Yisrael are obligated to perform these mitzvot.

Similarly, man contains 248 organs and 365 sinews corresponding to the 613 mitzvot (*Sha'arei Kedushah* 1:1). Man, then, is a living Torah Scroll,

each body part the equivalent of another mitzvah. Since the mitzvot which depend on the Land are included in the 613 mitzvot, there are body parts which correspond to these mitzvot. Therefore, one who resides in *chutz la'aretz* is lacking the vitality provided by the mitzvot dependent on the Land.

Conversely, one who resides in the Holy Land and keeps its unique commandments brings wholeness to his body. Many of the mitzvot revolve around the Beit Hamikdash. How can we gain the benefits of those mitzvot while we sit in *galut*? By anticipating its rebuilding, one merits reward for those mitzvot, as though the Temple were standing.

The *Yetzer Hara* is a clever creature. He knows how great the benefit of observing the unique mitzvot of the Land is. Therefore, he tries with all his might to prevent man from sanctifying himself through the mitzvot. Kohelet states (7:14), "G-d has made the one as well as the other." Commensurate with the level of purity is the level of impurity, which constantly attempts to cool off the heat of holiness by causing man to sin. When one succeeds in overcoming his *Yetzer Hara*, and strengthens his Avodat Hashem in spite of the difficulties involved, his Torah study is of the highest quality and will speak on his behalf in his hour of need.

The Gaon, Rabbi Yosef Kletzky, shlita, asked me a question he had heard from Rabbi Aharon Leib Steinman, shlita. As it is known, we live in the generation immediately preceding the arrival of Mashiach. We can already see the beginning of the redemption. Why did our generation merit this, when other generations, blessed with giants of the spirit, such as Rashbi, Rambam, Ramban, Rashi, and the Ba'al Shem Tov, could only dream about it?

I thought of responding that ours is a generation of materialism. Maran Harav Shach, zy" a, said that the *avodah zarah* of our day is the pursuit of physical pleasures. The advent of modern technology has blossomed like mushrooms after the rain. We haven't yet mastered the latest gadget before an even newer one hits the market. We don't even remember

which version came first. What is so urgent about upgrading products so quickly?

Conversely, spirituality, too, has spiraled to untold proportions. Hundreds of yeshivot, kollelim, and other Torah institutions dot the landscape, an unprecedented phenomenon. The mitzvot of *gemilut chessed* and *tzedakah* have entered our consciousness like never before. Even those in difficult financial straits contribute to charity to the best of their ability. In spite of the lures of the outside world, we continue sitting in our cocoon of Torah. We fill the Batei Midrashot and yeshivot, engrossing ourselves in Torah study without granting the street a glance.

When I was growing up in Essaouira, Morocco, we lived in a sort of ghetto. There was no temptation from the outside world, because there was no outside world to speak of. Even if we wanted to live a wanton life of wildness, the streets had nothing to offer us. We all felt the strong obligation to spend our days in Torah study, never having the need to battle with ourselves to sit and learn. Nowadays, the *Yetzer Hara* has gained a foothold amongst us. This is the generation in which Mashiach will arrive, bringing an end to all our suffering. True, previous generations raised tremendous Torah scholars. They certainly were worthy, by their own merit, of greeting Mashiach. However, these generations, as a whole, did not face the daily struggle with their *Yetzer Hara* in the same way we do. Therefore, we are more worthy to greet Mashiach.

The Gemara relates (*Sanhedrin* 98a) that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi met Eliyahu Hanavi and asked when Mashiach would arrive. Eliyahu replied, "Go to the gates of Rome. Mashiach sits there, among the lepers. Ask him when he intends to reveal himself and redeem Bnei Yisrael." Rabbi Yehoshua went off to Rome and, indeed, saw Mashiach together with a group of lepers. Rabbi Yehoshua asked him when he would come to reveal himself to Am Yisrael. Mashiach replied, "Today."

Rabbi Yehoshua rejoiced at these tidings and returned to Eretz Yisrael full of hope. After a few days, he met Eliyahu again and told him what Mashiach had said. But he could not understand why Mashiach had not

kept his word. Eliyahu assured him that Mashiach had told the truth. When he had said he would come today, he was referring to the pasuk (*Tehillim* 95:7), “Today, if you but heed His voice.” Am Yisrael are worthy of redemption only on the day that they uphold Hashem’s word. Since this day has not yet come, Mashiach too, has not yet arrived.

In our generation, many of our brethren attempt to observe the injunction “Today, if you but heed His voice,” in spite of the challenges which abound. I am occasionally invited to the weddings of those who are far from Torah and mitzvot. I agree to attend on condition that the women are all dressed modestly. Unfortunately, there have been instances when I was forced to leave due to the intolerable immodesty.

In Morocco, where I grew up, all of the Jewish women, and, *l’havdil*, the Muslims, who have learned from them, dress with *tzeniut*. No women would dare to emerge on the street without a long robe, and a wide scarf covering her face. Together with the increased *kedushah* of our generation are the attempts of defilement at luring away the Torah scholars to a life of luxuries and materialism. Those *avrechim* and yeshiva students who staunchly stick to their faith and refuse to capitulate to the *Yetzer Hara* deserve our wholehearted blessings.

The Gemara cites (*Berachot* 20a) that one of the *Amora'im* asked his colleague why their generation did not merit open miracles, as previous generations had. His colleague replied that the previous generations served Hashem with self-sacrifice and were therefore worthy of wonders and miracles. They, themselves, had not yet reached this level of *mesirut nefesh* in serving Hashem. One who serves Hashem beyond his capacity is treated, measure for measure, in a supernatural way. In our day, we study Torah and perform mitzvot with tremendous self-sacrifice, in spite of the difficulties and challenges involved. We are certainly worthy of welcoming Mashiach.

In Summary

- ◆ The influence of the *Yetzer Hara* is weaker in Eretz Yisrael than in the Diaspora. Why is this?
- ◆ Man is comprised of 613 organs, corresponding to the 613 mitzvot, including the mitzvot of the Land. Therefore, one who lives in Eretz Yisrael can more easily attain perfection. This is how we weaken the power of the *Yetzer Hara*.
- ◆ Our generation has been found most worthy of greeting Mashiach. We experience the strongest pull toward materialism. The Torah scholars, who study in spite of the temptations of the outside world, are greatly elevated and deserve to welcome Mashiach.



Ensuring Security in the Land

“A Land that Hashem, your G-d, seeks out; the eyes of Hashem, your G-d, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year’s end”

(Devarim 11:12)

Hashem informs Bnei Yisrael that the land they are about to conquer is the choicest land. It is superior even to Mitzrayim, known for its physical abundance. From where does Eretz Yisrael draw its great distinction? From the fact that Hashem constantly supervises it, from the beginning of the year until the year’s end.

As we continue reading the parashah, we come across the pesukim (ibid., 11:13-15), “It will be that if you hearken to My commandments that I command you today... Then I shall provide rain for your Land in its proper time, the early and the late rains... I shall provide grass in your field for your cattle, and you will eat and you will be satisfied.” This is

followed by a caveat (ibid., vs. 16): “Beware for yourselves, lest your heart be seduced and you turn astray and serve gods of others.” If, indeed, Bnei Yisrael fall into sin (ibid., vs. 17), “then the wrath of Hashem will blaze against you; He will restrain the heaven so there will be no rain... and you will be swiftly banished from the goodly Land that Hashem gives you.” Observing Torah is the key to settling the Land and meriting its blessings. Conversely, if Bnei Yisrael fail to observe the mitzvot, the skies will be sealed, and the Land will disgorge them.

In the days of Chizkiyahu (see *Melachim* II, 18:23), the nation had no need for an army, for the merit of their Torah study protected them from their enemies. Chazal relate (*Sanhedrin* 94b) that Chizkiyahu Hamelech stabbed a sword at the entrance of the Beit Hamidrash and declared that whoever desisted from Torah study would be pierced by it. Torah was uppermost in Chizkiyahu’s mind! He relied on the soldiers of Hashem to shield the nation. Learning Torah in the Holy Land provides protection for its inhabitants.

Later on in the parashah, we read the pasuk (*Devarim* 12:5), “There shall you seek out His Presence and come there.” The *Shechinah* is present in Eretz Yisrael. It should be the longing of every Jew to live in the Holy Land. The air of Eretz Yisrael itself makes one wise and enlightens the eyes of those who learn Torah there (see *Bava Batra* 158b). The *Shechinah* serves as a shield of protection, as Eretz Yisrael is under Hashem’s constant supervision (see *Devarim* 11:12). Who would be so foolish as to give up such unique protection, from the Creator Himself? Those who choose to live outside the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael must provide a good excuse for their decision. When David Hamelech informed Shaul that he wished to leave Eretz Yisrael, he equated this with “serving foreign gods,” for one who lives in *chutz la’aretz* is considered to serve foreign gods (*Ketubot* 110b).

We are taught (*Makkot* 23b), “Hashem wished to confer merit upon Yisrael. Therefore, He gave them Torah and mitzvot in abundance.” Chazal ask why it was necessary to give Bnei Yisrael so many mitzvot (see *Rambam on Mishnayot, Makkot* 3:16). Why couldn’t one mitzvah, done to

perfection, accomplish the same purpose? They reply (see *Zachor l'Miriam* 6) that Adam Harishon was given only one mitzvah, not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and he transgressed. Hashem gave us an abundance of mitzvot so that if we fail in one area, we still have the chance to do other mitzvot and earn merit through them.

Furthermore, when Bnei Yisrael are involved with mitzvot, they are too busy to pay heed to their *Yetzer Hara*. The Ben Ish Chai illustrates with an analogy. A king sent his son to a distant land in order for him to learn how to deal in business. Knowing that lewdness was rampant in this land, the king provided his son with a large entourage of guards, who would supervise his every deed. After some time, the lad returned home.

His father asked him, "Did you manage to visit the land and see the sights?"

The son responded, "How could I possibly tour the land, when the entourage you sent along constantly surrounded me? They did not allow me a moment's privacy."

Hashem surrounds us with innumerable mitzvot, which keep us busy from dawn to dusk. We have no time to sit idle, or even contemplate sinning.

The Torah tells us (*Devarim* 28:6), "Blessed are you in your coming and blessed shall you be in your going." Rashi expounds by stating that just as one's entry into this world was without sin, so should his departure from this world be free of sin. This will ensure him blessing in his going. How can one guarantee that he will, indeed, leave this world blessed? By surrounding himself with countless mitzvot, which increase his merit in *Olam Haba*.

The *Chachamim* asked Hashem (*Yirmeyahu* 9:11), "For what reason did the land perish?" Hashem replied (*ibid.*, vs.12), "Because of their forsaking My Torah." During the times of the *churban*, the people were erudite Torah scholars. How could they be accused of being lax in their Torah study?

Although they learned Torah and performed mitzvot, they lacked the eagerness and excitement which come along with doing mitzvot with joy. They bore the yoke of Torah like one who bears a millstone on his shoulders. Regarding the Torah as a burden caused them to slowly but surely ignore the seemingly lighter mitzvot. Eventually, they refrained from doing mitzvot altogether. The Land could no longer tolerate them, and disgorged them.

The Torah relates (*Bereishit* 2:25) that Adam and Chava were unclothed, but felt no shame, because they did not have a *Yetzer Hara*. This seems to be the case in our generation. People are not ashamed to walk around half-naked, literally like the animals of the field. When one makes sure to surround himself with mitzvot, he receives Heavenly protection from improper sightings. If he accidentally came across something inappropriate, Hashem will not allow it to impact him negatively.

Guadeloupe is an island near the United States coastline. It is rampant with promiscuity. A tremendous amount of *siyata di'Shemaya* is necessary to live a life of *kedushah* on its shores. One must be extremely vigilant there, because every gaze is likely to fall upon negative sights. An exceptionally handsome young man once came to me and asked if he should accept a job offer in Guadeloupe. I replied that although he might make a respectable living there, the risk just wasn't worth it. The people resembled beasts more than human beings.

The very next day, I received a phone call from this man. He told me the following. As soon as he arrived at Guadeloupe, he was beset with tremendous tests. My words of the day before immediately struck him. Without a second's delay, he lifted his legs and escaped so that he would not, *chalilah*, be ensnared in sin.

Chazal tell us (see *Sukkah* 52a) that the more righteous a person, the more the *Yetzer Hara* attempts to overpower him. This is most blatant in the Holy Land. All the powers of impurity try to gain a foothold and defile the *kedushah* there. The pasuk says (*Devarim* 32:43), "His Land will

appease His people.” The Holy Land atones for the sins of the *resha'im*. How is this? By means of the mitzvot which depend on the Land. These mitzvot lend an added measure of *kedushah* and *taharah* to the soil. Living in the Land and traversing it brings a person countless mitzvot. Unfortunately, Yerushalayim was left desolate of the myriad mitzvot of its inhabitants, as the *Navi*, Yirmeyahu, laments (*Eichah* 1:1), “Alas – she sits in solitude! The city that was great with people.”

How often do we hear people speak about “killing time,” saying they are bored, or, even worse, stating that they are fed up with their lives. Do tzaddikim ever talk like this? They are constantly involved in Torah and mitzvot. They do not have time to feel bored. The punishment in *Olam Haba* will be measure for measure. Since these people fled from the Beit Hamidrash and refused to keep the Torah and mitzvot, in the Next World, they will be seated in front of a Gemara and forced to learn Torah, with no break. Maybe this will be considered Gehinnom for them, as both Torah and Gehinnom are compared to fire. If they always involved themselves in the flame of passion, they will yet be surrounded by the blaze of Torah, which they always escaped.

When I was a young boy in Morocco, the women would wail over the *churban*. Passersby would assume that someone had just died. Do we also feel the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash? Do we too feel the lack of the *Shechinah*? Or have habit and routine dulled our senses, to the extent that we feel no loss or pain at all?

Yirmeyahu Hanavi exhorts us (*Eichah* 3:40), “Let us search and examine our ways.” The word נחפשה (let us search) has the same root as the word חופשה (vacation). It is specifically during the days of vacation that we must analyze our ways and examine whether we are going on the proper path. The destruction of the Beit Hamikdash took place during the months when people are on vacation, to teach us that these days pose a threat to Torah study, as well as protecting one’s eyes. They therefore demand added vigilance.

The Ben Ish Chai relates an interesting occurrence (*Shanah Rishonah, Devarim*). Yaakov Avinu took possession of the months Nissan, Iyar, and Sivan, which are months of *kedushah, taharah*, and acceptance of the Torah. Eisav came along and grabbed the months of Tammuz, Av, and Elul. Yaakov managed to seize the month of Elul, the month of mercy and forgiveness, from Eisav's hands. But he failed to take the months of Tammuz and Av, when the *kelippah* is in control, and many troubles have befallen our people. *B'ezrat Hashem*, in the future, Yaakov will succeed in sequestering the months of Tammuz and Av, as well, and these months will be transformed to days of joy, abundance, and blessing.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ The precondition for sitting peacefully in the Holy Land is Torah and mitzvah observance. Otherwise, the Land disgorges its inhabitants. Likewise, when Bnei Yisrael are involved in Torah study, they have no need for a human army. Hashem's supervision, coupled with their unremitting Torah study, protects them. This was the case in the days of Chizkiyahu Hamelech.
- ◆ Whoever resides in *chutz la'aretz* is considered to be serving foreign gods. By living outside the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael, he indicates that he is not interested in Hashem's direct supervision.
- ◆ Hashem gave us mitzvot in abundance so that we should always be occupied with them and never find the time to sin. The words, "Blessed shall you be in your going" mean that one should make every effort to leave this world with a clean slate. Yerushalayim was destroyed because the nation was lax in the seemingly easy mitzvot. Eventually, they neglected the seemingly important ones, as well.
- ◆ We must always be on guard against the *Yetzer Hara*, but especially during the days of vacation, when looseness is the order of the day, and there is a weakening in Torah study. The months of Tammuz and Av are months of retribution, for they are under Eisav's control. May we be

redeemed soon. Then these days will be transformed into days of joy and blessing.



Renewal – A Necessary Component for Torah

“It will be that if you hearken to My commandments that I command you today”

(Devarim 11:13)

Sifri expounds (*Re'eh* 6), “The words of Torah should be as precious to you as if you received them today at Har Sinai. Be familiar with them as though today you received them.” Torah is like a garment. As long as it is new and fresh, one feels tremendous pleasure in wearing it. But a worn-out piece of clothing is old hat; one has no joy in wearing it. After a while, it is relegated to the garbage bin. One must constantly consider the Torah new and learn it with freshness. Otherwise, it becomes routine and does not have the power to raise him to greater heights.

The Rav of a certain yeshiva would always repeat the same lecture. His listeners eventually found his speech boring, having heard it so many times. They sent him a message, asking why he repeated his lecture so frequently. He replied that if they thought it was mere repetition, it showed that they had never understood it to begin with. His speech was words of Torah, full of ideas and insights. “Whenever I review the material, I find novelty in it,” he ended.

Every day, we open our eyes with the words “I gratefully thank You, O living and eternal King.” Each day begins with a revitalization which did not exist the day before. As we go to sleep at night, we enter a form of death. Who guarantees that we will awaken in the morning? I have a friend who was the Rav of a kollel in the north. He was only fifty years old when

he went to sleep one night and never woke up. Certainly, our gratitude at awakening to a new day is genuine. We surely appreciate the revival we have merited upon awakening. The Arizal adds (see *Eitz Chaim* 29:3) that every morning, one awakens with renewed intelligence to reveal Torah insights. He bases his words on the pasuk (*Eichah* 3:23), “They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.” Renewal of one’s level of intelligence causes a strengthening of faith.

Every year, we repeat the same parshiyot, reviewing the same stories and halachot as we read the year before. What is the point of this yearly repetition? The very fact that we are adjured to read the words over and over again, proves that there is more to them than meets the eye. Every year, we are capable of discovering insights into the parashah that we may have repeated for decades. The Torah is a wellspring of wisdom whose waters never dry.

I remember a Rav who would constantly reiterate the saying (*Nedarim* 22a) “Whoever becomes angry is beset by the suffering of Gehinnom,” as well as the pasuk (*Mishlei* 16:5) “Every haughty heart is the abomination of Hashem.” The Torah is replete with wisdom, which we unearth each time we delve into it anew. The deeper we dig in its study, the more treasures we discover. Similarly, we accomplish much by analyzing the wrongdoings we did, resolving to bury them forever. Yitro listened to the inner voice that repeated itself with the miracles that Hashem performed for our people. Rashi explains (*Shemot* 18:1) that he allowed himself to become impressed over the Splitting of the Sea and the battle with Amalek, until these events became a part of his consciousness. The direct result of his observations was that he adopted a life of Torah observance, as he proclaimed (*ibid.* 18:11), “Now I know that Hashem is greater than all other gods.”

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Torah demands renewal. Each time that one repeats words of Torah, he reveals new insights into its meaning. The Rav who constantly repeated the same discourse explained that each time, there were new meanings in

the words. Repeating the parshiyot yearly provides us with new understanding each time. We begin our day with *Modeh Ani*, thanking Hashem for the opportunity of a new day, with its endless possibilities.

- ◆ Yitro contemplated the miracles that Hashem did for our nation, until they became part of his consciousness. I knew a Rav who would always review words of *mussar*, etching them into his being.



Gems on Parashat Eikev



The Virtues of Submissiveness

“This shall be the reward when you hearken to these ordinances, and you observe and perform them; Hashem, your G-d, will safeguard for you the covenant and the kindness that He swore to your forefathers”

(Devarim 7:12)

Moshe exhorts Bnei Yisrael to subject themselves to Hashem, becoming humble as the heel (עקב), the lowermost part of the body. Just as the heel carries the body, affording it stability, in spite of (or because of) its humble location, so is humility man’s crowning glory, standing him upright and lending him stature for eternity. The more a person reduces himself before Hashem, the greater is his spiritual status. Who was more humble than Moshe Rabbeinu? Due to his humility, he merited bequeathing the Torah to Am Yisrael and leading them in the Wilderness for forty years.

Moshe practiced what he preached. The Torah testifies about him (*Bamidbar* 12:3), “Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth.” Before any lecturer can hope to make an impression on his audience, he himself must internalize his

words. When he acts as a role model, his words will have their desired effect. This noble quality in Moshe allowed the *Shechinah* to speak from his throat (see *Nefesh Hachaim* 3:14). Whatever Moshe said was as though the *Shechinah* itself was speaking. By the laws of nature, Moshe's physical body should have become consumed by the Heavenly Voice which came forth from him. But his self-effacement provided him with special protection, and his body remained intact.

How great is the virtue of humility. It raises a person to the peak of perfection in *kedushah* and *yirah*. He has the strength to stand before the *Shechinah*, without becoming injured by the intense holiness.

I was once asked to define the word humility. I think it means the inner strength to remain silent when one wishes to speak, realizing it is inappropriate to speak up before those who are greater than oneself. Just as people behave with due respect when in the presence of royalty, so must we honor our fellow Jews. Each of them is accorded the status of a king, for he has a *neshamah* from Hashem within him (*Pardes Rimonim* 32:1). Regarding our fellow man as a member of the royal house will naturally cause us to grant him the honor he deserves. By the same token, we will acquire the trait of humility, the key to all good qualities.



Conceit – The Cause of All Negative Character Traits

“Hashem will remove from you every illness; and all the bad maladies of Egypt that you knew – He will not put them upon you, but will put them upon all your foes”

(Devarim 7:15)

The word חלי (illness) is numerically equivalent to forty-eight, corresponding to the forty-eight traits by which Torah is acquired (see *Avot* 6:6). Adding one for the word itself raises the *gematria* to forty-nine, the number of gates of purity and gates of impurity.

The Egyptians descended from Noach’s son, Cham (*Bereishit* 10:6). This nation inherited forty-eight negative traits from their infamous father. When Bnei Yisrael subsequently descended to that land, they, too, sank into the forty-nine levels of *tumah* (see *Ohr Hachaim, Shemot* 3:7-8). These are the illnesses and maladies of Egypt described above. Our Sages state (*Kiddushin* 49b), “Ten levels of sorcery (impurity) descended to the world. The entire world took one level, and Egypt took the other nine.”

The word מדוי (malady) is numerically equivalent to sixty, just like the phrase אדם גאווה (a conceited man). This indicates that the source of all illness and negative character is the trait of arrogance (see *Sha’arei Teshuvah* 1:27). One who possesses the trait of arrogance is exhibiting the evil qualities of Egypt. On the other hand, one who acquires Torah, humility, and fear of Heaven is spared the conceit of Egypt.

The plagues which rained down on Pharaoh came for one reason only: his excessive haughtiness (see *Rabbeinu Bachya, Shemot* 10:3). This was the legacy of his fathers, Mitzrayim and Cham. Since Pharaoh’s essence was rotten, all the abominations of Egypt were encapsulated within him. Moshe warned Bnei Yisrael to cleave to the forty-eight traits by which

Torah is acquired, through submission and humbleness. This would guarantee protection for them from all the faults and foibles of Egypt.



Bad Character Traits

***“Hashem will remove from you every illness;
and all the bad maladies of Egypt that you knew
– He will not put them upon you, but will put
them upon all your foes”***

(Devarim 7:15)

The word דוה (sick), which contains the same root as the word מדוי (malady), has the same *gematria* as the word גאווה (arrogance). Yerushalayim was destroyed on account of arrogance. Bnei Yisrael were not prepared to study Torah from one another, and were not mindful of each other’s honor. This is what the *Navi* lamented (*Eichah* 7:5), “על זה – היה דוה לבנו על אלה חשכו עינינו על הר ציון ששמם שועלים הלכו בו – For this our heart was ill, for these our eyes were dimmed: for Mount Zion which lies desolate, foxes prowl over it.” Pride belongs to Hashem alone (see *Iggeret HaRamban*), as it says (*Tehillim* 93:1), “Hashem has reigned. He has donned grandeur.”

Arrogance in the house has the ability to tear the home asunder. Hashem placed His Name within the name of each spouse (see *Sotah* 17a), so that each one should recognize that everything is from Him. What is there to boast about? If the couple insists on behaving arrogantly toward each other, Hashem removes His Name from them. They are left with the fire of contention, *rachmana litzlan*. Chazal state (see *Gittin* 90b) that when a couple divorces, the Mizbeach weeps. The destruction of their home is akin to the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, which went up in flames due to the fires of arrogance among the nation.

Hashem promised Bnei Yisrael that He would remove all the illnesses and maladies of Mitzrayim from among them. The word חלי (illness) is numerically equivalent to forty-eight. Hashem will help the person who clings to Torah and mitzvot to remove the cloak of negative traits and don the garb of positive qualities. The name חם (Cham) is also numerically equivalent to forty-eight. The Egyptians' negative character traits were inherited from their father, Cham.



No Hiding from Hashem

“Also the hornet-swarm will Hashem, your G-d, send among them, until the survivors and hidden ones perish before you”

(Devarim 7:20)

When the nation of Canaan heard about Bnei Yisrael's imminent arrival into their land, they feared lest Hashem would smite them like He struck the Egyptians, with ten plagues. They came up with a plan. They simply went into hiding, believing that this would provide their salvation from Hashem's wrath.

Hashem tells Bnei Yisrael that He would send the hornet, which would inject a poison into the Canaanites, thereby blinding them. Why did Hashem choose specifically this type of punishment? It was measure for measure. They “hid” from the eyes of Hashem, assuming such a thing was possible. The hornet would come and blind them, wherever they had hidden.

There is no escaping Hashem! He is King over everything, and He is everywhere. Although we cannot see him, for He has no form or figure, He sees us. It is our shortcomings which prevent us from seeing Him, as the pasuk states (*Shemot 33:20*), “No human can see Me and live.”

Shlomo Hamelech sums it up in Mishlei (21:30), “There is neither wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against Hashem.”



Abhorring Abominations

“And you shall not bring an abomination into your home and become banned like it; you shall surely loathe it and you shall surely abominate it, for it is banned”

(Devarim 7:26)

The letters of the word חרם (banned) can be transposed to spell the word מחר (tomorrow). If one brings an abomination into his home today, he can be assured that tomorrow, he himself will become abominated. People install televisions in their homes or connect to the Internet. They claim that they are watching nothing more than the news. But when one lets down his guard, becoming accustomed to viewing the monstrous media, all his previous protective walls suddenly crumble. He finds himself gazing at repulsive pictures, dragging his *neshamah* through all the filth on the screen until it, too, becomes an entity of despicability.

Therefore, the Torah exhorts us to loathe and abhor false gods. By cleaving to them, one is liable to become like them. Their evil qualities will adhere to him. But if one is vigilant in observing the command (*Devarim 4:40*) “You shall observe His decrees and His commandments that I command you this day,” he will earn protection from all abominations and their effects.



He Who Ends the Mitzvah Earns the Mitzvah

“The entire commandment that I command you today you shall observe to perform, so that you may live and increase, and come and possess the Land that Hashem swore to your forefathers”

(Devarim 8:1)

Rashi explains the words *the entire commandment*. One should do a mitzvah in its entirety. If one has begun to fulfill a commandment, he should complete it, since it is ascribed to the one who completes it.

Rashi cites the case of Yosef's remains as a support for his claim that a mitzvah is attributed to the one who completed it. In *Navi*, we read (*Yehoshua* 24:32), “Yosef's bones, which the Children of Israel had brought up from Egypt...” We know how painstakingly Moshe occupied himself with Yosef's remains. Why, then, did the Torah attribute Bnei Yisrael with bringing them up from Egypt? It was because they were the ones who ultimately buried Yosef in Shechem. The mitzvah is therefore ascribed to them.

How crucial it is to complete a mitzvah we have begun! Whether it is praying with concentration, doing a kindness with a fellow Jew, or any other good deed, it is fitting to reach the finish line. See it to completion, and it will be attributed to you.

I well remember how the Moroccan women of old would rid their homes of every last vestige of chametz, a month before Pesach. There are none as diligent as those women, who sought chametz in every nook and cranny, attacking even the most distant areas with a vengeance. I cannot forget one woman in particular, from Casablanca. She surely had scoured her home of any trace of chametz. Toward the end of the last day of

Pesach, she would approach a certain Arab and ask for flour in order to prepare for the imminent *mimouna* festival. She promised to pay as soon as the holiday ended. How pitiable that all of her hard work to rid her home of chametz went down the drain, as she purchased flour half an hour before the end of the holiday.

If we were punctilious in beginning a mitzvah with precision and care, let us make sure to end it in the most beautiful way possible. This will ensure that our hard work will not be for nothing, and that we receive full credit for doing the mitzvah.

What is a fool-proof method for doing mitzvot with true perfection? Appreciating the value of the mitzvah and cherishing it. Someone with this attitude will not suffice with doing mitzvot by rote, as if by force. His sole intention will be to enhance Hashem's glory.

A gleaming new car winks at its onlookers. But if it is missing the engine, it is worthless. It has no use if its primary part is missing. Similarly, a person gains reward from performing a mitzvah if he is careful both to fulfill it and to finish it in the best way possible.

If a person was stopped mid-mitzvah, he will receive reward for his part in the mitzvah, even though he was prevented from completing it. Hashem does not deprive any creature of its due (see *Berachot* 6a). Nonetheless, a mitzvah is attributed to the one who completed it. Therefore, we tell one who started a mitzvah to complete it.

In *Avot* (4:2), it states, "One mitzvah leads to another." A mitzvah done with joy and perfection has the ability to draw forth another mitzvah. This is another reason to do mitzvot as perfectly as possible, for perfect mitzvot beget more perfect mitzvot. This cycle of mitzvot will accrue untold reward for their executor.



Remember, Don't Forget

“Then you shall remember Hashem, your G-d: that it was He Who gave you strength to make wealth, in order to establish His covenant that He swore to your forefathers, as this day”

(Devarim 8:18)

Before his death, Moshe Rabbeinu reviews all of the kindnesses which Hashem did with Bnei Yisrael. He saved them from their enemies, sent down the manna from Heaven, and performed numerous miracles throughout their journeys in the Wilderness. Examples are the seven Clouds of Glory, the pillar of fire, the cloud which went before them, and the Well of Miriam, which accompanied them throughout.

Every Jew must always remember his Creator, Who gave him whatever he has. He should never think that it is his own acumen which grants him success. Hashem alone is all-powerful. All feelings of pride will naturally slide away, giving way to submission to a Higher Being.

Regarding the mitzvah of Shabbat, we are commanded (*Shemot* 20:8), “Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it,” as well as (*Devarim* 5:12), “Safeguard the Shabbat day to sanctify it.” Why are we first told to *remember* the Shabbat, and afterward, to *safeguard* the Shabbat? In order to properly safeguard the Shabbat, with all its details and nuances, one must first ensure to remember it appropriately. Without this, one is liable to forget Shabbat completely, and accidentally desecrate it, *rachmana litzlan*. In order to remember to sanctify the Shabbat, all Jewish homes have a white tablecloth spread on the table in honor of the purity and sanctity of the day.

The Gemara relates (*Bava Metzia* 83a) that two poor Jews were employed by a wine merchant. Their job was to haul the weighty wine jugs to the homes of the rich customers. One day, a heavy earthenware

jug, full of wine, slipped from their arms and crashed to the ground, breaking into smithereens. All the expensive wine was lost. When the wine merchant heard about this, he demanded that his workers pay for the damages. These poor Jews begged for clemency, claiming that they had nothing aside from the shirts on their backs.

The merchant took them to the Beit Din, where they awaited the halachic ruling. After hearing the case, the judge ruled that not only were these men exempt from payment, but their employer was obligated to pay them a day's wages. When the merchant expressed his surprise, the judge explained that the Torah requires an employer to pay his employees even when they cause damage. I would like to suggest that this is in order that one should constantly remember Who ultimately grants a person the wherewithal to run an efficient business and hire workers. Paying one's employees even when damage was done sharpens the awareness that his money is not completely his. It is merely entrusted to him for the sake of helping others.



Torah – Remedy for the Maladies of the Yetzer Hara

“Your sin that you committed – the calf – I took and burned it in fire, and I pounded it, grinding it well, until it was fine as dust, and I threw the dust into the brook that descended from the mountain”

(Devarim 9:21)

Man's negative *middot* are compared to the Golden Calf. The only way to completely eradicate them is by means of burning them with the fire of Torah. Torah gives a person the power to overcome his *Yetzer Hara*,

grinding his inclination to fine dust and throwing it into the brook, also an allusion to Torah (*Bava Kama* 17a), which is by the mountain.

The *Yetzer Hara* is nullified only through fire and water, both metaphors for Torah. In contrast, the *Yetzer Hara* himself is considered a calf or a mountain. The only way to completely destroy the *Yetzer Hara* is by grinding it into powder and drowning it in the waters of Torah.



The One Who Feels Hashem Merits All Blessing

“Now, O Israel, what does Hashem, your G-d, ask of you? Only to fear your G-d, to go in all His ways and to love Him, and to serve Hashem your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul”

(Devarim 10:12)

Is this all that Hashem asks of us? The entire Torah is full of commandments and instructions!

Chazal tell us (*Berachot* 28b) that before the death of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, his disciples asked him to bless them. He replied, “May it be Hashem’s will that your fear of Him be as great as your fear of humans.” Isn’t this considered a piece of advice, as opposed to a blessing? Generally, blessings include good wishes for health, sustenance, marriage, etc. Why did he give them advice instead of a blessing?

When Rabbi Yochanan’s disciples came to take leave of their mentor, they were struck by the fact that although he was head and shoulders above them in his spiritual stature, he was about to go the way of all men.

They certainly asked for a blessing in the spiritual sphere. One who looks death in the eye cannot ask for mundane materialism.

Rabbi Yochanan gave them a blessed piece of advice. He conveyed the message that one who fears Hashem will serve Him in the best way possible. This will, in turn, bring down Heavenly abundance both in spiritual and in physical matters.

Hashem asked Shlomo Hamelech which blessing he would like. He was offered wisdom, wealth, or victory in battle. Shlomo requested wisdom. Hashem told him that his blessing of wisdom would contain the other elements, as well. Through his wisdom, he would amass fortunes and would also subdue his enemies with clever maneuvers (see *Melachim I*, 3:5-14).

Before his death, Moshe turned to Bnei Yisrael and told them that Hashem asks for one thing only – that they fear Him. This fear includes everything. Through fear of Heaven, one will serve his Creator in a superior fashion, meriting all blessings. Tehillim states (111:10), “The beginning of wisdom is fear of Hashem, good understanding to all their practitioners. His praise endures forever.” One who chooses to observe the Torah, called “the beginning,” will merit wisdom. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was granting his pupils the greatest blessing, “May you acquire *yirat Shamayim*, which will bring upon you all possible blessing.”



Cleaving to Him

“Hashem, your G-d, shall you fear, Him shall you serve, to Him shall you cleave”

(Devarim 10:20)

Is it possible to cleave to Hashem, Who is described as an all-consuming fire? The meaning of this instruction is to cleave to Torah,

a compilation of His Names (see *Ramban, Bereishit, Introduction*). Before Adam sinned, the Torah was arranged according to various combinations of Hashem's Names (see *Midrash Tehillim 3*). After the sin, Hashem hid these Names and combined them with the Torah and mitzvot which we do (see *Leshem Shevo V'Achlomah*). One who exerts himself to study Torah and observe the mitzvot will merit cleaving to Hashem.

“Hashem is one and His Name is one” is a reference to His holy Names contained in the letters of the Torah. Therefore, a Sefer Torah which is missing a letter is invalid, because it indicates a defect in His Names. When a person transgresses, he is not merely damaging a mitzvah. He is damaging the very Names of Hashem, as it were. The danger is tremendous.

The *neshamot* of Bnei Yisrael, too, are contained in Hashem's Names (see *Shelah, Pesachim, Matzah Ashirah 376*). Hashem's Names total 613, just like the amount of mitzvot in the Torah. And there are 613 roots to the *neshamot* of Bnei Yisrael (see *Sha'ar Hagilgulim 38*), corresponding to Hashem's Names.

The holy Kabbalist, the Rashash, zy”a, says that this explains why the tzaddik confesses to sins, along with all of Bnei Yisrael, even for sins he never contemplated. Since all the *neshamot* of Klal Yisrael are bound as one, the tzaddik's *neshamah* is possibly rooted together with that of a rasha who sinned. As we know, all Bnei Yisrael are mutually responsible (see *Shavuot, 39a*). When a rasha causes damage due to his sins, the tzaddik comes along and clears it up.

It says (*Mishlei 3:18*), “It is a tree of life to those who grasp it.” Torah is called life (*Tosefta, Sotah 7:7*). Hashem, too, is called the “Life Source” (blessing of *Borei Nefashot*; see *Daniel 12:7*), for He sustains the entire world. From here we see that Torah and Hashem are one and the same.

The Torah states (*Devarim 28:10*), “Then all the peoples of the earth will see that the Name of Hashem is proclaimed over you, and they will revere you.” The Name of Hashem refers to Torah. One who occupies himself with Torah earns the respect of the nations. My grandfather,

Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy”a, had a righteous son by the name of Rabbi Yehudah Pinto, zt”l. When Rabbi Yehudah was a youngster, an Arab boy cursed him. In protest, the young Yehudah took a stone and threw it at the Arab’s forehead, causing him to bleed. This Arab lad happened to be the son of the governor, a rabid anti-Semite.

This incident was enough of an excuse to torment the Jews. The governor immediately set out to the home of the Rav, Rabbi Chaim, zt”l. He saw that the Rav was immersed in Torah study. He turned on his heel and fled. When his men asked why he hurried out, he said that he had perceived an aura surrounding the Rabbi, and he was afraid of being harmed. As soon as he arrived home, he prepared gifts for Rabbi Chaim, in order to appease him so that he should not be annoyed that he had disturbed his learning.

Rabbi Chaim called the governor to appear before him. The governor arrived with his knees buckling under. Rabbi Chaim asked him the cause of his previous visit. The man did not reply. He merely said that their sons had gotten into a skirmish, but everything was settled. This is a perfect illustration of a tzaddik who cleaves to Hashem’s Names by means of Torah study, arousing the fear and awe of the gentiles.

The angels say, as we recite in the Kedushah prayer (*Tehillim* 8:2), “How mighty is Your Name throughout the earth.” Hashem’s Name is alluded to in the Torah, which is on earth. Hashem’s Name is also upon Bnei Yisrael, called אָדָם (man). Both the word אָדָם and the word מַה (how) are numerically equivalent to forty-five. By means of the Torah, all these elements are combined, bringing sanctification to His Name (see *Zohar, Shemot* 124; see *Ramban’s Introduction to the Torah*).

I often conjure up the following inspiring incident: One day before Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman was taken to be killed by the Nazis, may their names be wiped out, his son presented him with a new pair of shoes. Rabbi Elchonon said that they were to be taken to be killed the next day; what was the point of having a new pair of shoes? His son replied that he wished to perform the mitzvah of honoring one’s parent in this way. Rabbi

Elchonon took the shoes joyfully. When his son came to the study hall, he noticed that Rabbi Elchonon still wore his old shoes. He asked his father why he did not wear the new pair. Rabbi Elchonon answered that the new ones had laces, whereas the old ones didn't. Tying the laces would demand extra time, which could be put to better use learning more words of Torah, cleaving to Hashem's Name without a break. Rabbi Elchonon felt responsible for every single moment of life, desiring to make full use of it by cleaving to Hashem's Names through Torah study.

The night before the Ba'alei Tosafot were taken to be executed by the Crusaders, they revealed insights into *Masechet Bava Kama (Perek Merubah)*. They wished to utilize their last moments on earth for the sake of Torah study and cleaving to Hashem. The next day, all of them gave their lives for *kiddush Hashem*. One survived. He guarded the Torah novellae which had been discovered the night before. Fortunate are they who shine like the light from their resting place.



Hints

“Then the wrath of Hashem will blaze against you; He will restrain the heaven so there will be no rain, and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will be swiftly banished from the goodly Land that Hashem gives you”

(Devarim 11:17)

The word **מטר** (rain) is a synonym for the word **גשם**, which is numerically equivalent, adding one for the word itself, to the word **שמד** (denial of Hashem). Adding one to this word makes it numerically equivalent to the word **משה** (Moshe). The message here is the following: One who is ungrateful to Hashem, to the extent that he denies Him

completely by serving foreign gods, is punished by a lack of rain. But if he repents correctly, he can reach the level of even Moshe Rabbeinu. The *zechut* of the Torah of Moshe will protect him, and he will merit every blessing.



Re'eh



Keeping the Mitzvot – Keeping the Land

“For you are crossing the Jordan to come and possess the Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you; you shall possess it and you shall settle in it. You shall be careful to perform all the decrees and the ordinances that I present before you today”

(Devarim 11:31-32)

Hashem stipulates that Bnei Yisrael will inherit the Land if they keep mitzvot. The earth, so to speak, feels spirituality.

We find numerous instances throughout Scriptures in which the Land is offered comfort. One example is in the *Nachem* Prayer recited on Tishah b'Av. There, we call Hashem “the Comforter of Zion.” We can understand that people need comforting. For example, Yeshayahu Hanavi called to his people (*Yeshayahu* 40:1), “Comfort, comfort, My people.” Bnei Yisrael had just lost the Beit Hamikdash and were in a state of sorrow. They certainly needed to be comforted. But what is meant by “Comforter of Zion”? How can the Land be comforted?

There are many mitzvot which are dependent on settling the Land. Examples are anointing a king, *shemittah*, and the other land-related

mitzvot. When these mitzvot are kept correctly, the Land is satisfied, so to speak, and shelters its inhabitants. Hashem guarantees this with the words (*Vayikra* 26:3-5), "If you will follow My decrees... you will dwell securely in your land." Therefore, inheriting the Land is contingent upon observing the mitzvot.

The pesukim continue (*Devarim* 12:1-5), "These are the decrees and the ordinances that you shall observe to perform in the Land that Hashem, the G-d of your forefathers has given you, to possess it, all the days that you live on the Land. You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations that you are driving away worshipped their gods: on the high mountains and on the hills, and under every leafy tree. You shall break apart their altars: you shall smash their pillars; and their sacred trees shall you burn in the fire; their carved images shall you cut down; and you shall obliterate their names from that place. You shall not do this to Hashem, your G-d. Rather, only at the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose from among all your tribes to place His Name there shall you seek out His Presence and come there." We see a direct connection between destroying all of the places where idols were worshipped and coming to serve Hashem in the Beit Hamikdash.

What is the definition of *avodah zarah*? It is not only the worship of foreign gods. It is serving any interest foreign to Hashem. It is exchanging love of Him for love of another (see *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 307:17). All pursuits of materialistic pleasures fall in this category. The Torah exhorts us to seek shelter in Hashem's Sanctuary instead of following after fleeting frivolities.

If a person finds fun times fulfilling, what is there to convince him to trade them in for service of Hashem? These pesukim tell us that true pleasure and purpose are to be found only in Torah and mitzvot and the service of Hashem. One who immerses himself in the sea of Talmud, exerting himself to decipher a page of Gemara or Tosafot can attest to the joy which fills his heart. He has truly found an island of tranquility amid the turbulence of this transient world.

Once, a Jew had planned to sin with a strange woman. Before the pre-arranged time, he decided to attend a Torah *shiur*. The speaker promised that anyone who had participated could approach him after the lecture and make any request, which would be fulfilled, *B'ezrat Hashem*. This man, too, joined the petitioners. He asked to become stronger in Torah and *yirat Shamayim*. This man had originally planned to consort with a strange woman! But after tasting the life-giving waters of Torah, all thoughts of immorality fled his mind. In order to merit becoming fortified in love of Torah, many prayers must be offered, and many tears shed in supplication.

The Chatam Sofer was once taken ill. He could not deliver his usual *shiur* and asked his son, the Ketav Sofer, to fill in for him. The disciples originally thought the lecture would not be on the level of the Chatam Sofer. But after hearing it, they were truly impressed. They approached the Chatam Sofer, relating that they had been very pleased with his son's delivery. The son's level did not fall short of his father's, and perhaps even surpassed it. The Chatam Sofer replied that he was happy to hear their report and certainly did not have envy toward his son (see *Sanhedrin* 105b). "You must know," he concluded, "that I have wept buckets of tears so that my son should have *ahavat* Torah. *Baruch Hashem*, my tefillot were accepted."

The Chatam Sofer did not pray for his son's health or wealth. Only that he should develop a love for Torah. How much the Chatam Sofer himself must have loved Torah!

On Yom Kippur, as we recite, "Where is the place of His glory?" It is an auspicious time to ask for wealth, righteous children, or *ruach hakodesh* (see *Pri Eitz Chaim, Rosh Hashanah* 7). A man once asked me what he should pray for. I asked him what he had in mind. He replied that he wished to be wealthy, so that he could support Torah scholars and send his sons to yeshivot, etc. I replied that if he were wealthy, he wouldn't have time to think about yeshivot for his sons, and certainly not have time for himself to learn Torah. On the contrary, he should request Torah, for Torah is the best commodity there is in the world.

Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma related that he was once walking on the road. A man approached him and asked where he came from. He replied that he lived in a city full of scholars. He asked Rabbi Yossi to move to his city and he would offer him fantastic wealth. Rabbi Yossi replied that he wouldn't exchange Torah for all the wealth in the world, as the pasuk states (*Tehillim* 119:72), "The Torah of your mouth is better for me than thousands in gold and silver" (*Avot* 6:10).

Rabbi Tarfon had numerous cities and vineyards. He leased them all to others, in order to be free to study Torah. He was once walking through one of his vineyards, while reviewing his studies. His tenant took him for a common thief, assuming he was the one who had recently stolen fruits. Rabbi Tarfon was bound in a sack and almost thrown into the river. He called out, "Woe to Rabbi Tarfon who is being put to death!" The tenant realized his mistake and released him (*Nedarim* 62b).

Rabbi Tarfon preferred the taste of Torah to the flavor of the fruits, for Torah is the best merchandise (see *Mishlei* 3:14; *Hakafot* of Simchat Torah).

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Observing Torah and mitzvot is the precondition for settling the Land.
- ◆ Mitzvah observance and Torah study are the greatest pleasures possible.
- ◆ Words of Torah make such an impression on a person that they may save him from sin.
- ◆ One must pray for love of Torah. The Chatam Sofer shed copious tears that his son, the Ketav Sofer, should develop a love for Torah.
- ◆ It is preferable to pray for *ahavat* Torah on Yom Kippur than to pray for wealth in order to support Torah scholars.
- ◆ Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma would not exchange Torah and mitzvot for all the wealth in the world.

- ◆ Rabbi Tarfon abandoned his holdings in order to devote himself to Torah study.



The High Road

“See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse”

(Devarim 11:26)

Hashem is the epitome of good (*Da’at Tevunot* 18). Therefore, whatever He does is only good and full of blessing. If a person experiences suffering or difficulties, he should know that they do not come from Hashem, but from his own iniquities. The world is saturated with an abundance of goodness. The question is whether we are worthy recipients of all that goodness. Are we capable of soaking up the blessing, or do our deeds deter us from achieving this?

Hashem uses the word “present,” for the blessing and the curse are, in essence, presents from Him. Even the seeming curses are actually blessings in disguise, for they awaken a person to do teshuvah, and they atone for his sins. Certainly, anyone would choose the gift of blessing over the gift of curse. This is available via Torah study and mitzvah performance. But when Hashem sees that a person is not worthy of the blessing, which is the core of all good, He bestows upon him the gift of curse, so that he will wake up and return to his Father.

“Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that evil and good emanate?” (*Eichah* 3:38). Yirmeyahu is telling us that Hashem never does anything bad. If a person experiences suffering, it is his wrongdoings that brought it upon him. The Torah tells us (*Devarim* 14:1), “You are children to Hashem, your G-d.” A father wants to give ceaselessly to his son. So does

Hakadosh Baruch Hu, our all-merciful Father, wish to provide us with all things good. The only deciding factor is whether or not we are worthy.

Whatever Hashem metes out to a person is good. Either it is in reward for his good deeds, or it is in order to awaken him to repent. Let us use the following analogy: A sick man takes medicine, which is good for him, for it saves his life. But it is clear that ideally, this man would prefer not to have a need for the medicine. Since he is unwell, he has no choice but to take it. The wise man will preserve his health by maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and will have no need for medicine.

In every generation, foreign cultures similar to Amalek and Balak's nation, Moav, rise up against us. Their entire objective is to cool off Am Yisrael's Avodat Hashem. They wish to sever them from the pipeline of blessing and abundance. Amalek caused Bnei Yisrael to sin by injecting doubts in *emunah* in their minds (see *Shem MiShmuel, Parashat Vayikra*, 679). And Bilaam Harasha awakened Bnei Yisrael to the desire for women by causing them to sin with the daughters of Moav (see *Bamidbar* 31:16). Nowadays, Amalek and Bilaam are disguised as the television and the Internet. These are devices of destruction, intensifying the desire for lust and forbidden pleasures, wreaking havoc and claiming untold sacrifices.

Whenever I receive the public for audiences, I hear of awful atrocities. Who can remain unmoved after hearing about families torn to pieces due to the devious devices mentioned above! This is not the place to mention the incidents in detail. Suffice it to say that these implements of destruction are nothing but the enemies of our time, whose pronounced purpose is to divert a person off the path of propriety and awaken his beastly instincts.

Perusing the menu in a restaurant indicates that each item has a price, which one will pay at the meal's end. Everything in this world, too, comes with a price tag. The day will come when one will pay for whatever he enjoyed. If most of his actions were according to Torah and mitzvot, he will not have to pay much. But if he fills himself with every item on the menu, gorging on pleasures which contradict a life of Torah, he will have

a steep bill awaiting him, which he probably will be unable to afford. It is therefore worthwhile to choose the way of good over evil, so that we do not, *chalilah*, find ourselves with an overwhelming, unbearable debt.

The proven method of gaining Hashem's grace is to ascend, slowly but steadily, on the road that leads to Him. A woman once approached me, stating that she had terrible problems, each day more difficult than the previous one. After hearing about some of her troubles, I asked if she observes Shabbat. She replied that two years ago she had undertaken to observe Shabbat, but did not make much progress in this area. I explained that Hashem was sending her signals that He was not pleased with her one-time resolution. He wanted her to keep at it, constantly coming closer to Him.

A baby would never learn to walk if he was satisfied with the first steps he took. He must continue onward, walking longer without letup. Although he falls, he keeps on going, trying once and again. Only in this manner, does he acquire the skills necessary for walking.

Walking on the path of Torah is a similar exercise. The road to greatness is strewn with stones and steep inclines. The wise man is not the one who does not slip. He is the one who does not become discouraged after slipping. After falling, he stands up, wipes off the dust, and goes on. He is like the infant who does not despair when he falls, but sticks to his goal of walking a distance, steadily and securely. The Torah is called a path (see *Kedushin* 2b). We must navigate our way through it one step at a time, without allowing despair to distract us. When is each step effective? Only when it is connected to more steps in the right direction, small as they may be. As long as there is clarity and consistency, our small steps can bring us to the House of Hashem, earning us wonderful things.

Let us not minimize the significance of the first step. Although in and of itself it is not enough to bring us to our destination, it is fundamental for our progress. Pinchas the Kohen is a prime example of someone who took the plunge for Hashem's sake (*Bamidbar* 25:7). He was the first to make a

move to remove the shame of Bnei Yisrael. By plunging the sword into the sinners, he established a precedence for Am Yisrael to follow.

Although Hashem reserves reward for good deeds in *Olam Haba* (*Kiddushin* 39b), He granted Pinchas reward in this world (*Bamidbar* 25:11-13). This was in order to impress upon the people just how much Hashem valued Pinchas' act in risking his life for His sake. His act set the stage for future generations to lay their life on the line in order to sanctify Hashem's Name.

When one stands up for his principles, taking action when others remain indifferent, this herculean act of self-sacrifice awards him immeasurable reward. Hashem demonstrated this in His reward to Pinchas. He granted him eternal life in the World of Truth, as the pasuk states (*ibid.*), "I give him My covenant of peace." The word שלום (peace) is closely related to the word שלימות (perfection). Hashem granted Pinchas a perfect reward, both in this world as well as the next. This was because Pinchas did what was called for, without paying heed to Shevet Dan, who tried to prevent him. He acted with *mesirut nefesh* in the face of his scoffers, sanctifying Hashem's Name in public and bringing the epidemic to an end.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ "See, I present before you" suggests that Hashem is granting us a gift. Everything that happens to a person, the good as well as the seemingly bad, are all essentially good, and actually a present. Hashem is the epitome of good; whatever He does is only good.
- ◆ The wise man will choose the gift of blessing over the gift of curse. He does this by clinging to Torah and mitzvot.
- ◆ The road of Torah and mitzvot is strewn with difficulties and downfalls. The trick is to never fall into the clutches of despair. Instead, one should pick himself up and take one step at a time, like a baby who never gives up, but stubbornly goes on. Although the first step is significant, one

should not suffice with it, but continue along the road that leads to the House of Hashem.

- ◆ Hashem rewarded Pinchas in this world. Although this is unusual, Hashem did it in order to demonstrate His appreciation to Pinchas for his self-sacrifice on His behalf, an act which was a lesson in *mesirut nefesh* for future generations.



Hear No Evil; See No Evil

“See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing: that you hearken to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, that I command you today. And the curse if you do not hearken to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, and you stray from the path that I command you today, to follow gods of others, that you did not know”

(Devarim 11:26-28)

Moshe Rabbeinu warns Bnei Yisrael that if they go in the way of the Torah and mitzvot, they will merit Hashem’s blessing. But if they turn their back to Him, following false ideologies, they will be beset by curse. Further in the parashah, we read (ibid. vs. 29), “You shall deliver the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Eval.” What is the significance of presenting the blessing and curse on two mountains, and why are their locations written about in such detail? We know that the Torah is sparing with words; what does it want to teach us?

Furthermore, why does the Torah use the word “see” when warning Bnei Yisrael to go on the proper path and distance themselves from

wrongdoing? We can base our answer on the words of the *Mesillat Yesharim* (Chapter 2). He explains that there are two types of blind people. One is blind from birth and cannot see at all, no matter how hard he tries. The other can naturally see, but chooses to blind himself to reality. The word “see” is written to tell a person, “See and contemplate what is happening around you. Do not be like those who purposely blind themselves to the truth which is revealed before them.”

The pesukim continue, “The blessing: that you hearken to the commandments of Hashem... And the curse if you do not hearken to the commandments.” There are those who turn a deaf ear to the piercing truth. The Torah turns to them, as well, to tune in to what is going on around them. They should pay specific attention to Hashem’s command to go in the right path and distance themselves from all forms of sin and foreign lifestyles.

How can one perceive the unvarnished truth without distorting it? By fulfilling the instruction of the *Navi* (*Yeshayahu* 30:20), “Your eyes will behold your Teacher.” Analyzing the deeds of the righteous and contemplating their lifestyles will cause a person to cleave to the ways of Torah, which they represent (see *Mesillat Yesharim* 21). Looking at the right things will set the stage for clear eyesight. I often conjure up images of my father, zy”a, as he did mitzvot. Seeing him in my mind’s eye energizes me to fulfill Hashem’s will to perfection.

Regarding our question as to why the Torah spoke at length about the blessing and the curses on the mountains, I would like to suggest the following: The *Yetzer Hara* is like a mountain; at times, he seems insurmountable, and at times, quite small and insignificant. When the *Yetzer Hara* finds himself facing a tzaddik, he acts like a tzaddik himself. He parades as a pious man, whose only desire is to bless and bring good. But if the tzaddik opens his eyes to the truth, he uncovers the identity of his “benefactor.” He discovers it is none other than the *Yetzer Hara* himself, bent on causing him to sin. Chazal tell us (*Sukkah* 52a) that in the future, the *Yetzer Hara* will reveal himself both to the tzaddikim and the resha’im. The tzaddikim will perceive him as a threatening mountain,

whereas the resha'im will perceive him as a thin thread. Each group will burst out in bitter weeping. The tzaddikim will cry out, "Where did we muster the strength to overpower such an intimidating mountain?" And the resha'im will cry, "Couldn't we find the strength to overcome this little hair?"

The greater the person, the greater is his *Yetzer Hara* (ibid.). The *Yetzer Hara* of the righteous man comes to him with sweet talk, as though he was interested in nothing other than blessing this person with all things good. On the other hand, the wicked man is already steeped in sin. The *Yetzer Hara* does not hesitate to approach him like a mountain of curse. He convinces him to commit the lowest sins, since he already has him in his net. This man will follow him, like a dog on a leash, straight to purgatory.

The blessing and curse were given on two mountains in order to drive home the following point. What motivates us to observe mitzvot? Is it the *Yetzer Hatov*, who encourages people to act *l'shem Shamayim*, or the *Yetzer Hara*, who urges us to take pride in our good deeds? From which mountain do our intentions derive? Are they rooted in the grassy grounds of the *Yetzer Hatov* or in the murky mud of the *Yetzer Hara*?

Blessing is manifested by a person having clear vision and the ability to identify the source of his actions. Conversely, blinding oneself to reality and failing to investigate the cause of his actions will lead up the Mountain of Curses.

Lot is a prime example of someone who was so close to the truth but failed to use his situation to his advantage. He saw Avraham in his righteousness and piety, but he closed his eyes to it all. He chose, instead, to look to the people of Sodom and Amorrhah, who were terribly wicked (*Bereishit* 13:10-13; see *Rashi*, ibid.). In spite of this decision, Lot did have some mitzvot to his credit. We find that he ate matzot on Pesach, fulfilled the mitzvah of welcoming guests, and did not reveal to the Egyptians that Sara was Avraham's wife (*Bereishit Rabbah* 51:6).

Lot is an enigma. Was he a tzaddik or a rasha? Lot lived a paradoxical life. He was lured into fulfilling mitzvot by his *Yetzer Hara*, in order to let him rest on his laurels. He felt good about himself; wasn't he keeping the mitzvot? But he let down his guard and never realized how his *Yetzer Hara* was wreaking havoc with his life, as he ended up sinning abominably.

Moshe tells us, "See, I present before you today." Every day, it is incumbent upon man to awaken and examine his deeds. Is he being directed by the *Yetzer Hatov* or by the *Yetzer Hara*? One who is self-assured that his *Yetzer Hatov* is leading him, just as Lot was, is liable to fall into the clutches of the *Yetzer Hara*.

When Hagar and her young son, Yishmael, were sent out of Avraham's house, Yishmael became deathly ill (*Bereishit* 53:13). Hagar prayed for water, that she might revive her child. The Torah states (*Bereishit* 21:19), "Then G-d opened her eyes and she perceived a well of water; she went and filled the skin with water and gave the youth to drink." The Midrash says (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 53:14) that this well was there all along. But Hagar had not noticed it. Only after Hashem opened her eyes, did she discern the well and restore her son's life with its waters.

The words "See, I present before you today" teach us that all we have to do is open our eyes to see the truth. Are we conducting ourselves in accordance with the truth, which will bring us blessing, or are we being led, *chalilah*, by the forces of evil and curse? Those who desire to go in the way of Hashem are guaranteed that He will open their eyes so that they can discern the correct road.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why did Hashem offer the curses and the blessings specifically on two mountains? Why does the Torah go to lengths in specifying their exact locations?
- ◆ Why does the Torah use the word "see"? A person must open his eyes to see the unvarnished truth. One method of doing this is by analyzing the

deeds of our great men. The blessing we are promised if we listen to the Torah should awaken us to open our eyes to the truth.

- ◆ It is the way of the *Yetzer Hara* to approach a man in the form of a mountain. Whether he is a mountain of blessing or a mountain of curse all depends on the person. The Torah delineates the locations of the mountains in order to awaken us to investigate the source of our actions. Do they come from a place of purity and blessing or are they sourced in curse?
- ◆ Lot was an anomaly. Was he a tzaddik or a rasha? He was motivated to do mitzvot by his *Yetzer Hara*, in order to let down his guard and be led to the Mountain of Curse.
- ◆ Hagar's eyes were opened to the well after she prayed for water. The well had been there all along, but she saw it only after she prayed.



A Mountain of an Inclination

“It shall be that when Hashem, your G-d, brings you to the Land to which you come, to possess it, then you shall deliver the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Eval”

(Devarim 11:29)

Upon their entry into Eretz Yisrael, Bnei Yisrael were instructed to present the blessings and curses on Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval, respectively. What is the significance of holding this gathering on mountains? When one wishes to bless his friend, does he shout blessings from the mountaintops? Is a *berachah* effective only when it is called out from the peaks? Certainly not. Why, then, the ceremony at the summit?

The Torah wishes to teach us that if Bnei Yisrael go in the way of Torah and mitzvot, Hashem will shower them with an abundance of blessing. But

if they, *chalilah*, turn their back on Him, they will be met with curse. It is the *Yetzer Hara* who obstructs the road of Torah and mitzvot. He is like a mountain. From the distance, a mountain seems imposing and insurmountable. But upon coming closer, one realizes it is nothing but a mound of tiny grains of sand, easy to crumble upon contact. The tzaddikim, who know the true colors of the *Yetzer Hara*, do not hesitate to engage him in combat. They quickly crush him to a fine powder.

Hashem chose to give Bnei Yisrael the Torah upon Har Sinai for the same reason. The *Yetzer Hara* is compared to a mountain, intent on ruining one's chances for Torah study. Chazal say (see *Ramchal, Derech Eitz Chaim*) that the main thrust of the *Yetzer Hara* is against Torah study. He knows that the Torah upholds the world and protects man from sinning. Hashem told us (*Kiddushin* 30b), "I have created the *Yetzer Hara*; I have created Torah as its antidote." Torah is the remedy for the ills of the *Yetzer Hara*.

In order to merit Hashem's blessing, one must subdue his *Yetzer Hara*, which stands as a mountain before him. If one would only know his own strength, that he has the power to dissolve this seemingly unapproachable mountain and grind it to dust, he would gather all his energies and confront him head-on.

Moshe instructed the nation to conduct this ceremony after entering the Land, for mitzvah performance in Eretz Yisrael is incomparable to anywhere else (see *Ramban, Bereishit* 26:5). Conversely, aveirot transgressed in the Holy Land are much more severe than those done in *chutz la'aretz* (ibid., *Vayikra* 18:25). Transgressions are always grave, but they have an added level of seriousness when done on holy soil. On the other hand, although the reward for all mitzvot is inestimable, one who performs mitzvot in Eretz Yisrael earns untold reward, manifold times more than elsewhere.

"It shall be that when Hashem, your G-d, brings you to the Land to which you come." When Bnei Yisrael saw that Moshe was going to pass away in the Wilderness, and they would enter the Land without him, they

were very fearful. How would they manage to cling to the Torah without their faithful leader? When Moshe noticed their hesitation, he told them that it was the Land “to which you come.” The letters of the word שמה (to which) can be transposed to spell the word משה (Moshe). Moshe’s spirit would continue to accompany them in Eretz Yisrael and infuse them with the energy to cling to Hashem and His Torah. Moreover, the letters of the word שמה also spell השם (Hashem). The *Ba’al Haturim* declares (see *Devarim* 33:1) that whoever studies Moshe’s Torah, merits Hashem’s Presence and Divine blessing.

I once sat down to study Torah at 5:00 a.m. An annoying fly kept buzzing around me, giving me no peace. The *Yetzer Hara* is like that fly. He buzzes about and flaps his wings, giving man no rest, steering him off the proper path. Just as the only alternative is to swat at the fly and kill him, so too, one must subdue the *Yetzer Hara* by killing him, so that he cannot lift his head against him.

A Jew from Lyon once told me that he had just completed the study of the Daf Hayomi cycle of Shas. He asked me whether he should learn a different tractate in-depth, or begin the cycle of Daf Hayomi all over again. I thought about the matter for some time. I came to the conclusion that this man should renew the cycle of the Daf Hayomi. It is a consistent daily regimen. Fighting the battle against the *Yetzer Hara* necessitates consistency. It would, therefore, be more sensible for this man to learn in a consistent fashion. He would most likely stick to his daily dose of learning this way. Chazal warn us, regarding Torah study (*Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim* 873), “If you abandon me for one day, I will abandon you for two.”

The *Yetzer Hara* has various disguises at his disposal. At times, he comes to a person in a way of wickedness and curse, and at times, under the pretext of blessing and righteousness, as though his only interest is the person’s spiritual advancement. It is our moral obligation to look beneath the surface and unmask him. Even when he encourages one to do mitzvot, it might be a form of bribery, in order to cause the person to become arrogant.

In Summary

- ◆ Why were the blessings and curses given on mountains? The *Yetzer Hara* is compared to a mountain, which seems insurmountable from afar. Once one has approached it, though, he sees it is nothing but crushable grains of sand.
- ◆ The Torah was given on Har Sinai for the very same reason. The main emphasis of the *Yetzer Hara* is in the area of *bitul* Torah. One must engage him head-on in battle, grinding him to a fine powder.
- ◆ “It shall be that when Hashem, your G-d, brings you to the Land to which you come.” The letters of the word שמה (to which) can be transposed to spell the word משה (Moshe). Moshe’s spirit would continue to accompany the nation in Eretz Yisrael and infuse them with the energy to cling to Hashem and His Torah. Moreover, the letters of the word שמה also spell השם (Hashem). Whoever learns Torah merits Hashem’s Presence.
- ◆ The *Yetzer Hara* is compared, at times, to the Mountain of Curse (Mount Eval), and, at times, to the Mountain of Blessing (Mount Gerizim). He sometimes confronts a person through evil and curse, and sometimes, through sweet talk and blessing, encouraging him to do mitzvot for the purpose of self-aggrandizement.



The Leavening of the Heart

“No leaven of yours shall be seen throughout your boundary for seven days, nor shall any of the flesh that you slaughter on the afternoon before the first day remain overnight until morning”

(Devarim 16:4)

There is a custom, in all Jewish communities, to spread ten pieces of bread throughout the house on the eve of *bedikat chametz* (*Ben Ish Chai, Shanah Rishonah* 96:6). One recites the blessing and searches for chametz by the light of a candle. All chametz is burnt the following morning. Isn't it self-understood that after being scoured of any vestige of chametz, and every nook and cranny cleaned, the houses of the righteous are purged of anything resembling chametz? How can we suspect that any chametz escaped the scrutiny of the Jewish women of valor? And if, indeed, we do suspect that there may still be some chametz, why is it necessary to hide these pieces of bread?

We hide these ten pieces so that we should not recite the *berachah* on *bedikat chametz* in vain. But, what is the point of searching, when we are certain that our homes are chametz-free? What is the purpose of this game of hide-and-seek? Furthermore, what is the significance of hiding ten pieces, rather than any other number?

The *Ba'alei Mussar* (*Ye'arot Devash*, 2:17) state that on the eve of Erev Pesach, one is not obligated to expunge only the chametz from his home, but he is required, primarily, to eradicate all forms of chametz from his heart. The leavening agent of the heart is pompous pride, which swells the heart and causes man to sin (see *Berachot* 17a). Just as one is obligated to arrive at the Pesach holiday purged of all physical chametz, he must make sure to remove from his heart all traces of the *Yetzer Hara* of arrogance, as well as other negative traits.

“Be exceedingly humble in spirit” (*Avot* 4:4). The word *exceedingly* is used in order to teach us that one must humble himself to the extent that he is not affected by the malady of arrogance. Arrogance is the source of all negative character traits (see *Sha'arei Teshuvah* 1:27). One who wishes to return to his Maker must first and foremost remove all chametz, alluding to arrogance, from his heart. This first, crucial step will direct him on the road to repairing all the rest of his flaws.

When we recite the blessing before the search for chametz, when our homes have been purged of all traces of chametz, we are actually blessing for the search of the chametz in our hearts. We are reciting a blessing on the teshuvah process in which we are involved before the onset of the holiday. Pesach is a time of preparation for the festival of *Matan Torah*. Am Yisrael were redeemed from Egypt in order that they accept the Torah (see *Shemot Rabbah* 3:4; *ibid.* 24:2). Had Bnei Yisrael not been properly prepared to accept the Torah, they would have remained forever enslaved in Egypt. For this reason, we begin the count of the Omer on the holiday of Pesach. Each of the forty-nine days hints to another spiritual acquisition which Am Yisrael attained, until the fiftieth day, the day of *Kabbalat HaTorah*. This was the day they were crowned with all the wonderful traits required for accepting the Torah.

Symbolic of what transpired to our ancestors in Egypt, we remove the chametz from our hearts. Beginning on the festival of Pesach, we prepare ourselves for *Kabbalat HaTorah*, which takes place on Shavuot. How does this “search for chametz” express itself? By reciting the blessing beforehand and checking for chametz with the intention of ridding oneself of the chametz of the heart, as well as beginning the counting of the Omer, in anticipation of *Kabbalat HaTorah*.

The festival of Pesach is called by this name because Hashem *pasach*, skipped, over the Jewish homes, and killed the Egyptians' firstborn (*Shemot* 12:27). Chazal explain (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 199) that Am Yisrael had not yet received the Torah. There was no intrinsic difference between their spiritual level and that of the Egyptians. Hashem feared that the angels would not be able to differentiate between the firstborn of the

Egyptians and the firstborn of the Jews. Therefore, He descended in His full glory in order to smite the firstborn of the Egyptians.

During all the other plagues, Hashem remained on High, as it were, and struck the Egyptians. Why was it necessary, at the time of the last plague, for Him to descend in order to discern between the two nations?

When Hashem passed over the Jewish homes, He infused them with the all-encompassing light of the ten *sefirot*. While the Egyptians experienced devastating darkness, as their dead lay before them, tremendous light illuminated the Jewish homes.

I would like to suggest that we hide ten pieces of bread on the eve of *bedikat chametz* in commemoration of these ten *sefirot*. As we hide these pieces and conduct the ceremony of *bedikat chametz*, we offer a supplication that we merit removing the chametz of our heart, as well. In this merit, Hashem will reward us by illuminating our hearts with this great light, whose source is the ten *sefirot* which our ancestors merited enjoying in Egypt.

The Arizal writes (see *Be'er Heitev, Orach Chaim* 447:1) that whoever observes the halachot of Pesach punctiliously, ensuring that no chametz is seen or found on his premises, is guaranteed not to sin the entire year. This is quite astounding. We know (see *Kohelet* 7:20) that there is no such thing as a tzaddik who never sins. If one stumbled in sin, does that mean that he was remiss regarding the halachot of Pesach?!

Chametz is not just the sourdough. It also refers to the sour traits which take root in the heart. The words of the Arizal can now be understood in a different light. Whoever eradicates evil character traits from his heart is guaranteed not to sin throughout the year. The teshuvah he did on Pesach assures him of this. Let us not think for a moment that a tzaddik was negligent in eradicating chametz from his home. Rather, he was not scrupulous enough to expunge the chametz from his heart, and he therefore stumbled in sin during the year.

After Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, Hashem commanded them (*Shemot* 13:2), “Sanctify to Me every firstborn.” This is one of the parshiyot contained in the tefillin, about which the Torah states (*ibid.*, 13:16), “And it shall be a sign upon your arm, and an ornament between your eyes, for with a strong hand Hashem removed us from Egypt.” One begins laying tefillin at the age of Bar Mitzvah, when he becomes obligated to observe mitzvot. Bnei Yisrael, too, received the mitzvah of tefillin when they left Egypt and accepted the yoke of Torah and mitzvot. In commemoration of this, we do complete teshuvah on Erev Pesach, accepting the yoke of Torah upon ourselves, clearing our hearts of all sin, as hinted to by the eradication of all chametz from our homes.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Since one’s house is clean of all chametz before Erev Pesach, there is a custom to hide ten pieces of chametz throughout the house. Is this some sort of game? If the house is clean, why do we search for chametz? And what is the significance of ten pieces of bread?
- ◆ *Ba’alei Mussar* teach that the ten pieces of bread symbolize arrogance, the source of all sin. In *Avot*, we are taught, “Be exceedingly humble.” Just as one removes the chametz from the rooms of his home, so should he remove pride from the chambers of his heart.
- ◆ When we recite the blessing over searching for chametz, we are referring to the pieces of chametz hidden in our homes, as well as the arrogance festering in our hearts. Our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt in order to receive the Torah. They merited receiving it only after acquiring the forty-nine levels of sanctity, each of which corresponded to a level of their previous defilement. In commemoration, we count the days of the Omer, beginning with the removal of the chametz from one’s heart, thereby allowing us to receive the Torah.
- ◆ Why did Hashem Himself descend in order to strike the firstborn Egyptians? Couldn’t He have struck from Above, as He struck them during the rest of the plagues? When Hashem came down in His full glory, He passed over the Jewish homes, infusing them with the

tremendous glow of the ten *sefirot*. It is also in commemoration of these ten *sefirot* that we hide ten pieces of bread.

- ◆ The Arizal guarantees that one who is punctilious with the halachot of Pesach will not sin the entire year. But there is no one in this world who never sins! The Arizal is teaching that one who was scrupulous in scrubbing all vestiges of arrogance from his heart will receive Divine assistance in abstaining from sin throughout the year.



Chag Matan Torah

“Then you shall observe the festival of Shavuot for Hashem, your G-d; the voluntary offerings that you give should be commensurate with how much Hashem, your G-d, will have given you”

(Devarim 16:10)

The wording “the festival of Shavuot for Hashem” teaches us that this festival is for Hashem’s glory. Let us illustrate with an analogy. A man invites his good friend for a meal. He pleads and cajoles, until the friend agrees to accept the invitation. What an insult it would be if the friend were to show up only to find his host deeply engrossed in a newspaper, hardly noticing that his guest has arrived. The guest would be rightfully hurt and angry and would leave the house in deep humiliation.

On the holiday of Shavuot, we invite Hashem, as it were, into our homes. The entire purpose of this festival is to praise and glorify His Name for the tremendous gift of the Torah that He has given us. But, all too often, instead of greeting Him appropriately, acknowledging the honor He has granted us by accepting our invitation, we are involved in eating, drinking, and other physical pleasures. We completely lose sight of the

essence of the day, which is reinforcing Torah study among Am Yisrael. Shavuot is a “festival for Hashem.” If we fail to welcome Him properly, He is terribly angered. Our loss outweighs any gains.

This sad state of affairs is exacerbated by those who exchange the pleasures of Torah study for gastronomical delights. Instead of spending the night of Shavuot engrossed in the sea of the Talmud, they make their way to the tea corner, where they drown in wine and fine cheesecakes. They miss the boat completely! The purpose of this day is to repair the breach of our forefathers, who went to sleep the night before *Matan Torah*, instead of eagerly anticipating this event. Instead of rectifying this situation and removing Hashem’s anger from His people, they intensify it by immersing themselves in frivolities.

Aside from its spiritual aspect, every holiday contains an element of physical preparation. For example, Pesach demands rigorous cleaning and eating matzah; Rosh Hashanah is a time when we eat various symbolic foods and blow the shofar; and Sukkot entails building a sukkah and living in it temporarily. But Shavuot contains only the spiritual element. We count seven full weeks, beginning on Pesach, preparing our *neshamot* and purifying our bodies in anticipation of the festival of *Matan Torah*. This is a festival solely for the sake of Hashem and His Torah. So significant is this day that Chazal state (see *Rashi, Shemot* 19:1, see *Yalkut Shimoni, Mishlei* 937) that every day, one should regard the Torah as though he just received it anew.

Viewing the Torah as something new and exciting will avert feelings of habit and routine from stealing into one’s heart. People naturally become disgusted with the old and mundane. Accepting the Torah anew, each morning, will help us avoid performing the mitzvot by rote, lacking all enthusiasm, *chas v’shalom*.

When Hashem granted the Torah to Am Yisrael, there was a great tumult throughout the world (see *Zevachim* 116a). All creatures alike were petrified into silence. When the nations heard the noises and saw the thunder, they asked their prophet, Bilaam, if the world was coming to an

end. Bilaam replied (*Tehillim* 29:11), “Hashem will give might to His nation.” Hashem was giving the Torah, termed “might,” to His people. He explained that not only was the world not ending, it was receiving fortification. Torah upholds the world and strengthens it. When the nations heard this, they joyfully called out, “Hashem will bless His nation with peace” (*ibid.*).

This incident is puzzling. The name Har Sinai connotes hatred, as the words סיני (Sinai) and שנאה (hatred) sound similar. When the Torah was brought down on Har Sinai, hatred of the nations toward the Jews descended, as well (see *Shabbat* 89a). The nations are filled with bitter envy toward the Jews for meriting to become the Chosen Nation, thereby receiving the Torah. Doesn’t this Gemara contradict the above-mentioned exchange, in which the gentiles blessed our nation? Surely blessing and enmity cannot co-exist.

When Bnei Yisrael cleave to Hashem and His Torah, the nations admire them and revere them. They are motivated to bless them. But when Bnei Yisrael turn their backs to Hashem and His Torah, the nations despise them, plotting on how to murder them. Hashem intentionally made this condition. Animosity is placed in the hearts of the gentiles in order to spur Am Yisrael to teshuvah. If not for this hatred, they would easily assimilate among the nations. But Hashem wants Bnei Yisrael to maintain their status as the Chosen Nation. Therefore, whenever they start looking toward the nations, beginning to mimic their lifestyles and cultures, the animosity of the nations flares up against them, chasing them back to the road of Torah and mitzvot.

I once flew to Eretz Yisrael via Athens, Greece. When I first heard about this stopover, I wanted to cancel my ticket. I had no intention of setting foot on the tainted soil of the nation that had attempted to convert our people. On second thought, though, I realized that it was an act of Divine Providence that arranged for me to stop over there, and it would certainly provide me with a lesson for life. When we arrived in Greece, it was time for Minchah. I found a quiet corner and began the Shemoneh Esrei. I suddenly felt tens of pairs of eyes boring into me. When I finished my

prayer, I found about two hundred people surrounding me and studying me in wonder. Instead of trying to harm me for openly contradicting their faith, they regarded me with awe and adulation.

This incident set me thinking. When Greece was a world empire, they sought every way possible to cause Bnei Yisrael to abandon their heritage. But see how the tide has turned! Today, hundreds of years later, not only am I able to publicly pray in their airport, with no fear of retribution, but I am even offered kosher food on their airline! Who would have imagined that things would develop this way? The Greek nation, the essence of wickedness and defilement, now demonstrates compassion and consideration for all things holy. This is the fulfillment of what we mentioned before. When Am Yisrael go in the way of Torah and mitzvot, the nations admire them and bless them. But when Am Yisrael seek to imitate their gentile neighbors, the enmity of those very neighbors rises to the fore, forcing them to do teshuvah.

When Moshe ascended to Heaven in order to learn Torah from Hashem, the angels wished to put him to death. "What is a man of flesh and blood doing among us?" they demanded (see *Shabbat* 88b). Although Moshe did not eat or drink for the duration of his stay, forty days and nights (see *Devarim* 9:9), the angels were not comfortable with his presence. They claimed that Moshe's strength was limited, and he could not hold out for very long under such circumstances. In contrast, they asserted they were completely different creatures and had no innate need for food, drink, or rest. They were constantly prepared to serve Hashem and fulfill His wishes at any time. Not so man, a physical being, dependent on food and sleep for his maintenance. His involvement with materialism prevents him from being at the ready to do Hashem's will at any given moment.

When Moshe realized that the angels were threatening to burn him alive, he turned to Hashem for assistance. Hashem told him to hold on to the Heavenly Throne and give a fitting response. If Moshe was afraid to respond to the angels, how was he unafraid to hold on to the Heavenly Throne? Isn't that more daunting than replying to the charges of the angels?

Hashem assured Moshe that he would remain unharmed. This was to teach him a lesson. If he was unscathed even after holding onto the Heavenly Throne, all the more so would he not be injured by responding to the angels. Hashem was telling Moshe that by virtue of the fact that he reached great heights, both physically and spiritually, to the extent that he had no need for food or drink, he had become extremely elevated. He received special resources which enabled him to live together with the *Shechinah*.

Hashem gives each of us the potential to rise to extraordinary heights. Where one will reach, though, depends upon his own efforts. Is he wise enough to appreciate the Torah anew each day, regarding it with the enthusiasm of novelty? Or does he learn Torah and perform mitzvot perfunctorily, with a lazy and lackadaisical attitude? Hashem, for His part, imbues each person with tremendous energy, which can be harnessed to study the Torah with purpose and perfection. It is up to man to accept this gift, and use it correctly.

Shlomo Hamelech, wisest of all men, states (*Kohelet* 9:4), “A live dog is better than a dead lion.” His words imply that life is the greatest gift of all. The lion, king of the beasts, is strong and fearful only as long as he lives. Once he is dead, a creature as simple as a dog is preferable to him. This message should breathe new life into us. As long as a person lives, he should fill his time with words of Torah. The tzaddik, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, phrased it metaphorically, “As long as the candle burns, one can still repair” (*Chayei Hamussar* 197:422). One should never, *chalilah*, waste any moment of life, for every moment is precious. When he will finally awaken from his stupor, he will find the candle of his life almost burned down, offering hardly any time to rectify his misdeeds and ascend in Torah knowledge.

I was once standing at the grave of the great philanthropist, Edmond Safra, a”h. I was struck by what was written on his tombstone. No mention was made of his tremendous assets or of the numerous banks he owned throughout the world. His relatives chose to memorialize

him by writing that he was a *ba'al chessed* and bequeathed of his fortunes to Torah institutions, widows, and orphans.

This is in fulfillment of the verse (*Yeshayahu* 58:8), “Your righteous deed will precede you.” After 120 years on this earth, neither fame nor fortune will escort a person on his final journey. No one has been buried amid his earthly possessions. Only his Torah knowledge, termed “righteous deed” (see *Chulin* 89a), will accompany him and advocate his cause in the Heavenly Court.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ “The festival of Shavuot for Hashem” implies that we celebrate this holiday for Hashem’s sake alone. We must ensure that we welcome Him properly, immersed in Torah and not, *chalilah*, in frivolity and foolishness.
- ◆ We are instructed to regard the words of Torah with freshness, each day anew. One should consider himself as if he is receiving the Torah every day of his life. In this manner, he will observe it with enthusiasm, and never by rote or force of habit.
- ◆ The nations blessed Bnei Yisrael upon hearing that they were receiving the Torah. Yet, we know that Har Sinai was called by this name because together with the Torah, *sinah* (hatred) of the gentiles descended upon Bnei Yisrael. Do the nations admire them or abhor them? When Bnei Yisrael do Hashem’s will, the nations bless them, but when Bnei Yisrael try to imitate them, their hatred flares up. This is to bring Bnei Yisrael back to Hashem in teshuvah.
- ◆ When Moshe was on High, he received the power to hold on to the Heavenly Throne and respond fittingly to the accusation of the angels. Every person receives special powers to ascend in Torah and protect himself from injury. It all depends on the level of his service of Hashem and his dedication to Him. Moshe sacrificed his life for Hashem by refraining from food and drink for forty days. He thereby merited Divine protection and the ability to teach us this vital lesson.

- ◆ “A live dog is better than a dead lion.” Likewise, the *Ba’alei Mussar* say, “As long as the candle burns, one can still repair.” One should utilize his every moment in this world for Torah study and mitzvah observance. Only Torah and mitzvot will accompany a person on his final journey.



Gems on Parashat Re'eh



Moshe's Love for Bnei Yisrael

“See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse”

(Devarim 11:26)

Moshe begins with the singular form of the word *see* (ראה), and then changes to the plural form *before you* (לפניכם). Why is this? Moshe spoke to the nation as a whole. Yet, out of his love for each individual Jew, and his devotion toward him, he began his message in the singular form. This was in order to awaken each person's heart to his words. He concluded with a message to the public, who had assembled to hear the word of the Living G-d.



The Light of Torah

“See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing that you hearken to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, that I command you today”

(Devarim 11:26-27)

The *Ba'al Haturim* (vs. 27) explains that the method of receiving blessing is hinted in the words of this pasuk. The last letters of the phrase **את הברכה אשר תשמעו** (the blessing that you hearken) spell the word **תורה** (Torah). Torah is the greatest blessing this world has to offer. When is this blessing effective? Only when a person *hearkens to the commandments*, i.e., prepares himself to obey Hashem's word. Parashat *Vezot Haberachah*, too, conveys this message. There, Moshe blesses the nation. With what does he bless them? With the Torah, the source of all blessing.

The numerical value of the word **ראה** (see), adding one for the word itself, is equal to that of the word **אור** (light), referring to the light of Torah. One who hearkens to the words of Torah and conducts himself according to their instruction will merit being infused with the light of Torah. Moshe's use of the word *today* alludes to the clarity and brilliance which will fill the heart of one who studies Torah and obeys Hashem's word. He will be suffused with a glow as great as the midday sun.

One who cleaves to Torah and mitzvot will eventually merit receiving goodness from Hashem. Tehillim states (34:9), “Taste and see that Hashem is good.” By tasting the taste of Torah, one will savor its sweetness, which will imbue him with great light.

The connection between the three parshiyot, *Eikev*, *Re'eh*, and *Shoftim*, is the following. One who humbles himself before the Torah, as the lowest part of the body, the heel (*eikev*), will eventually come to see (*re'eh*) the

light of the Torah. In order not to lose his level of self-nullification toward the Torah, he must position personal *shoftim* (law-enforcers), which will provide him with protection from sin.



Clear-sightedness

“See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse”

(Devarim 11:26)

Blessing and curse are not visible objects. Why does Moshe use the word *see* regarding them? Wouldn't it have been more appropriate to use the word *know* or *contemplate*?

We find a similar difficulty at *Matan Torah*. There, the pasuk says (*Shemot* 20:15) that the nation saw the sounds. How can one see sounds?

Moshe was teaching the people to see the outcome of their deeds. He wanted them to envision the results of blessing, and, *chalilah*, those of curse. One should always be one step ahead of himself, by imagining the results of his deeds before he actually does them. By doing this exercise, one will automatically choose to go the right way, for he clearly sees the good which awaits him.

Pirkei Avot (3:1) teaches, “Consider three things and you will not come into the grip of sin.” By contemplating from whence one came, where he is headed, etc., he will surely guard himself from sin.

“The entire people saw the sounds” (*Shemot* 20:15). Hashem adjured His children to look into the future, deliberating the great good and blessing that awaits them if they go in the way of righteousness. Regarding the mitzvah of *shemittah*, the fruits of one's labor are easily

discernible. The pasuk there states (*Vayikra* 25:21), “I will ordain My blessing for you.” There are abundant stories of miracles and blessing which was the portion of those who kept the laws of *shemittah*. Orchards which lay fallow throughout the *shemittah* year yielded abundant, choice produce, beyond human logic. When Hashem observes the sacrifice of the *shemittah*-observers, He showers them with blessing, above and beyond their wildest dreams.



Count Your Blessings

“See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse”

(Devarim 11:26)

Moshe’s blessings had not yet taken effect. Why, then, does he use the word *see*, as though the nation was already able to see the results of their actions?

A person’s physical senses are, by definition, limited. He can see only so far and hear only so much. He can smell and taste and touch only to a certain degree, and no more. But while the physical senses are restricted, the spiritual senses are boundless. This is why tzaddikim can see far into the future. They know things that weren’t even told to them directly. Their hearts tell them what is transpiring. The power of Torah, deep within them, raises them above their natural senses, and adorns them with spiritual powers, unbounded and immeasurable.

The word ראה (*see*) is related to the word אור (*light*). Torah is the ultimate light (see *Megillah* 16b). One who fills himself with the light of Torah merits limitless sight, above and beyond physical, limited sight. Similarly, when one enlightens himself with the words of Torah, he merits

receiving an abundance of blessing and success, conveyed through the conduit of Torah, which impacts a person with all things good.

The Ramchal states (*Mesillat Yesharim* 2) that there are two types of blind people. One is physically sightless. Hard as he tries, he cannot see. The other is naturally sighted, but chooses to blind himself to the truth. When Moshe said, “See,” he meant, “Open your eyes to the truth so that you merit attaining goodness and blessing, and not, *chalilah*, curse and imprecation.” Aside from the curses which will come upon him, blinding oneself to the truth is in itself a curse.

A woman once approached me with twins in her arms. She reminded me of the following incident that had happened to her. During pregnancy, the doctors recommended an abortion. They did not hear the heartbeat of one of the babies, indicating that it had died. This would surely harm the other child, they felt. Therefore, they thought the best course of action would be to end the pregnancy altogether. She had come to me, asking for advice. I had told her unequivocally that she should not have an abortion. She had no solid proof that one of the babies had died. Furthermore, the second was alive and kicking. Performing an abortion was nothing short of murder. *Baruch Hashem*, in spite of the doctors’ dire predictions, this woman merited giving birth to healthy twins. The woman now asked me how I had known to advise her in this way. I replied that doctors are only human. But one who immerses himself in Torah is given *siyata di’Shemaya* to see even concealed matters. I relied on the merits of my forefathers, zy”a, who were steeped in Torah, to guide me in my response.

Sometimes, what seems good is actually harmful, and what seems bad is really a blessing in disguise. Wealth is certainly a blessing, yet there are situations in which riches are a misfortune. Instead of their owner enjoying them, he is harmed by them. Conversely, a person might suffer tremendous adversity, and it seems like his entire world has toppled. But it is specifically through the difficulty that he merits salvation. Moshe assured the nation that if they would go in the ways of the Torah, they would be protected from the curse that stands behind a veneer of

blessing, and would be worthy of the blessing which is sometimes veiled as curse.

The *gematria* of the word ראה (see), adding one for the word itself, is equal to that of the word רז (secret), and thus also יר (crown) and יר (stranger). When one expends efforts in studying the Torah, he merits understanding its secrets. He can even reach the level of “attaching crowns” to it, an allusion to revealing deep, mystical insights. The *Yetzer Hara* will eventually find himself completely estranged from this person, unable to cause him to sin at all.

The holy Rabbi Yaakov Abuchatzeira, zy”a, makes a connection between the parshiyot of *Eikev* (עקב) and *Re’eh* (ראה) (*Pituchei Chotam* 364). He states that one who truly wishes to adhere to the Torah should constantly bear in mind his end. He will be required to give an accounting for all of his deeds. This is hinted at in the words עקב – ראה. They can literally be taken to mean, “See your end.” When one considers himself humble as the heel (עקב), he merits seeing the light of Torah. Moreover, by behaving humbly, one naturally becomes sensitive to the seemingly insignificant mitzvot, which people tend to tread upon. To him they are considered consequential. By being scrupulous in their observance, he merits the great light of Torah.



A Tithe for Torah

***“And you shall eat before Hashem, your G-d,
in the place that He will choose to rest His
Name there”***

(Devarim 14:23)

Regarding the mitzvah of *ma’aser sheini*, the Torah commands the following. One must ascend to Yerushalayim with this portion of his

produce and eat it there. If he is unable to do this, he may redeem it for its monetary value and bring this money with him to Yerushalayim. There, he should purchase food with these funds and eat it. Why is it necessary to eat *ma'aser sheini* specifically in Yerushalayim; why can't a person eat it at home with the correct intentions?

Yerushalayim was the center of Torah. The Sanhedrin was located there, and halachic rulings were decided there. Tehillim states (122:2), "Our feet stood firm within your gates, O Jerusalem." Chazal expound (see *Makkot* 10a) that our feet stood firm in the battle of Torah within Yerushalayim. The sound of Torah emanated from Yerushalayim.

Everyone was enjoined to ascend to Yerushalayim in order to observe correct Torah study. Although the nation ascended three times for the festivals, it was insufficient to absorb the Torah in the air. During the festival seasons, the people were occupied with the joy of the festivals and their accompanying mitzvot. They were too distracted by the sights and sounds to really pay attention to the sound of Torah there. Ascending to Yerushalayim with one's *ma'aser sheini*, at a calm and quiet time, and eating of his produce there, afforded one the opportunity to imbibe the Torah atmosphere undisturbed.

Another purpose of ascending with one's *ma'aser sheini* was in order to nullify any feeling of personal pride regarding one's produce. Observing the miracles which took place in Yerushalayim had the effect of reminding a person that everything comes from Hashem, and there is none other than Him.



The Mitzvah of Tzedakah

“For destitute people will not cease to exist within the Land; therefore I command you, saying: You shall surely open your hand to your brother, to your poor, and to your destitute in your Land”

(Devarim 15:11)

Poverty is a curse which plagues our people in every generation. There will always be paupers. Hashem arranged this intentionally, in order to teach Jews to be benevolent with their fellow man. Accustoming themselves to the mitzvah of charity will imbue them with traits of compassion towards their less fortunate fellow Jews.

Chazal teach (see *Yevamot* 79a) that Am Yisrael are conspicuous in three traits: They are compassionate, bashful, and kind-hearted. The destitute of our nation are never alone; they can always expect aid from their fellow Jews. If Am Yisrael are scrupulous in giving *tzedakah* generously, Hashem blesses them with abundance, as the pasuk states (*Devarim* 15:10), “Hashem, your G-d, will bless you in all your deeds and in your every undertaking.” Chazal tell us (*Shabbat* 119a), “Tithe in order that you become rich.” One should never think that giving *tzedakah* will adversely affect him. On the contrary, by means of giving *tzedakah*, one receives tremendous blessing.

A most effective method of giving generously of one’s assets is minimizing one’s passion for possessions. In the days of Shlomo Hamelech, the streets were strewn with precious gems (see *Melachim* I, 10:27). This was a direct result of the people directing their interests toward Torah rather than materialism. The people were influenced by their righteous leader, Shlomo Hamelech, who asked not for riches, but for the wealth of wisdom. When Hashem observed how Shlomo refrained from requesting physical benefits, He granted him all that He

had originally offered: wisdom, wealth, and victory over his enemies (ibid., 3:5-14).

Often, people attribute their success to their own expertise. But we are believers, the sons of believers. We trust that everything is in the hands of Heaven. Hashem Alone decides who will prosper and who will become impoverished (see *Niddah* 16b). We often see two stores which sell the very same items, located in similar places. One brings in huge profits, while the other accrues only losses. It is all Heavenly-ordained. The shopkeeper who supports the needy sees blessing in his work.

Everyone aspires to attain money. There is hardly anyone who does not wish to increase his holdings. But we must keep in mind what Chazal tell us (*Avot* 2:7): “The more possessions, the more worry.” Who is interested in adding apprehension to his life? Conversely, we are taught (*Nedarim* 81a) to be careful with the children of the poor, for from them, Torah will come forth. This is because they are not involved with physical pleasures. Their lives revolve solely around the axis of Torah.

A prominent Jew in Argentina signed on a huge business deal. But he suffered a tremendous loss in this transaction. He came to me and proposed that if I would pray for him to get out of the mess he was in and recoup his losses, he would split the profits with me. This would have put me in the league of the millionaires and allowed me to perform tremendous deeds. But I declined his offer. The mantle of money is a few sizes too big on me, and I would most likely trip up in it. I merely blessed him with success, no strings attached. Hashem, indeed, granted him success above and beyond his wildest dreams. I did not fathom asking him for one penny, in fulfillment of the pasuk (*Mishlei* 30:8), “Give me neither poverty nor wealth, but allot me my daily bread.”



The Omer Counts

***“You shall count seven weeks for yourselves,
from when the sickle is first put to the standing
crop shall you begin counting seven weeks”***

(Devarim 16:9)

The words *you shall count... for yourselves* suggest that this counting is for the benefit of the people. It is in preparation for *Kabbalat HaTorah* on the festival of Shavuot. One must arrive at this holiday with improved character traits. The perfection of man, a crucial factor in accepting the Torah, corresponds to the perfection of Creation at the onset of Shabbat (*Bereishit 2:1*). The sixth day of Creation corresponds to the sixth day of Sivan, when the Torah was given. The pasuk states (*ibid.*, 1:31), “And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.” Rashi explains that all the components of Creation were in a state of suspension until the sixth day, the sixth of Sivan, which was designated for *Matan Torah* from the time of Creation.

According to the *Tanna* who rules that the Torah was given on the seventh of Sivan (see *Shabbat 86b*), this means that one must consider the Torah with freshness, as when it was given on Har Sinai. The festival of Shavuot, according to this opinion, is a day that we celebrate having received the Torah anew through one’s own efforts.



Shoftim



On the Cusp of the High Holidays

“Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities – which Hashem, your G-d, gives you – for your tribes; and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment”

(Devarim 16:18)

Man’s level is measured by his ability to station watchmen over himself, as it were, protecting him from sin. If he has already sinned, he must appoint judges, who will arouse him to repent. Kohelet states (7:20), “There is no man so wholly righteous on earth that he does good and never sins.” Occasionally, tzaddikim also fall into the snare of sin. All the more so are ordinary people ensnared by sin. It is every person’s moral obligation to repent his wrongdoings. One should not, *chalilah*, hold on to his sins and refrain from doing teshuvah. Hashem knows we are only human and therefore vulnerable to the seductions of the *Yetzer Hara*. But refraining from doing teshuvah is unpardonable.

The Rambam teaches (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 1:1) that a major component of teshuvah is confession. Admitting one’s transgressions, coupled with the awareness of their weightiness, will bring a person to do complete teshuvah. He will resolve to never repeat his sins again. In a human court,

a central factor in the verdict is whether or not the accused confessed to the crime. As long as he refuses to confess, the case remains open, becoming more and more complicated with time. If the court has found sufficient evidence to charge the accused as guilty without his confessing, his punishment is much more severe than if he had originally admitted to his guilt. This is why whenever someone is charged in a courtroom, the first thing he is told is that if he confesses, his sentence will be lighter.

Similarly, Hashem, the Supreme Judge, wants a person to confess his sins. Confession has the power to awaken a person to do teshuvah, and protect him from sinning in the future. For this reason, Chazal have established the *viduy* prayer. It is a thorough compendium of sins. This is in order to aid a person in confessing his sins. But one should not allow *viduy* to be mere lip service. Rather, he should put his heart into what he is saying, enunciating each word carefully and imagining that he is standing before the King of kings, Hashem.

Rav Shach, zt"l, said that when we stand before Hashem on the Day of Judgment, we are afraid not only because of our many sins, we quake because we are standing before the King of Justice. Whose heart does not tremble before the King of the universe?

It would be a good idea for a person to take a sefer of Selichot and study it, before the *Yamim Nora'im*. This way, when he comes to the Day of Judgment, he will be prepared to recite the Selichot with the proper intentions.

I once observed someone spending the entire day of Yom Kippur on his feet, his eyes glued to the *Machzor*. But the very next day, he sinned with a gentile woman. There is no doubt in my mind that had this man concentrated on what he was saying, confessing his sins properly, his prayers would have awakened him to teshuvah, averting such a blatant, severe sin, the very day after Yom Kippur.

The Torah commands us, "Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities." Every person must make a personal accounting. In what areas must he improve? What are his weak points which need the

fortification of watchmen and law-enforcers? A married man, father of ten, once approached me. He related that his workplace had Internet access, causing him a spiritual downslide. He asked me how he could avoid the damage of this dangerous weapon. I told him that first of all, he must hand in his letter of resignation. His livelihood might suffer, but his *neshamah* must be protected at all costs.

Individual policemen have little power in a crime-ridden city. Likewise, one cannot overcome the *Yetzer Hara* in a place of provocation and promiscuity. It is incumbent upon a person, therefore, to remove himself from a place of *nisayon*, for one can never be sure whether he has the power to shield himself from sin. This is the reason why we recite in our Morning Prayer, “Do not bring me into the power of challenge.” Often, one is humiliated by his challenges, for he is not strong enough to confront them. The wise man will identify his weak points and the sins surrounding him. He will relocate to a more secure environment. There he will succeed in establishing watchmen and judges, in order to protect himself.

————— **In Summary** —————

- ◆ Man’s level is gauged by his ability to station guards over himself to protect himself from sin. If he has already fallen, he must establish judges who will decide his verdict.
- ◆ The Rambam says that a major factor of teshuvah is *viduy*. This prayer points to man’s various sins, allowing him to repent them.
- ◆ What are a person’s weak points, for which he must appoint watchmen over himself? Just as individual policemen cannot protect a crime-ridden city, so too, is a person incapable of protecting himself in a place full of tests and temptations. We ask Hashem not to bring us challenges, because we fear we might not rise to them.



Of Judges, Officers, and Kings

“Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities – which Hashem, your G-d, gives you – for your tribes; and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment”

(Devarim 16:18)

Shlomo Hamelech states that man’s body is a miniature city. I once had a discussion about this with one of my sons, may he live long. On contemplating the parts of the human body, we realize that it is not merely a city, but an entire world! Just as a city needs officers to enforce law and order for the preservation of healthy living, so too, is the human body in need of protection from outside elements which are liable to disturb one’s Avodat Hashem.

This pasuk can be explained literally. Judges and officers must be appointed to maintain law and order. The pasuk can also be interpreted homiletically. Man must provide protection for his body, so that materialism should not stand in the way of the fabric of his Avodat Hashem.

One is naturally drawn after physical pleasures. He must therefore be vigilant and protect himself from sinning. It is natural for a person, upon awakening in the morning, to desire nothing more than to relax and take it easy. But if he provides protection for his body, preventing his eyes and his ears from seeing and hearing wrong things, the allure of materialism will abate. He will be drawn to words of Torah instead. Man is a composite of both the physical and the spiritual. There is a constant tug-of-war taking place inside him, as each side seeks satisfaction. The *neshamah* pulls him to study Torah, while the body draws him to materialism. When a person appoints officers to protect him from the attractions of the street, his body automatically weakens its demands. The *neshamah* has the upper hand, guiding him to the Beit Hamidrash.

Every aveirah is surrounded by fences, preventing one from transgressing. For instance, the Torah forbids a man from having relations with his wife when she is a *niddah*. In order to help him, there are various halachot that enforce a distance between them at this time. These halachot serve as watchmen, standing sentry as they surround a person and shield him from sinning.

The Torah states (*Bamidbar* 15:39), “And do not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray.” Since the eyes and the heart are the agents of sin (see *Rashi*, *Bamidbar* 15:39), one must avoid that first inappropriate sighting. This will prevent him from thinking improper thoughts.

The parashah continues (*Devarim* 17:15), “You shall surely set over yourself a king whom Hashem, your G-d, shall choose; from among your brethren.” Aren’t judges and officers enough to protect the people? Why the command to appoint a king, as well? The Torah is our ultimate judge, issuing ordinances to mankind. The punishment for sin is the policeman, keeping man in tow. And Hashem is the King of all kings, whom Bnei Yisrael crown numerous times a day with each *berachah*, “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe...” If Bnei Yisrael are surrounded by these law-enforcers, with Hashem at the helm, what is the purpose of a human king?

There is an intrinsic difference between a gentile king and a king of Israel. A gentile king rules his nation, but a Jewish king must first and foremost rule over himself. He must be master of his passions. For this reason, the Torah commands a king to write two Sifrei Torah. One is to be kept in his treasury, so that he should not become haughty but remember that all his wealth comes from Hashem. The second scroll accompanies him wherever he goes (see *Sanhedrin* 21b). This reminds him that Torah is his constant escort and guide. A king is forbidden to possess too many wives, horses, or gold and silver, so that his heart should not become proud (*Devarim* 17:16-20).

The king served as a role model for Am Yisrael, depicting how one must rule his instincts and subdue his passions. The reason why Hashem felt it imperative for the nation to appoint a king was that they should have a role model, taking a lesson from him for their personal lives. They would learn from him how to control their baser instincts and not be controlled by them. The Gemara states (see *Gittin* 62a) that the ones who deserve to be called kings are our Rabbis. They crown Hashem as their King by ruling over their passions. When a person appoints judges and officers over himself, he ultimately appoints a king over himself, as well. He attains autonomy, able to subdue his personal interests for the sake of Hashem and His Torah.

“You shall surely set over yourself a king” (*Devarim* 17:15). By honoring a king of flesh and blood, and obeying his instructions, one understands what is demanded of him regarding Hashem, King of the entire world. How, then, can we crown Him upon ourselves, and serve Him whole-heartedly? Hashem commanded us first to appoint a human king. By observing him, one will come to some level of understanding the King of the universe, and will coronate Him upon himself, serving Him appropriately.

In Summary

- ◆ “Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities.” This refers to literal law-enforcers, as well as spiritual watchmen.
- ◆ Man is naturally drawn after materialism and physical pleasures. Therefore, he must establish fences as protection against his *Yetzer Hara*. The Torah has erected these guards to prevent us from sinning.
- ◆ Why is it imperative to appoint a king, aside from the judges and officers? The Torah is like a judge; the punishment is like an officer; and Hashem is the King. Why the need for a human king?

- ◆ The king serves as a role model for controlling one's passions. Moreover, by observing a human empire, one will understand, to some extent, something of Hashem's kingdom, which is above our understanding.



Torah – The Remedy for the Yetzer Hara

“Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities – which Hashem, your G-d, gives you – for your tribes; and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment”

(Devarim 16:18)

The Torah commands Am Yisrael to appoint judges and officers at the gates of all of their cities. The judges would judge justly, and the officers would grant protection for the city, ensuring that the verdict is executed. This will allow the city to function smoothly.

Isn't it self-understood that once the nation has settled in the Land, they would appoint law-enforcers to protect the citizens? Why does the Torah find it so important to mention this?

In every civilized city in the world, there is an organized court system. This provides arbitration between citizens of that city. Court rulings are issued there. Besides this, there are officers whose job it is to keep the peace, allowing the residents to live tranquilly.

I remember specific villages in Morocco. Maybe a total of twenty families lived in each. Notwithstanding their miniscule numbers, they appointed people who were in charge of maintaining law and order, whether by means of a judicial system or by police surveillance, examining all who entered the village.

Shlomo Hamelech, wisest of men, compares the human body to a large city. The body is composed of millions of tiny details, all working together harmoniously. It can be compared to a city made up of thousands of components which ensure its proper function. For thousands of years, scientists have attempted to investigate this wonderful creation called the human body. They have not yet concluded their study. Each study uncovers more secrets and revelations.

Just as the physical body contains limitless miracles, so is the spiritual side of man as deep as the sea. The human mind is capable of storing vast amounts of data. It can analyze and deduce in a way which even the most sophisticated machine cannot duplicate.

When a person sleeps, he can travel to distant countries in the blink of an eye. One moment, he is walking the ancient roads of the Holy Land, and the next, he is on some exotic island. Just as a large city offers all types of sites and attractions, so can the human mind lead a person to all types of places, some wholesome and beneficial, and others, full of danger and destruction.

The Gemara states (*Sukkah* 28a) that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, the smallest of Hillel Hazakein's disciples, learned from his mentor and absorbed his holiness. Our Sages add (*Masechet Sofrim* 16:8) that were we to take all the waters in the sea and convert them to ink and chop down all the trees in the world and construct quills, all the words of Torah we could write would be a drop in the vast ocean of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai's Torah knowledge. How tremendous is the mind of man! It can contain immeasurable Torah treasures. Conversely, it can house untold amounts of defilement and decadence.

Because man's body, and specifically his mind, is so powerful, the Torah commands us to station guards over it, who will protect him from sin. The pasuk states, "Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities." Each one of us must protect his citizens, shielding them from the *Yetzer Hara*.

The term *your cities* is an allusion to the organs of the body. They are our entranceway to the outside world. One connects to those in his environment, interacting with them and absorbing their values, by means of his body. Included in this category are the eyes, ears, and mouth. They can be agents of sin. Regarding the eyes, the pasuk states (*Bamidbar* 15:39), “You shall not spy after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray.” Rashi expounds (*ibid.*), “The eye sees, the heart desires, and the body commits the sin.” Gazing at inappropriate “sites” arouses the heart to sin.

The Torah commands us to place guards at the gates of our body. One is adjured to close his eyes and stuff his ears from seeing and hearing the wrong things. He should muzzle his mouth from saying words of falsehood and *lashon hara*. What is it that provides a person with the ability to control himself? It is the Torah, the shield and security against the plots of the *Yetzer Hara* (see *Kiddushin* 30b).

Often, improper thoughts creep into man’s mind. They are liable to cause him to sin. One should preferably prevent situations of *nisayon* by protecting himself from inappropriate sights which can feed the desire to sin. But if one already fell by sighting something improper, he is instructed to appoint officers and judges upon himself. This is in the form of the Torah and mitzvot. When one is involved in these exalted pursuits, he is protected from falling into sin. Chazal teach (see *Ketubot* 59b; *Avot* 2:2), “Idleness leads to boredom, and boredom leads to sin.” Immersion in the sea of Torah will prevent a person from sinking in the quagmire of foolishness and frivolity.

The word תתן (shall you appoint) has the same root as the word מתנה (gift). This is the Torah, presented to us as a gift (see *Eiruvin* 54a). We call the festival of Shavuot, when we received the Torah, *Chag Matan Torah*, to remind us that the Torah is an invaluable gift. It was in Hashem’s treasury (see *Shabbat* 88b) until He granted it to His children, His Chosen Nation. The words of Torah are like watchmen, protecting the people, each one an individual city.

Parashat *Shoftim* is read every year during the month of Elul, the month of teshuvah. When a person is aroused to return to his Maker, he must know, first and foremost, that the Torah is the means by which he can save himself from the negative influences of the *Yetzer Hara*. The Gemara tells us (*Kiddushin* 30b), “I created the *Yetzer Hara*; I created Torah as its antidote.” One who involves himself in Torah protects himself from sin. Hashem observes his self-sacrifice for the sake of Torah, and offers him *siyata di’Shemaya* from the snares of the *Yetzer Hara*. “One who comes to purify himself receives Heavenly assistance” (see *Shabbat* 104a). We are also taught, “In the way man wishes to go, he is led” (see *Makkot* 10b).

Many tzaddikim are named after animals. We find the names Aryeh (lion), Tzvi (deer), Dov (bear), and Zev (wolf), to name a few. Many righteous women are likewise called after the animal kingdom. One prophetess was Devorah (bee), and another was named Chulda (weasel). Of course, there are animals one would never contemplate naming his child, such as *chamor* (donkey) or *chazir* (swine). But the fact that people are named after specific creatures teaches us that although the animal kingdom is a lower level than humans, the beasts have a lesson to teach us. The wisest of all men said (*Mishlei* 6:6), “Go to the ant, you sluggard; see its ways and grow wise.” Likewise, *Avot* (5:20) states, “Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion, to carry out the will of your Father in Heaven.” Although the leopard is a selfish creature, which consumes its prey while it is still living, it has the positive quality of boldness. It conducts itself as it sees fit, not considering what others think.

This quality of boldness is most necessary in serving Hashem. One should employ courage in the face of those who scoff at his service of Hashem (see *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 1:1). He should staunchly uphold the words of the Torah, regardless of what others think and say about him.

The lion is actually a lazy creature, spending most of its day at ease. Nevertheless, it has tremendous strength, which the Torah tells us to emulate. We should be strong in serving Hashem.

Man is an amalgamation of character traits. Some of his qualities are positive and beneficial, and others are detrimental and destructive. Let us learn a lesson from the animal kingdom. If the creatures, which are essentially on a lower level than mankind, contain good qualities which are worthy of emulating, all the more so should one develop his positive attributes, by cleaving to the Torah, which protects him from sin.

David Hamelech says (*Tehillim* 119:99), “From all my teachers I grew wise.” It is possible to learn from everyone. A specific person might have negative character traits, which need improvement. Nonetheless, even he has what to teach others. This should teach a person that he may never fall into despair, considering himself beyond hope. He should encourage himself with the thought that he certainly has qualities worth emulating. Searching for his strong points will motivate him to walk in the ways of Hashem.

Just as the animals of the jungle have traits worth emulating, so does even the lowest person have some positive attribute. It might be buried under layers of dirt. But if he searches, he will discover them. Unearthing his positive attributes will prove beneficial in rectifying what needs to be corrected, as well as bring him to cling to the Torah and mitzvot, man’s officers and judges.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why does the Torah command Bnei Yisrael to station officers and judges in each city? Isn’t this self-understood? This command refers to the city that is each and every person, comprised of millions of parts, and crowned with a mind which can contain tremendous amounts of information.

- ◆ The words *shall you appoint* mean that every Jew must appoint officers and judges.
- ◆ The phrase *in all your cities* refers to the organs of the body. They connect us with the outside world, from which one absorbs thoughts and information. With what should a person protect himself? The Torah, the shield against the plots of the *Yetzer Hara*.
- ◆ This parashah is read during Elul, the month of teshuvah. One who truly wishes to purify himself should immerse in the waters of the Torah, which protect from sin.
- ◆ Many people are named after animals, even though these animals have selfish traits. Moreover, Chazal have told us to emulate certain good aspects of various animals. If the animals, which have many negative traits, since many are predators and others are lazy creatures, have lessons to teach us, all the more so does every person, no matter how low, contain some aspect worthy of emulation.
- ◆ By recognizing one's good qualities, he will come to improve them. He will cleave to the words of the Torah, our officers and judges.



Pride – The Root of Doubt

“If a matter of judgment is hidden from you, between blood and blood, between verdict and verdict, between plague and plague, matters of dispute in your cities – you shall rise up and ascend to the place that Hashem, your G-d, shall choose. You shall come to the Kohanim, the Leviim, and to the judge who will be in those days; you shall inquire and they will tell you the word of judgment”

(Devarim 17:8-9)

Parashat *Shoftim* is closely connected to parashat *Re'eh*, where it says (ibid. 16:16), “Three times a year all your males should appear before Hashem, your G-d, in the place that He will choose: on the Festival of Matzot, the Festival of Shavuot, and the Festival of Sukkot.” The pilgrimage to Yerushalayim fortified the faith of the people. Observing the throngs of Jews ascending to Yerushalayim, amidst joy and enthusiasm, the nation was infused with faith in Hashem. Moreover, they observed the ten miracles performed in the Beit Hamikdash (see *Avot* 5:5). This alone was enough to strengthen their level of belief and accept Hashem’s rule upon themselves.

In this parashah, too, the Torah instructs one who is unclear regarding a halachic ruling to ascend to the Kohen or judge in Yerushalayim. There he will obtain the correct verdict. Examples of such cases would be when a person does not know whether or not a sample of blood is pure or impure, whether one is guilty or innocent, or the status of a blemish. The person would be adjured to ask the judge of his city for his verdict. But if he is still in doubt, he must ascend to Yerushalayim and ask the Kohen or judge for the Torah opinion on the matter.

“The very air of Yerushalayim makes one wise” (see *Bava Batra* 21a). The *Navi*, Yeshayahu (2:3) states, “For from Tzion will the Torah come forth, and the word of Hashem from Yerushalayim.” Yerushalayim is saturated with wisdom. Bnei Yisrael were commanded to ascend there three times a year, in order to absorb the pure, undiluted air, thereby reinforcing their *emunah* in Hashem. The Kohanim and judges there had the last word; there was no questioning their verdict. Whoever failed to accept the pronouncement of the Kohen or judge in Yerushalayim was put to death, as we are told (*Devarim* 17:12), “And the man who will act with willfulness, not listening to the Kohen... or to the judge, that man shall die, and you shall destroy the evil from among Israel.”

The sefer *Maor Vashemesh* (Parashat *Shoftim*) asks the following: It was the job of the Kohanim and the Leviim to work in the Beit Hamikdash, not to serve as arbitrators. Only the Kohen Gadol was involved in matters of judgment, concerning blemishes on the sacrifices. Why, then, were the Kohanim mentioned before the judges, if the judges were actually the ones who gave rulings for the people?

The author responds by stating that all doubts and uncertainties are a direct result of Adam Harishon’s sin. He was the first to doubt the word of Hashem. Hashem had placed Adam in Gan Eden, a paradise of the senses. He was allowed to eat from all of the trees except from the Tree of Knowledge. Instead of heeding the voice of Hashem, Adam chose to listen to his wife, who persuaded him to eat from the forbidden fruit. The fact that Adam could grant the words of his wife preference over the words of Hashem indicated that he had his doubts regarding Hashem’s word.

All doubt and uncertainty which exists in the world is an offshoot of this original doubt. Doubt has given rise to questions in halachah, creating the need for clarification of the halachah in order to arrive at the root of Hashem’s intention.

When one is at odds with the words of his mentor and prefers to accept the words of the disciple, he demonstrates that he does not fully

appreciate the teachings of his teacher. If he properly values his teacher, he would accept his words unquestioningly. I would like to add that doubt is an outgrowth of arrogance. When a person feels that his opinion is the only one, he is most liable to cast aspersions upon the words of our Torah teachers, for his self-aggrandizement blinds him to the truth.

There are two categories of dispute. One is that of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. Chazal attest (*Avot* 5:17) that their disputes were *l'shem Shamayim*. Conversely, the dispute of Korach was based on feelings of envy and pride. It was not *l'shem Shamayim* and resulted in a *chillul Hashem*. Regarding the disputes of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, our Sages state, "These and those are the words of the living G-d." Although the halachah is always according to the ruling of Beit Hillel (see *Eiruvin* 13b), there was never personal competition between the two groups. Their sole desire was to clarify the halachah. They never negated each other's opinion, but rather, internalized the understanding that all insights in halachah are words of the living G-d. Where was there room for contention? Hashem was so pleased with their approach that He promised that in the future, the halachah will be ruled according to the opinion of Beit Shammai (*Vayakheil Moshe* 42:2; 54:1).

Scriptures relate a tragic episode in Jewish history which was due to arrogance. When Yiftach was on the battlefield, he made the following vow: If Hashem would allow him to conquer his enemies, the first thing to emerge from his house would be offered as a sacrifice to Hashem. To his utter dismay, who came out of his house, if not his very own daughter! Yiftach did not have the heart to place his dear daughter upon the altar. He thought of an alternative plan. Instead, he sent her to live alone in a mountainous region (see *Shoftim* 11:30-39).

When the Sages of the time observed this maiden's suffering, as she grew older without being allowed to marry and raise a family, they beseeched Yiftach to find a way to nullify his vow. "I am like a king," he proclaimed. "Who is there to nullify my vow?" They answered, "Pinchas, the Kohen Gadol, is capable of nullifying your vow." But Yiftach was not ready to humble himself before Pinchas. He called Pinchas to appear

before him. But Pinchas, too, felt that he could not come to Yiftach, since it would be a slight to Hashem's honor. They argued among themselves, each one filled with righteous indignation. Neither was willing to bend his pride before the other. Yiftach's vow was never annulled, and his daughter remained a spinster until the end of her days (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:3).

Hashem was extremely displeased by their attitudes. Pinchas was punished by having *ruach hakodesh* and the High Priesthood removed from him (see *ibid.*), whereas Yiftach died an unusual, ignoble death. His limbs fell from his body, one by one, each one buried in another location within Gilead. This is alluded to in the pasuk (*Shoftim* 12:7), "Yiftach... was buried in the *cities* of Gilead."

How despicable is arrogance! It causes a person to take leave of his senses, to the extent that he may act with utmost cruelty to those whom he holds dear. In direct contrast, the quality of humility builds worlds of goodness and upholds civilization, as we have discovered from the bond between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai.

One who possessed the character flaw of arrogance was adjured to ascend to Yerushalayim in order to clarify the halachah. But it was insufficient to simply turn to the judge for a halachic ruling. First, he had to visit the Beit Hamikdash and observe the Kohanim and Leviim at work. Watching them involved with the blood of the sacrifices moved the people to repentance and removed any vestige of conceit from their hearts. They saw, before their very eyes, what they themselves deserved, on account of their sins. Observing the Leviim at song uplifted their listeners to greater levels of *ahavat Hashem* and *emunah*. This helped eradicate arrogance from their hearts.

Witnessing the self-sacrifice of the Kohanim and Leviim in their service of Hashem, along with the blood of the offerings, did something to a person. It effectively wiped out all traces of arrogance from within him. He was thus able to accept the words of the judge without question or doubt.

Sifrei Kabbalah offer a *segulah* against forgetfulness. One should write the word אֵלֶף (*aleph*) three times. The *gematria* of the word *aleph* is 111; when it is written three times, it is 333, corresponding to the word שכחה (forgetfulness). This *segulah* is not effective for everyone. Only one who seeks the truth, through self-negation and humility, merits this. It is also well-known that an over-consumption of olives causes forgetfulness (see *Horiyot* 13b).

I once sat down to a meal with an acquaintance. During the course of the meal, we ate a large quantity of olives. This man was scheduled to deliver a public address after the meal. To his chagrin, he had a hard time putting his thoughts in order, and his words came out jumbled. He told me, half in earnest, and half in jest, that maybe the profusion of olives was the cause of his forgetfulness. I replied that it had nothing at all to do with olives. As proof, I told him that I, too, had consumed a large amount of olives, and was not stricken with forgetfulness. It would be wise, I suggested, to examine himself for any trace of arrogance in his heart, which may have confused him and caused him doubts.

I told him this based on a past experience. I was once asked to speak before a large crowd. When I reached the podium, I was suddenly overcome with weakness and confusion. I could not remember anything of what I had prepared to say. I knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that this situation happened because I had allowed thoughts of pride to enter my mind. Fully aware that the remedy for pride is humbleness, I turned my hat at an unseemly angle. I made somewhat of a fool out of myself, but I was able to chase away any feelings of arrogance.

When we were young yeshiva students, we would often argue regarding *divrei Torah*. When we reached a stalemate, we would approach Moreinu, Rabbi Chaim Shmuel Lopian, zt"l, and ask his opinion. We would present our question to him, feeling it was of monumental significance. He would instruct us to study Rashi's words thoroughly, and we would realize that our question was no question at all. We would look up the Rashi and burn with shame for asking a question out of place.

I once tried to analyze these situations. When we presented our case before Rabbi Chaim Shmuel, zt”l, the question seemed insurmountable. But after examining Rashi’s words, it evaporated and we were left wondering what had bothered us so. I came up with the following conclusion: When we bickered over *divrei Torah*, we were not concerned to get to the bottom of things. We were goaded on by personal pride, out of a desire to prove to our study partner that we were in the right. As soon as we agreed to ask the Rosh Yeshiva for his opinion, we indicated a desire to know the truth. Then, upon studying the matter, our question vanished. It is conceit and the desire for popularity that plant doubt in a person’s mind. Uprooting the weeds of arrogance removes the buds of doubt which grow as a result.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ There is a direct connection between parshiyot *Re’eh*, regarding the pilgrimage to Yerushalayim on the festivals, and *Shoftim*, where one is adjured to obtain the ruling of the Kohen and judges for halachic questions. The very air of Yerushalayim makes one wise. This is the purpose of ascending to this city.
- ◆ The author of *Ma’or Vashemesh* asks why it is imperative to first seek the Kohen before seeking the opinion of the judge. He answers that the very first doubt was planted by Adam Harishon in Gan Eden. He cast uncertainty upon Hashem’s word and preferred to listen to his wife, instead. This doubt gave rise to all future doubts in halachah. Doubt is an offshoot of arrogance. One who holds highly of his own opinion is likely to cast aspersions upon the opinions of those greater than himself.
- ◆ How precious is the quality of humility! Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai had vastly different halachic opinions, yet they had tremendous respect for one another. Their arguments were for the sake of Heaven, and will, therefore, endure. Yiftach’s conceit, however, prevented him from seeking counsel with Pinchas the Kohen, who had the ability to annul his vow. He was punished with a horrible death. Pinchas, too, was punished

for not agreeing to go to Yiftach to annul his vow. The priesthood was taken from him.



A Royal Responsibility

“You shall surely set over yourself a king whom Hashem, your G-d, shall choose; from among your brethren shall you set a king over yourself; you cannot place over yourself a foreign man, who is not your brother”

(Devarim 17:15)

The tribe of Yehudah represented royalty (see *Bereishit* 49:10). Although Yehudah was never actually the king, his brothers always related to him as king of the family. Proof of this is that when Yosef related his dreams, which indicated that he would eventually rule over his brothers, they decreed the death sentence over him, as a rebel (see *Tiferet Yonatan*, *Bereishit* 38:1). Yehudah was the accepted ruler of the clan. The brothers, therefore, punished Yosef by casting him into a pit. When and how was Yehudah ordained the acknowledged king?

When our matriarch, Leah, gave birth to Yehudah, she proclaimed (*Bereishit* 29:35), “This time let me gratefully praise Hashem.” Why did she feel an urge to praise Hashem only after having a fourth child? Through the power of *ruach hakodesh*, Leah realized that Yehudah completed the *Merkavah*. The *Merkavah* is upheld by our forefathers: Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, and David Hamelech. Since David descended from Yehudah, Leah felt that Yehudah had an intrinsic part in the *Merkavah*. She chose to call him Yehudah (יהודה) as a form of praise and thanksgiving (הודיה) to Hashem for this son who would be the progenitor of David Hamelech, fourth wheel of the *Merkavah*.

Moreover, Hashem's Name יה-ו-ה is hinted to in the name יהודה. Just as Hashem is King of all kings, so was Yehudah, who bore Hashem's Name within his own, king in this world.

The Bnei Yissachar (*Ma'amarei Chodshei Kislev-Tevet* 14:1) points out that Assarah b'Tevet is a day of deep mourning, for it was the beginning of the end. If not for this bitter day in our history, when the Romans placed a siege around the walls of Yerushalayim, they would never have reached the climax of burning down the Beit Hamikdash on Tishah b'Av. In a similar vein, although Yehudah did not officially rule the nation, he was the beginning of the Davidic dynasty, the cornerstone of this great empire. Yaakov Avinu recognized the regal stature of his son, Yehudah, and therefore (*Bereishit* 46:28), "he sent Yehudah ahead of him to Yosef, to prepare ahead of him" a place for Torah study in the land of Goshen.

In Kabbalah, the first of the *sefirot* is the *sefirah* of *keter* (*Pardes Rimonim* 5:4), and the last is the *sefirah* of *malchut* (*ibid.*, 20:2). A physical *keter* (crown) is insignificant as long as there is no *malchut* (royalty). A crown itself, without the backup of a nation, is ineffectual in coronating a king. So, too, is this first *sefirah* of *keter* unrecognizable without the last *sefirah* of *malchut*, as well as the other *sefirot* which are between them.

Most of our daily blessings open with the words, "Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe." If a person truly believes that Hashem is his personal G-d, he will attain the absolute feeling that Hashem is King of the universe. Just as He rules over him individually, so does He rule over each and every creature in the entire world.

A great tzaddik by the name of Rabbi Chaim, once appeared before my holy grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy"l. This man traced his lineage to our previous Sages. He approached my grandfather for a blessing. When asked why he felt the need to request the blessing of a tzaddik when he had the merit of his forefathers to his credit, he replied that specifically because he understood the value of the merit transmitted by forefathers to their descendants, he sought the blessing of others who had that merit. Similarly, one who intrinsically feels, with every fiber of

his being, that Hashem is his King, will come to the profound recognition of Hashem as King of the entire world. This will intensify his appreciation for his Creator.

The name יהודה alludes to the quality of owning up to the truth: מודה על האמת. In the incident with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, Yehudah admitted to the truth, even though it was difficult (see *Bereishit* 38:26). For this, he was worthy of our entire nation being called by his name, *Yehudim*. At times, one is adjured to admit to his mistakes, and at times, to acknowledge his virtues, and act accordingly.

The Ramban tells us (*Bereishit* 49:10) that the Chashmonaim were great men. But not a trace of their legacy remains. They were members of the tribe of Levi, appointed to serve in the Beit Hamikdash. But they were not satisfied with this position and sought the power of kingship, which belongs solely to the tribe of Yehudah, as the pasuk states (*Bereishit* 49:10), “The scepter shall not depart from Yehudah.” They were punished severely. The incident of Uziah Hamelech is another example of someone who tried to seize undue power. He desired to offer the *ketoret* of the Kohanim, although he was not from the tribe of Levi. He was punished with *tzara’at* and destined to sit outside the camp until he was healed (see *Divrei Hayamim* 26:16-21).

The Torah forbids a king from having numerous horses, money, or wives. This is in order that his heart does not become proud, as the pasuk states (*Devarim* 17:16), “Only he shall not have too many horses... And he shall not have too many wives, so that his heart not turn astray; and he shall not greatly increase silver and gold for himself.” The eyes of the nation rest upon their king. Therefore, it is fitting for him to set fences around himself to shield himself from potential pitfalls. As he is the role model of the people, he must beware of those things that cause sin and arrogance (see *Rambam, Melachim* II, 3:6).

Shlomo Hamelech was the scion of the House of David, rooted in the tribe of Yehudah. He felt that as wisest of all men, he had the power to control his inclinations. He claimed (see *Tanchuma, Va’era* 5), “I will

override [these commands] and I will not sin.” In spite of his tremendous sanctity and prominence as the one who sat on the throne of Hashem, Shlomo succumbed to his passions, thereby defiling his elevated level of holiness.

Chazal go so far as to say (*Yalkut Shimoni, Mishlei 960*) that some of the Sages wished to categorize Shlomo among those who do not have a portion in the World to Come, on account of his sins, even though he did teshuvah and received forgiveness. Why were our Sages so hard on Shlomo, placing him together with the wicked ones of our nation? They explain that by transgressing Hashem’s word, Shlomo brought the end to his monarchy. Yeravam replaced him as king. Since Yeravam was a tremendous sinner who caused the masses to sin in *avodah zarah*, Shlomo was held accountable. Had Shlomo not transgressed Hashem’s word, Yeravam would never have risen to power, and Am Yisrael would not have worshipped *avodah zarah*.

But the Sages’ request was not approved on High (see *Sanhedrin 104b*). David Hamelech advocated for his son. He asserted that Shlomo’s intentions in accumulating money, wives, and horses were actually for the sake of Heaven. Shlomo wished to rule the *kelippah* contained in these three elements. Once the *kelippah* would be under the control of *kedushah*, Shlomo himself could have been Mashiach and redeemed Bnei Yisrael. [See the words of the Ben Ish Chai on this subject (*Ben Yehoyada, Shabbat 56b*)]. Scriptures relate (*Melachim I, 11:1*) that Shlomo specifically married the daughters of gentile kings in order to thereby rule over the *kelippah* contained in those nations (see *Rakanti, Shoftim*). By increasing horses, which originally came from Egypt, Shlomo would thus gain control of the *kelippah* in this land, which was saturated with licentiousness. His accumulation of money alluded to control over the *kelippah*, which had adhered to our nation on account of the Golden Calf.

Notwithstanding Shlomo’s lofty objectives, he succumbed to the *Yetzer Hara* and sinned by transgressing Hashem’s word. But the Heavenly Tribunal took mercy on him and did not consider him as one who has lost his portion in the World to Come, for his intentions were worthy.

In Summary

- ◆ The Torah commands our nation to appoint a king. Why was Yehudah the one deserving of royalty, and when did he receive this regal status?
- ◆ The brothers judged Yosef a traitor when he repeated his dreams to them. They felt that he wished to usurp the kingdom from Yehudah, the acknowledged king. As soon as he was born, Yehudah was destined for rulership, as his mother, Leah, proclaimed, “This time let me gratefully praise Hashem.” Leah thanked Hashem for giving her this son, progenitor of David Hamelech, the fourth wheel of the Merkavah. The essence of Yehudah’s kingship lay in the fact that David Hamelech would emerge from him.
- ◆ Shlomo Hamelech violated Hashem’s prohibition of having numerous horses, money, and wives. The Sages were prepared to pronounce him one of those who do not have a share in the World to Come. Due to his sins, Yeravam ruled in his stead. Yeravam was an avowed sinner, who caused the nation as a whole to sin, as well. This was ascribed to Shlomo Hamelech.
- ◆ But Hashem did not accept this verdict. Shlomo’s intentions were altruistic. He had wanted to subdue all forms of the *kelippah* and bring the arrival of Mashiach. The *kelippah* was contained in gold, on account of the sin of the Golden Calf; in women, who seduce man into sin; and in horses, which originate in the defiled land of Egypt.



Beware the Wiles of the Yetzer Hara

“When Hashem, your G-d, will cut down the nations whose Land Hashem, your G-d, gives you, and you will possess them, and you will settle in their cities and in their houses, you

shall separate three cities for yourselves in the midst of your Land, which Hashem, your G-d, gives you to possess it”

(Devarim 19:1-2)

Bnei Yisrael were commanded to eradicate all the nations of the Land before they settled it and apportioned it among themselves. Hashem would help them overcome their enemies, as the pasuk states, “When Hashem... will cut down the nations.” Without this Divine assistance, Bnei Yisrael would have no chance against the mighty nations ruling the Land.

Why was Hashem adamant that the nations should be utterly demolished? Why could Bnei Yisrael not live side-by-side with the nations who had inhabited the Land from time immemorial? The answer lies in the pasuk (*Shemot* 23:33), “They shall not dwell in your Land lest they cause you to sin against Me.” Chazal adjure us (*Avot* 1:7), “Distance yourself from a bad neighbor.” Living among the gentiles would influence Bnei Yisrael to imitate their ways. Therefore, Hashem commanded our nation to annihilate the gentiles. Living among the wrong company has a detrimental effect upon one’s *yirat Shamayim* and impacts him negatively. In direct contrast, dwelling among tzaddikim and those who fear Heaven has a positive effect upon a person and encourages him to uphold Hashem’s word.

Aside from eradicating any vestige of the nations of the Land, Bnei Yisrael were commanded to destroy all the idols and foreign deities of the nations. There should be no trace of them in the Holy Land (see *Devarim* 12:2-3). How perilous is the impact of wicked people!

Bnei Yisrael are commanded to set aside three cities as cities of refuge (*Devarim* 19:1-10). All who murder unintentionally would find a haven there from the relatives of the victims. Why were these cities necessary? After Bnei Yisrael would eradicate the nations, as Hashem had commanded, the negative influence of these peoples would disappear, as well. How could anyone murder, albeit unintentionally?

The pasuk states (19:9), “When you observe this entire commandment to perform it – which I command you today... then you shall add three more cities to these three.” Rashi expounds, “There you have nine: three that are on the other side of the Jordan, three that are in the Land of Canaan, and three for the future.” The Ramban states (ibid., 19:8) that in the future, Hashem will expand the borders of Eretz Yisrael. It will contain the land of another three nations, the Keini, Kenizi, and Kadmoni. This is in line with Hashem’s promise to Avraham that his children will inherit the Land of ten nations. The borders of Eretz Yisrael will include the entire world. Yerushalayim will stretch to the size of Eretz Yisrael and Har Hamoriah will be as big as all of Yerushalayim. Apart from the three cities of refuge in Eretz Yisrael and the three on the other side of the Jordan, Bnei Yisrael will add another three.

In the future, Hashem will slaughter the *Yetzer Hara* (*Sukkah* 52a). There will no longer be an urge to sin. Thus there will no longer exist unintentional sinners. Why, then, is there the command to add cities of refuge in the future?

Our Sages teach (*Avot* 2:4), “Do not believe in yourself until your dying day.” Bnei Yisrael succeeded in conquering their enemies, thereby eliminating any negative impressions. Nevertheless, the *Yetzer Hara* is a shady character. His shadow remained. The nation was instructed to precede the malady with the remedy. Designating the cities of refuge would provide a haven for future unintentional murderers. At times, one believes he is immune from a specific sin. He did all in his power to repel any force of this misdeed. But he must know that as long as he lives, the *Yetzer Hara* beats within him. One is susceptible to his ills at any time and in any place. Therefore, he must always stand sentry, lest he fall into the snare of the *Yetzer Hara*. Although Bnei Yisrael effectively removed from themselves any residue of negativity of the nations in the Land, their work was far from complete. Who was there to guarantee that they would not stumble in sin in the future? Since “guilt is ascribed to the blameworthy” (*Sanhedrin* 8a), an unintentional murder might be committed, to awaken them to do complete teshuvah for their sins.

Eliyahu Hanavi, also known as Tishbi, will resolve all our queries, including the question as to why it is necessary to designate three cities of refuge in the future. There are some matters which are above our level of understanding. Another example of this is the case of the wayward son (*ben sorer u'morer*). Chazal tell us (ibid., 71a) that there was never actually such a case. Why, then, does the Torah go to such detail in describing this phenomenon? We do not know the reason. In the future, we will become enlightened regarding these difficulties.

We might take a lesson, though, from the establishment of the cities of refuge. One must constantly be on the lookout, always vigilant against the *Yetzer Hara*. He should never claim that he will be fine and has no need for caution. The wayward son teaches the outcome of marrying the beautiful captive woman. The results of this union could prove disastrous. Likewise, the establishment of cities of refuge teaches us how crucial it is to cleave to the Torah, at all times and in every instance. Even if one believes he has the *Yetzer Hara* under his belt in one specific area, he must gird himself with strength and continue his vigil. No one is immune forever.

If Hashem commanded the nation to establish three cities of refuge in the future, when the *Yetzer Hara* will be a thing of the past, how much care must we exhibit nowadays, when the *Yetzer Hara* is alive and well, within each of us. Let us not lose heart, for “he who comes to purify himself, receives Heavenly assistance” (see *Yoma* 38b).

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Hashem commanded Bnei Yisrael to destroy the nations living in the Land before settling it. This was in order to remove the negative impressions of the gentiles. Why was it necessary to designate cities of refuge after doing so? It is difficult to think that anyone would commit a murder, even unintentionally.
- ◆ This question is strengthened by the fact that, in the future, Hashem will slaughter the *Yetzer Hara*.

- ◆ Although Bnei Yisrael removed all negative influences of the gentiles by eradicating them from the Land, their work was not complete. The *Yetzer Hara* still lay in ambush. Constant vigilance was necessary to thwart his evil designs. Eliyahu Hanavi will resolve our difficulties regarding the future cities of refuge. Let us learn a lesson from this subject. If Hashem commanded the establishment of cities of refuge for the future, when there will be no fear of the *Yetzer Hara*, all the more so must we beware of the *Yetzer Hara* nowadays, when he is in full power.



Gems on Parashat Shoftim



Officers and Judges

“Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities – which Hashem, your G-d, gives you – for your tribes; and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment”

(Devarim 16:18)

The parashah begins with the plural version: *judges and officers*. Then it uses the singular form *shall you appoint*. Why doesn't the Torah write the term *shall you appoint* in the plural, as well?

By using the singular form, the Torah teaches us that this command is relevant to each individual member of Klal Yisrael. Each of us is charged to place bodyguards upon the parts of his body, protecting them from sin. A study of the human anatomy reveals the built-in features of protection which Hashem has provided for us. The eyelids, for example, shield the eyes from gazing at inappropriate “sites.” The lips help guard the mouth from improper speech. The ear lobes can block out words of sin from entering one's ears. One is adjured to utilize these features in order to deter negative influences from infiltrating his being.

Torah study which is said by a mouth and heard by ears which allow negativity to pass through them is not a pure form of learning. This

adulterated form of study is unlikely to advocate a person's cause when the time comes. A Sefer Torah with blurred lettering is unfit for use. So too, Torah learning which is obscured by the frivolities of nonsense and misdeeds is incomplete. Not only is this type of Torah study ineffectual in accruing a person merit, it will likely be an obstacle on his path to perfection. On the other hand, one who establishes “watchmen,” protecting his body parts from becoming sullied, merits the highest form of Torah study, a springboard for rising ever higher on the ladder of Torah and *yirah*.

David Hamelech states (*Tehillim* 119:59), “I considered my ways and returned my feet to Your testimonies.” David had all sorts of plans for places to visit. But time and again, his feet led him to the Beit Hamidrash. This was because he always made sure to place “watchmen” upon himself, which prevented him from visiting questionable locales.

When I was young, I dreamed of being a wealthy businessman. My “watchmen” appeared in the guise of my holy ancestors. They protected me from grazing in foreign pastures and guided me on the path they had trodden for me, the tried and true trail of a Torah life.



A King and a Judge

“Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities – which Hashem, your G-d, gives you – for your tribes; and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment”

(Devarim 16:18)

The parashah begins with the plural version “judges and officers – שופטים ושוטרים.” Then it uses the singular form “shall you appoint – תתן

לך.” Why doesn’t the Torah write the term *shall you appoint* in the plural (תתנו לכם) , as well?

The plural form of the word *you* is לכם, the letters of which also spell the word מלך (king). Hashem wanted Am Yisrael to initially appoint judges and officers without appointing a king. Eventually, these leaders themselves would appoint the appropriate king for the nation. This is hinted by the omission of the plural form לכם.

Shmuel Hanavi was a most righteous and noble judge of our people. Hashem assured him that He would inform him who was worthy of becoming king over Klal Yisrael. Regarding our first king, Shaul Hamelech, the pasuk states (*Shmuel I*, 13:1), “Shaul reigned at the age of one year.” This means that Shaul was free of sin, like a one-year-old baby (see *Sanhedrin* 22b).

Am Yisrael were instructed to appoint judges and officers who were tzaddikim and feared Heaven. These judges and officers bore a heavy responsibility, as they were the ones who eventually anointed the kings over the nation. As long as they were righteous, Hashem came to their assistance, and they succeeded in anointing kings who were pious and devout.

The Torah uses the singular form “shall you,” for it speaks to the judge or officer himself. His heart should never, *chalilah*, become proud. First and foremost, he must rule over himself. Only afterward would he be capable of ruling the nation.

Furthermore, the singular form of “shall you appoint” indicates that Am Yisrael are a mutually responsible unit (see *Shavuot* 39a). Although the kings were invested with the power of sovereignty, they had to be careful not to lord over the nation. Considering their status as a member of the people would obviate feelings of pride and arrogance.

Moshe Rabbeinu, our great leader who gave us the Torah, is called the humblest of all men (*Bamidbar* 12:3). His heart never swelled over his

nation. On the contrary, he constantly felt indebted to his people, who had accepted him as their leader.

The Torah precedes “judges” to “officers” to teach us the following: In order for a person to ensure that he protects himself appropriately, as a good law-enforcer, he must first be a good judge. He must know the halachot clearly, in all their detail. This will help him avoid the pitfalls of sin.



Giving Tzedakah Is a Charitable Act

“Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue”

(Devarim 16:20)

Why does the Torah mention righteousness twice? The pasuk in Mishlei (10:2) helps us glean insight into the mitzvah of *tzedakah*. It says, “Charity rescues from death.” One is instructed to donate charity to the poor, regardless of whether or not he previously gave to others. In the merit of giving generously, his own life will be spared. The double language of *righteousness* in reference to *tzedakah*, teaches us how urgent it is to offer aid to those in need. This will redound to his credit, saving him from death in this world and accruing him untold reward in the World of Complete Righteousness.



The Prohibition of a Pillar

*“You shall not erect for yourselves a pillar,
which Hashem, your G-d, hates”*

(Devarim 16:22)

Rashi explains that erecting a pillar, or altar, even for Hashem’s sake, is prohibited. Although our Avot were accustomed to erect altars in order to offer sacrifices for Hashem, this act became prohibited to our nation. This is because it became, over the years, a distinctly non-Jewish practice, as the gentiles erected pillars for their idols. The original altars of our forefathers were beloved by Hashem. But over time, altars became an icon of the nations, and therefore forbidden to our people, as the pasuk states (*Vayikra* 18:3), “Do not follow their traditions.”



Ki Teitzei



The Battle for Life

“When you will go out to war against your enemies, and Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand, and you will capture his captivity. And you will see among its captivity a woman who is beautiful of form, and you will desire her, you may take her to yourself for a wife”

(Devarim 21:10-11)

Whoever was afraid to enter the battlefield was instructed to return home. This was so that he should not infuse his fellow fighters with weak-heartedness (*Devarim 20:8*). Chazal explain that a person was afraid because he had sinned (see *Sotah 44a*). He was afraid that his sins would cause the nation's defeat. Only the righteous ended up going to war. These were the nation's noblest, those who were sure they did not carry any trace of iniquity. They fully trusted that Hashem would stand at their side, helping them conquer their enemy. How can we suspect such righteous individuals of being captivated by gentile captive women?

This subject contains a message to those who would remain at the battlefield. After they took note of their comrades who had returned

home on account of their sins, they were liable to believe themselves clear of all sin. Feelings of arrogance were likely to enter their hearts. Therefore, the Torah warns them to beware. The very trait of arrogance, which originated from feelings of pride at being sin-free was apt to seduce them to gaze at the beautiful women of foreign nations. The Mishnah teaches (*Avot* 2:4), “Do not believe in yourself until the day you die.” These people may have left their homes as righteous individuals, and were thus chosen to fight our nation’s battles, but they were adjured to do battle with their *Yetzer Hara*, who lay in ambush, ready to attack, as long as they lived.

The commentators (*Alshich*, *Devarim* 21:10; *Kli Yakar*, *ibid.*) state that this pasuk is referring to the battle against the *Yetzer Hara*. One must face him in combat and take him captive. As long as a person lives, he wages war with his *Yetzer Hara*. This war never has a cease-fire, but is constant, every hour of every day. When the *Yetzer Hara* observes a person slackening in his vigilance against him, he lays a net at his feet, and ensnares him into sin. Once a person is caught in his Web, it is very difficult to extricate himself. This is why our Sages exhort us (*Avot* 2:4), “Do not believe in yourself until the day you die.” As long as one is not smug and self-complacent, he will constantly be on the lookout for the *Yetzer Hara*, fighting him on all fronts. When Hashem sees that a person takes this battle seriously, then “Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand.” Hashem will give him *siyata di’Shemaya* to overpower his *Yetzer Hara* and conquer him.

A person who considers himself a tzaddik is preparing for his own downfall. The Torah warns those who go out to war to steer clear of any thoughts of arrogance. Pride at being among those selected to fight empowers the *Yetzer Hara*. This, in turn, leads to the distasteful attraction toward the beautiful captive women. And this would result in the birth of wayward sons.

Once, after prayer, Rav Huna realized he had worn his tefillin with the straps inside out. He immediately took upon himself forty days of fasting, in repentance (*Moed Katan* 25a). Even the great Sage, Rav Huna, could err,

for “there is no man so wholly righteous on earth that he [always] does good and never sins” (*Kohelet* 7:20). One should therefore never become arrogant, feeling that he has done his part and can rest on his laurels in his battle with the *Yetzer Hara*.

I once read the following amazing story about the Gaon, Rabbi Reuven Zelig Bengis, zy”a, head of the *Eidah Hacharedit* and mentor of Maran Harav Elyashiv, zt”l. He once held a festive meal in honor of a *siyum* on completing the entire Shas. One week later, he gathered his family and announced that he would like to prepare another *siyum* on Shas. When they asked him how he could possibly have completed Shas in just one week, he replied the following: This upcoming *siyum* would celebrate his completion of “Shas in waiting.” Whenever he had five minutes here or there, waiting for a *brit* or a chuppah to begin, he would utilize these few moments to learn a bit more. These minutes accumulated and produced wonderful results – the completion of the entire Shas!

This tzaddik used every spare moment for Torah study. He knew just how destructive the force of the *Yetzer Hara* can be. As soon as the *Yetzer Hara* sees that someone is unoccupied for even a short time, he jumps upon him and causes him to sin. This tzaddik prevented the *Yetzer Hara* from doing this, by taking advantage of every free minute. His achievement was twofold: He was spared the machinations of the *Yetzer Hara*, and he merited completing the entire Shas.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Those who feared their sins did not go out to war. Only the tzaddikim went out to war. How can we suspect that they would think about foreign women, to the extent that the Torah made a provision for this situation?
- ◆ After witnessing countless potential soldiers making their way back home, those who remained to fight the war were liable to become arrogant. After all, they had no sins to be afraid of. The Torah therefore warns them specifically to beware the perils of pride, for this flaw can induce even them to think about foreign women.

- ◆ Rav Huna took upon himself a forty-day fast in order to atone for wearing tefillin inside out. Even a great man like Rav Huna was capable of stumbling in sin. Certainly, we, small of stature, must beware.



Good Deeds – The Foundation of Our Existence

“When you will go out to war against your enemies, and Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand, and you will capture his captivity. And you will see among its captivity a woman who is beautiful of form, and you will desire her, you may take her to yourself for a wife”

(Devarim 21:10-11)

There are two types of war. There is an obligatory war and a voluntary war (see *Rambam, Melachim* 5:1). Rashi explains (*Devarim* 21:10) that this pasuk is referring to a voluntary war. This raises an obvious question. In voluntary wars, anyone who feared retribution for his sins returned home. Only the tzaddikim went into battle. How can we understand that they laid eyes on gentile women and desired to take them?

The Torah exhorts us (*Vayikra* 19:2), “You shall be holy, for holy am I.” The Ramban expounds (*ibid.*), “Sanctify yourselves by that which is permitted to you.” By subduing one’s urge for delicacies and other physical pleasures, which are not clear-cut transgressions, one reaches a level of elevation and sanctity. Abstention from materialism detaches one from earthliness and raises him to spiritual heights.

Why were people interested in fighting the permitted wars, in spite of the dangers involved? There were most likely those who wished to

plunder and earn a fortune in loot. This is certainly in contradiction to the injunction “Sanctify yourself by that which is permitted to you.” Money is the epitome of materialism. When one seeks to bolster his bankbook, he naturally loses some of his sanctity.

Although those who went to war were originally tzaddikim, their desire for materialism drove them to fall by sighting strange women. Their inclinations drew them to take these women as wives. How perilous is physicality! The glow of gold blinds the eyes of even the wise ones. The Torah knows man’s natural impulses, and therefore made a provision regarding these foreign women, allowing the men to take them under certain conditions. It was better that they should marry them in a permitted way than take them sinfully (see *Kiddushin* 21b). Most of those who went out to fight the battle of our people did so *l’shem Shamayim*, but there were those who did not.

Rashi explains this pasuk to refer to a permitted war. *Ba’alei Mussar* interpret it otherwise (*Ye’arot Devash* 1:6). They say it refers to the battle against the *Yetzer Hara*. One must fight him to the end, until he has conquered him and taken him captive. The Ramchal asserts (see *Mesillat Yesharim* 2) that as long as one lives, his *Yetzer Hara* attempts to seduce him to sin and hinder him in his service of Hashem. It is only by Hashem’s grace that he overcomes his *Yetzer Hara*. Hashem has granted us the Torah as the number one weapon against the *Yetzer Hara*, as we are taught (*Kiddushin* 30b), “I created the *Yetzer Hara*; I created Torah as its antidote.”

Chazal proclaim (*Bava Metzia* 85b), “Great are the deeds of Chiya.” Chiya devoted himself to the Torah education of the youngsters. If not for his wonderful acts, Torah would likely have been forgotten from Yisrael (see *Sukkah* 20a). The Gemara details his deeds (*Bava Metzia* 85b). He would plant fields of flax. With the flax, he would weave nets with which he caught deer. He would slaughter the deer and feed its meat to the needy. He would work their skins into parchment, onto which he would write the words of Torah. He would then bring these scrolls along with

him, teaching them to children wherever he went. How praiseworthy were the character traits of Chiya, who acted in such a blessed manner.

When I was young , I believed that only one who is accustomed to miracles is worthy of the title tzaddik. This thought was banished from my mind when I read how Chazal held Rabbi Chiya in such esteem on account of his positive attributes. Whether or not he was a miracle worker was peripheral to the fact that he acted with pure, altruistic motives. It is not the bombastic wonders which make a person impressive. Rather, it is the small deeds, done with pure intentions, which make a person great.

When Hashem sought an emissary to extract His children from Egypt, He chose Moshe Rabbeinu, who proved his compassion by pitying the sheep and carrying it on his shoulders (see *Shemot Rabbah* 2:2). Good character traits are the foundation for observing Torah. Those who desired to take the captive women as wives had proven their dubious desires by going to war in order to accrue more wealth. Once temptation for the physical was allowed a place in their hearts, it dragged them to forbidden sights, arousing their hearts to long for the beautiful women of the gentile nations.

“Do not believe in yourself until the day you die” (*Avot* 2:4). Those who went to war were the finest of our nation. Nonetheless, they allowed lustful thoughts to lead them to seek greater wealth. It was these thoughts that encouraged them to desire the captive women, as well. “In the way a person wishes to go, he is led” (*Makkot* 10b). Conversely, “The will of those who fear Him He will do” (*Tehillim* 145:19). One who fears Hashem is careful in his actions, and subsequently, receives Divine assistance to do Hashem’s will. His good deeds cause Hashem to fulfill his wishes.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Since only the righteous men, free of sin, went out to war, how can we understand that they craved the captive women?

- ◆ “You shall be holy, for holy am I.” The Ramban expounds (ibid.), “Sanctify yourselves by that which is permitted to you.” Among those who went out to a voluntary war were those who sought to increase their wealth. Yielding to the craving of materialism resulted in craving foreign women. How great is the danger of materialism, blinding the eyes of even the wise!
- ◆ *Ba’alei Mussar* state that this pasuk refers to the war with the *Yetzer Hara*. If one fights seriously, he will eventually subdue his evil inclination and take him captive. Chazal extol the praises of Chiya, for he acted altruistically. Good deeds are the basis for the entire Torah. One who does not have good character is liable to forget his Torah studies, for “*derech erez* precedes Torah.”
- ◆ Those who went out to war out of lust for money stumbled in the sin of lust for women.
- ◆ “The will of those who fear Him He will do.” One who is scrupulous with his actions due to his fear of Heaven will receive Divine assistance to fulfill Hashem’s will.



Battling the Yetzer Hara

“When you will go out to war against your enemies, and Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand, and you will capture his captivity. And you will see among its captivity a woman who is beautiful of form, and you will desire her, you may take her to yourself for a wife”

(Devarim 21:10-11)

Ba’alei Mussar state that this pasuk refers to the constant battle one wages against his *Yetzer Hara*, man’s number one enemy. One who truly

strengthens himself against this adversary is promised that he will be able to take him into captivity. Not only will he overpower his *Yetzer Hara*, but he will also manage to redeem the captives that he took (see *Zachor l'Miriam* 17). The *Yetzer Hara* is a cunning creature. When one is held in his captivity, he loses out on many fronts. His *yirat Shamayim* plummets, he is not scrupulous in halachah, he does not fear sin, etc. But when one declares war upon his *Yetzer Hara*, he is guaranteed victory. He will even recoup his previous losses.

Why does the pasuk emphasize that Hashem is “your G-d”? Wouldn't it be enough to simply state, “and Hashem will deliver him into your hand”?

The *Yetzer Hara* is an entity of fire. Human beings are only flesh and blood. According to nature, we do not stand a chance against him. Only when a person abandons all foreign deities, including lusts and passions for physical pleasures, and coronates Hashem as his King, will he receive *siyata di'Shemaya* to conquer his *Yetzer Hara*.

Moreover, when one wages war against his *Yetzer Hara*, he is proving to all that he places himself solely under the jurisdiction of Hashem. Otherwise, he would not have the moral strength to fight this dastardly devil. By proving that he is under Hashem's dominion, he receives Heavenly assistance to succeed in this war. *Ba'alei Mussar* add (see *Tzror Hamor, Devarim* 21:18) that by denouncing all foreign deities and crowning Hashem as his king, he is able to regain his captives. These are his previous good qualities, which had been sequestered by the *Yetzer Hara*. Furthermore, he will merit another benefit, as will be explained.

“A woman who is beautiful of form” allegorically denotes the Torah. As long as a person is under the authority of his *Yetzer Hara*, the Torah is held captive, as well. But when one succeeds in extricating himself from the clutches of the *Yetzer Hara*, the gleam of Torah is allowed to shine forth once again. He regrets the time that the Torah was held captive along with him, in the clutches of the *Yetzer Hara*. Upon doing complete teshuvah, not only does one re-connect with the Torah, but he sees Torah

as the “beautiful woman” it is. The charm and grace of the Torah shine from afar, attracting one to connect with it as before.

In parashat *Nitzavim*, we read (15-19), “See – I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil... and you shall choose life.” I saw a *drush* on this pasuk. The word רָאָה (see), adding one for the word itself, is numerically equivalent to the word סֵתֶר (secret). When one “looks into” the Torah, truly delving into it, he merits discovering its hidden secrets. Regarding the beautiful woman, a reference to the Torah, the pasuk states, “You will see among its captivity.” Merely gazing at Torah brings a person to perceive its beauty.

Ba’alei Mussar ask why Adam Harishon was punished immediately upon eating from the Tree of Knowledge. We know that Hashem is long-suffering and compassionate. He does not hurry to bring retribution upon his children, but waits for them to repent. Why did Hashem veer from His usual habit and punish Adam immediately and so severely, especially since this was his only sin?

In the days of Adam Harishon, there was no concept of *Yetzer Hara* in the world. Through his sin, Adam himself created this entity. Had Adam controlled his urges, he would have bequeathed this strength to all future generations. The *Yetzer Hara* would never have gained a foothold in the heart of mankind. But, unfortunately, Adam sinned, inviting the *Yetzer Hara* to take residence in his heart, and inside all people ad infinitum. Hashem dealt him with the strict hand of justice, for he caused all generations after him to sin, as well. The severity of the retribution indicated how poisonous was the sin of the forbidden fruit, producing punishment for all generations to come.

Now we can understand the concept of Hashem being strict with tzaddikim to a hairsbreadth (see *Bava Kama* 50a). Their vast Torah knowledge has afforded them the ability to recognize Hashem’s greatness, as well as the truth of Torah. When they sin, the charge against them is all the greater. Trials come upon a person only when he has the tools to deal with them. The tzaddikim, who are great in Torah, are also capable

of quieting their *Yetzer Hara*, as the Gemara states (*Kiddushin* 30b), “I created the *Yetzer Hara*; I created Torah as its antidote.” One who has more Torah wisdom has more armaments at his disposal in his battle against the *Yetzer Hara*.

Kabbalah (see *Zohar* I, 179a) calls the *Yetzer Hara* the *Sitra Achra* (סטרא אחרא). The *Yetzer Hara* is a wily character, coming upon a person through the “back door” (אחור). At first, he tries to trip a person in small things. When he has him in his pocket, he draws him further and further into sin, until he is beyond hope. But one who indicates that he truly wishes to fight his *Yetzer Hara* will receive *siyata di'Shemaya* to overpower him and will even reclaim his captives.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ *Ba'alei Mussar* say that this parashah refers to the battle against the *Yetzer Hara*. When one goes into out-and-out battle against his *Yetzer Hara*, he succeeds in retrieving his captives, which are the good qualities that were originally taken from him by the *Yetzer Hara*.
- ◆ The term “your G-d” is used to indicate that only after one abandons all foreign “deities” and crowns Hashem as his sole King, does he succeed in conquering his *Yetzer Hara* and redeeming his captives. “A woman who is beautiful of form” refers to the Torah. After doing teshuvah, one merits revealing its inner beauty.
- ◆ Adam Harishon was punished most severely for his sin, for he introduced the *Yetzer Hara* into the heart of mankind. The *Yetzer Hara* does untold harm throughout the generations. Hashem is most scrupulous regarding tzaddikim. Through Torah, they have the power to overcome their *Yetzer Hara*.



Royalties in Battle

“When you will go out to war against your enemies, and Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand, and you will capture his captivity”

(Devarim 21:10)

When Hashem observes that a person is waging war with his *Yetzer Hara*, He grants him *siyata di'Shemaya* to overcome his inclination and vanquish it. We must understand that man's number one enemy is his *Yetzer Hara* (see *Sukkah* 52b; *Chovot Halevavot* 5:5). In order to triumph in this all-encompassing battle, one is dependent on Hashem's help (see *Sukkah* 52b). Just as Hashem comes to the assistance of those who fight physical enemies, so too, does He afford help in fighting man's inner foe, if He sees that a person truly wishes to suppress his evil inclination. David Hamelech states (*Tehillim* 20:8), “Some with chariots, and some with horses; but we, in the Name of Hashem, our G-d, call out.” We are armed with Hashem's Name when we both fight our physical fights, as well as our inner battles.

In the introduction to *Eichah Rabbah* (30), we read a fascinating narrative. There were four kings, each of whom requested of Hashem to assist them against their enemies in a different way. They were: David, Asa, Yehoshafat, and Chizkiyahu

David said (*Tehillim* 18:38), “I pursued my foes and overtook them...” Hashem acquiesced to him gaining victory this way, as the pasuk in *Navi* states (*Shmuel* I, 30:17), “And David smote them from twilight until the evening of the next day.” Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi explains that Hashem would light up the night on behalf of David so that he could strike his enemies. This is referred to in the pasuk in *Tehillim* (18:29), “For it is You Who will light my lamp...”

Asa declared that he did not have the strength to slay his enemies. He would merely pursue them, and Hashem should strike them. Hashem agreed to this, as well, as the pasuk states (*Divrei Hayamim* II, 14:12), “Asa and the people with him pursued them...” The continuation of the pasuk emphasizes that it was Hashem Who ultimately destroyed them, as it says, “...they were crushed before Hashem and before His camp,” not “before Asa.”

Yehoshafat proclaimed that he had the strength neither to pursue nor to strike his enemies. He stated that he would simply sing to Hashem, Who would do the job. Hashem consented to his request, as well. The pasuk states (*ibid.* 20:22), “As soon as they began their exuberant song and praise...”

Chizkiyahu announced that he had not the strength to kill, to pursue, or even to sing praise. He said he would lie in bed, and Hashem would act. Hashem agreed to this, also, as the pasuk states (*Melachim* II, 19:35), “And it was that [very] night: An angel of Hashem went out and struck down... of the Assyrian camp.”

These four kings had different military tactics, as is evident by their prayers for assistance. David’s approach was to fight his enemies head-on. Asa was prepared to enter the battle, as long as Hashem would promise to help him. Yehoshafat stated that he would sing Hashem’s praises as Hashem fought his battles. And Chizkiyahu claimed that Hashem would fight for him and subdue his enemies even as he slept. Hashem filled the request of each one.

In the days of Chizkiyahu Hamelech, Sancheirev’s army came out to wage war against Am Yisrael. The Vilna Gaon, zy”a, cites the Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 95b) that states that Sancheirev’s army numbered 185,000 generals. The armies themselves consisted of over two billion soldiers! They all perished without Chizkiyahu having to lift a finger.

Chizkiyahu Hamelech was in constant battle with the *Yetzer Hara*. He was the one who eradicated all vestiges of *avodah zarah* and educated the nation to diligent Torah study. Even the very young children knew the

halachot of *tumah* and *taharah* (ibid., 94b). Because Chizkiyahu was always involved in fighting the *Yetzer Hara*, Hashem granted him victory in battle, without any effort on his part.

With this in mind, we can understand that “When you will go out to war against your enemies” can mean that when you go to war against your *Yetzer Hara*, “Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand.” Hashem will help you conquer him.

Once, when I was in Canada, a man approached me and told me the following story, to which his father was witness. The holy Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy”a, once visited the city, Marrakesh. Everyone came out to greet him enthusiastically, including the Arabs, who accorded him great honor. Suddenly, an Arab stood up from among the throngs and spat at Rabbi Chaim’s forehead. The onlookers hurried to wipe away the spittle, as well as avenge the honor of the revered tzaddik. As Rabbi Chaim observed that emotions were beginning to boil, he hurried to calm the masses, telling them that they would shortly see how Hashem dealt with this brazen Arab. Suddenly, a soldier stationed in northern Marrakesh shot a bullet by mistake. It hit the Arab directly in the forehead and killed him on the spot.

I was not surprised at all by this narrative. Rabbi Chaim, zy”a, constantly fought his *Yetzer Hara*, subjecting it to Hashem’s will. It only made sense that Heaven would assist him in fighting his physical enemies, without any exertion at all on his part.

The king of Morocco once said he fears his friends more than his foes. His enemies aver their intentions loud and clear. He is able to steer clear of them. But his friends smile and act congenially toward him. Sometimes, under the veneer of friendship, though, they are planning a revolt. He can never know for sure whether they are truly his allies or not.

The *Yetzer Hara* acts in a similar manner. He often presents a pleasant countenance, as if his only concern is the welfare of the person. All the while, he is planning and plotting against him, spreading a net of materialism and lust under his feet (see *Chovot Halevavot* 5:5).

A battle in which one can never ascertain his enemy's intention is most perilous. In our constant battle with the *Yetzer Hara*, we are heavily dependent upon Heavenly mercy. The power of Torah study shields a person from the schemes of the *Yetzer Hara*, earning one Heavenly protection, as the Gemara states (*Kiddushin* 30b), "I created the *Yetzer Hara*; I created Torah as its antidote."

Chazal (*Eiruv* 18b) go so far as to say that if a person finds himself at a fork in the road, with one path leading to a woman and one to a hungry lion, one should choose the road of the lion. He has a slight chance of escaping the lion and emerging safely, whereas the road with the woman would certainly lead him to purgatory. From this illustration we should draw the conclusion of just how difficult it is to escape the seductions of the *Yetzer Hara* and how careful we must be in this area. One should strive to avoid situations that present a test to begin with. For this, we pray daily (Morning Prayer), "Do not bring me to a state of *nisayon*." Who knows if we would pass the test, or fail it with humiliation?!

The Ben Ish Chai on parashat *Shoftim* (*Shanah Rishonah*) asserts that the greatest *Yetzer Hara* of all time is that of immorality. This is especially true in our generation, when the *Yetzer Hara* for *avodah zarah* has already been eradicated. Chazal tell us (*Sanhedrin* 98a) that Mashiach will come when the generation is completely righteous or completely liable. The spiritual degeneration of our times leads me to believe that Mashiach will come in a completely liable generation. Mashiach will trace his lineage to Peretz, son of Yehudah (see *Rut* 18-22). The name פֶּרֶץ (Peretz) is closely related to the word פְּרִיצוֹת (breach, immorality). Our generation is so steeped in lewdness and immorality, may Hashem protect us. We are certainly at the threshold of the days of Mashiach. Earlier commentators (see *Avodat Hakodesh* 3:61) remark that when Mashiach arrives, Hashem will purify the world of all defilement. Only those who are clean of all sin will merit beholding Mashiach. Certainly, all of us wish to be among the meritorious, and not, *chalilah*, among those who are liable. Therefore, let us fortify ourselves with purity and holiness. Let us guard our eyes from all evil, so that they will merit gazing at Mashiach.

In Summary

- ◆ *Ba'alei Mussar* state that the battle in this parashah is referring to man's inner battle with his *Yetzer Hara*. Just as one needs *siyata di'Shemaya* to fight his physical battles, so too, does he need Divine assistance in his constant war against the *Yetzer Hara*.
- ◆ Four kings received Divine help in conquering their enemies, all according to their requests. Chizkiyahu asked for Hashem to fight his battles completely, and was granted this. This was in merit of his constant battle against the *Yetzer Hara*. Hashem took up for him in his physical battles against his human enemies.
- ◆ The *Yetzer Hara's* intentions are often hidden from us. Therefore, we depend on Heavenly assistance to overcome him. When Hashem observes a person truly desiring to overtake his *Yetzer Hara*, He grants him Divine assistance in this endeavor.
- ◆ We ask Hashem to spare us from challenging situations. One should always avoid such situations, for he has no guarantee against the persuasions of the *Yetzer Hara*.
- ◆ The greatest *Yetzer Hara* of our generation is that for immorality. Reinforcing our sanctity and purity will help us merit the arrival of Mashiach.



Arousal in the Wake of the Days of Judgment

“When you will go out to war against your enemies, and Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand, and you will capture his captivity”

(Devarim 21:10)

Rabbeinu Bachya states unequivocally that man’s greatest enemy is his *Yetzer Hara* (*Chovot Halevavot* 5:5). Chazal interpret this pasuk to refer to the inner battle one constantly faces as he fights his *Yetzer Hara* (*Zohar Chadash, Parashat Ki Teitzei*).

The days of Elul are auspicious for doing teshuvah, for that is when Hashem is close to us (see *Shelah Hakadosh, Rosh Hashanah, Yesodot Hateshuvah*). When one goes out to war with his *Yetzer Hara*, Hashem stands at his side, as the pasuk says, “And Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand, and you will capture his captivity.”

Sifrei Kabbalah state (see *Megaleh Amukot, Shoftim*) that in the days of Elul, judgment and mercy are intermingled. One who arouses his heart to repentance arouses Heavenly mercy, which silences the voice of judgment. Even on days designated for judgment, such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the mercy we arouse through our teshuvah breaks through the judgment and ultimately dominates. But one who fails to awaken his heart to do teshuvah during these days creates a prosecution against himself. The voice of judgment demands to know how this person could let such a golden opportunity slip by without any motion of teshuvah. The *Navi* proclaims (*Amos 3:8*), “A lion has roared; who will not fear?” Worse than never doing teshuvah is doing it and then returning to one’s sins immediately after these days. This will surely arouse the accusation of the *Middat Hadin*. This is something to truly fear.

During the rest of the year, Hashem regards each person according to his level. One who has committed aveirot such as *lashon hara* or *bitul Torah* has created a partition between himself and his Maker, which prevents him from becoming close to Him.

For this reason, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, zy”a writes (*Likutei Shoshanah*) that before praying or doing any mitzvah, it is appropriate to have thoughts of teshuvah. This will remove the partition between oneself and Hashem, which may have been erected by his previous sins. In this manner, his prayers and good deeds will be capable of reaching to Heaven.

In contrast, during the month of Elul, Hashem is close to one and all, regardless of where they stand. The *Navi* enjoins us (*Yeshayahu* 55:6), “Seek Hashem when He can be found.” In the words of the Zohar, “Hashem is found in the fields during this time. He is easily accessible to those who seek Him out.”

The Ba’al HaTanya asks why Chazal did not institute a festive day during Elul in order to celebrate Hashem’s closeness to each of us individually at this time.

I would like to cite the incident in the Gemara (*Avodah Zarah* 17a) in response to this question. Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya was originally a sinner of ill repute. There was not one harlot whom he had not visited. He once heard about one who resided on a distant island and charged a pouch of dinars for her services. He took this amount and crossed seven rivers in order to reach her. During the moment of sin, she passed wind. She said that just as this air would never return to its source, Elazar ben Durdaya would never return to his source and succeed in repenting. Elazar ben Durdaya was so overtaken by this statement that he went off to the mountains. He placed his head between his knees and wept bitterly until his *neshamah* expired. A Bat Kol emanated and proclaimed, “Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya is allotted a portion in the World to Come.” When Rebbi heard this, he cried out, “There is one who earns his portion in

many years, and one who has earned his portion in but a brief moment. Moreover, he merited being called ‘Rabbi.’”

How was this harlot so sure that Elazar ben Durdaya had no chance of doing teshuvah? Was she some sort of prophetess? And how did she succeed in influencing him to repent, to the extent that a Heavenly Voice invited him to the World to Come?

A pleasant fragrance brings physical pleasure to its beneficiary, whereas an unpleasant odor disturbs those in its environment. Frivolities of this world are nothing but rotten and rancid, emitting a bad smell.

This woman was herself aroused to do teshuvah when she observed the dedication and self-sacrifice of Elazar ben Durdaya for sin, which is compared to a bad smell with no tangible pleasure. Her feelings of regret impacted him to such an extent that he was filled with remorse. He escaped to the mountains and placed his head between his legs, an illusion to the *brit* which he had defiled. A Bat Kol called out that his teshuvah was accepted, and he merited being called “Rabbi.”

Yeshayahu Hanavi says (43:7), “Everyone who is called by My Name and whom I have created for My glory, whom I have fashioned...” The Ba’al Shem Tov, zt”l, comments that even sin was created for Hashem’s glory. When one perceives sin and is aroused to repent, sin has been utilized to increase Hashem’s glory. The teshuvah of Rabbi Elazar was so monumental that it carved an opening under Hashem’s Throne of Glory, and earned him an exalted position in the blink of an eye. Hashem’s glory is enhanced when He accepts those who repent their sins.

The head of the Beit Din in Armentières told me the following. A woman of about ninety came to ask for a divorce. The Rabbis asked the reason for this. Perhaps she had no children and did not want to go through the process of *yibum* or *chalitzah*. She replied that she did, indeed, have children. Still, she demanded a divorce, for her husband had always treated her poorly. He was now on the way out, and she was not interested in sitting *shivah* for him.

Hashem's ways are different than those of humans. Spouses demand a divorce when their partner has treated them unjustly. Not so Hashem. Even when a person increases his sins, Hashem allows him time to contemplate his deeds and do teshuvah. Even a small thought of teshuvah earns a person a portion in the World to Come. Hashem never divorces Himself from the bride of His youth, no matter how far she has strayed.

The days of Elul are the most auspicious days of the year for returning to Hashem. Why, then, as the Ba'al HaTanya asks, do we not celebrate? Those who are aroused to repent should, indeed, celebrate. But those who are not, should not. Elul is the time when Hashem is near, but it is up to each individual to take advantage of this month.

The following analogy will clarify this concept. If a king proclaims that he will visit his subjects, they will certainly not greet him in a construction site, mired in mud and slime. They will prepare a clean room in which to welcome him. Although Hashem is close to one and all at this time, He comes close only to one who cleans himself properly. This is borne out by the verse (*Shemot* 25:8), "They shall make a sanctuary for Me," and only then, "so that I may dwell among them." Hashem seeks closeness with every member of Am Yisrael, but not every person takes advantage of the gift of teshuvah. Those who do not, remain distant from Him. For this reason, a national holiday was not instituted for the celebration of teshuvah.

On Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment, we pass before Hashem "as a shepherd tends his flock" (*Yechezkel* 34:12). Hashem scrutinizes each person individually, examining whether or not he is worthy of life (*Rosh Hashanah* 18a). Those who did not prepare properly beforehand will suffer the consequences.

I once met someone I had not seen in ten years. He asked if I thought he had changed at all. I told him that I noticed that all of his hair had fallen out. He understood I was actually referring to his downward spiritual spiral. He was terribly ashamed. If he was ashamed before me, a mere mortal of flesh and blood, all the more so should he be ashamed before

the Master of the universe. One should fear the future, after his 120-year sojourn on this earth. Teachers and disciples will ascend on High. There will be cases in which the disciples will earn greater portions than their mentors. This will be most shameful, indeed.

The days of Elul were given to us by Hashem in His great mercy as days of preparation for meeting Him on Rosh Hashanah. When we will pass before him like sheep, we will be well-prepared. The level of mercy will be so great that the *Middat Hadin* will be silenced then. Whoever merits utilizing these days appropriately has built himself into a new person. He will joyfully go to build his sukkah and purchase a lulav and etrog, the objects of his victory. This is in line with the injunction in Kohelet (9:7; *Kohelet Rabbah* ibid.), “Go, eat your bread with joy.” One who ends the day of Yom Kippur with a heartfelt tefillat *Ma’ariv*, said with proper intent, and not bent on finishing up already, can be assured that he was written in the Book of Life. But those who hurry home, praying quickly in order to break their fast, arouse the *Middat Hadin* that was quiet throughout the Days of Mercy. “For nothing they have silenced me,” it avers. It is likely that this person’s entire teshuvah process throughout Yom Kippur was of the caliber of “I will sin, and I will repent” (see *Yoma* 85b). This was likely the case on some latent level, *rachmana litzlan*.

When I spent Yom Kippur in the yeshiva in Lyon, a man from Paris came to join us. He arrived dressed in his *kittel*, ready for the awesome day. All day long, he stood at the back of the Beit Hamidrash, engrossed in prayer. After one of the prayers, I approached him and asked whether he had managed to eat anything before the fast began. He replied in the negative, stating that he had been fasting for two days straight. I invited him to my home after the fast. He could rest up for a week and then go on his way. He explained that he was on the way to Marseille. He did not have time for even a brief stay. I was wondering what it could be that demanded his undivided attention, to the extent that he could not even break a two-day fast. If it was a *shidduch*, it could certainly wait, and all businesses were closed that Sunday, so it was not a business deal. I then realized it must have been for aveirah. I was correct. He was filled with great shame. How

terrible! Here was a person who had been fasting for two days straight and standing in prayer the entire day of Yom Kippur, confessing his sins in the *viduy* prayer, yet, his head was filled with thoughts of sinning as soon as the day was out, may Hashem protect us.

Each of us should check our inner selves. Do we have thoughts of sin, *chalilah*, specifically thoughts of sins between man and his fellow man? Chazal say that these sins are not atoned for on Yom Kippur until one appeases his fellow man. Every person is created in the Divine image (*Bereishit* 9:6). One who insults his fellow man defaces the image of Hashem. He must receive forgiveness from his fellow man before asking for forgiveness from Hashem.

Our mission in the month of Elul is to arouse ourselves to do teshuvah, taking advantage of the opportunity at our doorstep. These days are more valuable than all other days of the year, for Hashem is close to us then and accepts our Torah study and mitzvot more readily, as the *Navi* states (*Yeshayahu* 55:6), “Call to Him when He is near.”

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Elul is a combination of both the *Middat Hadin* and the *Middat Harachamim*. We must beware of arousing the Attribute of Judgment, and attempt to do teshuvah, in order to subject the judgment to the quality of mercy.
- ◆ The Ba'al HaTanya asks why we do not celebrate the month of Elul, when Hashem is closer to us than ever.
- ◆ Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya did teshuvah under the influence of the harlot, who was herself aroused to repent after observing his dedication to sin.
- ◆ The Ba'al Shem Tov avers that even sin has the ability to increase Hashem's glory, when it encourages a person to repent.
- ◆ Hashem always awaits our teshuvah and will never give us a bill of divorce.

- ◆ We do not celebrate the month of Elul, for there are those who resist repentance.
- ◆ How can we greet the King amidst the mud and muck of sin? We must clean ourselves appropriately through teshuvah.
- ◆ We stand before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah like sheep being counted by their shepherd. Whoever is not worthy will be put to great shame.
- ◆ One should never repent on Yom Kippur with the intent of returning to sin when the day is out.
- ◆ Sins between man and his fellow man, created in the Divine image, obviate the path to complete forgiveness.



Guarding One's Eyes

“When you will go out to war against your enemies, and Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand, and you will capture his captivity. And you will see among its captivity a woman who is beautiful of form, and you will desire her, you may take her to yourself for a wife”

(Devarim 21:10-11)

Hashem promised Bnei Yisrael that when they would enter into a voluntary war, He would grant them *siyata di'Shemaya* to be victorious. They would merit taking captives and booty. When Bnei Yisrael do Hashem's will and go in His ways, they merit His shining countenance, and they conquer their enemies easily. But when they turn themselves away from Him, all the weapons in the world cannot help them against their enemies.

The Torah continues the parashah by stating that if a Jewish soldier noticed a beautiful gentile woman and craved her, he may take her, under certain conditions. She must sit in his home for an entire month, allowing her hair and her nails to grow long. If he still desires her, in spite of her messy appearance, he may take her as a wife.

How do we understand that the Torah gives a dispensation for a pure, kosher Jew to marry a gentile woman, captured in war? Wouldn't we expect Hashem to warn His nation to guard their eyes against encounters such as this? However, instead of such admonitions, the Torah allows one to take this gentile woman, after meeting specific stipulations. Had I been Moshe Rabbeinu, I would have asked Hashem how He could allow such a situation to be mentioned in the holy Torah, the embodiment of sanctity and chastity.

Additionally, those of our nation who went to war were completely righteous, bringing a Sefer Torah along with them. How could they be aroused to desire such women? It is even more surprising when we contemplate that even after seeing them with overgrown hair and fingernails, they would still crave them. Let us analyze the intentions of the Torah in allowing one to take a beautiful woman when he went to a voluntary war.

Bnei Yisrael are Hashem's *kallah*. He is the *chatan*, and the Torah is the marriage contract (see *Shemot Rabbah* 46a). Before marrying a woman, a man meets with her and they talk together. Only after they find favor in each other's eyes, do they agree to marry. Bnei Yisrael and Hashem are bound by the knot of marriage. In order to understand Hashem, Bnei Yisrael are adjured to study the Torah, written by His hand. Hashem knows Bnei Yisrael better than they will ever know themselves. He knows that they are fitting to be His *kallah*. By studying His Torah, they reach the level of "Hashem, the Torah, and Yisrael are one" (*Zohar* II, 90b).

The Torah is the barometer by which we gauge Hashem's desire. When a woman is familiar with her husband's likes and dislikes, her marriage can be a wonderful institution. But when she doesn't bother to learn his

nature and desires, merely doing as she herself sees fit, her marriage is headed toward disaster and is liable to end in divorce. In order for Bnei Yisrael to live in love, peace, and harmony with Hashem, they must be aware of His wishes. What is it that gives Him pleasure? Conversely, what does He dislike, and what arouses His ire? Only when both partners of a marriage recognize each other's nature and attempt to respect the desires of the other does the marriage flourish, producing wonderful fruit.

When a person tastes Torah, he is guaranteed to see that it is good, sweeter than honey. David Hamelech said (*Tehillim* 34:9), "Taste and see that Hashem is good." The moment a person tastes the sweetness of Torah, he experiences its goodness.

The holy Rabbi Chaim of Sanz, zt"l, would sit and study Torah until the small hours of the night, with a small candle illuminating his Gemara. One night, the candle fell and his clothes caught fire. His *shamash* smelled fire and hurried in. Imagine his shock at finding his mentor engulfed in flames! He began to smother the flames with a blanket. Rabbi Chaim asked, "Why do you interrupt my Torah study?" The caretaker replied, "I was saving the Rav's life. In another short moment, the fire would have consumed everything in its path. Do you call that interrupting the Rav's learning?!" Rabbi Chaim looked at him in surprise and begged his forgiveness. He had not been aware that his clothing had caught fire! This is called being engrossed in Torah study. Rabbi Chaim was caught up in the fire of Torah and did not even notice the flames which threatened to consume him.

The *Yetzer Hara*, upon taking note of the beautiful relationship of Bnei Yisrael and the Torah, attempts to loosen these ropes of love and sever them completely. He therefore introduces into man's heart thoughts of lust. He confuses man's mind with thoughts of strange women. These thoughts drive away thoughts of Torah and do not allow the person to concentrate on his learning. One must constantly be on the lookout for the *Yetzer Hara* and prevent him from dominating his mind with inappropriate images.

One who fears Hashem and remains steadfast in his inner battle is guaranteed to take captives. He will succeed in removing the influence of the *Yetzer Hara* from himself. The pasuk continues, “And you will see among its captivity a woman who is beautiful of form.” When one goes out to war with ulterior motives, his *Yetzer Hara* easily gains a foothold and causes him to sight a beautiful woman. Had he gone to war with the strains of Torah resounding in his ears, intent on increasing Hashem’s glory, the Torah would surely have protected him. He would never have come across a beautiful gentile woman. But when one enters war with a lackadaisical approach to Torah, his *Yetzer Hara* gets the better of him and puts all sorts of inappropriate matter into his mind. He sights the beautiful woman, and a longing for her is aroused in his heart.

I was once asked to deliver a *shiur* for a group of fifty women. When I arrived at the venue, I discovered that about five hundred women had come to hear me speak. For a moment, I felt weak and confused. I then made a personal accounting. What was my purpose: to deliver a Torah discourse or to gaze at strange women? At first, I planned to leave the place. But after a few minutes of contemplation, I came to the conclusion that I was here to deliver a Torah lesson and bring inspiration to my listeners. Since this was my only motive, Hashem would surely protect my eyes from bringing me to thoughts of sin. I spoke with closed eyes and felt Hashem with me, protecting me from stumbling in sin.

I know someone who seemed to be reconciling a marriage between a man and his wife. In the end, this fellow married the man’s (former) wife. His original intentions were never to save the marriage. On the contrary, he planted seeds of discord so that he could eventually take the woman for himself. How unfortunate that he didn’t consider the tears of the Mizbeach, which weeps whenever a couple parts (see *Gittin* 90b). His passions blinded him to rend asunder the tear that had developed between husband and wife, instead of mending it while could still be repaired.

When I once had a stopover at a London airport, my gaze fell upon the news screen. I happened to glimpse the image of the news reporter. I never intended to actually look at her, but to my utter chagrin, her image stood before me for the duration of three years! Whenever I stood up for the *Amidah* prayer, her image popped up before my eyes, disturbing my prayers. When I could not rid myself of her picture, I visited the gravesite of my ancestor, the holy Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy”a, and prayed tearfully that he supplicate Hashem on my behalf to remove this image from my mind. How perilous is inappropriate sighting! It begins with a few short moments, but can have a lasting impression. Hashem finally took pity on me and removed these thoughts from my mind.

Chazal relate (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit* 161) the following narrative about Rabbi Mattia ben Charash. He was well-known for overpowering his *Yetzer Hara*. He never looked at the form of a woman in his entire life. One day, the Satan was especially bent on tripping him up. He disguised himself as a beautiful woman and stood before him, just as he was on his way to deliver a Torah discourse to his disciples. When Rabbi Mattia discovered that he was about to stumble into the clutches of sin, he ordered his students to bring him two burning iron rods. He poked these into his eyes, blinding himself. The Satan would now be unable to cause him to gaze at inappropriate matter. This reaction caused quite a stir in *Shamayim*. Hashem sent the angel, Refael, to heal Rabbi Mattia by restoring his vision. But Rabbi Mattia declined. He claimed it would be better to remain sightless rather than possibly fall in another test. Only after Hashem promised that the Satan would test him no longer, did Rabbi Mattia agree to regain his vision.

A person must go out to war on a daily basis against his *Yetzer Hara*. He will thereby be spared sinning with the beautiful foreign woman, an allegory for all indecent “sites.” At times, one might think, “What’s the big deal if I gaze at a woman? I’m a married man. The impulse of youth does not blaze within me as in the past.” These thoughts themselves are part of the *Yetzer Hara’s* bag of tricks. No one can know when he might surrender to the seductions of the *Yetzer Hara*.

I would like to mention here the phenomenal level of my father in guarding his eyes. For the duration of forty years, since the passing of his father, the tzaddik, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, he did not leave his house once. When he had to move from Casablanca to Mogador, and from there to Eretz Yisrael, approximately twenty men built a human wall around him, so that he would not stumble by seeing something inappropriate. The holy eyes which were protected from any form of negativity merited seeing the future, as the following anecdotes illustrate.

In was on Erev Yom Kippur, 1973. My father lived in Ashdod at the time. When he came to begin his prayers on this holy day, he suddenly turned to my brother and asked if the bomb shelters were clear and well-equipped. My brother did not understand why he was asking this, but one look from my father sent him downstairs to check. At that point, no one dreamed there would be a war. But with his pure eyes, he could see what others could not and predict the future.

During the war, two women came to my father, weeping uncontrollably. They stated that military messengers had just arrived, informing them that their husbands had fallen in battle. Their bodies were held in Egypt, they had claimed. To one woman, my father said, "May your husband's *neshamah* be bound with the living," a blessing offered to the bereaved. And to the other, who was the wife of my relative, Rabbi Azarzar, he stated that he did not see that her husband had been killed in battle.

This woman then went to the military camp in Ashdod and asked them to check thoroughly whether or not her husband's name appeared among the fallen soldiers, or perhaps there had been some mistake. After a thorough examination, they reassured her that there had been no mistake, and her husband was, indeed, among the dead. But this woman stood her ground, for she had the word of Rabbi Moshe Pinto to back her. She insisted that they research the matter.

The soldiers decided to pay Father a visit and asked him not to plant false hopes in the heart of this pitiful woman. Father merely asked if they

themselves had seen the body. When they replied in the negative, he sent them on their way, warning them not to announce his death.

After some time, a prisoner exchange took place between Israel and Egypt. Lo and behold! Rabbi Azarzar was among those in the exchange. He related that when they were digging foxholes in the area of the Suez Canal, the Egyptians threw grenades onto their bunker. All of his comrades fell. An Egyptian soldier tried to shoot him, time and again, but kept missing. When Rabbi Chaim saw that he was so close to death, he pretended he was dead and thereby saved himself. He prepared a *seudat hodayah* in thanksgiving for his miraculous salvation and invited my father, who had seen with his pure eyes that he was still living.

Regarding the question as to how the Torah can allow one to marry a gentile woman captured in battle, our Sages say that the Torah knows man's nature. It was preferable to allow a person to marry such a woman in a permitted way, so that he should not take her incorrectly (see *Kiddushin* 22a). In any event, if one were to go to war with the Torah in his heart, he would surely succeed in subduing his *Yetzer Hara* and avoiding the perils of the beautiful woman, who would beget the wayward son (see *Sanhedrin* 107a). The Torah does not look positively upon such a union. For this reason, the battle with the *Yetzer Hara* is alluded to here. By constantly being on the lookout for the *Yetzer Hara*, one will avoid confrontations with him, which will almost certainly have negative implications.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why did the Torah make a provision allowing one to take a beautiful captive woman for a wife, instead of warning him to guard his eyes against gazing upon her in the first place? How could Bnei Yisrael come to be drawn after such women, since they were carrying the Sefer Torah with them?

- ◆ Bnei Yisrael are Hashem's *kallah*, and He is their *chatan*. The Torah is the marriage contract. In order to ensure a good marriage, Bnei Yisrael are enjoined to study the Torah to discover Hashem's will.
- ◆ The *Yetzer Hara* sees the strong connection between Bnei Yisrael and their Creator. He tries with all his might to sever the knot, by introducing thoughts of sin into the hearts of man.
- ◆ When one enters the battlefield with thoughts of fulfilling a mitzvah, Hashem protects his eyes from wrong sights. But when one is far from Torah study and does not fear Hashem as he should, thoughts of sin enter his mind, and he can even be drawn to desire the beautiful captive woman.
- ◆ The Torah makes a provision for marrying the captive woman. It is better that one should marry her in a permitted way than in a forbidden manner.



Performing to Perfection

“If you build a new house, you shall make a fence for your roof, so that you will not place blood in your house if a fallen one falls from it”

(Devarim 22:8)

Isn't it self-understood that one would erect a fence around his roof? No one wants to endanger the lives of his loved ones. Why, then, does the Torah deem it necessary to enact the mitzvah of making such a fence?

Every person comes into this world with a purpose which he is meant to fulfill. Each animal is created to serve mankind and then to leave this world just as it came. In contrast, man enters the world in order to accomplish a purpose. We find many people who possess caches of

acquisitions. But none of it will escort them on their final journey. Torah is the only thing that accompanies a person on his trip into the world which is completely good (*Avot* 6:10). Yeshayahu Hanavi proclaimed (58:8), “Your righteousness will precede you.” “Righteousness” is a reference to Torah (see *Chulin* 88a).

The Zohar (II, 82b) calls the Torah a “Book of Advice,” for it guides one along the path of life, counseling him as to the best way to navigate his journey in this world. On one of my flights to Argentina, I noticed a woman riveted to her book. She did not eat or sleep throughout the flight, so engrossed was she in her reading. As we were landing, she finished the final chapter, a smile of fulfillment upon her face. As I was disembarking, I found that she had left her book on her seat. Remembering just how precious this book was to her, I brought it to her attention. She merely waved me off, as if to say the book was of no significance and could remain where she had left it.

I always like to learn from my experiences. I tried to think what I could learn from this incident. It taught me the vast difference between the gentile and the Jew. A gentile can spend hours on something, and then abandon it on the plane. The Jew, on the other hand, studies the Torah, his guidebook, with great effort, and is meticulous to uphold all that is written in it. He knows that the mitzvot are capable of building his personality.

When a person recognizes his purpose in this world, he is ensconced in a blanket of security. He will never be gripped with sadness or depression. This is in direct opposition to the general population, who are far from Torah and mitzvot. For them, depression has become a way of life. In order to prove one’s mettle as a person of value, he must present the business card of a leading psychologist or therapist, whom he visits regularly. Although I certainly experienced difficult times, I never allowed myself to fall into sorrow or depression. This is due to the Torah, which gladdens the heart. One who studies Torah immediately forgets his personal problems. All that concerns him is understanding what he is learning.

The Torah contains various mitzvot. Some are understandable; others are not. The mitzvah to erect a fence around one's roof is logical. On the other hand, the mitzvah of sending away the mother bird and taking her eggs is above our level of comprehension. If not for the Torah's injunction, we would never think of doing this, for we would consider it an act of cruelty.

The Torah commands us to build a fence around our roof to teach us that all mitzvot, understandable and otherwise, must be kept punctiliously. The Torah is our way of life, through which a person accomplishes his purpose. He must do all mitzvot because Hashem commanded them, not because they make sense to him (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Vayikra* 626).

A person might aver that he would never murder, for this is the epitome of cruelty. Nevertheless, he should internalize the understanding that he is avoiding this act not only because it is unethical, but, first and foremost, because the Torah commands it. If people would do only those things that sit well with them, the world would fall into chaos. Just as every person's face is different from every other person, so are their minds different. What seems correct to one person might seem like callousness to the next. How can the world exist when each person acts only according to how he sees fit? Who is to say what is the proper path of behavior?

The mitzvah to erect a fence around one's roof guards us against this type of thinking. All directives of the Torah must be kept scrupulously, without differentiation. One must fulfill the commandments that he understands, as well as those beyond his understanding. And when he fulfills the logical mitzvot, he should intend to do them because this is Hashem's will.

A woman was going to bury her two sons who had been killed in a car accident. On the way she came to see me, asking for words of *chizuk* and encouragement. With her strong spirit, this mother asked no questions. She just wanted me to help strengthen her *emunah* in this trying time,

when she was sending off her sons with her last good-bye. Only firm faith in Hashem and the understanding that everything comes from Him, the good and the difficult, will allow a person to cope with such a tragedy. If a person accustoms himself to live by the word of Hashem and accept all that transpires, those easily comprehensible and those not, then when troubles beset him, he does not have grievances toward Him. He accepts whatever comes his way with love, having internalized the concept that whatever He does is good (see *Ta'anit* 21a). Even if, at times, things seem to be unreasonable, this person believes beyond the shadow of a doubt that Hashem has His own calculations, and everything adds up to a perfect sum.

At the end of parashat *Ki Teitzei*, we are commissioned to erase the memory of Amalek, who “happened upon you on the way” (*Devarim* 25:17-19). The word קרה (happened) contains the word קר (cold) within it. Amalek’s method of destruction was by cooling off the *emunah* of Am Yisrael. Amalek asserted that those mitzvot which are illogical are best left unfulfilled; one should observe only what he can comprehend. This type of “chilled” attitude toward mitzvot is most likely to pull a person away from the path of righteousness and performance of all mitzvot, whether self-understood or not. For this reason, we are enjoined to eradicate Amalek and the warped way of thinking which he represents.

Man’s purpose in this world is to accept the word of Hashem, no questions asked. By ensuring observance of the logical mitzvot with the intention of doing the will of Hashem, one will fulfill the seemingly difficult and incomprehensible ones, as well, even when they demand self-sacrifice.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why does the Torah command one to place a fence around his roof, when this is self-understood? The Torah is full of mitzvot, some easily understood, and others, not. It is our job to fulfill all of them, whether we understand them or not.
- ◆ Were people to observe only those mitzvot which they can rationalize, the

world would be a place of chaos. Who is to decide what is correct and what is not? The Torah is our guidebook for living. By commanding one to erect a fence around his roof, we learn that we must keep all mitzvot, both those that we understand and those that we do not.

- ◆ When a person trains himself to keep all of Hashem's mitzvot perfectly, he accepts the difficulties he faces with love and equanimity, with full awareness that all that Hashem does is good.
- ◆ In the commandment to eradicate all memory of Amalek, the wording is: "that he happened upon you on the way." The word קרר (happened) can also mean that he cooled you off. Amalek taught Bnei Yisrael to "chill out" and thaw from their fiery enthusiasm in Avodat Hashem. One who refrains from doing the mitzvot which are above his comprehension will eventually abstain from doing even those he understands. We are therefore enjoined to eradicate Amalek completely, as well as his essence and the way of life he represents.



The Results of Envy

“An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the congregation of Hashem, even their tenth generation shall not enter the congregation of Hashem”

(Devarim 23:4)

Sefer Shmuel I (17) describes the famous battle between David and Goliat. Young David, physically small, succeeded in vanquishing the mighty warrior, Goliat. Goliat is described (ibid., 17:4-6) as standing at six *amot* plus a *zeret* and was completely coated in a scale-like shield of armor. He wore a copper helmet and copper foot coverings. Before David volunteered to fight him, Goliat had the boldness to declare to the entire

Jewish camp, “Why should you wage war against me? I am a mighty Pelishti, whereas you are mere subjects of Shaul. Choose for yourselves a representative who will fight on your behalf. If he conquers me, then I and my entire nation will be your servants. But if I conquer him, then you will all be enslaved to me” (*Shmuel I*, 17:8-9).

The lad, David, heard what was going on, and offered to risk his life to rescue his people. The pesukim (26-47) indicate that David could not bear this defiled creature blaspheming Hashem and His nation. By the laws of nature, David did not stand a chance against Goliath, who was many times his size. But he felt he had to do something to avenge his faith.

When Shaul saw who had volunteered to fight the battle of the Jews (*ibid.*, 55) “he said to Avner, the minister of the army, ‘Avner, whose son is this lad?’” Rashi asks if Shaul did not recognize David. David was his arms-bearer; he knew who he was. What caught Shaul’s eye was that David conducted himself with royalty. Shaul reasoned that if David came from the royal family of Peretz (פרץ), he would become king. A king “breaks” (פורץ) the way for himself, and no one can stop him (*Yevamot* 76b). He also knew that if David hailed from the royal family of Zerach, he would become important.

Doeg replied, “Before you ask after his lineage, inquire as to whether or not he is worthy of being a member of the Jewish nation, for he descends from the Moabite, Rut.” Avner answered, “We learn that an Ammonite or Moabite man may not enter our nation. But an Ammonite or Moabite woman is permitted. This is because it is not the way of women to come out with bread and drink to the war-weary.”

Doeg surely knew the halachah, which had been ruled in the Beit Hamidrash of Shmuel Hanavi (*Yevamot* 77a). This was the ruling transmitted by Moshe Rabbeinu via Yehoshua. Why did Doeg ignore this ruling, insisting on challenging David’s roots? It was due to his tremendous jealousy of David, who merited vanquishing the mighty Goliath and was associated with royalty.

Doeg's name (דוג) alludes to this defect. The word דוג means "worry." He was constantly worried about David. Therefore, he was envious of David's victories. Chazal teach (*Avot* 4:21), "Envy, lust, and the pursuit of glory drive a person out of the world." Doeg's envy of David removed him from the world of Torah and halachah, to the extent that he denied an outright ruling and challenged the Torah teacher of the time.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ When David offered to fight Goliath, Shaul asked who he was. Didn't Shaul recognize David as his arms-bearer? Shaul saw David behave in a regal manner, and therefore inquired as to whether he descended from royal roots. Doeg told him to first ascertain whether or not David was considered part of the Jewish nation.
- ◆ How could Doeg forget the halachah, publicized in the Beit Midrash of Shmuel Hanavi, which clearly stated that an Ammonite or Moabite man may not convert to Judaism, but an Ammonite or Moabite woman was permitted to convert?
- ◆ Doeg harbored such intense envy toward David for his victory with Goliath and for winning the hand of the king's daughter in marriage that he simply forgot the halachah. Our Sages warn us that envy, lust, and glory drive a person out of this world.



If You Give Your Word, Make Sure to Keep It

“You shall observe and carry out what emerges from your lips, just as you vowed a voluntary gift to Hashem, your G-d, whatever you spoke with your mouth”

(Devarim 23:24)

The Torah warns us regarding vows. One who promised to bring a voluntary offering in the Beit Hamikdash, or any other donation for *kedushah*, must beware to fulfill his word. This teaches us the significance of the spoken word. How careful we must be in all areas of speech!

The following incident taught me an important lesson. A man was found publicly desecrating Shabbat. When his relatives visited me, I expressed my dismay at his open denigration of this sacred mitzvah. His nephew told him that I was extremely agitated over his conduct. The man then told me that if I was angry at him, he was not interested in me any longer. For good measure, he did away with his *kippah*, effectively throwing off the yoke of mitzvot. I tried to mollify him, stating that I was not angry with him personally, but pained by his flagrant violation of Shabbat. During another discussion with his nephew, I discovered that he still told his uncle that I was angry at him. I asked why he was spreading false rumors. He replied that his intentions were pure; he figured that if he told his uncle that the Rav was angry with him, he would repent and observe Shabbat again.

The nephew regretted having told his uncle that I was angry at him. Not only were his words ineffective, they caused the man to sin further. I impressed upon this nephew the Torah's prohibition against repeating another's words, even if they are the truth. Only words of Torah may be repeated; it is considered a mitzvah to tell them over to others. Both of

us discovered, the hard way, just how much damage can be caused by the misuse of words.

This incident taught me a tremendous lesson. How careful we must be with what comes out of our mouths! The nephew certainly had good intentions. But he may have inserted his interpretation of my words when repeating them. Maybe he recapped my words with negative intonations, which I had never intended. His repetition would have best been left unsaid.

The Torah warns us (*Vayikra* 19:17), “You shall reprove your fellow and do not bear a sin because of him.” One is enjoined to rebuke his fellow man before him and not behind his back. The latter form of rebuke is liable to be completely ineffective and even backfire.

In Tehillim, we read (145:18), “Hashem is close to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him sincerely.” Why doesn’t it say, “Hashem is close to all who are close to Him, to all who sincerely draw close to Him,” or, alternatively, “Hashem hears all who call upon Him”?

Hashem is, indeed, close to all who call out to Him. But this does not mean to say that He hears, i.e., responds, to all who call upon Him sincerely. Often, a person requests something which is not in his best interest. Hashem, Who is omniscient, knows which things are for a person’s ultimate benefit, and which are not. Therefore, since Hashem is close to all who call upon Him, He withholds the object of the person’s request. Even when Hashem denies someone his fervent wish, for reasons known only to Him, He demonstrates intense closeness toward the person, even participating in his suffering. Hashem is close to all who call upon Him, whether He accedes to their wishes or not. How powerful is speech, capable of evoking Heavenly mercy, even when his request is rejected. Hashem does only what is ultimately beneficial for His children.

There is a vast distinction between man’s connection with Hashem and His connection with man. Man’s connection to his Maker is limited. However sincerely a person prays, or however much his desires are fulfilled, he can never reach beyond a certain point in closeness to

Hashem. Only death can bring a person to cling completely to Hashem, as the pasuk states (*Vayikra* 10:3), “I will be sanctified through those who are closest to Me.” As long as a person is living, he is bound by his body, restricted from joining Hashem in the full sense.

Chazal teach (*Avot* 2:4), “Do not trust in yourself until the day you die.” Man is constantly being pursued by his *Yetzer Hara*. If a person were to believe that he is completely connected to his Creator, the *Yetzer Hara* would likely inject thoughts of arrogance and conceit into his heart. He would feel that his good deeds brought him where he is. In order to obviate this scenario, Hashem decreed that He is the One Who is close to man, when he truly calls out to Him. This is the reason for the wording, “To all who call upon Him sincerely,” and not, “To all who are truly close to Him.”

Pirkei Avot teaches that our actions have everlasting significance, as it says (2:1) that there is “a watchful Eye, an attentive Ear, and all your deeds are recorded in a Book.” What is the significance of delineating “a watchful Eye” and “an attentive Ear,” when “all your deeds are recorded in a Book” would seem sufficient to relay the message that everything we do lives on? Were it to just state that all our actions are recorded in writing, one would mistakenly think that only the big, seemingly significant acts which have far-reaching consequences are recorded. But the fact is that man sees only as far as his eyesight reaches. Hashem, on the other hand, examines the heart (*Shmuel* I, 16:17). Only Hashem is able to decide what is really important and what is not. “A watchful Eye, an attentive Ear” are not references to mere eyesight and hearing. They signify the sight and hearing of none other than Hashem, Himself, Who is unlimited and able to analyze the true reasons for a person’s deeds.

One must be vigilant regarding his speech. At times, he feels that he spoke appropriately. But this is not always the case. One day, he will be called to task for all that he said. This is why our Sages exhort us (*Avot* 1:11), “Scholars, be cautious with your words.” The wise man will weigh his words, so that he does not cause damage with what he says. Although one may feel that his words are beneficial, a thorough check will prove

whether or not this is so. Maybe the watchful Eye and the attentive Ear will not be pleased with what they observe.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The Torah commands us to honor whatever we say. This mitzvah is stated in regard to vows, but it speaks to all of us on various levels. Speech is sacred and should be guarded.
- ◆ Before rebuking one's fellow man, he should make sure he will not do more damage than good.
- ◆ Hashem is close to all who call to Him sincerely. But He is not necessarily close to all who are truly close to Him. There are times when Hashem must deny our requests. Only He truly knows what is good for us.
- ◆ The phrase "A watchful Eye, and an attentive Ear" teaches us that every act of ours, no matter how seemingly small, is recorded for posterity.



Faith Clarifies All Doubt

“Remember what Amalek did to you, on the way, when you were leaving Egypt”

(Devarim 25:17)

When Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, amidst mighty miracles, all the nations of the world were gripped with fear. They clearly saw Hashem's strong hand. This is expressed in the Song of the Sea (*Shemot* 15:15): "Then the chieftains of Edom were confounded, trembling gripped the powers of Moav, all the dwellers of Canaan dissolved. May fear and terror befall them..." The nations were so afraid of Am Yisrael that they all proclaimed (*ibid.*, 15:18), "Hashem shall reign for all eternity!" Our nation was

compared to a boiling bathtub. Everyone is afraid to enter, for fear of being scorched. One brazen man, named Amalek, took the plunge. He got burnt, but he cooled off the waters for everyone else (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim* 938). The nations of the world were no longer in awe and fear of Am Yisrael, as they had been originally.

Because Amalek cooled off the attitude of the surrounding nations toward Bnei Yisrael, we are commanded to eradicate them.

But Amalek's malevolence does not end there. Amalek will go down in history for introducing doubt in the hearts of Am Yisrael vis-à-vis their faith in Hashem. This faith had become firmly established in the wake of witnessing Hashem's great miracles on their behalf (see *Shem MiShmuel, Parashat Vayikra* 5679). Doubt continues to gnaw inside us to this very day. As long as Amalek endures, this doubt will consume us. Only with the arrival of Mashiach and the complete eradication of Amalek, when Hashem's sovereignty will be universally recognized, will all forms of doubt disappear.

The Rambam (*Hilchot Melachim* 12:1) asks how the world will look in the times of Mashiach. Will we live like our fathers of thousands of years ago? The Rambam says that the world will continue functioning as before, with developments and technological advancements proceeding at the same rate as previously. But of course, everything will be in the most kosher manner. Mashiach will filter everything with the fine sieve of halachah. The most essential change which Mashiach will effect will be the removal of the buds of uncertainty, rooted in the weeds of Amalek. Mashiach will reinforce our *emunah* in Hashem. With the elimination of all vestiges of doubt, Hashem's Throne will, once more, be complete. All will subscribe to Him, fully believing that there is none other.

The *gematria* of the name עמלק (Amalek) is equal to that of the word ספק (doubt). The word מקרה (coincidence) is comprised of the two words רק מה' (only from Hashem). Even those things that seem like happenstance are from Hashem Alone. One who attributes what happens to him to mere coincidence sets himself up for doubt and

confusion. He resembles the nation of Amalek, who closed their eyes to Hashem's supervision.

While on a trip to Morocco, I had to catch an outgoing flight. Generally, I like to arrive at the airport approximately three hours before takeoff. But this time, I lost my way on the road. It was only one hour to takeoff, and I was a considerable distance away from the airport. In desperation, I called out to the previous tzaddikim, that their merits should guide my steps and allow me to arrive at the airport as quickly as possible. A taxi suddenly stopped near me, and the driver agreed to take me to my destination. When I asked him if he normally travels this route, he said no, but he had lost his way and found himself there.

Heaven arranged that this taxi driver should get lost so that he could bring me to the airport in record time. The place where he picked me up was a place where no taxis are ever found. I considered it an open miracle to find a taxi there just when I needed it.

Just as we have accustomed ourselves to see the hand of Hashem in each and every occurrence, there are those who see coincidence as the cause of everything that transpires. They would claim that even this incident with the taxi was coincidence, as well.

Those who live by the credo of coincidence fortify the force of Amalek in the world. He tried to "chill" our *emunah* in Hashem and His messengers.

The Torah tells us (see *Devarim* 17:10), "You shall do according to the word that they will tell you." Even if our Sages were to state that right is left and left is right, we must follow them blindly. Their ruling is the ruling of the Torah (*Shoftim* 11). When one complies with the instructions of the tzaddikim, he demonstrates his firm faith in Hashem and His servants, who represent the Torah outlook.

Rabbi Kalifa Mizrachi experienced a terrible trauma when his young son, Yosef, spilled boiling water on himself. He suffered third-degree burns. Rabbi Mizrachi was well-known for his simple faith in tzaddikim.

He sent messengers to my father, Rabbi Moshe Aharon Pinto, zy”a, in order to receive his advice and blessing. When my father heard that the boy had been burnt by water prepared in honor of Shabbat, he instructed the father to pour the rest of the water on the boy’s body and *B’ezrat Hashem*, he would have a complete recovery. Rabbi Mizrachi complied without asking questions, although the instructions seemed strange to him. Without hesitation, he entered the hospital where his son had been admitted, and poured the rest of the water on him. At first, the doctors were ready to call the police and report the father for child abuse. But after the son’s cries died down, they were struck with shock. The boy’s condition suddenly improved until he was completely healed, save for a small scar, a reminder of the great miracle that happened to him.

Today, this Yosef is one of our disciples, living in New York. I invite him, from time to time, to stand at the pulpit and share his amazing story with the public.

Believe me, if I were told to pour boiling water on my son who had already been scorched, I am not so sure I would agree. This seems a most cruel act. But those who have staunch *emunah* accept the instructions of the tzaddikim without asking questions. In this manner, they re-affirm and reinforce their faith ever more. Those who believe will completely banish doubt from their hearts, strengthening their faith in Hashem and tzaddikim.

Parashat *Ki Teitzei* ends with mention of Amalek, and parashat *Ki Tavo* begins with the mitzvah of *bikurim*, as the pasuk states (*Devarim* 26:1-2), “It will be when you enter the Land... that you shall take of the first of every fruit... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose, to make His Name rest there.” What is the connection between these two subjects?

Bnei Yisrael were ordered to bring the first of their fruit to the Kohen in order to teach them that it is not their power which brings them wealth. Hashem alone provides their sustenance. He is the One Who blesses their fields and orchards. If not for the rains and bounty which He

showers upon them, nothing would grow. It is only due to Hashem's supervision that the earth yields its products.

Bringing *bikurim* proved Am Yisrael's perfect faith in Hashem, Who blesses their produce. With the reinforcement of this faith, Amalek's power is diminished, together with the negative traits which he represents. Doubt is replaced by trust. In contrast, when a person is self-assured that it is his expertise which brings him his livelihood, he strengthens the power of doubt. This is the doubt planted in this world by Amalek, whose objective was to cool off our faith in Hashem.

Nowadays, we unfortunately do not have the Beit Hamikdash. We do not have the opportunity to ascend to Yerushalayim with baskets full of ripe fruit. It would behoove us to become accustomed to thank Hashem for all the good He does for us, small and great alike. The epitome of *hakarat hatov* is to bless upon the seemingly bad just as one blesses on the good (see *Berachot* 60b). This wonderful quality reinforces one's faith on the one hand, and nullifies the power of Amalek, on the other. Who among us does not anticipate the coming of Mashiach, who will bring an end to all our suffering? Only after Amalek's influence is completely eradicated from this world, will Hashem reveal His great light upon us. Let us hasten his arrival by removing all doubt and intensifying our faith!

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ We are enjoined to eradicate the memory of Amalek. They were the first to cool off the gentiles' fear of Bnei Yisrael. They also introduced doubts in *emunah* into the hearts of our nation. This is hinted to in his very name. The word עמלק (Amalek) is numerically equivalent to the word ספק (doubt).
- ◆ Parashat *Ki Teitzei* ends with the mention of Amalek, and parashat *Ki Tavo* begins with the mitzvah of *bikurim*. This is to teach us that when one brings *bikurim*, he asserts that all comes from Hashem Alone.

Strengthening one's faith weakens the power of Amalek, expressed by doubt and the belief in coincidence.



Modern-day Amalek

“Remember what Amalek did to you, on the way, when you were leaving Egypt, that he happened upon you on the way, and he struck those of you who were hindmost, all the weaklings at your rear, when you were faint and exhausted, and he did not fear G-d. It shall be that when Hashem, your G-d, gives you rest from all your enemies all around, in the Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance to possess it, you shall wipe out the memory of Amalek from under the heaven – you shall not forget!”

(Devarim 25:17-19)

The mitzvah of eradicating Amalek is monumental. We see this in the fact that it is described in much detail in the Torah, and that both Moshe and Yehoshua were commanded to fulfill it. Like all the mitzvot, it must be done according to specifications, without adding or subtracting from Hashem's command (ibid., 13:1).

It may seem that this mitzvah is not relevant in our times. If we were to kill someone who seems to be an Amalekite, the entire world would rise in retaliation. How is it feasible to perform this mitzvah nowadays, when we are not even aware of who is a true-blooded Amalekite?

The modern-day Amalek is none other than the *Yetzer Hara*, who waits at man's doorstep to trip him up, time and again. It is man's mission to gird himself with inner strength to combat this enemy and remove his influence, so similar to Amalek. In the days of the Wilderness, Amalek sat in ambush at the doorsteps of Bnei Yisrael, biding their time as they prepared to pounce upon them with doubt and cool off their *yirat Shamayim*. This is borne out in the pasuk (*Bereishit* 4:7), "Sin rests at the door." In a moment of weakness, the *Yetzer Hara* steps in and rubs his hands in glee, having discovered a treasure trove.

The way to eradicate Amalek and the *Yetzer Hara* is only with Torah. We are taught (*Kiddushin* 30b), "I created the *Yetzer Hara*; I created Torah as its antidote." Only intense Torah study, coupled with overcoming one's negative inclinations, can completely nullify his power. By way of *remez*, the word עמלק (Amalek) can be divided in two: ע-מלק. It is possible to מלק (slaughter) the *Yetzer Hara* by means of the Torah, which is interpreted in 'ע (seventy) ways.

A man from Lyon, France, let us call him Yisrael, once told me he had a neighbor whom, he was certain, descended from Amalek. Whenever Yisrael observed any Jewish custom, his neighbor would object and voice his blatant anti-Semitism. Whenever Yisrael would sing the Shabbat *zemirot* with his family, this man would bang on their mutual wall in protest. Yisrael was sure that his neighbor hailed from Amalek, so disgusted was he with anything that contained a trace of holiness.

I told Yisrael that I thought that his neighbor was actually a Jew. The fact that any sign of Judaism so irked him proved that he himself contained a spark of it, albeit hidden and all but snuffed out. His *Yetzer Hara* was trying with all his might to prevent this spark from shining forth. I advised him to approach his neighbor and speak to him pleasantly, inquiring whether he is, indeed, Jewish.

Yisrael accepted my advice and approached his neighbor. The neighbor, at first, viewed him with suspicion, but after a few moments, allowed him to enter his home. In response to the query as to his religion,

he asserted that he was definitely a non-Jew. As evidence, he produced a piece of paper, which his mother presented to him upon her deathbed. He protected this page at all costs, but could not read it for it was written in strange letters. Perhaps his Jewish neighbor could help him decipher the message?

Yisrael showed me the paper. To my utter shock, it was covered with Hebrew lettering, stating clearly that their family was Jewish. This anti-Semite's mother was called Liba, a common name among Ashkenazi Jews. The neighbor, obviously, went into a state of shock at this revelation. But with time, he came closer to authentic Judaism, learning Torah and recognizing his Creator.

Kohelet (7:2) states, "And the living should take it to heart." The word וְהַחֲיֵי (and the living) is numerically equivalent to twenty-nine. Adding one for the word itself makes thirty, the *gematria* of the letter ל', an allusion to לִמּוּד (study). Torah study affords one life. As long as a person lives, he should immerse himself in Torah, through which he gains the tools to conquer Amalek, the embodiment of the *Yetzer Hara*.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The *Yetzer Hara* is the modern-day Amalek, who waits in ambush at our doorstep. The way to eradicate him is by Torah study and mitzvah performance. We can divide the word עַמְלֵק into ע-מֵלֵק. It is possible to מַלֵּךְ (slaughter) the *Yetzer Hara* by means of the Torah, which is interpreted in ע' (seventy) ways.
- ◆ "And the living should take it to heart." The word וְהַחֲיֵי (and the living) is numerically equivalent to twenty-nine. Adding one for the word itself makes thirty, the *gematria* of the letter ל', an allusion to לִמּוּד (study). Torah study affords one life. As long as a person lives, he should immerse himself in Torah, through which he gains the tools to conquer Amalek, the embodiment of the *Yetzer Hara*.



Defeating Doubt

“Remember what Amalek did to you, on the way, when you were leaving Egypt”

(Devarim 25:17)

In days of old, the nations of the world were of the opinion that Hashem does not manage the world directly. In their opinion, it was beneath His dignity to be involved in the daily affairs of the world. He therefore appointed messengers who supervise and run it for Him. For this reason, they worshipped the elements, such as the luminaries. They did not deny Hashem’s Presence or the fact that He created the world, they just felt that after arranging everything, He took a back seat, so to speak, and assigned positions to various elements regarding the management of the world (see *Rambam, Avodah Zarah 1:1*).

With Bnei Yisrael’s release from Egypt, the nations were released from this mindset. They clearly saw Hashem’s miracles and His direct supervision of His nation. As clarity dawned, they attained a keen awareness that it is Hashem Who created everything and continues to manage it all, every single moment of the day. This awareness grew and intensified, reaching its crest at the Splitting of the Sea, when everyone clearly witnessed Hashem’s Presence. The Midrash says (*Mechilta, Beshalach 3*) that a maid-servant had greater revelations at the sea than the prophet Yechezkel ben Buzi. Chazal explain that when the sea split, all the waters in the entire world split, as well. If someone was holding a cup of water, the water in the cup split. This proved to all the magnitude of *Kriyat Yam Suf*.

The pasuk says (*Shemot 15:15*), “Then the chieftains of Edom were confounded, trembling gripped the powers of Moav.” The nations were literally quaking as Hashem’s powers stormed the world. He showed them clearly that He is in charge. Then came Amalek. They didn’t care for the burning intensity with which the nations regarded Am Yisrael, Hashem’s

Chosen Nation. They wanted to cool off this fervor. They arose in battle, opening the way for other nations, as well, to make inroads in attacking our people (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim 938*).

Furthermore, Amalek planted the seeds of doubt in Am Yisrael. Amalek claimed that there is really no such thing as Divine intervention. Everything happens by mere coincidence (see *Machshavot Charutz*). The name עמלק is numerically equivalent to the word ספק. Hashem proclaims that neither is His Name or His Throne complete as long as Amalek and doubt endure (*Shemot 17:16; Rashi, ibid.*).

We are enjoined (*Devarim 25:19*), “You shall wipe out the memory of Amalek from under the heaven – you shall not forget!” The injunction to eradicate Amalek prevails in every generation, for his essence and way of life are in direct contradiction to Judaism. As long as Amalek exists, this war wages on. The forces of purity and faith constantly fight the forces of doubt and defilement. The most effective way of removing Amalek’s impact is through intensifying Torah study and strengthening one’s faith in Hashem. When a person believes that all that transpires is by His word, and one does not stub his finger unless it was pre-ordained on High (*Chulin 7b*), Amalek’s power becomes reduced, and impurity loses its grip.

Bnei Yisrael wandered in the Wilderness for the duration of forty years in order to shake off the shackles of defilement to which they had been chained. These negative forces had their source in Amalek, the symbol of *keri* (form of impurity) and *kerirut* (coldness). Since Bnei Yisrael slackened in their Torah study, the Amalekites attacked them, injecting them with impurity (see *Tanchuma, Ki Teitzei 9*). Our nation needed forty years to cleanse themselves of the after-effects of their brush with Amalek. The *kelippah* attempts to gain a foothold wherever there is an increase in *kedushah* and *taharah*. This is because impurity gains nourishment from that which is pure. The battle with Amalek has yet to end. The forces of impurity constantly fight against the powers of purity. Since Torah gives life to Am Yisrael, the *kelippah*, or the *Yetzer Hara*, tries with all his might to thwart a person’s decision to study Torah (see

Derech Eitz Hachaim of the *Ramchal*). The greatest *Yetzer Hara* is that of *bitul* Torah.

The *Yetzer Hara* knows his work well. He does not persuade a person not to believe in those instances where the hand of Hashem is apparent. It is in cases in which there is doubt that the *Yetzer Hara*, coming with the power of Amalek, plants uncertainty in man's heart, convincing him that things are different than they really are. He argues that it is not Hashem's hand running the world, but mere happenstance.

The machinations of the Evil Inclination are a slippery, steep incline. Once a person has lost his footing, there is a real risk of him sliding down to purgatory, with no hope of halting his decline. Therefore, a person must be on the alert to never allow the *Yetzer Hara* an opening in his heart. It is easy to slide downward; climbing back up the slope requires tremendous effort.

Contemplating the wonders of the world brings a person to the recognition of Hashem as the undisputable Manager. He sustains and supports all living creatures (see *Avodah Zarah* 3b). Scientists have studied the life of the raven. Its nestlings are hatched with white feathers. The mother does not recognize them as her offspring and abandons them. The scientists discovered that from the very eggs from which these birds hatch, worms emerge, which nourish the chicks until they can fend for themselves. They then shed their white feathers and replace them with black ones. Then their mother begins to recognize them as her own and nurtures them.

On a superficial level, one can claim it is mere coincidence that the eggs produce worms which nourish the nestlings. But one who contemplates the world on a deeper level cannot remain indifferent to this marvel of Creation. He is compelled to recognize Hashem's hand behind the scenes.

Parashat *Ki Tavo*, following parashat *Ki Teitzei*, begins with the mitzvah to bring the *bikurim* to the Kohen, as the pasuk states (*Devarim* 26:1-2), "It will be when you enter the Land... that you shall take of the first of every fruit... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that

Hashem, your G-d, will choose, to make His Name rest there.” This mitzvah came into effect immediately upon their entering Eretz Yisrael. What was so significant about it that it warranted such urgency?

Eretz Yisrael is the Land which contains the essence of *kedushah* and *taharah*, since Hashem supervises it directly at all times (*ibid.*, 11:12). As mentioned earlier, wherever there is an increase of sanctity, the *kelippah* attempts to gain a foothold, waging war against the powers of purity. Hashem knew that as soon as Bnei Yisrael entered the Land, they would apportion it and begin working it. There was a likelihood that the thought that it was their power and prowess which granted them bounty would take root in their hearts. This thought was planted by Amalek, father of doubt and derision. By commanding Bnei Yisrael to bring the first of their produce to the Beit Hamikdash before partaking of it, Hashem sowed in their souls the realization that everything from the ground comes from Above. Only by the grace of Hashem and His constant supervision do they merit enjoying the fruits of their labor.

The precondition for rains and harvest is Torah study and mitzvah observance. The pasuk states (*Devarim* 11:13-14), “It will be that if you hearken to My commandments that I command you today... then I shall provide rain for your Land in its proper time, the early and the late rains, that you may gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil.” The fact that Hashem binds Torah study and mitzvah performance with the produce of the Land indicates that there is law and justice. Only by doing Hashem’s commandments will Bnei Yisrael be showered with blessing.

The words (*ibid.*) “that I command you today” teach us that a person is required to consider the words of Torah as having just been given to him today at Har Sinai. The Midrash says (*Yalkut Shimoni, Mishlei* 937), “They should be new to you every day.” Only when a person feels freshness in Torah can he be faithful to Hashem and His Torah, and avoid all instances of doubt and uncertainty.

Let us use the following analogy to illustrate. A person purchases a new, expensive suit. The first few times he wears it, he feels tremendous pleasure. He guards it from all stains and dirt. But, with time, he becomes used to his suit and is not so careful to keep it clean. As more time passes, he does not feel any sense of specialness whatsoever. Eventually, he considers replacing it with a new one.

Similarly, Hashem granted us a most splendid gift, the Torah. In order to constantly feel excited about it and not consider it old hat, we must accept it anew each day. Only in this manner is there a chance that we will preserve it at all costs. But when a person does not feel inclined to view the Torah with freshness, he becomes habituated to it and may even grow to loathe it. He seeks newer, modern versions of serving Hashem, in exchange for the “outdated” Torah. He sees pleasure and fun in them. But they are merely substitutes for the “real thing.” The *kelippah* takes advantage of this situation and plants doubts in *emunah* into the heart of the one who is burnt-out with a Torah lifestyle. The way to combat doubt is by accepting the Torah anew each day, viewing it like the first of the fruit, plucked just now and bursting with purity.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, zy”a, writes that when a person does a misdeed, it creates a foul odor, the smell of impurity, in the world. The *ketoret* in the Beit Hamikdash was made of eleven types of fragrant herbs, including *chelbonah*, a foul-smelling spice (*Kritut* 6b). The Gemara asks why *chelbonah* should be included in the *ketoret*, since it was supposed to emit a sweet smell for Hashem. This spice represents the *resha'im*. Although they adhere to impurity and discharge a bad smell in the world, Hashem still desires them, anticipating the day they will return to Him. They will then remove all doubt from their hearts and bring offerings of good deeds to Hashem. The proximity to the sweet fragrances caused the *chelbonah* to smell sweet, as well. Am Yisrael’s power of mutual responsibility allows the influence of the tzaddik to “rub off” on the *resha'im*, arousing them to do teshuvah.

These words should encourage us to find a way into the hearts of our lost brothers, by uprooting all doubt from them and enlightening their

eyes with the pure truth. As soon as the world is divested of all doubt, Hashem's Name and His Throne can once again be complete, and His radiance can be revealed upon us, bringing the final *geulah*.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Amalek was the first to cool off the fear which the nations felt toward Bnei Yisrael. Likewise, he planted doubt in the hearts of our people. As long as the force of Amalekite impurity prevails, Hashem's Name and Throne are incomplete. Therefore, it is a mitzvah to eradicate Amalek. Bnei Yisrael wandered in the Wilderness for forty years in order to shake off the defilement of Amalek, before they would merit entering the Holy Land.
- ◆ The *kelippah*, rooted in the doubt of Amalek, approaches a person in the form of the *Yetzer Hara*. He tries to convince him that whatever happens is mere coincidence. This plants doubt in man's heart.
- ◆ Parashat *Ki Tavo* begins with the mitzvah of *bikurim*. This mitzvah is capable of removing all doubt from man's heart, as he contemplates Hashem's blessing upon the Land, irrelevant of his specific labors.
- ◆ The way to remove doubt is through renewing our acceptance of Torah, regarding it like the new fruit, freshly harvested from the tree (of life).
- ◆ The *ketoret* was a combination of many spices, including *chelbonah*, a foul-smelling herb. The *chelbonah* alludes to the resha'im, whose deeds emit a bad smell in the world. But Hashem eagerly awaits their return. Moreover, the tzaddikim, who are compared to the sweet spices of the *ketoret*, influence the resha'im to repent.



Gems on Parashat Ki Teitzei



Reward and Punishment

“You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a sojourner in his land”

(Devarim 23:8)

Rashi explains that one should not abhor an Egyptian because “they were your hosts at a time of pressing need.” The Midrash adds, “And they escorted you on your way out of Egypt” (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 226*).

The Egyptians treated our nation miserably when they were in their land. They enslaved them bitterly. Even after they sent them out, they chased after them. Nonetheless, Hashem does not deprive any creature of its due reward (see *Bava Kama 38b*). Although the Egyptians had a list of sins as long as the *galut*, Hashem does not counterbalance their good with their bad. He rewards them for what they did right and punishes them separately for their iniquities. They will be dealt with strictly for harassing our people, but for providing a home and escort for them, they will be richly rewarded.



Beware of Beneficial Speech

“Remember what Hashem, your G-d, did to Miriam, on the way, when you were leaving Egypt”

(Devarim 24:9)

We are commanded to remember what Hashem did to Miriam, as the nation left Egypt. He struck her with *tzara'at* for speaking *lashon hara* about her brother, Moshe.

Miriam was a righteous woman. Surely her intentions were pure. Perish the thought that she wished to speak negatively about her beloved brother. Nevertheless, she was dealt with the strict hand of justice and received *tzara'at* as punishment.

There is a profound lesson for us here. If the *tzaddeket*, Miriam, who had no negative intentions whatsoever toward her beloved brother, was nonetheless stricken with *tzara'at*, how much more severely will those who purposely spread derogatory information, with the intention of blackening their fellow Jew's name in public, be punished.

The punishment of *tzara'at* is measure for measure for the sin of *lashon hara*. Just as the speaker ostracized his fellow Jew by denigrating him, so too, must he move outside the camp, excommunicated from civilization until he is healed of the maladies of *tzara'at* and evil speech.

The parashah continues with the injunction “Remember what Amalek did to you, on the way, when you were leaving Egypt” (*Devarim 25:17*). The essence of Amalek is coldness. Their self-imposed credo was to cool off people's hearts in their service of Hashem.

The *Yetzer Hara* is the Amalek of our times (see *Tikkunei Zohar Chadash*). He tries with all the tricks in his bag to persuade people to “chill out” and lower their level of *emunah*. The *Yetzer Hara* knows that if he were to approach a person with the suggestion of committing a blatant

sin, he would be chased away. What does he do? He operates in a clever, cunning fashion. He worms his way into a person's heart, convincing him that speaking disparagingly about his fellow man is necessary, because it is for a beneficial purpose. After accustoming him to speak negatively, he slithers into other sins, until he has his victim trapped in a deep, dark pit, swarming with sin.

The connection between the incident with Miriam and the command to remember Amalek's dastardly deed, then, is the following: *Lashon hara* is categorically forbidden. On very rare occasions, when there will be tangible benefit in speaking negatively, or it will prevent great damage, one should ask a Rabbinic authority as to how to behave. One should always be very careful regarding his speech. Who can be assured that it is not the voice of Amalek, the *Yetzer Hara*, twisting the truth in order to trip him up?



Ki Tavo



Maintaining the Mitzvot – Maintaining the Land

“It will be when you enter the Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it, and dwell in it”

(Devarim 26:1)

“Moshe and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying: Keep the entire commandment that I command you this day”

(ibid. 27:1)

The juxtaposition of Bnei Yisrael’s entering and inheriting the Land and Moshe’s command regarding mitzvah observance teaches us that the basic precondition of existence in Eretz Yisrael is the fulfillment of the mitzvot. Without the fine stitching of mitzvah observance, the tapestry of Bnei Yisrael’s endurance in the Land simply unravels, becoming worn-out and frayed. Eretz Yisrael is the only place which has land-related mitzvot.

Moshe Rabbeinu pleaded with Hashem, importuning Him for the opportunity to enter the Promised Land. His sole purpose in entering was

to observe the Torah perfectly, for only there would he have access to the land-related mitzvot (see *Sotah* 14a).

Man is comprised of 248 organs and 365 sinews, corresponding to the 613 mitzvot (*Sha'arei Kedushah* 1:1). Each organ parallels another specific mitzvah. Eretz Yisrael has certain mitzvot which can be performed only on its shores. These mitzvot grant the nation the ability to exist there. This indicates a direct correlation between man and Eretz Yisrael, for both are dependent on the mitzvot. Moreover, man was created from the dust of the land.

This helps us understand the statement of Chazal (see *Ketubot* 110b) that one who resides in *chutz la'aretz* is like one who has no G-d. Man's body is fundamentally linked to the Holy Land, as both man and the Land are dependent on the mitzvot. It is like a three-ply cord. If man severs his ties with Eretz Yisrael, the third thread, that of Torah and mitzvot, becomes loose, as well. Mitzvot are the rope which connect man with his Creator.

One who has the resources to ascend to the Holy Land but desists is held accountable. He willfully forfeits the connection to the Land and to mitzvot, thereby relaxing his ties with Hashem, as well. Unfortunately, there are those who exhibit no sorrow or regret at living out of the boundaries of the Promised Land. They consider Eretz Yisrael a foreign country. These Jews have certainly dimmed the spark of Judaism within them.

Regrettably, we find ourselves in France and other lands of the Diaspora. But as we bemoan the exile of the *Shechinah*, anticipating the arrival of Mashiach, we are connected with Eretz Yisrael, the Holy Land. *Be'ezrat Hashem*, we will merit its rejoicing, with the coming of Mashiach.

Another intrinsic association between the Torah and the Holy Land is that both are acquired with suffering (see *Berachot* 5a). One who toils over the words of Torah and sweats over living in Eretz Yisrael will ultimately merit inheriting everlasting life in the World to Come, the essence of good and bliss, reserved for the worthy.

In Summary

- ◆ The connection between Bnei Yisrael's entering the Land and the command to observe all the mitzvot is that the prerequisite for enduring in the Land is fulfilling Torah and mitzvot.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu begged Hashem to allow him entry into the Land. He had an unquenchable desire to drink from the waters of Torah, including all of its mitzvot.
- ◆ Man is comprised of 248 organs and 365 sinews, corresponding to the 613 mitzvot of the Torah, upon which Eretz Yisrael is founded. The many land-related mitzvot denote a direct connection between man, the mitzvot, and Eretz Yisrael.
- ◆ One who resides in *chutz la'aretz* is similar to one who has no G-d, for he forfeits a portion of mitzvot which connect him with his Creator.
- ◆ Another correlation between the Torah and Eretz Yisrael is that both are attained through suffering. One who undergoes the tribulations of Torah in Eretz Yisrael is guaranteed a portion in the World to Come.



Bikurim – Baskets of Blessing

“It will be when you enter the Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it, and dwell in it, that you shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground that you bring in from your land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose, to make His Name rest there”

(Devarim 26:1– 2)

The mitzvah of *bikurim* was relevant from the time Bnei Yisrael entered the Holy Land. From the festival of Shavuot onward, they would take the first of their produce and bring it to the Kohen in the Beit Hamikdash. This was a form of *hakarat hatov* to Hashem for all the good He had done for them and the promises which He kept. Chumash *Devarim* introduces many mitzvot with the words *Ki tavo* (When you enter [to the Land]), e.g., appointing a king, *shemittah*, and *orlah*. These subjects are not included in parashat *Ki Tavo*. Why is the subject of *bikurim* singled out as the opening mitzvah in parashat *Ki Tavo*? And why is this portion not called “parashat *Bikurim*”?

There is an underlying connection between the beginning of the parashah and its end. It starts with the topic of bringing *bikurim* and ends with the various curses which will be incurred by the one who does not uphold the mitzvot as he should. This reminds Am Yisrael that settlement of the Land is contingent on their upholding Torah and mitzvot. If not, the Land will disgorge them. The words of the pasuk further hint to this by saying, “וירשת וישבת” – You shall take possession of it, and dwell in it.” Taking possession of the Land is dependent upon Torah study, done in the ישיבה – yeshiva. The Torah was given to Am Yisrael before they

entered the Land, to teach them that it is the whole basis for their existence there.

Before Am Yisrael entered the Land, Moshe Rabbeinu sang its praises as a Land flowing with milk and honey, blessed with all things good. But he warned them against becoming fat and placid, kicking Hashem, as it were, in their complacency. They should never feel it was their own might that brought them their wealth. Until their sojourn in the Wilderness, they were living in a strange land. Hashem extracted them from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, bringing them to the Land of Blessing amidst tremendous miracles (see *Devarim* 8:2-18).

In order to reach this level of awareness, they had to constantly feel that it was Hashem Who bequeathed this wonderful Land to them. The subject of *bikurim* is the opening mitzvah of parashat *Ki Tavo* for the following reason. When the Land would yield its produce, they were liable to feel that it was their own labor which produced such beautiful fruit. By bringing the first of their fruits to the Kohen, they would be reminded that it was Hashem Who had brought them there. Preserving this mindset would yield to strict adherence to all of the other land-related mitzvot, such as *shemittah* and *yovel*.

This is the secret of Am Yisrael's survival. They rise above the stormy seas of gentile fads, standing staunch against the winds of the time. How do they manage to do this? By taking their basket up to Hashem. The word for basket is **סַבֵּל**, numerically equivalent to sixty. These are the sixty tractates of the Talmud. It is Torah alone which protects a person from sinking in the quagmire of materialism.

Another anchor tying us to safe shores is recalling our exile in Egypt. This is the reason we mention this *galut* daily in our prayers. Similarly, David Hamelech's throne depicted a royal crown on one side and a simple shepherd on the other. This was in order to constantly remind him of his humble beginnings and prevent his heart from becoming haughty when he ruled the nation.

In Summary

- ◆ This parashah is called *Ki Tavo*. Many subjects in Chumash *Devarim* begin with these words, yet only the subject of *bikurim* was chosen as the opening mitzvah of this parashah. If this mitzvah is so central, why isn't the parashah called "parashat *Bikurim*"?
- ◆ The parashah opens with the mitzvah of *bikurim* and closes with the curses. Entering and settling the Land are in the merit of the Torah. The alternative is curse. The parashah is called *Ki Tavo* (When You Come), to teach that coming to the Land and settling there is dependent on Torah and mitzvah observance.
- ◆ Bnei Yisrael were liable to become proud of the produce, the fruit of their labor. Therefore, the Torah commanded them to bring *bikurim*, in order to remind them that everything comes from Hashem.



Soulful Strivings

“It will be when you enter the Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it, and dwell in it”

(Devarim 26:1)

When a person is born, his *neshamah* enters the Land of the Living. Chazal say (*Avot* 4:22), “Against your will you were created and against your will you were born.” The *neshamah* basks in the glow of the *Shechinah* in a wonderful haven under the Throne of Glory. Hashem compels it to don the garb of the body and descend to the physical world of materialism (see *Bartenura, Avot* 4:22). The *neshamah*, understandably, does not want to part from the spiritual pleasure which it enjoys Above. It is also concerned that all of the earthliness of this world will bog it down, lessening its luster and damaging its pristine qualities. But it is not

given a choice and must descend to embark upon the precarious journey called “life.”

The Mishnah continues, “And against your will, you will die.” Although, at first, the *neshamah* has no desire to descend to this world, after tasting the delights of the physical, it becomes so accustomed to it that it has no interest in leaving.

The letters of the word וְהָיָה in the phrase וְהָיָה כִּי תָבוֹא (It will be when you enter) can be transposed to spell Hashem’s Name ה-ו-ה-י. Hashem Himself escorts the *neshamah* on its uncertain expedition in this world of materialism, easing the transition from one world to another and helping it navigate its way.

Hashem knows full well that this world is full of physical and spiritual hazards. The *neshamah* placed within man’s body constantly reminds him of his source and helps him connect to his roots of spirituality and sanctity (*Maftach-Shalshet*). This is the crux of the constant battle in which a person is placed. It is a war between the spiritual soul and the physical body. As the *neshamah* draws a person upward, his body gravitates toward the ground, to the dust from which he was originally created. At times, the *neshamah* prevails, and at times, the body has the upper hand. When the body triumphs, the *neshamah* becomes dull and shabby, even forgetting where it came from. It has no desire to return to its rightful place on High, so mired is it in the muck of materialism, in the form of physical pleasures and amusements.

Hashem reminds the *neshamah* that it contains a Divine spark within it (see *Pardes Rimonim* 32a). This is so that it will constantly remember its sublime origins and, throughout its expedition in this world, recall its Heavenly source. It is the *neshamah*’s mission to tell the body, “Inherit and take possession of it!” This means that the person should settle in the Beit Hamidrash and inherit the Torah there, as the pasuk states (*Devarim* 33:4), “The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the Congregation of Yaakov.” The more a person is engrossed in Torah study, the more he feels Hashem’s reality. Upon contemplation,

we see how the giants of our people, such as the Rambam, the Ramban, etc., felt Hashem's Presence with them 24/7. They were able to do this, for they abandoned the physicality of this world and embraced their lofty *neshamot*.

The pesukim continue (ibid., 26:2), "That you shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground that you bring in from your land." The words "of the first" (מראשית) refer to the Torah, as the opening verse of the Torah says (*Bereishit* 1:1), "In the beginning of G-d's creating – בראשית ברא." Rashi expounds, "For the Torah, which is called *the beginning of His way* – ראשית דרכו." A person is adjured to place the Torah before him always. As he will go in its ways, he will merit reaping the produce of the Land. These are the mitzvot which he does, called the fruits of his labor. Fulfillment of mitzvot is our purpose in this world, as well as our protection from sin.

When the *neshamah* resists the order to descend, Hashem promises it His constant escort. He advises it that the best way to preserve its purity is by seeking shelter in the House of Study and observing the mitzvot. When the time comes for the *neshamah* to return to its roots, it will have many merits, worthy of untold reward.

The pasuk states (*Devarim* 28:6), "Blessed are you in your coming and blessed shall you be in your going." Rashi comments that just as one came into this world with the blessed status of being free from sin, so too, he should depart from this world in the same blessed manner. The time frame between arriving in this world and departing it, known as life, entails hard work. This is the only way one can hope to leave sin-free and reach the Heavenly Tribunal with a clear record.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Am Yisrael's settlement of Eretz Yisrael is an analogy for the *neshamah's* sojourn in this world. "Against your will, you were born" implies that the *neshamah* descends to this world of physicality

against its will, coming from the most elevated place, under the Heavenly Throne.

- ◆ The Mishnah continues, “Against your will, you will die.” Once the *neshamah* has tasted of the pleasures of this world, it does not want to leave.
- ◆ Hashem escorts a person in his perilous journey in this world. The *neshamah* within him recalls its Heavenly source and helps him connect to spirituality and sanctity. Man’s constant battle is whether to allow his *neshamah* to draw him upward, or to let his body pull him downward.
- ◆ The tzaddikim of old constantly felt Hashem’s Presence with them, for they abandoned materialism in favor of their spiritual side.
- ◆ The Torah and mitzvot are what protect a person as he traverses the road of life.
- ◆ “Blessed are you in your coming and blessed shall you be in your going.” Rashi comments, “Your departure from the world should be without sin, like your coming into the world.” It takes a lifetime of work to merit departing with a clean slate, worthy of eternal reward.



The Taste of the Bikurim

“It will be when you enter the Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it, and dwell in it, that you shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground that you bring in from your land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you, and you shall

put it in a basket and go to the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose, to make His Name rest there”

(Devarim 26:1-2)

These pesukim describe the mitzvah of *bikurim*, the command to take the first of one's ripened fruit and bring it to the Beit Hamikdash.

Let us analyze this mitzvah. The pasuk begins with the word ויהיה (it will be). Chazal teach (*Bereishit Rabbah* 42:3) that this word always denotes a state of joy. What is the joy involved in bringing *bikurim*? Furthermore, why does the Torah command a person to bring his individual fruits to Yerushalayim? Isn't it more convenient and just as effective to donate a considerable sum to support Torah scholars?

Regarding the mitzvah of *ma'aser sheini*, the pasuk states (*Devarim* 14:24-25), "If the road will be too long for you... then you may exchange it for money, wrap up the money..." This mitzvah, too, requires one to ascend with the fruits of *ma'aser sheini* to Yerushalayim, where they are to be eaten in a state of *kedushah*. But there is a provision for one who lives very far away. He can exchange the fruits for their monetary value, which he brings with him to Yerushalayim. Why doesn't the Torah provide this solution for those who had to bring *bikurim* from great distances? Imagine a person who owns vast acres of land, full of orchards and fruit-bearing trees. He will have to hire many wagons to carry the *bikurim*. It would certainly be simpler to exchange these fruits for their monetary equivalent and bring this up to the Beit Hamikdash.

Small Things Make a Man Big

The mitzvah of *bikurim* is unique. Many mitzvot are big and impressive. In contrast, the mitzvah of *bikurim* is simple and easy. One is commanded to bring his few first fruits up to the Beit Hamikdash. The one who performs this mitzvah might wonder why so much ado is made over these few fruits, as he makes the tortuous journey all the way to the Beit

Hamikdash in order to redeem them. It is specifically this seemingly insignificant mitzvah about which we are ordered to make a fuss. The taste of the *bikurim* leaves one with the sense that all mitzvot in the Torah are capable of bringing him to ever greater spiritual heights.

Yaakov and Lavan and the Prayer over the Fruits

As Yaakov made his way to Aram Naharaim, while escaping his brother, Eisav, he offered a stirring prayer before his Maker. All he asked for was (*Bereishit* 28:20-21), “If G-d will be with me, and He will guard me on this way that I am going; and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear; and I return in peace to my father’s house.” On the words “and I return in peace (שלום),” Rashi comments that Yaakov beseeched Hashem to help him return to his father’s house whole (שלם) from sin, without being influenced by the wicked ways of Lavan. Although Yaakov was righteous in the home of his father, Yitzchak, he knew this was no guarantee that he would manage to maintain his great level in the proximity of the rasha, Lavan. Who could promise that Lavan’s influence would not affect him? Therefore, Yaakov prayed that he remain righteous. This is like the prayer of one who asks to be able to breathe under water, or one who asks for salvation in the thick of the jungle.

Not only did Yaakov remain righteous in Lavan’s house, but he succeeded in making a name for himself. He married there and raised a wonderful family of twelve tribes, called “the tribes of G-d, a testimony for Israel” (*Tehillim* 122:4). Yaakov’s short prayer yielded great results. We mention this in the prayer, “An Aramean (Lavan) would have destroyed my father (Yaakov).” Even a seemingly small mitzvah like *bikurim* has the power to propel a person to tremendous heights, just like the pithy prayer of Yaakov, which yielded such amazing results.

In light of this, we can understand why the small fruit of the *bikurim* could not be exchanged with gold and silver, as could *ma’aser sheini*. Hashem takes great pleasure in man keeping small mitzvot wholeheartedly. This is indicated by the use of the word וְהִיא, which denotes joy. When a person happily keeps the small mitzvot that Hashem

has given him, and thanks Hashem for all the good that He has bestowed upon him, he will naturally grow in his Avodat Hashem. By fulfilling the small mitzvot, one proves that he has no thought of “my power and the strength of my hand has gained me all this,” rather he acknowledges that everything comes from Hashem. He proves his true love of Hashem and his desire to do His will.

The First Fruit – The First Mitzvah

Many mitzvot can be performed only after another one has been done first. For example, the mitzvah of *ma’aser sheini* can be done only after *terumah* and *terumat ma’aser* have been taken. In contrast, the mitzvah of *bikurim* is at the forefront of the land-related mitzvot. It is this seemingly small mitzvah which heralds all the mitzvot to come. It paves the path toward the proper fulfillment of all mitzvot. Hashem desires that we perform all His mitzvot like a soldier at service, not distinguishing between the commands which seem weighty and those which seem petty and insignificant.

As a child, Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, zt”l, Rosh Yeshiva of Telshe, Cleveland, used to collect Rabbanim cards. He would arrange these cards in a special album. His mother once came across this album and began leafing through it. She gazed in awe at the splendor of these giants of our people. Suddenly, she noticed an empty spot in the middle of one page. She was surprised that her very organized son, Mordechai, would leave a blank space just like that, without realizing. Then she saw that there was writing in that spot. In place of a picture, she recognized the childish scrawl of her young son. This is what she read: “*Be’ezrat Hashem*, here will be my picture, when I grow up and become a Rabbi, great in Torah and mitzvot.” She became extremely excited over the pure aspirations of her child. Instead of dreaming of wealth, he wished to become rich in Torah. He eventually actualized his ambition, as he became a giant of the generation.

Before the farmer accepted upon himself the land-related mitzvot, he was given the mitzvah of *bikurim*. This introduced him to the doctrine of

performing all mitzvot, large and small alike. He would ultimately do Hashem's will with pure motives, meriting upholding the mitzvot of *shemittah* and *yovel*, as well as all other mitzvot.

The Letter ך Points Heavenward

Wherever the Torah writes a word in its full version (including the letter ך), it is an indication that the protagonist acted altruistically.

For example, in parashat *Pinchas*, the Torah delineates how Pinchas took up for Hashem's sake and zealously struck Zimri ben Salu. The name of Pinchas is written there as פִּינְחָס to indicate his self-sacrifice. No one could brazenly demand how he could take the law into his own hands. We find that the name of David, too, is written as דָּוִד in Scriptures, to connote his pure motivations in his service of Hashem (*Divrei Hayamim*). Similarly, Moshe Rabbeinu added the letter ך to the name of Yehoshua (changing it from הוֹשֵׁעַ to יְהוֹשֻׁעַ).

Moreover, when Bnei Yisrael were in the Wilderness, they were called by their original names, with this letter added on. For instance, the family of גֵּרְשׁוֹן is called גֵּרְשׁוֹנִי, etc. The nations of the world had spread rumors that the Jewish nation was comprised of *mamzerim*. In Egypt, the men would work from dawn to dusk while the women remained at home alone and unsupervised. The gentiles averred that it was impossible that the Egyptians did not have their way with them. Hashem added the letter ך to their names as testimony to their purity. The pure daughters of Yisrael never consorted with strange men (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 226*).

The mitzvah of *bikurim* is introduced with the word וְהִיָּה, containing the letter ך. One who brings *bikurim* declares that he will serve Hashem to the best of his ability, fulfilling mitzvot in all their fine details. The letter ך is Hashem's confirmation that this person's deeds are for the sake of Heaven. His intentions are pure, and he does his duty with joy.

Bikurim – Heavenly Bounty

In the routine of daily life, a person does not contemplate all of the wonderful goodness which Hashem bestows upon him on a constant basis. Hashem allows us to breathe, pumps our hearts, and activates our brains. He grants us family, children, and abundant sustenance. What do we do? We ignore it all. Imagine a man trudging through the sweltering desert. All he wants is a drop of water. Suddenly, a man appears and offers him a full jug. Won't the person be ever grateful to his benefactor? Every hour of the day, Hashem affords us more water than we need. But we forget how grateful we should be for this.

The mitzvah of *bikurim* teaches us a lesson in *hakarat hatov*. Even if all one has is a small amount of fruit, he brings it to the Beit Hamikdash. As he travels the long road to Yerushalayim, he analyzes this mitzvah. It brings him to an awareness of Hashem's kindnesses toward him in granting him this fruit. This will be a springboard for him to recall all of Hashem's kindnesses, throughout his life.

As one arrives at the Beit Hamikdash with wagonloads of Hashem's bounty, his heart is full of gratitude toward Hashem. He offers the fruit to the Kohen with a sense of sincere thankfulness. This gives Hashem tremendous satisfaction. For this reason, the word *והיה* is used here. In order for this message to be transmitted, the fruit itself had to be brought, not its monetary value. As the owner would pray before the Mizbeach, he would recall the good deeds of our forefathers and how Hashem saved them from poverty, specifically Yaakov, who was in danger of losing all his assets to Lavan, the swindler. Afterward, Lavan even attempted to uproot him completely. The merit of Yaakov's tefillah to be saved from the clutches of Lavan stood by him and stands by his progeny forever. The man bringing the *bikurim* comes to give thanks to the Creator for all the good He did for him, and for upholding His promise to the forefathers that He would give their children the Promised Land.

In Summary

- ◆ Why does the mitzvah of *bikurim* begin with the word וְהֵיָה, a word denoting joy? Why couldn't the owner bring the monetary value of the fruit to Yerushalayim, instead of the fruit itself, as was the case regarding *ma'aser sheini*?
- ◆ The mitzvah of *bikurim* applied to the smallest of fruit. Even a seemingly small mitzvah can bring a person to the greatest heights of righteousness.
- ◆ Yaakov Avinu asked for nothing other than avoiding the negative influence of Lavan. But it was the power of this prayer that granted him the tremendous merit of fathering the Tribes of Hashem. How great is even a short prayer!
- ◆ *Bikurim* is the first mitzvah given to the farmer, indicating how he should grow in his service of Hashem.
- ◆ One who brings *bikurim* and decides that he is a servant of Hashem testifies that his motives are noble, as indicated by the letter ׀ in the word וְהֵיָה.
- ◆ The Torah uses the letter ׀ in the name of פִּינְחָס as testimony that he acted altruistically. We find that David and Yehoshua, likewise, had this letter added to their names to indicate their loyalty to Hashem. In the Wilderness, the names of the families of Am Yisrael were recorded with this letter, to prove that they were of pure lineage.
- ◆ Taking the *bikurim*, the first of the fruits to ripen, to Yerushalayim, was a catalyst for appreciating Hashem's kindnesses.



Man's Mission in Withstanding the Yetzer Hara

“It will be when you enter the Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it, and dwell in it, that you shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground”

(Devarim 26:1-2)

This parashah delineates the mitzvah of *bikurim*. The reason why the Torah discusses it in detail can be connected to the mitzvah to “love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources” (*Devarim* 6:5). Man must constantly remember that he is completely dependent on Hashem. He serves Him by subjecting his three main resources to His calling. These are his heart, his life, and his money. The mitzvah of *bikurim*, as well as the mitzvah of *ma’aser*, applies to one’s assets. He has toiled and sweated over his produce, literally the fruit of his labor. As he offers the first of the fruits to Hashem, he asserts that everything is His alone. Another method of serving Hashem through one’s property is evident in the mitzvah of *shemittah*, when one abandons his fields and relies on Hashem for his sustenance.

It is Hashem’s desire that a person should constantly grow and connect with Him in his thoughts, his speech, and his deeds, at every hour of the day, every day of his life. He should do this as he earns his livelihood, as he goes on the way, as he rests, and as he awakens.

The reason for this is found in the previous parashah (*ibid.*, 21:10-11), “When you will go out to war against your enemies, and Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand, and you will capture his captivity. And you will see among its captivity a woman who is beautiful of form.” There are two types of disputes. One is capable of being reconciled. An

example of this is in marriage. At times, husband and wife might even hate each other, *rachmana litzlan*. But they can be reconciled, and peace can be restored. Then there is the eternal entanglement which can never be smoothed out. It is the battle with our number one enemy – the *Yetzer Hara*.

The phrase “When you will go out to war against your enemies” refers to this eternal enemy (see *Zohar Chadash, Parashat Ki Teitzei*). The only way to deal with him is to categorically eliminate him. This is the precondition for observing the mitzvot mentioned in parashat *Ki Tavo*, which connect man at all times with his Creator.

After gaining victory a number of times, one may be under the impression that he succeeded in conquering his *Yetzer Hara*. But the matter is not as simple as that. The *Yetzer Hara* is a slimy, slithering snake (see *Zohar I, 35b*). The word נחש (snake), adding one for the word itself, is numerically equivalent to the word שטן (Satan). A snake dies only after it has been decapitated. The Satan must be dealt with in a similar fashion. A person might believe he has uprooted him completely from his heart, but if even a sliver of a root has remained, it is liable to mushroom into mammoth proportions, just as before. The battle against the *Yetzer Hara* is long and tiring. Real victory is gained only after he has been completely eradicated, similar to Amalek.

Those who went to fight the wars in Klal Yisrael were the tzaddikim of our people. How could they be suspected of falling into the trap of the beautiful captive women, to the extent that they were warned not to sin with them?

This teaches us that as long as a person lives, the *Yetzer Hara* lives within him. Even tzaddikim, who are filled with righteousness and sanctity, must never feel that they have wiped out their *Yetzer Hara*. This causes a person to let down his guard. When one is lax on his spiritual battleground, the *Yetzer Hara* has a field day.

In the words כִּי תִצֵּא (When you will go [to war]), the letter ך and the letter ת add up to the same *gematria* as the word קדוש (holy). A person

should always aspire to holiness. But he is so far from *kedushah* that he does not notice the force of the *Yetzer Hara*, as it escorts him to war, even as he encounters a beautiful woman.

A case in point came my way. A man once approached me and began pouring out his tremendous suffering. He related that his daughter almost drowned twice. This was proof that Hashem did not watch over him, he averred. When I asked for details, he explained that it was when he took his wife and daughter for a trip to the beach. The laws of *tzeniut* were left to the winds. I told him that Hashem was punishing him in this way for sinning in immoral conduct.

A person flaunts his piety. He studies Torah and performs mitzvot, but at the same time, he fails to fight his *Yetzer Hara*. He may have a long list of aveirot, yet he has the audacity to blame Hashem for his tribulations. Wouldn't it be worthwhile for him to take a step back and make a calculation of his deeds?

Parashat *Ki Teitzei* always falls in the month of Elul. This is to hint to a person that he is required to do complete teshuvah and recognize his sins, so that he can fight his *Yetzer Hara*. Who knows for what he will be taken to task on the great Day of Judgment? Bearing this in mind is a prerequisite for attaining *kedushah*.

The Avodah of Bnei Yisrael – Confession and Submission

As we approach the End of Days, Am Yisrael is beset by outside enemies. These are the Bnei Yishmael, the Arabs, who are tremendously powerful. There is no chance of making peace with them. This is despite their faith in Hashem and respect for the Har Habayit as a place of sanctity. They claim that the Har Habayit belongs solely to them. The inherent difference between our Wall, the Kotel, and their place of sanctity, is the following: The Kotel was built only of whole stones which were never cut with any metal object (see *Sotah* 48b). Metal is analogous to conceit and war. The Jew always makes himself like stone, formed from the ground. This is as we assert in the Shemoneh Esrei, "May my soul be

like dust to all.” The Torah tells us (*Bereishit* 3:19), “For you are dust, and to dust shall you return.” In contrast, the mosque standing brazenly with its golden cap on Har Habayit represents pride and arrogance.

Another intrinsic difference between both places of prayer is the following: When a Jew approaches the holy Kotel, his thoughts turn to repentance and confession. As he stands in this most holy spot, he feels his insignificance. The place itself brings him to do teshuvah. In contrast, as soon as the Arab leaves his place of worship, he plots and schemes ways to rob and plunder the Jews. His confessions are mere lip-service.

Let us make sure not to be like the Arabs. Our teshuvah must be followed by a commitment to improve.

David Hamelech teaches us that the Jew is never attached to gold and silver. The Gemara relates (*Avodah Zarah* 44a) that he wore a crown of gold and diamonds, which he had taken as booty. It weighed hundreds of kilos. He was able to wear it only by means of a magnet which hung over his head and kept it in place.

What lesson can we glean from this narrative? David’s objective was to tell Am Yisrael that gold and silver were not an intrinsic part of him. David never wasted time counting his money. He kept his head clear for Torah study. He proclaimed (*Tehillim* 40:9), “Your Torah is in my innards,” for his entire being was filled with nothing but Hashem’s Torah. As far as he was concerned, the grandeur of royalty, represented by the crown of gold hovering in the air above him, was completely detached from him. This was David’s arsenal in combating his *Yetzer Hara*.

A man in Bnei Brak bequeathed a tremendous fortune to his sons. He included two wills. One was to be opened immediately upon his death, whereas the other was to be opened only seven days later. As his sons opened the first one, they found a request that he be buried in the socks he had worn on Yom Kippur. The *chevrah kadisha* categorically refused to accede to this strange request. Just as a person arrives in this world unclothed, so does he leave. Shrouds are merely for the sake of honoring the deceased. The only garments one wears in the World Above are his

good deeds (see *Pardes Rimonim* 31:5). The Vilna Gaon asserts that Gehinnom is nothing but the shame of the sinner, naked of Torah and mitzvot. He will have nowhere to turn for concealment. The father was buried without his socks. His sons asked his forgiveness for their inability to comply with his request.

After the requisite seven days of mourning, the second will was read. This is what it said, “Dear children, I ask your forgiveness for causing you distress over the matter of the socks. Certainly I knew that it is forbidden to bury a person in his clothes. My sole intention was to teach you that nothing, but nothing, of this world goes with a person to the Upper World. With all the fortune I bequeath to you, you will not be able to bring along even a petty pin. Therefore, do not pursue money, for its value is meaningless in the everlasting world.”

The pasuk tells us that in the war against the *Yetzer Hara*, only subduing oneself before Hashem assures one victory.

The Power of Torah Protects from Eternal Death

The *Yetzer Hara* paints this world in vivid colors. He makes it look like this is the place to be and makes man forget that one day he will bid it all good-bye. Hashem allows us to disregard the day of death to some extent, in order that we apply ourselves wholeheartedly to Torah study and service of Hashem with joy. Tehillim states (100:2), “Serve Hashem with gladness, come before Him with joyous song.” This is the joy of the Jew, who happily celebrates mitzvot and the festivals, as it states (*Devarim* 16:14), “You shall rejoice on your festival.” In contrast, rejoicing in committing a sin is very severe.

The Ben Ish Chai writes that one who serves Hashem with all his faculties merits this world as well as the Next. One should never completely forget the day of death to the degree that he places excessive emphasis on his worldly assets. He should never take pride in his wealth and believe it will be with him forever. Man’s mission is to bear in mind that he came from dust and will return to dust. The Chafetz Chaim, zt”l,

likens a person to a tourist. A tourist must always have his passport with him, so that he can cross borders and enjoy the sites and attractions of various countries. Without a passport, he is limited. Torah is a man's passport as he journeys through life. It is what keeps him afloat in his sea of worries, and affords a balm for his soul when he is sinking in strife.

The Torah is man's bodyguard against the *Yetzer Hara*, who surrounds him on all sides in this world of falsehood. By absorbing the Torah, one builds a fortress around himself (see *Sotah* 21a). Without the help of the Torah, one does not stand a chance against the Satan (see *Sukkah* 52b). With one inappropriate thought, the Satan casts man into purgatory. But when one is armed with the Torah, he has the power to face his enemy head-on and triumph.

After combating his *Yetzer Hara*, one is capable of bringing *bikurim*, as described in the next parashah (*Devarim* 26:1-11). He thereby acquires merits, which will accompany him on his final journey. Certainly he wants to bring baskets full of mitzvot! This demands recognition of his purpose in this world and extensive preparation. If a person knocks at his neighbor's door and is asked what he came for, doesn't he have a fitting reply? If he would just stand there silent, the householder would simply close the door in his face.

If a person makes himself a member of the royal family, considering Hashem his Father and our Avot his royal ancestors, then he will not need to ask permission to be let into the Upper World when his time comes. He will be treated like one of the family, as the *Navi* proclaims (*Yeshayahu* 26:2), "Open the gates, so the righteous nation, keeper of the faith, may enter!" But without Torah, one is considered a complete stranger. He will be asked what he wants and on what basis he expects to be allowed entry. Woe to the one who is tongue-tied on that occasion!

Man's entire objective in *Ki Teitzei* (when you go out) into this world, is that *Ki Tavo* (when you enter) the World to Come, he arrives well-equipped. This entails confronting the *Yetzer Hara* and eradicating him.

Proper Preparation for the Day of Judgment

Man's preparation for the Yamim Noraim can be compared to preparing to meet his Maker. On the Days of Judgment, man is judged for his deeds throughout the year. These parshiyot are read at the end of the year, for Hashem wants us to realize just how transient man's life is. It is but a fleeting shadow, as stated in Tehillim (144:4). The clouds block the sun for a brief moment, creating shadows, and then they are gone. Man's days are numbered and pass quickly. There is a small puff of a cloud, an analogy to one who perishes in the prime of life. Then there is the big cloud, the symbol of a person who merits longevity. But everyone eventually passes on.

As the Days of Judgment draw near, the preceding weeks fly by, until the momentous day arrives, when all creatures stand before Hashem in judgment. The deeds of all living things are as clear to Hashem as though they were happening at that very moment. It is appropriate that one approach the Days of Awe with the merit of Torah study and a calculation of all his deeds.

The tzaddik, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, zt"l, would quiver and quake in fear of the Day of Judgment. Throughout the month of Elul, he could not write anything. In direct contrast, there are sinners who have no qualms regarding the Day of Judgment. They are like a person who stands opposite a lion and has no fear at all. He assumes that the lion is behind bars. They think that Hashem is far away, in Heaven, and does not see their deeds. The fear alone should kill them. Conversely, there are tzaddikim who dread the Day of Justice. They discern the lion outside its cage and tremble in fear.

Man's job is to prepare properly for the Days of Judgment. He knows exactly where he has failed. He should confess his sins, one by one, before his Creator. He should prepare a battle plan against the *Yetzer Hara*, resolving to remain at his elevated status and never return to sin. He should ask Hashem for His forgiveness. Only in this manner can he rest assured that he has conquered his *Yetzer Hara*, as the pasuk states

(*Devarim* 21:10), “And Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand, and you will capture his captivity.”

In Summary

- ◆ The mitzvah of *bikurim* demonstrates how to serve Hashem with one’s possessions. This mitzvah teaches us just how much Hashem longs for our service of Him every moment of our lives, even when we work the fields.
- ◆ Parashat *Ki Teitzei* alludes to man’s inner battle with his number one enemy, his very own *Yetzer Hara*. If he fails to eradicate him completely, he will grow to mammoth proportions, eventually overcoming him.
- ◆ The phrase **כִּי תִצַּא** contain the letters ״ and ׳ת, which add up numerically to the word **קדוש** (holy). The only way to become holy and sanctified is by fighting with all of one’s might against the *Yetzer Hara*, never forgetting about him. This will merit Hashem’s help in surmounting him.
- ◆ The basic foundation of our service of Hashem and our prayer to Him is submission toward Him. The Kotel is built of whole stones which were never cut with a metal instrument. This indicates the trait of humility. In contrast, the Arabs show off their gold, especially the Dome of the Mosque. Their pride pushes them to sin, even after confessing their iniquities in their place of worship.
- ◆ David wore his crown in a manner that it hovered above his head, never touching it. This indicated that he never allowed his wealth to “rub off” on him.
- ◆ Hashem granted man the gift of forgetfulness so that he does not become preoccupied with the day of death. This enables him to serve Hashem with joy. But he should not forget his day of death in order to allow himself to do aveirot.
- ◆ The Torah is the joy of our lives and our haven of refuge, as the Chafetz Chaim eloquently describes. It also protects a person from the plots of the *Yetzer Hara*. Therefore, one must prepare for the Day of Judgment, and not come, *chalilah*, empty of mitzvot, dumbstruck, as it were. The

shame in the World to Come is unbearable. Chodesh Elul should send one shivering, resolved to make a personal accounting as is the custom of the tzaddikim.



Meriting Hashem's Blessing

“And these shall stand for the curse on Mount Eval: Reuven, Gad, Asher, Zevulun, Dan, and Naphtali”

(Devarim 27:13)

The Ohr Hachaim relates that when Bnei Yisrael heard the ninety-eight curses on Mount Eval, they were filled with tremendous dread. They approached Moshe and asked what would be their fate. Moshe replied that the fact that they continued to exist even though they transgressed Hashem's word, time after time, was evidence that they would not be destroyed. For Am Yisrael will survive forever (*Shmuel I*, 15:29). The Ohr Hachaim continues, asking why Bnei Yisrael were afraid of the curses only here. Why weren't they filled with dread when they heard the curses previously, recorded in parashat *Bechukotai*?

He replies that in parashat *Bechukotai*, the nation as a whole was warned of the implications of future sins. They would deserve a blitz of curses. But those curses were aimed at the entire nation. They felt strength in numbers, and this thought numbed the edge of dread contained in the prophecy. Here, though, Moshe delineated the curses which would come upon each person individually if he veered from the path of Torah. This aroused tremendous fear in each one's heart.

Why did Moshe appease Bnei Yisrael by removing their fear regarding the curses? Shouldn't he have intensified their fear of sin, showing them that they had what to be afraid of if they took the wrong course of action?

We find that the curses were indeed realized, one by one. Their fears were well-founded. Why, then, did Moshe mollify them?

Moshe's message was not one of platitudes and empty assurances. He did not attempt to assuage their fears. What he did do was explain to them that there was a way to avoid their frightening end, were they to find themselves mired in sin. That is the way of repentance and atonement. When a person truly regrets his misdeeds, Hashem, the Master of Mercy, accepts his teshuvah and is angry no longer. The ט"ז (ninety-eight) curses are transformed into a חץ (arrow). When Bnei Yisrael do teshuvah, Hashem shoots His curses upon their enemies. The word סלח (forgive) also has the numerical equivalent of ninety-eight. Hashem, in His capacity as the ultimate One Who forgives, nullifies all the curses which Bnei Yisrael deserved. See how great is the power of teshuvah, converting curses to blessing!

The great tzaddik, Rabbi Betzalel Rakow, zt"l, head of the Gateshead Beit Din in England, asks the following in his sefer, *Mishkan Betzalel*: In parashat *Ki Tavo*, the Torah states that when Bnei Yisrael would arrive at Har Eval, they would be commanded to erect an altar for Hashem, as the pasuk states (*Devarim 27:4-7*), "It shall be that when you cross the Jordan, you shall erect these stones, of which I command you today, on Har Eval... You shall slaughter peace-offerings and eat there, and you shall rejoice before Hashem, your G-d." How was it possible for them to offer sacrifices in joy upon the mountain where curses were heaped upon them? Wouldn't it have been more sensible to offer the sacrifices upon Har Grizim, the mountain of blessing?

Bnei Yisrael were capable of offering sacrifices of rejoicing even on the mountain of curses, for they understood that the curses were conditional. If they did true teshuvah, Hashem would forgive their wrongdoings. They would thereby avoid the punishment of the curses. For this fact alone, they felt obligated to offer sacrifices.

Why did Hashem find it necessary to warn Bnei Yisrael by means of such harsh and severe curses, when each sinner could have easily been

punished individually? The aim of the curses was to silence the voice of the *Middat Hadin*, which demands retribution upon the entire nation, as all are mutually accountable (see *Shevuot* 39a). Ninety-eight imprecations are recorded to demonstrate to the *Middat Hadin* that if Bnei Yisrael do wrong in Hashem's eyes, they will be dealt with stringently.

Here is the place to insert a thought regarding Bnei Yisrael's mutual accountability. Often, a person is deserving of punishment. Instead of striking him in one fell swoop, Hashem strikes at Am Yisrael as a whole. The suffering is divided among the masses, thereby diminishing its potency. In this way, it is much easier to accept.

The parshiyot of *Shoftim*, *Ki Teitzei*, *Ki Tavo*, *Nitzavim*, and *Vayelech* deal with teshuvah in anticipation of the Day of Judgment. The best tool to bring to war is knowledge of the enemy's armaments, so that one can fight most effectively. The pasuk opening the previous parashah (*Devarim* 21:10), "When you will go out to war against your enemies," teaches us that we must be familiar with our enemy's weapons. This will enable us to strike him successfully and take his captives. *Ba'alei Mussar* interpret this pasuk as referring to man's ongoing battle with his *Yetzer Hara* (*Ya'arot Devash* I, 6). By recognizing the ammunition of the *Yetzer Hara*, one can overcome him and capture his captives. The method of deliverance from the *Yetzer Hara* is by means of appointing *shoftim* (judges) and *shotrim* (law-enforcers). These are the fences which protect man from sin. Since the *Yetzer Hara* is sly and slippery, he manages to slide in through any small crack in one's resolve, so intent is he on seducing man into sin. We must be on guard, erecting judges and law-enforcers around ourselves. These are the gendarmes of Torah and mitzvot, arming a person with merit.

But when a person refrains from appointing judges and officers upon himself, wasting his time from Torah study, he puts himself in a perilous position. He exposes himself to the *Yetzer Hara*, who wishes to enter his innards, as this parashah begins, "When you enter the Land" (*Devarim* 26:1). The Torah wakes us up from our stupor, reminding us that the Day of Judgment is coming, when we will have to give an accounting for all of

our deeds. On this day, each person's fate is decided. Will his life flow smoothly, filled with blessing and bounty, or will it entail suffering and sorrow and curse?

Let us take the message of these parshiyot to heart, so that we may merit standing steady before Hashem in judgment, worthy and deserving of goodness and kindness.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ After Bnei Yisrael heard the curses recorded in parashat *Ki Tavo*, they approached Moshe, quaking with fear. Moshe calmed them, declaring that Bnei Yisrael will never disappear. The Ohr Hachaim finds a difficulty in their timing. Why didn't they approach Moshe previously, after hearing the curses stated in parashat *Bechukotai*?
- ◆ He responds that in parashat *Bechukotai*, the curses were addressed to the nation as a whole, whereas in parashat *Ki Tavo*, the curses were upon each and every person, individually. This caused them tremendous fear.
- ◆ Why did Moshe assuage their fears, when it would have been more appropriate to shake them up and reinforce these fears? Moshe did not allay their fears, but comforted them with the understanding that through doing teshuvah, they could avoid the curses mentioned here.
- ◆ How could Bnei Yisrael be expected to offer sacrifices of joy upon Har Eval, the mountain of curses? Wouldn't it have been more sensible to order that they bring these offerings on Har Grizim, the mountain of blessing? The knowledge that they possessed the power to do teshuvah, thereby annulling all evil decrees, armed them with great joy and enabled them to offer sacrifices of joy.
- ◆ Parshiyot *Shoftim*, *Ki Teitzei*, *Ki Tavo*, *Nitzavim*, and *Vayelech* are connected by the thread of teshuvah, which runs through them all. This is man's greatest weapon against his number one enemy, his *Yetzer Hara*.



The Mitzvah of Joy

“Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, amid gladness and goodness of heart, when everything was abundant”

(Devarim 28:47)

Ba’alei Mussar (see *Chareidim*, Introduction, 4) tell us that joy is the foundation for Torah study and mitzvah performance. Joy energizes and empowers a person with enthusiasm in upholding Hashem’s word. When happiness is lacking, a person is lackadaisical in his service of Hashem. Whatever he does is with a heaviness, as though he were forced into it. When a person is in a state of bliss, his actions are done with an eagerness and a zest. He does not feel the burden of mitzvot, for his duties are a labor of love. But one who is downcast lacks joie de vivre. His vitality is sapped and every small annoyance seems massive in his eyes. Keeping mitzvot, which, at times, demands a level of self-sacrifice, seems threatening and foreboding. He therefore seeks the easy way out, looking for ways to evade his obligations to Hashem.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov teaches (*Likutei Moharan*), “It is a great mitzvah to always be joyous.” It is not just a good idea to be in a state of happiness, but it is a moral imperative. A life suffused with joy is a life of mitzvah. When a person is in a state of joy, he brings his mitzvah performance to a new level. He does the mitzvot in a perfect way. Joy is the catalyst for mitzvah performance, as our Sages teach (*Avot*), “One mitzvah leads to another.”

Rabbi Nachman’s use of the wording “always be joyous” means at all times, without exception. Since the injunction to fulfill mitzvot is constant, as long as a person lives, so must one always be in a state of joy.

During the days leading to the Days of Judgment, we are enjoined to “rejoice with trembling” (*Tehillim* 2:10). Isn’t this an oxymoron? Are we meant to be happy or fearful?

Let us resolve this seeming contradiction with the following analogy. A close friend of the king's was invited to a meal at the royal palace. This man's joy knew no bounds. But together with his joy, he had a sense of somberness, understanding that he must conduct himself with appropriate propriety. There is no comparing eating supper at one's dinner table to feasting in the royal palace.

The day of the visit finally arrived. The man was euphoric with excitement. But the onlooker was able to discern a trace of tension in the friend's demeanor. Would he honor the king's name by acting correctly?

This is the feeling of "rejoicing with trembling" which is apparent during these days of awe. The joy we feel is tempered with solemnity. This seriousness keeps our joy on an even keel, so that it never reaches a state of light-headedness and mockery, *chalilah*.

On Rosh Hashanah, all Am Yisrael pass under Hashem's glance like sheep tended by their shepherd (*Yechezkel* 34:12; *Musaf Rosh Hashanah, U'Netaneh Tokef*). Each person is called to give an accounting for his deeds of the previous year. We, who believe in Hashem with firm faith, have full trust in His reign of kindness. We are therefore joyous, knowing that He will judge us with mercy and compassion. During the days of mercy and forgiveness, Hashem is closer than ever to His children. This closeness itself gives us cause for gladness. But Rosh Hashanah is, after all, the Day of Judgment. Judgment evokes fear. This fear moderates the joy of the day. We pour forth our hearts in supplication that the Attribute of Mercy outweigh the Attribute of Justice, and we merit being written for a long, good life, and peace.

Moshe Rabbeinu warns the nation that the curses will come upon them "תחת אשר לא עבדת את ה' אלו-הך בשמחה" – Because you did not serve Hashem with joy..." The word used here is תחת (because). This word can also mean "under." When a person is not in a state of joy, he moves away from the lofty levels of Torah and *yirah*, and regresses to the lowest level

possible. The letters of the next word, אשר, can be transposed to spell ראש (head). Joy is the drive that puts people at the top.

The head is one of man's major body parts. It contains the brain, which is in charge of all body functions. When a person is in a state of joy, his mind is alive, charging him with the energy to perform mitzvot. But when he dons the cloak of despair and dejection, his mind ceases functioning, and he spirals lower and lower.

The top doctors and researchers have scientifically proven that the power of joy can physically heal a person. Man is comprised of both body and soul. These elements are intertwined, directly affecting one another. Doctors can attest that patients who adopted a positive, upbeat attitude conquered their illnesses more easily and quickly than the norm. Conversely, patients who fell into the clutches of depression, despairing of their condition, had tremendous difficulty recovering.

Torah and mitzvot are the elixir of life. Torah heals the body physically (see *Mishlei* 3:8, *Eiruvin* 54a). In order for one to survive this turbulent world, replete with hazards at every turn, Hashem granted us the Torah, our road map which helps us navigate our way on the journey of life. Our hardships become stepping-stones to progress in Avodat Hashem. Torah solves man's problems. In order to gain maximum benefit from the solution of Torah, it would be advisable to adopt an approach of joy, which arouses man's heart to observe Torah and mitzvot enthusiastically, thereby bringing healing to all men.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The foundation for all Torah and mitzvah observance is joy. "It is a great mitzvah to always be joyous." Joy is a constant mitzvah, for it has the ability to empower the person with fuel to perform more mitzvot, as "one mitzvah leads to another."
- ◆ Regarding the days of mercy and atonement, we are taught, "Rejoice with trembling." Isn't this a self-contradiction? We are joyous that our merciful

Father will judge us compassionately, while our joy is tempered with solemnity as we are being judged.

- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu warns the nation that curses will come upon them “תחת אשר לא עבדת את ה' אלו-הך בשמחה – Because you did not serve Hashem with joy...” The word used here is תחת (Because). This word can also mean “under.” When a person is not in a state of joy, he moves away from the lofty levels of Torah and *yirah* and regresses to the lowest level possible. The letters of the next word, אשר, can be transposed to spell ראש (head). Joy is the drive that puts people at the top.



Hashem's Kindness Calls out from Every Corner

“Moshe summoned all of Yisrael and said to them: You have seen everything that Hashem did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land – the great trials that your eyes beheld, those great signs and wonders. But Hashem did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear until this day”

(Devarim 29:1-3)

Moshe Rabbeinu called to all of Am Yisrael and reminded them of all the wonderful things that Hashem did for them in Egypt and in the Wilderness. The letters of the word אתם (You) can be transposed to spell the word אמת (truth). They could not deny the miraculous reality in which they found themselves. But Moshe was speaking to a generation

that did not remember the miracles in Egypt, or those in the Wilderness for that matter. The entire previous generation perished in punishment for the sin of the spies. How could Moshe say, “You have seen”?

Although this generation did not experience the miracles of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, they were brought up on narratives detailing the miracles of that era. And they did experience the wonders of the Wilderness first-hand. Their clothes did not wear out, and their shoes never became old. They were fed by manna from heaven. A pillar of fire lit their way, and a cloud protected them from the sun’s strong rays. True, they did not observe the Exodus or the Splitting of the Sea, but Hashem’s ongoing miracles were enough to instill in them love and trust in Him.

Why does the Torah mention that Moshe summoned all Bnei Yisrael? Moshe was involved in telling them about the blessing which awaited them if they would go in the way of the Torah, and the curse, *chalilah*, for the opposite. Why the necessity to call them a second time?

Moreover, why did Moshe tell the nation, “But Hashem did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear”? Bnei Yisrael witnessed Hashem’s power and all the mighty miracles in the Wilderness. Obviously, they used their senses to do this. What is the meaning of this pasuk?

Although Moshe had been speaking to the nation all along, he now had a new message to impart. He called the entire nation to take note, raising his voice for attention. Moshe was like a Rav standing at the head of the Beit Hamidrash and delivering a lecture to his disciples. When the speaker wishes to impart a particularly important or new idea, he raises his voice and tells his audience to pay attention. This was Moshe’s intention in summoning the people to him once again. I think that every speaker should take a lesson from this. Using intonations and inflections will spice his words, making them palatable to his listeners. The aftertaste will linger long after the speech has ended.

Moshe also wished to transmit to his people the message that in order to observe the miracles of Hashem, they need not search high or bend low. Hashem’s kindnesses cry out from every cranny and crevice. Even a

blind man recognizes Hashem's greatness. Moshe told Bnei Yisrael that Hashem had no need to give them an eye to see or an ear to hear, for that which is broadcast is known to all. Nevertheless, Hashem continued demonstrating His might throughout the years in the Wilderness. Bnei Yisrael can never justify wrongdoing with the claim that they were not present at *Yetziat Mitzrayim*. Even one who did not physically witness the Exodus can clearly see Hashem's Presence in every corner of the world. All that he must do is extricate himself from the exile of distrust. Believing in Hashem and walking in His ways will keep one on the straight and narrow.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The letters of the word אַתָּם (You) can be transposed to spell the word אֱמֶת (truth). Am Yisrael could not deny the blatant truth of the miracles of Egypt and the Wilderness. Although this was a new generation which had seen the above-mentioned miracles, they were raised with the awareness of these wonders, akin to having experienced them themselves. All of the miracles in the Wilderness were witnessed by this generation. The miracles of the manna, and others, certainly gave them food for thought.
- ◆ Why does the Torah say that Moshe summoned the nation when he had been speaking with them all along? He wished to impart a new message, and therefore raised his voice, similar to calling them together again.
- ◆ Why did Moshe say, "But Hashem did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see?" Bnei Yisrael saw the wonders in the Wilderness with their very own eyes! It was in order to sharpen their awareness that Hashem's Presence calls out from every corner. Physical organs are unnecessary in order to sense it.



Attachment to Torah

“Moshe summoned all of Yisrael and said to them: You have seen everything that Hashem did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land – the great trials that your eyes beheld, those great signs and wonders. But Hashem did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see, or ears to hear until this day”

(Devarim 29:1-3)

Rashi explains “a heart to know” as the ability to recognize Hashem’s kindnesses and adhere to Him. However, could it be that until that day, Hashem had not granted them the ability to appreciate His kindnesses? Rashi explains that on that day, Moshe gave a Sefer Torah to the tribe of Levi (Parashat *Vayelech* 31:9). Am Yisrael was extremely agitated, and said, “Moshe Rabbeinu, we, too, stood at Har Sinai and received the Torah. Why does Shevet Levi take preference over the rest of us?” When Moshe heard this, he was very pleased. He proclaimed (*ibid.*, 27:9), “This day you have become a people to Hashem.” He said that now he saw their true adherence to Hashem.

Until that time, Bnei Yisrael had not yet demonstrated joy at receiving the Torah. But when they came before Moshe with their grievance toward him for bestowing the Torah only upon Shevet Levi, they broadcasted their desire to adhere to Hashem. They, too, stood at the foot of Har Sinai, they claimed, their voices calling out, “*Na’aseh V’nishma!*” (*Shemot* 24:7). On that day, Moshe joyously called out, “Today you have become a nation.”

Was Moshe unaware of their true desire to connect to the *Shechinah*, until the day they announced it publicly? Moreover, what was Moshe’s

motive in choosing to bestow the Torah only upon his own *shevet*, the tribe of Levi? And what did Bnei Yisrael mean by their demand (*Rashi*), “Why do you put the sons of your tribe in charge of it?”

“Man is led in the way he wishes to go” (*Makkot* 10b). The more a person yearns to cling to Hashem’s ways, the more help he receives. Moshe pointed out to Bnei Yisrael, with the words “But Hashem did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see,” that Hashem had already demonstrated His great strength before Bnei Yisrael through the many mighty miracles which He had performed for them in Egypt. He now expected their children to take a lesson from these wonders and uphold their share in the Torah and in closeness to Him. When a person gives someone directions, he does not walk him to his destination. He merely points him in the right direction, assuming that he will follow his instruction. Through opening their eyes and hearts to His wonders, Hashem showed Am Yisrael the right path. What was left for them to do was to travel this road, coming ever closer to Him, one step at a time.

Rav Sa’adyah Gaon would perform the self-flagellation of rolling in the snow. When asked to explain his unusual behavior, he replied with the following: Every day, he lamented the fact that he had not merited recognizing Hashem previously, as he had at the present. Had he understood Hashem’s greatness the day before, he certainly would have served him more genuinely and wholeheartedly. He was punishing himself for this lack of clarity.

When Bnei Yisrael approached Moshe with the claim that they, too, stood at Sinai and received the Torah, they were in essence expressing their strong desire to cleave to Hashem. After having witnessed the mighty miracles which Hashem performed for them, they were aroused to fulfill their part in Avodat Hashem. With this assertion, they proved that they were worthy of being Hashem’s Chosen Nation. Moshe bestowed the Torah on Shevet Levi first, in order to test Bnei Yisrael’s loyalty. Would they stand up and demand their share of the Torah? Did they appreciate its true value?

Chazal teach (see *Sanhedrin* 99b) that one who has control over the words of Torah, has control over the entire world. Bnei Yisrael internalized this message and therefore wished to receive the Torah. They wanted to have a share in upholding the world which was nurtured by the power of the holy words of the Torah. This is a primary principle for the entire world. Whoever wishes to adhere to Hashem and impact the world in a meaningful way should connect with the Torah, the force that injects life and strength into everything.

A sizeable portion of those who approached Moshe with this grievance did not even stand at Har Sinai or witness the miracles in Egypt and in the Wilderness. All those who had left Egypt between the ages of twenty and sixty died in the Wilderness. Nevertheless, this new generation cried out, “We, too, stood at Sinai!” They proved their faith in Hashem and His Torah even though only their *neshamot* were present at *Matan Torah*. They fully believed that the Torah is the essence and therefore had a strong yearning to receive it. Moshe’s words, “But Hashem did not give you a heart to know, or eyes to see until this day” was a compliment of the highest caliber. Even though this generation had not observed the miracles of Hashem firsthand, they craved to have the Torah, through the power of their tremendous faith. They thereby proved themselves worthy of becoming His nation.

Rashi further explains on the words “But Hashem did not give you a heart to know” that a person cannot fully comprehend his teacher’s lessons until forty years have passed (see *Rashi, Devarim* 29:6). Until now, Hashem did not treat Bnei Yisrael strictly. But now, at the end of forty years of wandering in the Wilderness, He would become more stringent with them. They finally reached the apex of faith and were therefore accountable, their every deed examined under a microscope. From this point onward, it was up to them to internalize the message and seek Hashem.

The Torah was given to Bnei Yisrael after Moshe spent forty days in Heaven (*Devarim* 9:9-11). These days correspond to the number of days it takes for a baby to be formed. After this period of time, a baby is

considered alive (see *Yevamot* 69b; see *Niddah* 30a). A baby is fashioned only by the power of Torah, which was given after forty days and nights. Man contains 613 organs in his body, corresponding to the 613 mitzvot, each organ representing another mitzvah (see *Sha'arei Kedushah* 1:1).

Bnei Yisrael testified that they were worthy of becoming a nation. Nonetheless, they had to beware the malady of arrogance, lest they become ungrateful to Hashem, *chalilah*. The pasuk says (*Devarim* 32:15), “Yisrael became fat and kicked.” Pride drags a person to the depths of doom. The feeling that one has already attained perfection is liable to knock him down from the heights he has achieved.

Further on, it says (*ibid.*, 29:5), “Bread you did not eat and wine or intoxicant you did not drink.” Bnei Yisrael divorced themselves from materialistic pleasures. For this reason, they merited clinging to Hashem and involving themselves in His Torah. When a person is free from the shackles of physicality, he can devote himself to Hashem’s word alone.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The words “until this day” are difficult to understand. Did Bnei Yisrael not recognize Hashem’s abundant kindnesses with them until now? This was the day that Bnei Yisrael complained to Moshe that he had bestowed the Torah only upon his own tribe. This proved to him their desire to adhere to Hashem. For this, he complimented them with these words.
- ◆ Was Moshe unaware of Bnei Yisrael’s desire to connect to Hashem before this incident? Moreover, why did he grant the Torah only to his own tribesmen, Shevet Levi?
- ◆ Moshe gave the Torah at first only to Shevet Levi, in order to test the rest of Bnei Yisrael. Did they really desire to receive the Torah? Bnei Yisrael protested, “We, too, stood at Har Sinai,” even though only their *neshamot* were present. They keenly felt as though they were physically at *Matan Torah*.

- ◆ Rashi gives a second explanation of the words “But Hashem did not give you a heart to know.” One does not fully comprehend his mentor’s teachings until forty years have passed. Until now, Bnei Yisrael had not been accountable for the mitzvot given at Sinai. Now, forty years later, they were.



Gems on Parashat Ki Tavo



The Connection between Amalek and Bikurim

“It shall be that when Hashem, your G-d, gives you rest from all your enemies all around, in the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance to take possession of it, you shall wipe out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heaven – you shall not forget!”

(Devarim 25:19)

“It will be when you enter the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it, and dwell in it”

(ibid., 26:1)

What is the connection between the injunction to eradicate Amalek, at the end of parashat *Ki Teitzei*, and the mitzvah to bring *bikurim* from the first of the produce, at the beginning of parashat *Ki Tavo*?

In order to serve Hashem, one must simultaneously fight his *Yetzer Hara*, who tries with all his might to thwart man’s spiritual service and

obstruct his plans of Torah study and mitzvah performance. The mitzvah of *bikurim* is based on the axiom that it is not man's prowess which provides him with his produce. Hashem is the One Who bequeathed him a portion in the Holy Land, and it is only by His decree that the Land produces bounty or remains barren.

The mitzvah of *bikurim* directs one's attention to recognize Hashem's bounty and thank Him accordingly. This is the starting point for recognizing all of the kindnesses that Hashem does with him. He will become more perceptive of the reality that everything, great and small, comes from Him Alone. But it is his deeds which decide which way the wind will blow. Will the earth yield its crops or will the heavens block the rains? Bringing *bikurim* demands prior preparation. First, one must battle his *Yetzer Hara*, who attempts to inject unbidden thoughts in man's mind, causing him to think that the blessing of produce is in his hands, disconnected completely from his connection to Hashem.

Amalek is the prime example of one who is disconnected. He is a combination of the *kelippah*, *tumah*, and doubts in faith. There was no one like Amalek, who cooled off Am Yisrael's fire of *yirat Shamayim* and dragged them into sin. Our battle with Amalek has never ended. It continues on and on, generation after generation, in the form of the *Yetzer Hara*, who constantly tries to damage our spiritual strengths and steer us into sin. When one accustoms himself to be aware of Hashem's kindnesses with him, he effectively weakens the power of the *Yetzer Hara* and resists his attempts to cool off his Avodat Hashem.

The parashah continues, "אַרְמֵי אוֹבֵד אָבִי" – An Aramean would have destroyed my father" (ibid., 26:5). This refers to the *Yetzer Hara*, who desires that our connection to our Heavenly Father should be lost (אוֹבֵד).

The first step in serving Hashem perfectly and showing Him gratitude for all the good He has done for us, and continues doing, is to shake off the negative influence of the *Yetzer Hara*, who draws his strength from the

defilement of Amalek. Serving Hashem wholeheartedly blocks the venom of the *Yetzer Hara* from entering our bloodstream.



Inscribed in Stone

“It shall be on the day that you cross the Jordan to the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you, you shall set up great stones for yourself and you shall coat them with plaster. You shall inscribe on them all the words of this Torah, when you cross over, so that you may enter the land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as Hashem, the G-d of your forefathers, spoke about you”

(Devarim 27:2-3)

Since the survival of the Land is dependent upon the Torah, Bnei Yisrael were adjured to write it down upon the stones of the earth. Just as stones come from the earth, so is man created from the earth. When future generations would gaze upon these stones, they would be struck by their potent message. Where did they come from and to where will they return? What is their purpose in Eretz Yisrael? What is the driving force which gives them the energy to endure in the Land?

Rabbeinu Bachya adds (*Devarim 27:3*) that it is the power of Torah which enabled Bnei Yisrael to capture the Land. The merit of Torah afforded them strength to ward off their enemies. In order for a person to feel true joy in the Promised Land, in spite of the adage (see *Berachot 5a*) that “Eretz Yisrael is acquired with suffering,” one must fulfill the mitzvot willingly and with joy, not as if he were forced into it. When one fulfills

this imperative, he will experience only the pleasantness of settling the Land and will be spared the suffering of tribulations.

The *Yetzer Hara* is hard as stone (see *Sukkah* 52b). The only way to overcome him is by learning Torah, which is inscribed on stone. The Gemara relates (*Menachot* 29b) that when Hashem showed Moshe each generation and its leaders, he was especially impressed with Rabbi Akiva, who would abandon his entire lifestyle to study Torah, eventually becoming a giant for posterity. Moshe asked Hashem to allow Rabbi Akiva to be His agent to bring the Torah to Am Yisrael. Hashem replied that he was chosen for this task; Rabbi Akiva had another purpose awaiting him.

What drove Rabbi Akiva to adopt a life solely dedicated to Torah? He observed how a stone was worn down by the constant dripping of water on it. He thought that if water, a simple element, could dissolve even a substance as strong as stone, all the more so could Torah, compared to water, melt his *Yetzer Hara*, which is compared to stone. This paved the road to Torah study and its understanding (see *Aderet d'Rabbi Natan* 6:2).

Water wears down stone but does not make it disappear completely. So does the Torah diminish the power of the *Yetzer Hara*, but does not completely eradicate it. The *Yetzer Hara* wears many hats. He comes to a person in a different disguise each time. One must take this subject to heart, constantly standing vigil against his *Yetzer Hara*. Hashem tells us (*Kiddushin* 30b), “I created the *Yetzer Hara*; I created Torah as its antidote.”

The *kelippah* and the *Yetzer Hara* have control even in Eretz Yisrael (*Chessed L'Avraham* 3:4). They can be vanquished only in merit of the *divrei Torah* written upon the stones. Learning Torah in Eretz Yisrael subdues the *Yetzer Hara*.



Serve Hashem with Joy

“Because you did not serve Hashem, your G-d, amid gladness and goodness of heart, when everything was abundant”

(Devarim 28:47)

A woman who was approximately sixty-five years old approached me with her dilemma. She had undergone the teshuvah process twenty years earlier. But since she had done teshuvah through fear of punishment, she constantly worried that as this anxiety would wear off, she would fall back into the ways of sin.

I explained to her that although fearing Hashem was a wonderful way to return to Him, it was an incomplete way of serving Him. Joy is the quality needed to serve Hashem properly. When one’s fear wears off, he is able to further serve his Creator in joy.

When a person accustoms himself to serving his Creator with enthusiasm and joy, then even when the going is rough, his joy prevails. He does not even feel the edge of his troubles, as he serves Hashem to the best of his ability. This can be compared to a mother, who tends to her baby with utter devotion, sacrificing her personal comforts for him. She is suffused with love toward him. This love diminishes all of the difficulties and inconveniences involved. As the saying goes, “Love conquers all.”

Sukkot follows Yom Kippur for the very same reason. On Yom Kippur, we serve Hashem with fear and trembling. But true service of Him must include a measure of joy. Therefore, He commanded us to celebrate the festival of Sukkot, about which it says (ibid., 16:14-15), “You shall rejoice on your festival... and you will be only joyous.”

Let us arouse ourselves to serve Hashem with great joy. This will help a person serve Hashem at all times and in every situation, even at times of sorrow and suffering.



Nitzavim



Parting Ways with Materialism

“You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all the men of Israel...”

(Devarim 29:9)

“...for you to pass into the covenant of Hashem, your G-d, and into His oath that Hashem, your G-d, seals with you today”

(ibid. vs. 11)

The words “You are standing today” refer to the day of Rosh Hashanah, when we recite (*Tefillat Musaf Rosh Hashanah; Pri Eitz Chaim, Shofar 5*), “Today is the beginning of Creation.” All Klal Yisrael, from the oldest to the youngest, stand before Hashem on this day, in judgment for the deeds they committed during the previous year (see *Zohar II, 32b; Arvei Nachal, Nitzavim*).

The pesukim continue “...for you to pass into the covenant with Hashem.” Rashi explains that when two parties forge a covenant, they would pass between two barriers, as the pasuk (*Yirmeyahu 34:18*) states, “The calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts.” On Rosh Hashanah, we renew our covenant with Hashem, passing in judgment before Him, just as people pass between items when forging a covenant.

How does Hashem judge His children? The Gemara (*Rosh Hashanah 18a*) delineates. Hashem conducts an overall scanning of everyone in a

general judgment. It is beyond our comprehension how Hashem judges everyone in one glance. And He also has His creatures pass by Him like sheep, judging them on an individual basis. When Am Yisrael pass before Hashem's gaze on Rosh Hashanah, they are forging a covenant with Hashem. What, exactly, does this covenant entail?

In order to understand this subject, let us study the life of Avraham Avinu. Avraham was called **אברהם העברי** – Avraham the Ivri” (*Bereishit* 14:13). The entire population stood on one side (**עבר אחד**) of the world, while he stood alone, on the other (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit* 73). He was one man against the world, and although everyone mocked his service of Hashem, he paid them no heed. He served his Maker with tremendous self-sacrifice and pride. His father, Terach, was a notorious idol worshipper. He certainly did not teach Avraham to have faith in Hashem. Through contemplating Creation, Avraham arrived at belief in Hashem Yitbarach of his own accord. Avraham's distinction is that he was the first person in the world to reveal Hashem's existence on his own.

This is, in essence, what Hashem demands of each and every one of us, Avraham's descendants. “For you to pass into the covenant” indicates that we must put all forms of materialism on one side and stand apart from it, never feeling its pull. Avraham drew an imaginary partition between himself and the rest of the world. While they chased physicality and pleasures, Avraham remained apart, connected to his faith in Hashem. On Rosh Hashanah, we mention the merit of our Avot, for they were the ones who blazed a trail in serving Hashem and showed us how to sever oneself from the frivolities of this world.

Regarding Rosh Hashanah, we are told (*Tehillim* 81:4; *Rosh Hashanah* 8a), “Blow the shofar at the moon's renewal, at the time appointed for our festive day.” The word **שופר** (shofar) is related to the word **שיפור** (improvement) (*Yalkut Shimoni, Vayikra* 645). The word **חודש** (at the moon's renewal/lit. month) is related to the word **התחדשות** (newness). On Rosh Hashanah, one is enjoined to make himself into a new man. This is done through improving one's character and living among Torah-true Jews.

When I was about ten years old, the king of Morocco, Mohammed V, a lover of the Jews, was scheduled to visit our city. What preparations were made for his arrival! Early in the day, people reserved places in the streets in order to be able to see the king and greet him. Even though I was young, I got a good spot. After all, I was the grandson of the tzaddik, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy”a, greatly revered by all, Jew and Arab alike. Loud sirens heralded the king’s arrival. Even the biggest cynic could not sit by indifferently as the king was led into the city, amid much pomp and pageantry.

This was the honor given to a mere king of flesh and blood. Regarding Hashem’s honor, *l’havdil*, we are told (*Shemot* 33:20), “No human can see Me and live.” In order to arouse us to some level of knowledge of Hashem’s existence, we are commanded to blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. The sounds of the shofar echo this knowledge, reminding one to return to Hashem and improve his character flaws.

Our sefarim teach (*Beit Halevi Al HaTorah, Shemot* 12:43) that where common sense ends, belief begins. We might expound by saying that the world is based on natural order, comprehensible to mankind. Belief in Hashem is a matter of faith, above human comprehension. I can testify that from when we were very young, Father, zy”a, would imbue us with *emunah*, until it went into our bones, sometimes in difficult ways. We inherited his deep-seated faith in our very bloodstream. We always knew that Jews and gentiles are completely different species. We, as Jews, have a distinct purpose and are naturally at polar opposites of the spectrum from them.

Every day, Father had the custom to light candles in the Beit Hakeneset, *l’iluy nishmat* the tzaddikim of old. Once, he ran out of oil just as he was about to light the candle in memory of Rabbi David ben Baruch Cohen Azug. He asked my brother, Rabbi Chaim, shlita, to bring him a simple wax candle. Just as Father was lighting the candle, he got burnt by the flame, and his jacket was slightly scorched. When Rabbi Chaim noticed this, he suggested that perhaps Rabbi David ben Baruch

was punishing him for lighting his flame from simple wax and not oil, with which he lit the rest of the lights.

Father accepted his words and sent him to buy more oil. Additionally, he asked the tzaddik for forgiveness. But my brother had more to say. He thought that certainly in the tzaddik's merit, Father would attain a sizeable sum of money to distribute among the needy, as well as a new jacket in place of the ruined one. Just as he had predicted, Father received a large amount of funds. Yet he felt bad about the spoiled suit. Exactly one half-hour later, rapid knocks were suddenly heard at the door. A man by the name of Asimini presented Father with a brand-new jacket. The mystery of its appearance has yet to be solved.

In a similar vein, a man from Mexico once came to me, relating that he had been diagnosed with cancer. I admitted that I could not help him out, but one thing was guaranteed: If he would reinforce his level of *emunah*, Hashem might change the course of nature and perform wondrous things for him. I blessed him that the merit of the tzaddik Rabbi Chaim Pinto would protect him. The man said he believed whole-heartedly that Hashem alone carries the key to recovery. He averred that although he did not hail from Morocco, he had pure faith that the merit of the tzaddik Rabbi Chaim Pinto would stand in his defense.

After some time, this man made contact with me. He said that he had been trying to reach me for the past two weeks. Above all logic, his most recent tests came back completely clear, leaving no indication of any illness whatsoever. Even the doctors admitted that this was an open miracle. How great is the power of faith in the tzaddikim!

Hashem has made a pact with His children. If they stand apart from materialism, He will be one with them. He will remember His covenant with their forefathers and bless them with bounty, just as He blessed their fathers before them.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ The words “You are standing today” refer to the day of Rosh Hashanah, when Am Yisrael stand in judgment before Hashem. The words “For you

to pass into the covenant” refer to passing in judgment before Hashem, just as people pass between items when forging a pact.

- ◆ Avraham Avinu was called Avraham the Ivri, for he was one man, steadfast in his belief against the entire world. The rest of the world, mired in materialism, mocked him. Hashem expects us, too, to step away from materialism and cling to Him alone. We mention the merit of our Avot on Rosh Hashanah, for they bequeathed to us the correct manner of serving Hashem.
- ◆ The pasuk in Tehillim, “Blow the shofar” alludes to the injunction to renew ourselves through improving our deeds. Where logic ends, *emunah* begins. It is this pure faith which allows one to sever himself from materialism and renew his pact with Hashem.



Mutual Responsibility

“You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all the men of Israel. Your small children, your women, and your proselyte who is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water”

(Devarim 29:9-10)

The Zohar Hakadosh states that the pasuk “You are standing today” alludes to Rosh Hashanah, regarding which we recite, “Today is the beginning of Creation, today He will stand all creatures in judgment” (*Musaf Rosh Hashanah; Pri Eitz Chaim, Shofar 5*). Moshe hinted to Am Yisrael that just as they stood before him that day, hearing the words of

Hashem, so too, would they stand on Rosh Hashanah before the King of the universe, in judgment for the deeds of the past year (see *Zohar*, II 32b; *Arvei Nachal*, *Nitzavim*).

Why does Hashem choose to judge His children specifically on Rosh Hashanah? Rosh Hashanah is the day of man's creation (*Yalkut Shimoni*, *Bamidbar* 782), when Hashem blew into him a *neshamah* from on High (see *Mesillat Yesharim* 1). It is most fitting, then, that Rosh Hashanah is the day when Hashem takes stock of mankind, so to speak. Was it worth it to create man, for he goes in His ways, or would it have been better not to have created him?

"Today is the beginning of Creation" refers to the creation of Adam Harishon on Rosh Hashanah (see *Pri Eitz Chaim*, *Shofar* 5). Why, then, do we say, "Today is the beginning of *Creation*" and not, "Today is the beginning of *mankind*?" What we learn from this is that the entire Creation was actualized for one purpose only – mankind (see *Kohelet Rabbah* 7:19). How great is the responsibility on our shoulders to justify the Creation of the entire world! Every individual must internalize the concept that the world was created just for him (*Sanhedrin* 37a). When this thought fills man's mind, he feels motivated to improve his character and cling to Torah and mitzvot.

When I visited the gravesite of the tzaddik, Rabbi Baruch of Mezibezh, near the grave of the Ba'al Shem Tov, I found a sefer called *Oheiv Yisrael*, written by the Rebbi of Apta, zt"l. He asks an incisive question on our pasuk. It states, "You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all the men of Israel." He asks why the words "all of you" are inserted, when the different categories of people are stated immediately afterward, from the most important, to the humblest. Alternatively, why delineate the different types of people, when "all of you" already included all of them? He answers in detail.

I would like to suggest another explanation. Moshe was teaching Bnei Yisrael that the nation is comprised of various classes. Some members

wield power, and some are simple folk; some are wealthy and some are poor; some hold high positions and some are mere blue-collar workers. Nevertheless, they must each assume a sense of mutual responsibility for one another. They must fiercely feel that they are one cohesive unit. This is alluded to in the words, “You are standing today, all of you.”

True unity can be felt only when there is mutual respect and appreciation, even when the ranks differ. When the wealthy do not take pride in their wealth and the wise do not pride themselves on their wisdom, true unity can prevail among the people. Harmony can reside only in a place of brotherliness, even when the social strata differ. This is the true gauge of unity among Am Yisrael. Those who are held in high esteem do not exploit the common populace. Rather, they use their high positions to benefit their fellow man. They understand that if Hashem put them in a place of prestige, it is meant for them to utilize to the advantage of the public.

When Hashem observes that His children do not lord over one another, but live in peace and brotherliness, He hurries to inscribe them and seal them in the Book of Life. Our Sages teach (*Uktzin* 3:12) that the only vessel which can hold blessing is peace. Peace has the power to increase happiness, goodness, and blessing among Am Yisrael, opening wide the gates of abundance.

It is the way of the world that only suspects of crime are brought to trial. Law-abiding citizens are never ordered to appear in court for judgment. In contrast, the judgment of Heaven is all-inclusive and applies to the tzaddikim as well as the resha'im, those who cling to Torah and those distant from it. This fact points to the mutual responsibility which exists among Klal Yisrael. Tzaddikim are often taken to task for the sins of the wicked, even though they themselves would never contemplate such deeds. The entire generation is one unit, and each individual is responsible for his fellow man.

Moreover, one should not trust in himself until the day he dies (*Avot* 2:4). Even one who is closely connected with Torah and Chassidut, may,

at times, harbor thoughts of conceit. Since Hashem judges His righteous ones to a hairsbreadth (see *Yevamot* 121b), one will be answerable for even the slightest infringement.

A person may never say, “All will be fine with me.” He should not feel that because he is walking the straight and narrow path of Torah and mitzvot, he is perfect and has no need for improvement. On the contrary; Rabbi Yisrael Salanter said that as long as the candle burns, one can still repair. As long as the *neshamah* lives within a person, it can ascend to spiritual heights. Therefore, each person must make a thorough investigation of his actions, seeking sincerely to improve. If one seeks, he will find, as Kohelet teaches (7:20), “For there is no man so wholly righteous on earth that he [always] does good and never sins.”

The Gemara (*Rosh Hashanah* 18a) relates that Hashem judges His children in two ways. One is by means of a general survey, and the other is an individual inspection, like sheep passing before the shepherd. This second type of judgment is obviously more intense and indicting. How can we compare a judgment where the judge scans an entire group in one glance, with one in which each individual is examined separately? The different forms of judgment are intended for different types of people. The tzaddikim, who did complete teshuvah, merit a quick perusal, whereas the resha'im, who postpone the teshuvah process, are judged in detail, like sheep passing before their shepherd.

But, in truth, these two methods are intertwined, due to the mutual responsibility existing among our nation (see *Shevuot* 39a). At times, Hashem might strike a tzaddik for the sins of the wicked. As we know, the leaders of the generation are the central figures upon which the entire world exists and is sustained. A generation which boasts Torah giants and extremely pious people is influenced by their goodness and is worthy of blessing.

In order to be worthy of enjoying the light which emanates from such holy people, we must remove from ourselves the garb of sin and return completely to Hashem, so that the tzaddikim do not, *chalilah*, suffer for

our sins. At the end of the day, it is we who suffer their loss. It is known that when righteous people are taken on account of the generation's sins, their *neshamot* enjoy a special place in *Olam Haba*, far above anything imaginable in this world. We are the ones who truly mourn the passing of tzaddikim, as we are left bereft. Not only has the tzaddik left us on our own, but the bounty that came in his merit has also gone.

Therefore, we carry the tremendous responsibility to improve ourselves, so that our leaders are not taken from us. This loss is bemoaned in the *tachanun* prayer said on Mondays, "They have traveled to their rest and left us to sigh." May we increase peace and love, brotherliness and companionship among Am Yisrael. The best vessel for holding blessing is the vessel of peace.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ On Rosh Hashanah, Hashem makes an accounting as to whether or not it was appropriate to create the world for the sake of man. The deciding factor is man's actions. Why do we recite, "Today is the beginning of *Creation*" and not, "Today is the beginning of *man*," since Rosh Hashanah is the day when man was created? It is because everything was made for the sake of man. How awesome is man's responsibility to uphold the world!
- ◆ Why does the pasuk state "all of you" and then delineate all the sections of people? Moshe wanted to teach the people that although they are comprised of various classes, they must respect one another and feel mutual accountability.
- ◆ On Rosh Hashanah, Hashem judges all of His children, tzaddikim and resha'im alike. This is unlike a human court, wherein only the accused are judged. This indicates how all-encompassing the level of mutual responsibility among our people is. At times, tzaddikim are punished for the sins of the wicked. Furthermore, as long as a person lives, he is liable to sin. He should never trust himself, but constantly be on the lookout for the *Yetzer Hara*.

- ◆ Sometimes, tzaddikim are taken as atonement for the sins of the generation. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to strengthen ourselves in mitzvah observance, so that we may prevent their early demise, when we are left orphaned.



Balancing the Books

“You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all the men of Israel. Your small children, your women, and your proselyte who is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water”

(Devarim 29:9-10)

These words refer to Rosh Hashanah, as stated above. On that day, old and young, tzaddikim and resha'im, important and simple, stand before Hashem in judgment. Before transmitting his message, Moshe assembled the entire nation, from the oldest to the youngest. Just as all strata of society stood at attention, accepting his words, so does everyone, the important ones, the elders, the woodchoppers, and the water drawers stand before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah.

The Ba'al HaTanya writes (see *Likutei Torah*) that Am Yisrael is comprised of ten levels. The tzaddik, who stands at the helm of the nation, is compared to the head, the most significant organ of the body. In contrast, the rasha is compared to the lowly foot at the bottom. In order for the head to sit straight, the foot must keep the body stable. In order for the tzaddikim to exist, they need the resha'im, who draw the

kelippah away from them. Once they are relieved of all forms of impurity, the tzaddikim are free to absorb *kedushah* unfettered by defilement.

Parashat *Nitzavim* is always read close to Rosh Hashanah. There is an intrinsic connection between the two. Hashem began the Creation of the world on the 25th of Elul (*Vayikra Rabbah* 29a). On Rosh Hashanah, Adam, the crown of Creation, came into being. (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 782). The day that Hashem created Adam, He placed him in Gan Eden and admonished him not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge (see *Aderet d'Rabbi Natan* 1:8). But Adam did not withstand the cajoling of his wife, who, in turn, had been persuaded by the Snake, and fell into sin. Hashem originally wanted to judge Adam on the spot, but since Shabbat had already begun, He judged him and exiled him from Gan Eden only after Shabbat ended (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 11b).

Why do we recite, “Today is the beginning of the world” on Rosh Hashanah, when the world was actually created on the 25th of Elul? Since the entire world was created for the sake of Adam, who made his appearance on Rosh Hashanah, it is fitting to call that day the beginning of the world.

The entire Creation is in the merit of man. If not for him, there would be no justification for this world. Since he is the crown of Creation, the day upon which he was created is considered “the beginning of the world.” Similarly, Hashem extracted Bnei Yisrael from Egypt in order to give them the Torah. Had He thought them incapable of receiving the Torah, He would never have rescued them. Had that been the case, we, our children, and our grandchildren would still be enslaved in Egypt. It was only the merit of the Torah which allowed for the Exodus (*Shemot Rabbah* 3:4).

We have the custom to recite the passage of “Today is the beginning of the world” precisely after the blowing of the shofar. Why is that? The word שופר (shofar) is closely related to the word שיפור, meaning improvement (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Vayikra* 745). The shofar resonates with the message that man was created with the purpose of improving

himself and advancing in spirituality. The pasuk (*Iyov* 11:12) says, “Let one who is [like] a wild ass be reborn as a man.” Chazal (*Radak, Bereishit* 8:21; *Metzudat David, Iyov* 11:12) explain that Hashem, Who knows man’s makeup, a combination of good and bad character traits, gave him the Torah through which to improve himself. This enables him to reach his *tikkun* and fulfill his purpose on this earth. But when a person fails to improve, by means of Torah and teshuvah, he is denying this purpose.

On the second day of Creation, when Hashem separated the upper waters from the lower ones, the lower ones came to Him in complaint. They wished to ascend, too, and exist within the vicinity of the *Shechinah*. They considered it unfair that they had to remain below. They felt that they got the shallow end of the deal (*Bereishit Rabbah* 5:4; 2:2).

The complaint of the lower waters indicts us. Do we weep copiously to be granted the merit of clinging to the *Shechinah*? Or are we more interested in drowning ourselves in physical pleasures? If the waters, lacking intellect, recognized Hashem’s majesty and wished to be one with it, how much more should we, who carry the obligation to perceive our exalted mission, constantly seek closeness with Him.

Upon observing the distress of the lower waters, Hashem appeased them by granting that in the future, they would be the ones to anoint the Mizbeach in the Beit Hamikdash (see *Rashi, Vayikra* 2:13). In this manner, the waters of the earth would become sanctified and reach the same lofty level as the upper waters. How can we, made of the dust of the earth, connect with these upper waters, located under the Heavenly Throne? By learning Torah, which is compared to a living font of water. This is in line with the exhortation of the *Navi (Yeshayahu* 55:1), “Ho, everyone who is thirsty, go to the water.” *Water* refers to Torah (*Bava Kama* 17a). In order to become purified by the distilling qualities of Torah, we must constantly fight the *Yetzer Hara*, who attempts to drag us into the quagmire of earthliness. How can one overcome the pull of materialism? Through *nisuch hamayim*. This is an allusion to sanctifying the mundane through learning Torah and keeping mitzvot. Prayers and blessings lift the physical to a level of sanctity.

As we mentioned earlier, Moshe gathered the entire nation to hear his words. I would like to suggest another reason why he used the phrase “all of you” and then delineated each group among the people, which is seemingly repetitive. On Rosh Hashanah, Hashem does not judge only the Jewish nation, but the entire world, gentile and Jew, the animal kingdom, and even the inanimate objects. But what is the deciding factor that will sway the scales? It is Am Yisrael’s level at that time. If they are worthy, and uphold the Torah, the entire world is judged favorably. But if they, *chalilah*, turn their backs on the Torah, Hashem judges the world harshly. The words “all of you,” then, refer to all of Creation. The entire world trembles while awaiting its verdict, which is based on the spiritual level of the Chosen Nation.

Moshe was hinting to Bnei Yisrael that although the nation is comprised of various types and stripes, they are “all of you,” one single entity. The fact that they are different by nature does not contradict their moral imperative – to be one solid unit. When they put all differences aside and take up for the banner of Hashem’s Name as one, they will merit a good and peaceful life.

Throughout the year, it is our moral obligation to stand steadfast before Hashem. Chazal instruct us (*Berachot* 2a; *ibid.*, 9b) to recite the Kriyat Shema a number of times daily. This is a method of stirring one’s heart to love of Hashem. Although we offhandedly say the words (*Devarim* 6:5), “You shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources,” we must delve deeply into them and be honest with ourselves. Do we truly love Hashem with all our hearts? Do we approach Him, throughout the year, with love? Or do we awaken from our year-long stupor only when Rosh Hashanah is on the horizon? Wearing the crown of Creation carries tremendous responsibility. Knowing that the entire world is sustained in our merit should give us much food for thought. When Am Yisrael go in the right path, Hashem showers the world with blessing and sustenance, health and peace. But when they lose sight of what is right, *chalilah*, and drink from

contaminated wells, Hashem awakens them by means of ambulance sirens, to return to Him once again.

When Hashem sees that we stand before Him at attention, all year long, the Attribute of Mercy prevails, causing Hashem to decree on the world at large, and on Am Yisrael in particular, good tidings of comfort and salvation.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Just as Moshe assembled the entire nation, so too, on the Day of Judgment, all stand before Hashem. The Ba'al HaTanya writes that there are ten levels of people in Am Yisrael. Just as the head cannot exist without the foot, so does the tzaddik need the rasha to absorb the *kelippah*.
- ◆ The world was created on the 25th of Elul. Why, then, do we recite “Today is the beginning of the world” on Rosh Hashanah? Because that is the day when Adam was created. We read this passage after blowing the shofar, as the shofar hints to character improvement. Man’s main objective in this world is to perfect his character.
- ◆ When Hashem distinguished between the upper and lower waters, the lower waters complained that they were distanced from the *Shechinah*. Hashem appeased them by saying that they would become elevated through the *nisuch hamayim*, just like the upper waters. This should teach us a lesson. If the inanimate waters wished to come closer to Hashem, how much more should we pine for His closeness. We can accomplish this by means of a personal *nisuch hamayim*, an allusion to sanctifying the mundane to lofty heights.
- ◆ The words “all of you” include all of Creation, for everything is brought to judgment on Rosh Hashanah. The entire world depends on the deeds of Bnei Yisrael. Their merits grant goodness and their wrongdoings, destruction.
- ◆ Moshe alluded to unity, a central aspect of Judaism. “All of you” are gathered here, regardless of status, and all are mutually accountable.

- ◆ One should take to heart the message to “stand before Hashem,” not just on the Day of Judgment, but all year long.



Mirror Image

“You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all the men of Israel”

(Devarim 29:9)

The Zohar, as mentioned previously, associates this pasuk with Rosh Hashanah, when we recite, “Today is the beginning of Creation, today He will stand all creatures in judgment” (*Musaf, Rosh Hashanah*). Just as all Klal Yisrael, from the most prominent to the simplest, stood before Moshe as he said these words, so too, do all people stand before Hashem on the Day of Judgment, elders and youngsters, important and humble alike. Although we all stand before Hashem, not everyone merits standing in His proximity. Let us take an example from the king of Morocco. When he would parade through the city streets, all would emerge from their homes to gaze at his majesty. Obviously, not everyone was lucky enough to catch sight of him. Only those who prepared a spot early in the day, or even days before, were guaranteed a glimpse of their beloved king.

L’havdil, Hashem, King of all kings, judges all who appear before Him on Rosh Hashanah. Whether or not one will stand within His vicinity depends solely upon his preparation prior to this meeting. The days of mercy and forgiveness, beginning Rosh Chodesh Elul, serve this purpose. These are the days when Hashem, so to speak, steps out of His royal palace and comes into the field, mingling with His children. The *Navi*, Yeshayahu, exhorts us (55:6), “Seek Hashem when He can be found, call

upon Him when He is near.” One who has the wisdom of foresight will utilize these days maximally, returning to Him in complete repentance.

The Midrash states (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 6:3), “I am my Beloved’s, and my Beloved is mine.” If one fulfills his obligation as Hashem’s beloved, coming close to Him, then he will merit Hashem being his. Hashem will reflect his love and empower him with the ability to come back to Him completely.

The main problem of our generation vis-à-vis the days of repentance is that these days follow on the heels of Bein Hazmanim, days when we are not in the ordinary everyday routine. The transition from the halcyon, lazy days of vacation, to the intense and serious season of the Days of Judgment is a sharp one. Often, we are still caught up in the carefree experiences and memories of the summer schedule and fail to feel the imminence of the approaching Days of Awe. This is also why we do not have the ability to bewail the *churban* sufficiently. Instead of mourning the destruction of Tishah b’Av, we are busy planning for the upcoming vacation days.

The remedy for this ill is to constantly bear in mind the pasuk in Tehillim (16:8), “I have set Hashem before me always.” A person is enjoined to feel Hashem’s Presence at every stage of life and in everything he does, not just at the approach of the Days of Judgment. When one accustoms himself to living with the realization that there is “a seeing eye, a listening ear, and all of your deeds are recorded in a book” (*Avot* 2:1), it makes no difference what the season is. Even during the so-called down-times, one continues in his loyalty to Hashem and His mitzvot.

Doesn’t a king feel impelled to act regally even in his innermost chambers? His status obligates refined behavior wherever he is. So too, must we, the sons of kings (*Shabbat* 111a), conduct ourselves with perfection in our homes and outside, in the days of routine and in the days of vacation. When one lives by this credo, then, when the Days of Judgment draw near, he is capable of entering the proper mindset without finding the change drastic.

When a nursing mother wakes up for her crying baby numerous times each night, she does it out of a sense of love, to the point of self-sacrifice. We must feel this fierce love toward Hashem, Who sustains us constantly. The more we intensify our love of Hashem, the more we will desire serving Him whole-heartedly, throughout the year, and especially during the days of mercy and forgiveness.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we, simple people, could muster the love of the tzaddikim toward Hashem, as commanded in the verse in Kriyat Shema (*Devarim* 6:5), "You shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources"? The way to do this is by taking a lesson from the above pasuk. One merits reaching the level of the "heads of the tribes" and the "elders," i.e., the tzaddikim of the generation, by means of arousing strivings in the head, or the mind. When a person affirms that his aspiration is to ascend in Torah and *yirat Shamayim*, he will receive Heavenly assistance, as we are taught (*Makkot* 10b), "In the way in which man wishes to go, he is led."

I saw the realization of these words many years ago. My father, zy" a, could not see well. I accompanied him to a top doctor in England, a specialist in the specific problem which my father faced. When we reached the neighborhood where the doctor's office was located, I told my father to follow me. But Father not only did not follow me; he instructed me to follow him. To my utter surprise, he led the way through the streets of Manchester, until we arrived at the doctor's door. How could my father, nearly blind, lead me through the unknown streets safely, with no outside help at all? I then understood that it was in fulfillment of the above-quoted maxim. Since my father lived all his life with the desire to go in the ways of Hashem, he was led to the doctor's office, to have his eyesight renewed. In matters of spirituality, one merits assistance above and beyond human capacity.

Often, a person goes through the rote of mitzvah performance, without putting thought into what he is doing. What a shame! In order to reach heights in spirituality, one must completely throw himself into what he is doing, coupling his actions with proper thought and intention. When that

is the case, the mitzvah has the power to draw him upwards and protect him from sin.

As we approach the Days of Judgment, is our mind filled with thoughts of the summer vacation which we just experienced, or are we in Yamim Noraim mode? One who lives in the days of Bein Hazmanim with a certain degree of seriousness, never lightheaded or completely carefree, will find it easier to relate to the Days of Awe with appropriate seriousness. In this manner, he will be able to make full use of the wonderful gift from Hashem called teshuvah.

Parashat *Shoftim* begins with the verse (*Devarim* 16:18), “Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities – which Hashem, your G-d, gives you – for your tribes; and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.” *Ba’alei Mussar* say that we learn from here the obligation to enforce protection over each and every organ of our body (see *Noam Migadim, Shoftim*). Just as any self-respecting city provides its citizens with protection, so too, in order to function optimally, the body must be armed with protection from the winds of the outside world. The more fences and guard-posts one erects, the more secure one will be. When he leaves his everyday environment to spend time at vacation resorts, he is in need of manifold times more protection. Set times for learning are relaxed, lending the *Yetzer Hara* a foothold in matters of materialism and lust. Who are our officers and judges? They are the Torah and mitzvot, which arouse us to think through our deeds, thereby avoiding sin.

Chazal teach (see *Avot* 4:11; *Zohar Chadash, Midrash Rut* 75a) that when a person performs a mitzvah, he creates a good angel. These angels act as policemen, protecting their creator from sin. The Gemara states (*Sotah* 21a), “Torah provides protection.” No matter what situation a person finds himself in, he should set aside fixed times for Torah study and should adhere to the mitzvot, easy and difficult alike. One should never forego prayer with a minyan. When one conducts himself according to the dictates of the Torah even during down-time, he will surely approach the Days of Judgment with the correct frame of mind, and stand in the proximity of the King, not just before Him.

Weeks before we are planning a trip, we stand with pencil in hand, jotting down all the important (and not-so-important) things to do and take, so that everything comes out just so. Do we put as much planning into the upcoming Yamim Noraim? Are we worried that maybe we are not prepared well enough? Would that we would prepare for the Days of Awe at least as much as we prepare for summer vacation!

During the days of mercy and forgiveness, we have the custom to recite Psalm 27 in Tehillim. There we read, “By David, Hashem is my light and my salvation... One thing I asked of Hashem, that shall I seek: Would that I dwell in the House of Hashem all the days of my life, to behold the sweetness of Hashem and to visit in His Sanctuary.” David did not ask for fame or glory. He had one request and one request only: to sit in the Beit Hamidrash and to feel the excitement of Torah study and mitzvah performance, as though he were visiting there for the very first time. This specific chapter is recited during this time of year, in order to help us gain perspective of our purpose in this world. That is, to serve Hashem whole-heartedly by spending our days in His House. Only by means of Torah study does one merit protection for his body, keeping it safe from sin. The more one is careful to protect himself, the more Hashem will help him to succeed, enabling him to face his judgment with a clean slate.

David Hamelech was born with a tendency for lust and bloodshed (based on *Shmuel* I 16:12). Aware of the negative implications of his nature, David fought a constant battle with his lower self. This was by means of Torah, which protects man from falling into sin. We find that after David erred by taking Batsheva too soon, he was smitten with remorse. He testified about himself (*Tehillim* 51:5), “My sin is before me always.” Chazal tell us (*Shabbat* 56a), “Whoever says that David sinned is mistaken.” Nonetheless, David always carried feelings of regret and pain over his actions. We know that whoever is greater than his friend is beset by a greater *Yetzer Hara* (*Sukkah* 52a). Tzaddikim, therefore, are constantly involved in Torah and teshuvah, attempting to thwart the influence of the Evil Inclination.

It would be worthwhile to recite Psalm 27 of Tehillim with great concentration, and not mere lip service. May this chapter serve as a conduit to draw down the power of Torah and teshuvah invested in it by David Hamelech. He strove, all his life, to dwell in the House of Hashem and behold His sweetness, not only during the Days of Judgment, but throughout his life.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The Zohar states that the words “You are standing today, all of you” refer to Rosh Hashanah, when Klal Yisrael stand in judgment before Hashem. Who will merit standing in Hashem’s proximity? Only those who were punctilious in fulfilling “I am my Beloved’s” will merit experiencing “and my Beloved is mine.”
- ◆ One who lives with the maxim “I have set Hashem before me always” merits feeling Hashem’s Presence at all times, and in every situation. He comes to the Day of Judgment well-prepared.
- ◆ The words “The heads of your tribes, your elders” teach us that in order to reach the level of head of the nation, one must arouse this aspiration in his mind. He will be awarded Heavenly assistance. Furthermore, one must perform mitzvot not only with his body parts, but, first and foremost, with his heart and head.
- ◆ The words “Judges and officers shall you appoint” teach us that when one performs a mitzvah, he creates a good angel. These good angels protect a person from sin.
- ◆ It is customary to recite the psalm “By David, Hashem is my light and my salvation” during the days of mercy and forgiveness. David Hamelech declares, “One thing I asked of Hashem, that shall I seek: Would that I dwell in the House of Hashem all the days of my life...” This chapter should awaken us to our purpose in this world, thereby bringing us to do

teshuvah. We will then merit standing in Hashem's proximity when the Day of Judgment comes.



The Eiffel Tower – Turret of Falsehood

“You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all the men of Israel...”

(Devarim 29:9)

The holy Rabbi Chaim Vital and the Chida, zy”a, state that the letters of the word אַתָּה (you) can be transposed to spell the word אֱמוּנָה (truth). On Rosh Hashanah, one must stand before Hashem, holding fast to truth. Let us analyze the essential difference between truth adulterated by falsehood, which is only an illusion of the truth, and pristine honesty, the purest form of integrity. Only after we recognize the truth of Hashem's existence in this world, can we successfully distance ourselves from wrongdoing and repent our misdeeds.

When I visited the Ukraine, in Elul, 5766, I went to pray at the graves of our nation's previous greats, such as the Ba'al Shem Tov; the tzaddik, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, zy”a; and others. I have established the custom in recent years to visit their graves during this time of year, asking for the merit of these tzaddikim to protect us and ensure a year of life and peace.

In the past, the Ukraine was under Communist rule, which forbade all Torah and mitzvah observance. Jews with bold spirits would risk their lives to pass the torch of Judaism to the next generation, lest it be snuffed out completely. *Baruch Hashem*, the situation today is greatly improved. The visitor shakes his head in wonder, finding it difficult to believe that

this is the place where religion was repressed and Jews were executed for keeping mitzvot.

In order to arrive at the graveyard where these giants of the spirit rest, one must hire a horse and wagon. I, too, used this primitive mode of travel. Sitting in the wagon, I could not help but compare this transportation with the grand French Concorde, upon which millions of Francs were spent. What was the end of this airplane? It was nothing but a dismal failure, and sits in a lonely corner, of no use to anyone. In direct contrast, the good old horse has served man faithfully from time immemorial. In spite of technological advancements throughout the world, the horse trots blissfully along, walking with its load, on roads never before trodden by modern man.

The horse is a creature created by Hashem Himself. Therefore, it has withstood the test of time, fulfilling its mission on this earth. The Concorde, on the other hand, was an invention of man, and a sorry one at that. The animal kingdom, created by Hashem, has continued for thousands of years. Of course, there are animals that became extinct due to hunters seeking furs and skins, or through lack of sustenance, due to the destruction of their habitats. Otherwise, all animals would thrive, functioning just as they did at the time of Creation.

What was the purpose of constructing an airplane the likes of the Concorde? It was in order to bring pride and prestige to the French nation. Tremendous amounts of money and energy were poured into this endeavor, the apple of their eye. But all too soon, this plane met its sad end. Its blueprint was faulty from the start: The French people did not invent it in order to help people reach their destinations quicker, but only in order to receive international acclaim.

Conversely, when Hashem created the horse, and, indeed, all creatures, He made them with features which would best suit the needs of man. Everything in the world was made for His honor (see *Avot* 6:12). When mankind would employ the power of the horse and enjoy its advantages, they would praise Hashem for creating such a marvelous creature.

Hashem wanted to make life easier for people, as well as to glorify His Name by making this beast.

The supersonic Concorde was missing this vital component. Its invention involved no altruistic motives, merely glory and fame. Therefore, it could not fulfill its mission of serving passengers safely. This should teach us an invaluable lesson. When one does an act without pure motives, it cannot endure, and will eventually fade into oblivion.

Whenever I see the Eiffel Tower, the symbol of Paris, I am struck with the thought that this magnificent structure has missed its mark. It is quite impressive at first glance, but one sees that the word Eiffel (א״יפל) is related to the word אפילה, meaning darkness and gloom. The builders of this majestic edifice, and indeed, the entire French nation, hold their heads high with tremendous pride. But who is the One Who deserves honor and glory? Only Hashem. He is the One Who created metal and light. If not for the intellect with which He blessed the builders, they would never have succeeded in reaching such heights.

Many stand before this tower in wonder, praising its constructors. However, they forget Who is the Master Builder, the One Who gave the wisdom and understanding to the contractors and architects to produce a structure of such magnitude. The lowly horse, mentioned earlier, is a creation of something from nothing. The world was originally enveloped in darkness and emptiness. From this state, Hashem created the horse to serve mankind. In contrast, the Eiffel Tower is made of materials which already existed. The intelligence needed to build this edifice, too, came from a Divine source.

In direct opposition to this approach, is that of the tzaddikim. When they perceive the wonders of nature, they are struck with awe and enthusiasm, crying out, "This emanated from Hashem; it is wondrous in our eyes." When Yosef, the famed interpreter, was called to interpret Pharaoh's dream, he did not take any credit for himself. On the contrary, he proclaimed, "That is beyond me; it is G-d Who will respond with Pharaoh's welfare" (*Bereishit* 41:16).

In Tehillim, the pasuk (85:12) reads, "Truth will sprout from the earth." The source of truth is the earth. It grows from the ground like flowers. Just as beds of flowers are beautiful and fragrant, emitting a wonderful scent to all who pass by, so does truth contain the fragrance of Gan Eden, available to all who wish to enjoy its delightful and heady aroma. The smell of truth is indisputable, for it is obvious throughout the world.

I once spoke with a fabulously wealthy man and asked him for his opinion on life. He replied that he was very afraid of what is going on in the world. Ours is a generation of plenty. Coins roll from one person to the next at dizzying speeds. Unfortunately, the glitter of gold blinds one to the reality of Who has given him his wealth. Even the righteous have fallen into the habit of attributing their good fortune to their personal prowess. I was happy to see that this man was aware of the truth, for awareness of the truth enables one to adhere to it.

In direct opposition, I met a certain man a number of times. He always boasted his high connections. He constantly displayed excitement about his future plans, without once mentioning "*Be'ezrat Hashem*." This man's attitude grated on me. He felt that he controlled his destiny. He decided what would happen, how, and why. He never ascribed to the bottom line, which is the fact that Hashem runs the world and is the deciding factor in man's life. His style of speech caused me untold anguish. I finally could bear it no longer and threatened to sever all connection with him. He was hurt at my suggestion, but it was the right thing to do. Disconnected from him, I was able to look at the matter objectively. How foolish it is for mere mortals to ascribe their success to their own merit, forgetting Who guides the destiny of each creature in this world. This man had rendered himself a human Eiffel Tower, illuminated by thousands of lights, yet depicting darkness and gloom. This darkness is the product of those who gaze at it, ignoring the One Who built it.

During the war with Lebanon, in 2006, there was a blatant disparity in the attitudes of the Israeli populace. On the one hand, there was an outpouring of love and mutual help among all cross-sections of the population, religious and secular alike. Standing in the street, I lifted my

eyes heavenward and proclaimed, “*Ribbono Shel Olam!* Who is like Your nation, Israel! See how they help each other without taking into account their time, money, and energy.” On the other hand, there were those who continued life as usual. They did not contemplate why this trouble befell our people. As throngs were escaping the northern cities in panic, bathers flooded the beaches, celebrating their summer vacation enjoyably, ignoring the suffering of their fellow Jews.

Conversely, during the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War, the entire nation took part, whether in actually fighting on the front or helping with the injured and their families. What is the intrinsic difference between these previous wars and the modern-day war with Lebanon? Nowadays, money has taken such a place of pride in our lives that it has become an icon of idol worship. During wartime, regrettably, instead of thinking of ways to help their fellow brothers in need, many are mired in their money. They are occupied with where they will profit most and where their assets are safest. During the early days of the State of Israel, the economic situation was at a low. People’s minds were not constantly on wealth and acquisitions. Young and old were therefore able to relate to the troubles of the times, offering succor to the needy.

Shlomo Hamelech tells us (*Kohelet* 5:9), “A lover of money will never be satisfied with money.” This is because “one who has a hundred, wants two hundred” (*Kohelet Rabbah* 1:32). A woman died after being in a coma for a period of time, in the wake of a car accident. She had been a most devoted mother. She left her children a substantial sum of money. After she returned her soul to her Maker, her son phoned me, at a very late hour, to inform me of her passing. He said that now he felt calm, for his mother is on High and sees whatever his family needs. He was sure that they would lack for nothing, for she would surely advocate for her children from her place in Heaven.

Upon hearing his words, I became extremely agitated. “What are you lacking?!” I shouted at him. “Your mother left you loads of money. But instead of thinking how you can repay her, bringing her *neshamah* to loftier levels, through donations to the Beit Hakeneset or toward studying

Mishnayot in her memory, you think only of your personal gains. Where is your love toward your mother, and some small measure of gratitude for what she did for you all the years?" The man was silenced and filled with shame. He had no response, for he realized I was right. This was a clear case of money blinding the intelligent.

Maran Harav Shach, zt"l, once said that it is impossible to depend solely on Hashem while one invests all his strength and energy into amassing fortunes. One must make his priorities clear, for service of Hashem cannot co-exist together with materialism. This does not mean to say that one may not have money. But, rather, he must distinguish between the primary and the peripheral in his life. Avodat Hashem must be his prime objective, while materialism serves only as a means toward this goal. The Ba'al Shem Tov writes that man can acquire *yirat Shamayim* only if he completely devotes himself to Hashem, with every fiber of his being. This is possible only after he has detached himself from physicality and materialism, which smack of guile and deceit.

We are commanded not to destroy wantonly (*Devarim 20:19*). One must beware not to discard items which he does not need and which others may enjoy. This mindset teaches a person that everything he has comes from Above. Gifts from Heaven may not be disposed of on a whim. Offering them to the needy will arouse in them, too, a feeling of gratitude toward Hashem. This will provide a dual purpose to each item which one has no use for. He has trained himself to regard everything as Heavenly-ordained, and he has given the gift of gratitude to the poor man, as well.

Chazal teach us (*Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 45*) that the month of Elul is the month of mercy and forgiveness. Its purpose is to repair the damage done to our souls by the defilement of this world. To me, the Eiffel Tower is the symbol of the worst of these impurities. It stands tall and brightly lit, yet is really hollow and empty. It is the model of advanced technology, which ensnares untold victims in its Web. It casts its bright light far and wide, but just blinds the eyes of the beholder, not bringing him practical benefit.

In Summary

- ◆ What is the difference between truth mingled with falsehood, and pure, unadulterated truth? Only after recognizing the real truth, can we distance ourselves from evil and repent for our iniquities.
- ◆ The ordinary horse, made directly by Hashem, goes further than the supersonic Concorde, which lies in disuse. This serves to show the stark difference between natural wonders and those that are man-made. The Eiffel Tower is another example of glitter and glitz which is, in reality, nothing with nothing.
- ◆ All wisdom and physical assets must be ascribed to Hashem, the Source of all blessing.
- ◆ The difference between Israeli wars fought at the start of the State and later ones is that then, there was no pull of materialism, for there was none to be had. Each person, therefore, concentrated his efforts on helping his fellow man. Nowadays, however, all wish to live the good life and accrue more money. During wartime, many are occupied with their own self-interests and cannot be bothered by their fellow man's plight.
- ◆ One must set his priorities straight, for physicality and spirituality cannot co-exist.
- ◆ The prohibition against wasting gives us pause to appreciate the blessing of Hashem. Offering unused items to others gives them, as well, the opportunity to appreciate His bounty.
- ◆ The month of Elul is granted as a chance to repair the breaches caused by the defilement of the world we live in.



United, We Stand

“You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all the men of Israel. Your small children, your women, and your proselyte who is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water”

(Devarim 29:9-10)

Today refers to the day of Rosh Hashanah, when all stand before Hashem in judgment (see *Zohar* II, 32b; *Arvei Nachal, Nitzavim*). The word “you,” in the plural form, hints to the fact that when Bnei Yisrael are united, they merit emerging innocent in judgment and are inscribed for a good, blessed year.

The Ba'al HaTanya writes (see *Likutei Torah*) that Am Yisrael is comprised of ten levels of *neshamah* and is compared to the body of man. Just as the foot cannot exist without the head, so can the head not achieve perfection without the foot. Moshe delineated the various classes in our nation to transmit the message that just as we need the heads of the tribes, so too, do we need the wood-choppers and water-drawers, the simple people, who are compared to the foot. When all are united harmoniously, in peace and brotherhood, we are guaranteed to be inscribed and sealed for a good new year.

Moshe Rabbeinu specifically used the word אַתָּם (you) in order to allude to the transposition of its letters, which spells אֱמֶת (truth). The only truth is Torah (*Yalkut Shimoni, Daniel* 1,066). Unity is intrinsic for the survival of the nation, but without Torah, the living truth, it would have no head, no foot, nor anything else.

Chazal relate that although Achav Hamelech was a notorious idol worshipper, he emerged victorious in battle. He also ruled over the entire

world (*Vayikra Rabbah* 26:2; see *Megillah* 11a). How did Hashem allow him conquest of his enemies, when he and his people served foreign gods? It was in the merit of their caution to keep away from slander and *lashon hara*. Due to their unity, they were granted singular *siyata di'Shemaya* in fighting their battles, and all of their soldiers marched home in triumph.

The Gemara relates a fascinating phenomenon (*Sanhedrin* 103b). Achav, the avowed idol worshipper, revealed insights into the wisdom of Torat Kohanim, in eighty-five different ways. Sefer Melachim (I, 20:6-9; see *Sanhedrin* 102b) relates that he demonstrated tremendous respect for the Torah. The king of Aram sent his massive army, led by thirty-two kings, to fight Achav. Achav was deathly afraid. The king of Aram made a deal with him. If Achav would deliver his wife and children into his hands, he would desist from war. Achav readily agreed. But when the Aramean king added the caveat of surrendering the Sefer Torah, as well, Achav drew the line. He averred that it was not his personal property, but that of the entire nation, and he therefore was not able to yield it to others.

This account shows how much Achav cherished the Torah. Yet he served idols on a grand scale. How do we reconcile the paradox of Achav's life? Achav and his entire generation were tremendous Torah scholars and were punctilious to avoid the transgression of *lashon hara*. It was the *Yetzer Hara* of the time which spurred them to serve foreign gods (see *Sanhedrin* 102b). They merited victory in battle due to their extreme loyalty toward one another. Sefer *Melachim* relates the incident with the prophet, Michayahu ben Yimla who ordered Achav to fight, in the Name of Hashem. Achav obeyed, and met with great success.

Conversely, David Hamelech's men fell in battle (see *Vayikra Rabbah* 26b). How could this be; weren't only the righteous chosen to fight (see *Sotah* 44a)? Although David's generation was one of perfect faith in Hashem, they were battle-scarred by the sin of *lashon hara* (see *Vayikra Rabbah* 26b). Many of David's men spoke derogatorily, assuming that their words were purposeful and true. Nevertheless, they were severely punished and fell in combat. Although they won the wars, they lost the battles.

The Gemara guarantees great reward to the one who holds fast to silence. Silence is golden, for it prevents words of mockery, *lashon hara*, and various other iniquities of speech. Hashem awarded Achav's generation with victory in reward for their silence. Both Achav's and David's generations were steeped in Torah study. The difference was that in David's time, the people possessed steadfast *emunah*, whereas in Achav's time, they lacked this *emunah*. Hence, they worshipped false gods. Yet they held steadfast to their unity. How exalted are the ways of Hashem. He foregoes His own honor, but never overlooks a slight to the honor of His children.

Achav merited doing teshuvah at the end of his days (*Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 42). This was in the merit of the level of Torah study and unity of his generation. The Midrash states (*Bereishit Rabbah* 24:7), "Love your fellow man as yourself – this is an important principle of the Torah." Regrettably, he reverted back to his old ways, and he does not have a portion in the World to Come (*Sanhedrin* 10b).

Yeravam ben Nevat is the archetypal sinner who brought the masses to sin (see *Melachim* I, 14:16). *Pirkei Avot* teaches (5:18) that one who causes others to sin will not be given the means to repent, for the sins of the masses redound to his discredit. It could be that the sinner regrets his past misdeeds, but others, who learned from his wayward ways, do not. The instigator will be left with their iniquities on his hands. For this reason, Yeravam ben Nevat is denied a portion in the World to Come (*Sanhedrin* 90a). He is held accountable for the sins of the people, and for this he could never do complete teshuvah. In contrast, one who brings merit to the public is ascribed with their good deeds and merits a special level of *siyata di'Shemaya* to be spared from sin (see *Avot* 5:18).

Yeravam ben Nevat was full of himself. In his endeavor to increase his personal glory, he defaced Hashem's honor and damaged Am Yisrael's unity. He ordered the people to offer their sacrifices upon the altars which he erected in Beit El and Be'er Sheva, instead of ascending to Yerushalayim, as we are commanded. Only the king of Yehudah was allowed to sit in the *Azarah* section of the Beit Hamikdash when the

nation ascended on the festivals. As a king of Yisrael, he was afraid that his honor would suffer. This is why he instructed the people to re-route their pilgrimage to cities other than Yerushalayim (see *Melachim I*, 12:26-30). This deed made inroads in our nation's unity. Instead of the twelve tribes ascending as one, accepting Hashem's sovereignty as a single entity, they were splintered among various locations.

Bnei Yisrael regarded Yeravam ben Nevat as a righteous king. This was because Achiyah Hashiloni had anointed him as king. When Achiyah Hashiloni discovered that Yeravam was not going in Hashem's ways, he rebuked him severely. But in his arrogance, Yeravam could not accept the *Navi's* words. He hunted him down, to silence the voice of truth. Hashem carved an opening in Gan Eden and brought Achiyah Hashiloni up in a whirlwind, his body and soul still intact. Achav continued the work of Yeravam, serving false gods. Therefore, the sins of Achav's generation, as well, rest squarely on the shoulders of Yeravam, blocking his path to *Olam Haba* (*Sanhedrin* 90a).

Who is like our advocate, Moshe Rabbeinu? He always attempted to find merit for Bnei Yisrael in Hashem's eyes, standing in their defense and annulling harsh decrees. The Attribute of Justice protects Hashem's honor. This being the case, the task of the advocate is complex. For every recommendation to their credit, a prosecution is presented.

How can the world exist if the Attribute of Justice is constantly striking at the evil-doers, preventing Hashem's mercy from protecting them? Moshe reveals this secret in his words, "You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d," from your oldest to your youngest, in unity and harmony. This solidarity is capable of shielding you from the Attribute of Justice, for the *zechut* of the tzaddik protects the rasha from the strict hand of justice.

Conversely, the world cannot exist with only giants. The tzaddikim exist in the merit of the simple people. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, zy"l, writes the following in his commentary on Shir Hashirim, in the name of the Maggid of Mezeritch: The tzaddik sins in order to reach a

higher level through repentance and repair the *neshamah* of the rasha, which is connected with his. The flow of mutual responsibility runs deeply in the bloodstream of our people.

Imagine a man dressed in a dapper new suit. He finds a fellow Jew sinking into the mud. Of course, he will not hesitate to muddy his garment for the sake of saving the man from certain death. Similarly, the tzaddik allows his *neshamah* to become sullied, so that as he does teshuvah on his way up from the pit of doom, he can draw the rasha up with him. This brings salvation and succor to the poor rasha. The rasha's *neshamah* is a diamond in the raw, which is encrusted with filth. The tzaddik dirties his hands in the process, but extracts the diamond from the mud and polishes it to a high sheen. As he cleans his hands, the diamond that he is holding also becomes clean. How strongly does the diamond sparkle then!

On Erev Rosh Hashanah, we have the custom to distribute charity to the poor and ask forgiveness from our fellow man. This increases feelings of unity among our nation. When Hashem observes our attempts at creating unity in honor of the upcoming Yamim Noraim, He is greatly pleased and is happy to inscribe us in the book of the tzaddikim.

I thought of adding another dimension to Moshe's usage of the word "you" and not "we." It is known that Moshe is equal to all of Klal Yisrael (see *Mechilta, Yitro*). He was accustomed to find points in their favor. Had he included himself here, Bnei Yisrael may have felt that, as their leader, Moshe was responsible to instill peace among the people. By stating, "You are standing," he indicated that it is the mission of each and every Jew to feel a sense of obligation to maintain unity within our people.

On Rosh Hashanah, when we stand before Hashem in judgment, He expects us to be perfect in all of the mitzvot mentioned in this parashah. How does one acquire this lofty level of mitzvah observance? By connecting with the tzaddikim and following in their ways. The tzaddikim, likewise, connect with their fellow men. They "descend for the purpose of

ascending.” The tzaddik becomes strengthened by this act. In this manner, the rasha has performed a kindness with the tzaddik.

An analogy might clarify this subject. Imagine a king who wears the royal crown. Were someone to suggest that the king put the crown on his feet, he would be court-martialed for impudence. But were the king’s feet to hurt, he would benefit from lifting them up, maybe even resting them on his crown. Once his aches have left, he can stand straight once again, his head clear to serve his countrymen and free to re-accept the royal crown.

Moshe Rabbeinu was wined and dined in the palace of Pharaoh. He grew up a pampered child of the king’s household. But he was not satisfied with that lifestyle. He went outside to see how his people were faring. He saw their suffering and helped them bear the burden of their labor. This is stated in the pasuk (*Shemot* 2:11), “Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren and observed their burden.” He thereby lightened their load and lifted their spirits. Hashem took note of his deeds, which demonstrated the right personality traits required by the one who would extricate Bnei Yisrael from Egyptian servitude.

In order to reach the level of the “head,” one must first feel the “foot.” One who considers himself only a “head” and does not display sensitivity toward the “foot,” is like one who has no feet. Bnei Yisrael’s merit in judgment rests in their unity. Their interdependence proves that they are one cohesive unit.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ “You are standing today” is a reference to the great day, the Day of Judgment, Rosh Hashanah, when one and all stand in judgment before Hashem. The word “You” intimates unity and mutual accountability, in merit of which Bnei Yisrael are found worthy. The letters of the word אַתָּם (you) can be transposed to spell אֱמֶת (truth). Only the power of Torah, the ultimate truth, can bring the nation to unity.

- ◆ The Ba'al Hatanya says that the Torah delineated all of the various levels in Am Yisrael to indicate that the nation needs both the important people and the simple ones. Bnei Yisrael are compared to a body, composed of a head and feet, unable to exist without both.
- ◆ Achav merited victory in battle and had untold authority despite the fact that he promoted idol worship. He displayed tremendous reverence for the Torah, and there was mutual kinship among his people. Their *Yetzer Hara* for *avodah zarah*, though, was overwhelming, drawing them into sin.
- ◆ David Hamelech's generation were believers, but they fell in battle due to the sin of *lashon hara* and *rechilus*. Achav's generation had the advantage of unity.
- ◆ Yeravam sinned and caused the masses to sin, due to his pursuit of honor. He was unable to do teshuvah because the sin of the multitudes is attributed to him. The tzaddik sins so that when he repents, he can pull up the *neshamah* of the rasha with him, due to the *achdut* prevalent in Am Yisrael. Not only does the tzaddik benefit the rasha; the rasha benefits the tzaddik, for the tzaddik's *neshamah* is purified through the teshuvah he does after this sin.
- ◆ Moshe told Bnei Yisrael, "You are standing today," and not, "We are standing," in order that the nation should never wrongly believe that the obligation of responsibility toward the people rests solely with Moshe Rabbeinu. On the contrary, it is an obligation of each and every member of the nation. Moshe demonstrated the trait of taking responsibility for others when he tried to lighten his brothers' burdens in Egypt. He thus merited becoming their leader.



Open Faith in Hidden Miracles

“The hidden are for Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed are for us and our children forever, to carry out all the words of this Torah”

(Devarim 29:28)

Why did Moshe Rabbeinu find it necessary to mention that the hidden matters belong to Hashem, whereas the open, revealed things are for humans? Isn't it self-understood that what we cannot perceive is solely in Hashem's control, while what we are capable of understanding is in ours?

I would like to relate what I saw written in the memoirs of Rabbi Shlomo Lorencz, zt"l, regarding Maran Harav Shach, zy"a:

“In everything, Maran saw the wonders of Hashem's Creation. Once, while eating an apple, he turned to me and said, ‘Isn't it amazing that the apple has seeds? Each seed has the potential to produce a beautiful tree, bearing hundreds of attractive, sweet fruit.’ He spoke enthusiastically about the apple at every opportunity. He also averred, ‘Before prayer, I must clarify the concept of *emunah*.’ He did not hesitate to repeat these assertions, time and again. First and foremost, he wished to imbue himself with these truths. He told me that before the onset of Yom Kippur one year, he said to himself, ‘I must clarify to myself the idea of *emunah* before beginning to pray.’ He was very much an advocate of pure, simple faith.

“Maran continued his Erev Yom Kippur discourse with himself, ‘I sat in a corner of the Beit Hamidrash, and analyzed the wonders of Creation. How perfectly everything is made! I began speaking to myself. How foolish are the non-believers, who think that everything came into being of its own accord, according to the Big Bang Theory, etc. Aside from the question of where the elements for this so-called Big Bang came from, how could a sudden blast result in such a detail-oriented world? The sun is the exact distance from the earth that mankind needs in order to survive. If it would be just a little bit closer, the whole planet would be

burnt to a cinder. A bit further; we would all freeze to death. Science and worldly wisdom point a finger at a Creator. Only an imbecile would maintain apostasy in the face of such evidence.’

“Only after elucidating these points, did Rav Shach begin his prayers.”

These words of Rav Shach entered my heart and caused me to feel “Hashem, who is like You?” How wonderful it is that we have the Torah, through which one enriches his knowledge of Hashem. David Hamelech states in Tehillim (119:92), “Had Your Torah not been my preoccupation, then I would have perished in my affliction.” Due to the Torah, we merit the fulfillment of (ibid. 35:10), “Deliverer of the poor from one mightier than he.” In the merit of learning Torah, we are saved from being poor in spiritual strength, and thus from the *Yetzer Hara*, who is stronger than we.

There are some things which are blatantly obvious, as the sun at midday, which lights up the world. The earth’s existence and precise functioning attests to a Creator Who made it and maintains it, each day creating it anew.

If a person would arrive home after a day’s work to find a table set with all types of delicacies, would he assume it all got there on its own? Would he imagine that, after the meal, the dishes would find their way to the sink and become washed of their own accord? Does the food find its way into the pantry by itself? Man must exert himself to buy the food and prepare it, to set the table and clear it up.

So how can there be people who believe that the world came into being on its own? They have difficulty believing that there is a Creator Who upholds the world on a daily basis. Although the evidence is plain as day, they deny it.

Moshe Rabbeinu was warning Bnei Yisrael against allowing the influence of the gentiles to infiltrate into our camps. Moreover, if they weren’t meticulous regarding Torah study, they would likely begin to have doubts in *emunah*, and might even reach the level of denying Hashem, *chalilah*. The “chilled” attitude of the outside forces can compel

a person to believe that even what is obvious to the eye as the handiwork of Hashem was created of its own accord, *chalilah*.

I would like to relate another account about Rav Shach, from the aforementioned book of Rav Lorencz. This will help to actualize the concept of those hidden things which are revealed only to Hashem.

“A number of times, Maran related the Divine intervention at play in bringing him to Eretz Yisrael. At the outbreak of WWII, he was in Vilna. He vacillated between remaining in Lithuania, where he served as Rosh Yeshivat Kletzk, or to relocate, with his young family, to Eretz Yisrael. His wife was at home in Kletzk, and he had to contact her as to whether she should bring the family to Vilna, en route to the Holy Land, or tell her that he was returning home, where the family would remain.

“At a loss as to what to do, he prepared two telegrams. In one, he asked her to meet him in Vilna, so that the entire family could travel to Eretz Yisrael. In the second, he told her to remain where she was, and he would come home shortly. He figured that on his way to the post office, he would decide which telegram should be sent. To his delight, he found a long line there. This would give him more time to think. But his turn came before he reached a decision. There he stood, embarrassed, not knowing which telegram to send. The gentile clerk became irate with him and grabbed one of the two, sending it off to its designated address.

The fateful telegram was the one stating that he wished to emigrate to Eretz Yisrael. He saw the clerk’s grabbing it from his hands as a Heavenly sign. Eventually, this sign was what saved his family from the Nazi inferno. The gentile certainly was unaware of the pivotal role he played in this family’s destiny. But one who is imbued with faith in Heavenly intervention cannot but admit that Hashem was orchestrating things Above.”

In this pasuk, Moshe Rabbeinu teaches us a life lesson. The hidden matters, which we are oblivious to, are solely in Hashem’s hands. Only He knows what the future holds. See how wonderfully Hashem arranged that the post office clerk should grab the telegram which brought the Shach

family to safe shores. The entire matter occurred in a most bizarre fashion. When does a simple clerk grab letters from the customers? But when Hashem is preparing for His children's deliverance, He employs the wind and the fire, and even a humble postal clerk is hired for this cause. In the most obscure, unnatural manner, salvation is attained.

The believer in Hashem's managing of the world merits help in making the right decisions, in the most hidden, miraculous ways. By the laws of nature, a person cannot know what will be the deciding factor in making choices. But Hashem, Who desires only the good of His nation, sends His messengers at the right time, to enable His children to do what is in their very best interest.

Moshe enjoins the people to strengthen their faith in Hashem by increasing Torah study and improving their mitzvah performance. By immersing oneself in the words of Torah, one fortifies his faith in Hashem regarding the revealed matters of this world. He will see more and more instances of His management. David Hamelech says in Tehillim (8:4), "When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You have set in place." By contemplating the revealed facets of Creation, a person is convinced that Hashem is the One Who put it all into motion, and He is the One Who manages the hidden aspects of this world, as well. By recognizing His existence through open wonders, one strengthens his *emunah*, to the extent that he fully believes that even the hidden, inexplicable matters are also in His control and that He creates and supervises them constantly.

It is common that when a person has to make a decision, he is completely sure that he will choose one option. But when it comes to actually making the choice, he does the opposite of what he had originally planned. In retrospect, he finds that the choice he made turned out to be the correct one. Who guided him in his decision? Only Hashem. Mortals are limited by definition. Who can be so bold as to say that he knows what the morrow will bring? How many people went to bed peacefully and never opened their eyes again?

A person must accustom himself to believe in Hashem. At first, he does this through the revealed things, and later, by the hidden. In this manner, he will merit Hashem's guiding hand escorting him in all his ways, as the pasuk states (Tehillim 32:10), "As for one who trusts in Hashem, kindness surrounds him."

In Summary

- ◆ What is Moshe revealing to us in the words "The hidden are for Hashem, our G-d, but the revealed are for us and our children?" Isn't it self-understood?
- ◆ The entire world testifies to a Creator, clear as the sun. But there are those who remain stubborn and refuse to believe. They claim the world came into being on its own. For this reason, Moshe Rabbeinu told Bnei Yisrael to adhere to the Torah, thereby strengthening their faith in the Creator. They will believe that whatever they see emanates from Hashem.
- ◆ The hidden things are for Hashem, for only He truly knows what is best, and He manages the world accordingly.
- ◆ David Hamelech says, "When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, etc." Through contemplating Creation, the revealed wonders of Hashem, one strengthens his faith in the hidden aspects of the world.
- ◆ One should cast his burden upon Hashem, trusting that He will take care of his problems, and he will be met with His kindness.



One and Only

***“And you will return unto Hashem, your G-d,
and listen to His voice, according to everything
that I command you today, you and your
children, with all your heart and all your soul”***

(Devarim 20:2)

The fear of the Day of Judgment is so great that it is capable of inducing a person to make a penetrating accounting of his deeds. This will allow him to find his deficiencies. Being aware of where he went wrong will help him do complete teshuvah and submit his heart to the Torah.

On the Yamim Noraim, a person faces the bare truth. He sees Hashem's reality so clearly that he has no recourse but to return to Him. On the days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Hashem's spirit hovers over Bnei Yisrael, arousing him to repent. This is in line with the Rambam's words (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4), “Awake, you sleepers from your sleep, and slumberers arouse from your slumber.” Moreover, this Divine spirit helps a person to become purified of sin.

A man who was smothered by tar and cement must scrub himself with strong soap. The dirtier he is, the more intensely he must wash himself. One who sullied his soul with sin has deeply dirtied his body, soul, and spirit. How can he stand before Hashem? Even if he does teshuvah, the impression of sin will still be with him. When Hashem observes a person's true desire to come close to Him, He carves for him an opening under His Heavenly Throne in order to receive his prayers. This aperture allows one's prayers to rise up, unencumbered by the prosecuting angels, who wish to prevent this.

What a tremendous *chessed* on Hashem's part! Although His people sinned, He does not close the door to teshuvah (see *Sha'arei Teshuvah* 1:1). On the contrary, he helps them detach themselves from defilement

and purify themselves of their iniquities. He does this by nullifying the powers of the prosecuting angels. When a person's prayers are accepted on High, he is cleansed of sin, comparable to a newborn baby who never tasted sin, or a woman who immersed in a *mikveh* and was purified of her *niddah* status.

During the High Holy Days, Hashem makes it easier for a person to repent, for He is in our midst (see *Rosh Hashanah* 18a). During these days, less effort is required in order to be influenced by the *kedushah* which fills the air. This impacts a person to awaken to Hashem and seek His closeness. Furthermore, the festival period is marked by an added measure of *zechut avot*, which stands at the side of the penitent. We specifically mention *Akeidat Yitzchak*, which teaches us of the unlimited love for Hashem possessed by Avraham and Yitzchak. Our forefathers were so close to Hashem that nothing could prevent them from sacrificing their lives for His sake.

The pasuk (*Bereishit* 22:8) states, "And the two of them went together" to the *Akeidah*. Radak explains that the element of self-sacrifice was prevalent in Yitzchak Avinu just as in Avraham, his father. He was willing to surrender his life for the will of Hashem. Likewise, the wording of this pasuk indicates the tremendous love which existed between Avraham and Yitzchak, which united them in their love of Hashem. Hashem, the Torah, and the Avot, were literally one single unit.

The tremendous love between Avraham and Yitzchak intensifies the element of *mesirut nefesh* in the act of the *Akeidah*. They were prepared to cut the cords of their love, in order to fulfill the will of Hashem. Love of Hashem was uppermost in their minds, guiding their every move.

Avraham hurried to do Hashem's will, as the pasuk attests (*Bereishit* 22:3), "So Avraham woke up early in the morning and he saddled his donkey." He did not wait for his servants to saddle his donkey, for he wished to do Hashem's bidding as soon as possible. Although Avraham loved his son dearly, his actions were dictated by *yirat Shamayim*.

Our holy Avot reached the lofty level of recognizing Hashem with full clarity, to the point that they knew that “there is none beside Him” (*Devarim* 4:35). These men were stalwarts of faith in Hashem in a generation steeped in idolatry, to the extent that the people worshipped the ground beneath their feet (see *Bava Metzia* 86b). It is this *zechut*, between man and Hashem, and between man and his fellow man, which we invoke in these days of mercy and forgiveness, through prayer and supplication. We ask that the merit of our forefathers should stand by us to purify us of our ills.

One should utilize the Days of Awe to rectify all areas of life. He should improve not only in matters between man and Hashem, but use the *kedushah* of Hashem’s closeness to repair breaches between himself and his fellow man. The *Yetzer Hara* is extremely powerful and does his best to prevent a person from correcting damages between man and his fellow man. With full knowledge that Hashem will overlook His own honor but never that of His creatures, the *Yetzer Hara* puts his greatest emphasis in this area. These are the sins that prosecute most strongly.

The *Yetzer Hara* is a hazy type of character. He obscures a person’s vision, causing him to believe that his friend was not hurt by his acts and has no grievance whatsoever toward him. Through his skill at creating optical illusions, the *Yetzer Hara* makes a person think that he is just fine. He thereby never does teshuvah, and his sins remain. In parashat *Va’etchanan*, we read (*Devarim* 4:39), “You shall know this day and take to your heart that Hashem, He is the G-d – in heaven above and on the earth below – there is none other.” A person is required to attain a keen awareness of the fact that without improving matters between himself and his fellow Jews, he is lacking in his relationship with Hashem. Even if he repented his actions between himself and Hashem, his teshuvah is incomplete as long as he harbors sins between himself and others.

Hashem told Avraham (*Bereishit* 12:1), “Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house.” Chazal interpret these words (*Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer* 26) to be one of the ten *nisyonot* which Avraham underwent. The Ketav Sofer asks (*Bereishit* 12:1) why this was a

test for Avraham. Hashem promised him children, wealth, and honor. What was so difficult about relocating that this test was considered one of the “top ten”?

Avraham was extremely close with the inhabitants of his homeland, and he was considered their spiritual father. Avraham spent all of his life bringing back wayward sons to their Heavenly Father. Therefore, he felt bound to his neighbors and was concerned for their future. Chazal teach (*Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim 441*) that disciples are considered like sons, for the teacher invests in their education like a father to a son. Avraham, too, invested a part of himself in the inhabitants of the place. He would invite wayfarers into his home, satiate them, and feed them words of wisdom about Hashem Who created the world. Through this, he became strongly bound with his countrymen, to the extent that it was considered a *nisayon* to untie his bond with them.

Avraham was willing to forego all the blessings which Hashem promised him in order to be allowed to remain in his birthplace. On the other hand, Avraham’s love for Hashem knew no bounds. He understood that he must obey Hashem’s command, in spite of the difficulties involved. He left everything behind to begin the next phase of his life.

Hashem’s command of *Lech Lecha* indicated that Avraham had done everything possible in the land of his birthplace. Due to the peoples’ wickedness, he could not hope to become one with them.

The test of *Akeidat Yitzchak* also contains the words *Lech Lecha* (*Bereishit 22:2*), “Go to (*Lech Lecha*) the land of Moriah... one of the mountains which I shall tell you.” It can be considered a continuation of the previous *nisayon* of *Lech Lecha*.

The *Avot* never let anything come between themselves and Hashem. They came to an understanding of the pure, untainted truth. They knew with a clarity beyond doubt, that “there is none beside Him” (*Devarim 4:35*). It is most fitting to mention *zechut Avot* on the *Yamim Noraim*. Their memory should prompt us to improve our ways and take advantage of Hashem’s closeness by coming closer to Him.

The Ba'al HaTanya is very descriptive regarding Hashem's association with Am Yisrael during the days of mercy and forgiveness, as opposed to the rest of the year. He uses an analogy of a king who has a palace in a distant city. Whoever wishes to see the king must first make an appointment. Then he is granted a chance to come to an area which overlooks the king's garden. Peering closely will afford him a glimpse of the king. But on certain days of the year, the king steps out of his royal home. He goes out to visit in the fields. This allows those who live far away to catch sight of their beloved master.

Hashem is with us always, every day of the year. Whoever wishes to do teshuvah is encouraged. Nevertheless, on the Days of Awe, Hashem is much closer to His children. Those who are in the fields, i.e., distant from Him, during the rest of the year, now have the opportunity to return to Him.

What a shame not to take advantage of these special days, when Hashem is most found among His children (see *Rosh Hashanah* 18a). These are the days when *kedushah* is felt in the very air. From day to day, the *kedushah* intensifies, until it reaches a peak with the onset of Yom Kippur. The pasuk states (*Vayikra* 16:30), "For on this day he shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you; from all your sins before Hashem shall you be cleansed." The *kedushah* of the day fills the air and purifies Am Yisrael.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ On the Yamim Noraim, Hashem's spirit hovers over Bnei Yisrael. It has the power to awaken them to do teshuvah.
- ◆ On the Yamim Noraim, we mention the merit of our Fathers, who exemplified love of Hashem and fear of His Name. Regarding the *Akeidah*, the pasuk states, "And the two of them went together." Both Avraham and Yitzchak Avinu possessed inestimable levels of *mesirut nefesh*. They had untold love for one another, but were willing to surrender it in their love of Hashem.

- ◆ Man is obligated to repair matters between man and his fellow man. Yom Kippur does not atone for these things, and the *Yetzer Hara* attacks in this area.
- ◆ The order for Avraham to leave his birthplace is considered one of his ten tests. Avraham had invested tremendous effort into his countrymen, bringing them closer to their Heavenly Father. It was terribly difficult for him to abandon them. He was willing to forego all the blessings which Hashem promised, if only to remain with his people. In spite of the difficulty involved, Avraham followed Hashem, no questions asked.
- ◆ The Days of Mercy are the days when Hashem leaves His palace, so to speak. He enters the fields, so that those distant can enjoy His closeness. Can one be so foolish as to forego these exalted days and while them away until they are gone?!



The Fateful Decision

“I call heaven and earth today to bear witness against you: I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring”

(Devarim 30:19)

Unlike the rest of the creatures, man was made directly by Hashem's hands, so to speak, not merely by His utterance (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim* 877). Additionally, Hashem breathed into man a *neshamah* from on High (*Bereishit Rabbah* 12:8; see *Mesillat Yesharim* 1). “One who blows, blows of himself” (see *Sefer Hapeliah; Ramban, Bereishit* 2:7). Hashem literally blew of Himself into mankind (see *Nefesh Hachaim* 1:15). This elevated man above all other creatures.

Hashem created the entire world for the sake of man. This is why He was not satisfied with creating man merely through speech, but by His own hands, as it were. Chazal relate (see *Sanhedrin* 38a; *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 10) that Hashem collected all the soil in the world and with it, created the wonderful sculpture called Man. Since man is the purpose of Creation and its crowning glory, he represents it, allowing it to exist, according to his actions, for better or for worse (based on *Mesillat Yesharim* 1). Any self-respecting corporation will choose a well-suited candidate as its representative. One who makes a good impression with his neat appearance will bring benefit to the company. So too, is a person Hashem's envoy in His world. He contains a lofty *neshamah*, a spark of Hashem Himself, inside him. This is why Hashem invested in his creation, more than in that of the other creatures. Hashem wanted man to be as perfect as possible, so that he may represent His Maker in the best way possible.

After creating man, Hashem placed him in Gan Eden and warned him against eating of the Tree of Knowledge. Chazal state (see *Zohar*, III), that there were originally two Gardens of Eden, one in the Upper Spheres, completely spiritual, and one in the Lower World, where spirituality and physicality were intertwined. Adam was placed in the Gan Eden of this world. Our Sages (see *Kohelet Rabbah* 7:19) wax poetic in their description of this veritable garden of delight. It contained the most delightful and beautiful trees in the world. Hashem allowed Adam to enjoy and eat from all of the trees. Except for the Tree of Knowledge.

This raises the question: Did Adam Harishon have free choice? Did he have a *Yetzer Hatov* and a *Yetzer Hara* yet? The fact that Hashem warned him against eating of the Tree of Knowledge indicates that Adam had a measure of free will to decide whether or not to obey this command. Had he been lacking the element of free choice, Hashem would not have repeatedly warned him. He would merely have stated that the fruit of this tree was not for consumption. The fact that Adam did, in fact, sin, demonstrates that he had the power of free choice. Unfortunately, he made the wrong choice.

Adam's free choice means that the *Yetzer Hatov* and the *Yetzer Hara* were a presence in his life. Why, then, didn't Hashem give him all the mitzvot of the Torah, instead of just this one? Hashem said (*Kiddushin* 30b), "I created the *Yetzer Hara*; I created Torah as its antidote." The Torah is the power with which we fight the *Yetzer Hara*. Since Adam was beset by the *Yetzer Hara*, why didn't Hashem provide him with the Torah, man's weapon against it?

Adam had both inclinations, but we cannot compare his situation with ours today. Adam's *Yetzer Hara* was not an intrinsic part of his makeup, but hovered in his presence. Its intensity was much less than that of the modern-day *Yetzer Hara*. Since it was less foreboding, Hashem did not feel the need to grant him the Torah for protection. He gave him one mitzvah, which could protect him from his *Yetzer Hara*. But since Adam fell into sin by not preserving this mitzvah, the *Yetzer Hara* took a step closer. Instead of an outside force to be reckoned with, he became an intrinsic part of man. Hashem had no choice, as it were, but to give the Torah to mankind, in order to protect them from the machinations of this insidious intruder. He bequeathed to us 613 mitzvot, corresponding to the number of organs and limbs in man's body (see *Sha'arei Kedushah* 1:1).

Adam Harishon had the power of free choice. Only after he failed the test of the Tree of Knowledge, did his *Yetzer Hara* become part of him. Since then, the battle with the *Yetzer Hara* is a constant one, not ceasing for a moment.

The way to choose life is by adhering to the Torah and its mitzvot. This will help one combat his *Yetzer Hara*. The Zohar (II, 2b) states that the Torah is a book of good advice, helping a person navigate the twisted roads on the journey of life. The advice therein instills a person with the wisdom necessary for preferring good over evil. In this manner, he will merit inheriting tremendous reward.

There are those who explain (*Alshich, Bereishit* 3:1-8) that Adam Harishon purposely sinned with the Tree of Knowledge in order to bring

the *Yetzer Hara* inside himself. By constantly struggling against his own Evil Inclination and surmounting it, man will earn his portion honestly, not through charity. For this reason, after he sinned, Adam was not put to death, but expelled from Gan Eden. After he did complete teshuvah, Hashem returned him to Gan Eden. This is the garden of the Torah, sweeter than the nectar of all the fruit trees. But this time, Adam entered worthy and meritorious, having undergone the cleansing powers of teshuvah.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ After creating Adam, Hashem placed him in Gan Eden and warned him against eating of the Tree of Knowledge. Were the forces of the *Yetzer Hatov* and *Yetzer Hara* at play yet, allowing him to make his own choices? The fact that he did contravene the command of Hashem not to eat the fruit indicates that he did, indeed, have two inclinations and the power of free will.
- ◆ If Adam had free choice, why did Hashem give him only one mitzvah and not the entire Torah? He had a *Yetzer Hara*, but it resided outside him. Its impact, therefore, was not as strong as it is today. He received only one mitzvah, not to eat from the tree, because that was sufficient to combat his *Yetzer Hara*.
- ◆ After the sin, the *Yetzer Hara* entered man. Man is therefore in need of the Torah to protect him from sin. This is what is meant by the saying, “I created the *Yetzer Hara*; I created the Torah as its antidote.”



The Choice Is Yours

“I call heaven and earth today to bear witness against you: I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring”

(Devarim 30:19)

Hashem created this world with two realities: the reality of life and the reality of death. Since He wants His children to live both in this world and the Next, He exhorts us to choose life. The concept of choice is a deep one, seemingly self-contradictory. On the one hand, Hashem gives His children the option to choose between life and death, blessing and curse. On the other hand, all the many mitzvot in the Torah seem to deprive man of the power of free choice, dictating the way he should behave. Before delving into this matter, let us make it clear that man has the power of free choice, even if it looks otherwise. This is attested to in the words (*Tehillim* 135:4), “For G-d selected Jacob for His own, Israel as His treasure.” The words בַּחַר י-ה (G-d selected) contain the same letters as the word בַּחִירָה (choice). The sons of Jacob, Bnei Yisrael, always have the power of free choice.

The Torah’s injunction to “choose life” means that man should “choose actions which will result in life.” Hashem therefore recommends that His sons go on the right path, so that they merit life in this world as well as the Next. Does this inhibit man’s free will? Not at all. For example, the Torah says one must observe Shabbat. Each and every person has the option of deciding whether or not he will do so. One choice will bring him to a good place. The other will not.

A man is walking through the forest. He sees a fork in the road. Both paths will lead him to the king’s palace. One road, paved and smooth, brings him past a jungle of bears, which then leads to the palace. The

second road is strewn with pebbles and ditches and then leads to the palace. Does the man have free choice as to which road to take? Of course. But he will most likely not take the road past the bears, for it will bring him to an early death.

The Torah contains positive and negative commandments. One who is meticulous in all mitzvot will merit eternal life and blessing. Nevertheless, the choice is his. Will he perform mitzvot or not? Although the option is his, the price of a bad choice is steep. Out of His extreme love for us, Hashem wishes to confer good upon us, and therefore commands us to “choose life.” This will boomerang back to us, bringing us good.

Hashem created Adam Harishon on the sixth day and placed him in Gan Eden. Hashem planted the entire garden at his feet, to serve him and bring him delight. All that was denied to him was the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Hashem warned him that eating of this tree would prove detrimental. Adam had the free choice whether to obey Hashem’s command or not. His power of free choice did not negate the fact that he would be damaged. Therefore, although the choice was his, Hashem warned him that transgressing would carry a hefty fine.

As mentioned, Adam did not stand up to the test and disobeyed Hashem’s word. Although the choice was his, he was injured, for he did not choose the path of goodness. He, Chava, the Snake, and all future generations pay the price of that forbidden fruit.

When a person reaches marriageable age, Hashem commands him to marry, for a wife protects a person from sin (see *Kiddushin* 29b). Moreover, through marriage, one fulfills the mitzvah of reproduction, which keeps the world populated. A person has the choice as to whether or not to fulfill Hashem’s command and marry, or remain alone all his life. One who chooses not to marry decrees a death sentence upon himself. Chazal state (*Nedarim* 64b) that one who has no children is considered dead. Although the gift of free choice is a reality of this world, it is limited. A person is aware of the outcome of his decisions. This awareness colors his actions, prompting him to choose life. Choosing

good results in life; choosing bad means death and destruction. Who wouldn't choose life and blessing?

Hashem was extremely angered by Chizkiyahu Hamelech, who chose not to marry (see *Melachim* II, 20:1; see *Berachot* 10a). Chizkiyahu saw with *ruach hakodesh* that he would produce Menashe, who sinned and caused Bnei Yisrael to sin. Hashem caused Chizkiyahu to become deathly ill. Yeshayahu Hanavi visited him with the Divine message that he was breathing his last, not only in this world, but in the World to Come, as well. Hashem did not accept Chizkiyahu's justification that he did not want to bring a rasha into this world. Chizkiyahu was not entitled to prevent his son from making his own life choices. Even if Menashe would be wicked, as Chizkiyahu had foreseen, who is to say that he would not do teshuvah at the end of his days? Chizkiyahu had no right, by not allowing Menashe's *neshamah* to descend to this world, to prevent Menashe from rectifying his sins.

The Gemara relates various accounts of people who acquired their portion in the World to Come in but a single moment (*Avodah Zarah* 10b; *ibid.*, 17a, *ibid.*, 18a). In contrast, tremendous tzaddikim became ruined, losing their portion in the Eternal World. One example is Yochanan Kohen Gadol, who served as High Priest for eighty years and then defected (see *Berachot* 29a). How powerful is the force of free will, transforming worlds and overturning destinies.

Hashem is the ultimate good. His entire objective is to do good with His creatures. Therefore, at the year's beginning, He decrees only beneficial and blessed things. But because Am Yisrael is above *mazal*, they are capable of changing it, according to their actions. One who chooses iniquity changes the blessing prepared for him to curse.

Man is a creature of free choice. Nevertheless, this choice is limited, for he knows the outcome of each decision. The Torah's injunction to choose life further limits his choices.

Before a *neshamah* descends to this world, it takes an oath to go in the path of righteousness. Although this seems to negate the power of free

choice, a person can nullify this vow all too easily. After 120 years, he will be answerable for his actions.

In Summary

- ◆ The concept of free choice seems self-contradictory. On the one hand, man is given the choice between good and bad, yet on the other hand, the Torah's laws limit him and prompt him to choose good. Free choice is a reality in this world, as we see from the pasuk, "For G-d selected Jacob for His own, Israel as His treasure." The words **בַּחַר י-ה** (G-d selected) contain the same letters as the word **בַּחִירָה** (choice). The sons of Jacob, Bnei Yisrael, always have the power of free choice.
- ◆ "You shall choose life" is a mitzvah. But a person can still choose to do wrong, even though he will be led to purgatory. Adam Harishon was commanded not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, but he chose to disobey. We are still paying the price for this sin.
- ◆ Each person is commanded to take a wife. But he can choose whether or not to do so. Chizkiyahu Hamelech chose to remain alone in order to prevent the rasha, Menashe, from wrongdoing. Hashem was not happy with Chizkiyahu's reasoning. Chizkiyahu was slated to die as punishment for denying his son free choice, and, with it, the power to rectify his *neshamah*.
- ◆ Free choice in this world is limited, for man knows the outcome of his decisions. If he chooses wrong, he will pay the price. This knowledge should influence a person to choose the path of goodness.



Gems on Parashat Nitzavim



Born Anew

“And you will return unto Hashem, your G-d”

(Devarim 30:2)

Regarding Shaul Hamelech, we are told (*Shmuel I*, 13:1), “Shaul was one year old when he reigned.” Chazal (see *Yoma* 22b) comment that he was called this to teach that he was free of sin. He never even tasted the taste of sin. A baby is not held accountable for sin, for he has no idea what sin is. Shaul Hamelech, too, never tasted the taste of sin.

A *ba'al teshuvah* who abandoned his old ways and starts a new page in his life in holiness and sanctity is like a newborn. He has switched the taste of sin to that of the sweetness of Torah and mitzvot.

Chazal tell us (see *Berachot* 34b) that where *ba'alei teshuvah* stand, even perfect tzaddikim cannot stand. Previously, the *ba'alei teshuvah* were like animals in the wild. When they return to their roots, they ascend to the level of Man. Tzaddikim, on the other hand, were never called anything other than Man.

Chazal state (see *Yevamot* 61a), “You are called *Man* and the nations of the world are not called *Man*.” Not only the nations of the world, but anyone who does not follow the instructions of the Torah has more in

common with the animal kingdom than with humanity. Only one who observes the Torah and mitzvot is elevated above animals and considered human. The word אדם (man) has the same *gematria katan* as the word אמת (truth). Torah is the ultimate truth (*Berachot 5b*).



It's Not the Thought that Counts

“You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all the men of Israel...”

(Devarim 29:9)

The Gaon, Rabbi Moshe Sofer of Pshevorsk, zy”a, author of the sefer *Ohr Pnei Moshe*, asks what is the connection between parshiyot *Ki Tavo* and *Nitzavim*, which are juxtaposed in the Torah. There is no coincidence in the Torah. Rabbi Akiva would explain every single letter of the Torah, for each is replete with meaning (see *Menachot 29b*). What, then, is the underlying connection between these parshiyot? He expounds on this in his sefer.

I would like to offer another explanation. At the end of parashat *Ki Tavo*, we read (*Devarim 29:8*), “You shall observe the words of this covenant, and you shall do them, so that you will succeed in all that you do.” This pasuk implies that in order to serve Hashem correctly, it is insufficient to merely have goodwill. Rather, goodwill must translate into deed, as the pasuk clearly says, “And you shall do them.” Some Jews claim that they have a “Jewish heart.” But they must also have a “Jewish body,” ready and willing to serve Hashem. Pirkei Avot (1:17) teaches, “Not study, but practice is the main thing.” Learning about mitzvot can arouse one to do good deeds. Certainly, the intentions we have when we

do a mitzvah play a pivotal part in its execution. If one thought of doing a good deed but was prevented, his thoughts themselves earn him reward. But it cannot be compared with the reward for an actual mitzvah done with proper thought.

Parashat *Nitzavim* opens with the words “You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d.” The commentaries explain (see *Zohar* II, 32b; *Arvei Nachal, Nitzavim*) that this verse refers to Rosh Hashanah, when we declare (*Musaf Rosh Hashanah; Pri Eitz Chaim, Shofar* 5) that today is the beginning of Creation, when all stand in judgment before Hashem. The word *nitzavim* (standing) denotes standing erect, as befitting the honor of the king. Since on Rosh Hashanah, we are the sons of kings, we must stand erect before Hashem. How do we do this? By filling ourselves up with Torah and mitzvot. This is the connection between the two parshiyot. If one steepes himself in the world of Torah, soaking up good deeds, he will merit standing staunch, with head erect, on Rosh Hashanah. He will certainly emerge innocent.

The word אתם (you) in the first pasuk of *Nitzavim* has the same letters as the word אמת (truth). Similarly, at the end of parashat *Ki Tavo*, we are told to do the mitzvot with the words: “ועשיתם אתם”. Torah is the ultimate truth (*Yalkut Shimoni, Daniel* 1,066). When does the truth of Torah find expression? When Bnei Yisrael uphold the covenant.



Taking a Stand in Fearing Hashem

“You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all the men of Israel...”

(Devarim 29:9)

Rav Shach, zt”l, was known to have said that the fear we feel on the Day of Judgment is not necessarily due to the judgment, but to the fact that we are standing before Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Why don’t we feel this sense of awe throughout the year? Are we remiss in fulfilling our obligation of (*Berachot* 28b) “Know before Whom you stand”?

Chazal teach (*Vayikra Rabbah* 29a) that the world was created on the 25th of Elul. But the injunction “You are standing today” refers to Rosh Hashanah (see *Zohar* II, 32b; *Arvei Nachal, Nitzavim*), when we stand before Hashem in judgment. Why do we say “Today is the beginning of Creation” on Rosh Hashanah, when, in truth, the world came into being on the 25th of Elul? It is because the purpose of the entire Creation is for the sake of mankind. If not for man, Hashem would not have made this world. Our Sages go so far as to say that each person is considered an entire world (see *Sanhedrin* 37a). Therefore, one should always feel that the world was created for him. The words “Today is the beginning of the world” refers to the creation of man, for whom the entire world was worth creating.

Parshiyot *Nitzavim* and *Vayelech* seem to contradict each other. Parashat *Nitzavim* (standing) depicts standing erect and still, whereas parashat *Vayelech* (and he went) denotes movement. But the truth is the exact opposite. These parshiyot complement one another. After Bnei Yisrael stand in judgment before Hashem, He leads each one according to his deeds. If a person was punctilious in following the path of Torah and

mitzvot, Hashem leads him along the path of goodness and blessing. But if, *chalilah*, he sins, Hashem leads him along the path of trouble and curse.

The Gemara relates (*Berachot* 28b) that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai wept copiously before his death. When his disciples asked for an explanation, he said, “Two paths stand before me. One leads to Gan Eden, and the other – to Gehinnom. I do not know which road I will be led on.” Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, leader of his generation, who was constantly immersed in the sea of Torah, did not feel secure regarding his lot in the World of Truth. What can we, simple people, do, to feel the fear of judgment in the World of Truth?

Hashem gave us a sampling of the future judgment in this world, on Rosh Hashanah. This helps us feel a sample of what awaits us in the Upper Worlds. Fear of judgment is mainly the awe we feel as we stand before Hashem. This fear should accompany us at every moment of our lives. How can we acquire this level of constant fear of Hashem? By implementing the pasuk (*Tehillim* 16:8) “I have set Hashem before me always,” as well as remembering before Whom we stand.



The Truth of the Matter

“You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all the men of Israel...”

(*Devarim* 29:9)

Our Sages say that this pasuk refers to Rosh Hashanah, when all Am Yisrael pass before Hashem like sheep, judged for the deeds of the past and the year to come.

The word **אתם** (you) has the same letters as the word **אמת** (truth). Torah is the ultimate truth, for it invigorates a person, as Mishlei states (3:18), “It is a tree of life to those who grasp it, and its supporters are praiseworthy.” Torah enables a person to emerge innocent in judgment and merit inscription in the Book of Life. When a person lacks Torah, however, failing to invest time to study it and fulfill its mitzvot, he is left with a division of **אמת**, which is **מת-א**, i.e., **מת אדם** (a dead man). Man without Torah is like a body without a soul. Without the living waters of Torah, man is worthless, considered dead.

The Torah is a book of sound advice, abounding with words of wisdom (see *Zohar* II, 82b). It tells a person how he can merit living happily. Torah is the living tree, granting vitality to the fruits which cling to it. One who conducts himself according to it merits a life of goodness and blessing. But when one turns his back on Torah, preferring a life of nothingness, his life becomes exactly that, and he is like a dead man.

The *sefarim hakedoshim* (*Tiferet Shlomo*, *Mo'adim*; *Yismach Yisrael*, *Naso*) state that in the merit of the tzaddikim who passed on, the entire world receives spiritual blessing from Above. This is in line with Chazal's words (see *Berachot* 18a), “Tzaddikim are considered living even after death.” From their place under the Heavenly Throne, they bask in the glory of the *Shechinah* and merit studying Torah from Hashem Himself. The *neshamot* of the tzaddikim continue living in *Olam Haba*, affording them the advantage of allowing those who are in this world to live lives of abundance both spiritually and materially.

In *Kohelet*, Shlomo Hamelech states (4:2), “So I consider more fortunate the dead who have already died than the living who are still alive.” What is the meaning of “the dead who have already died”? If they are dead, surely they already died. The *Zohar* (III, 70b) says that the double language refers to the double death of the tzaddikim. Before they passed on from this world, they “killed themselves” in the tent of Torah. When one sacrifices his being for the sake of Torah, he merits eternal life.

I would like to add a point. The word אמת can be divided to spell 'אמת. The letter 'א refers to the most important person, the tzaddik (*Megaleh Amukot, Vayikra*). When he lived, he was the emissary of Hashem, the אלוֹפוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, or Chief of the world (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 20b). The tzaddik is considered dead, for he sacrifices himself in the tent of Torah. When one connects with the *neshamah* of the tzaddik, following in his ways, he merits connecting with Hashem and will emerge innocent in judgment.



The Power of Torah

“See – I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil”

(Devarim 30:15)

“Life and good” is Torah, as Tehillim (34:9) states, “Taste and see that Hashem is good.”

The power of Torah is tremendous. David would not go to battle the Pelishtim, even when they were very close to the Israelite camp, without Hashem’s permission (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Shmuel II*, 142). He was connected to the Torah with every fiber of his being. This allowed him to put aside all worries and wait for Hashem’s consent to go to battle. Shaul Hamelech, in contrast, went out to war even before receiving Hashem’s approval (*Shmuel I*, 13:8-14).

Once, on a plane trip, as the meals were being distributed, I noticed a fellow Jew eyeing my every move. This man seemed to be distant from anything Jewish. I took out a sefer to learn. Maybe this sight would ignite

a hidden spark in his soul. The Jew came over to me immediately, in tears. “Today is my father’s *yahrtzeit*,” he began. “He passed away forty years ago. In your merit, I remembered this. I feel a strong urge to advance in my knowledge of Judaism, as a merit for his soul.” This is the far-reaching power of Torah. The Torah of a person in one country can reach a Jew far away, bringing back lost sons to their Father’s warm embrace.



Vayelech

Ingrained Habits Will Remain

“Moshe went and spoke these words to all of Israel. He said to them: I am one hundred and twenty years old today; I can no longer go out and come in, for Hashem has said to me: You shall not cross this Jordan”

(Devarim 31:1-2)

This pasuk manifests the statement (*Kohelet* 8:8): “Nor is there authority over the day of death.” Even Moshe Rabbeinu, our great leader, the one who spoke to Hashem face to face, had to face his day of death. *L’havdil*, when the king of Morocco was deathly ill, all the fortunes he invested in top specialists did not bring him salvation. When his time came, he left the world like every other man. Man is limited by the mere fact that he is mortal. He may be rich and famous, but a Higher Force decides how his life will look and how long he will spend on this earth.

In certain areas of life, man has some measure of control. But regarding the length of his years, he is helpless. Only Hashem holds the key of life, deciding exactly when a person’s end will come and he will be called to the World Above.

Chazal exhort us (*Avot* 2:10; see *Shabbat* 153a), “Repent one day before you die.” Since no one knows when his end will come, his entire life should be spent in teshuvah and good deeds. Shlomo Hamelech states (*Kohelet* 9:4), “A live dog is better than a dead lion.” Although the lion is king of the animals and extremely strong, his powers persist only as long as he lives. Once he is dead, the lowly dog is preferable to him.

When a person is young, he is vibrant and full of energy. As he ages, even the simplest daily act requires more exertion. One would be wise to utilize the years of his youth to serve his Maker with vigor and vim. In his later years, he is too old and set in his ways to make significant life changes (see *Kohelet* 12:1; see *Sha’arei Teshuvah* 2:34). A person’s character traits become more ingrained as he grows older. If he was always prone to anger, or being miserly, his old age will intensify these traits beyond his control. For this reason alone, it is mandatory for us to work on our character while we are yet young. This will spare us the embarrassment of reaching old age with bad habits.

In contrast, tzaddikim and *talmidei chachamim*, like good-quality wine, improve with age (see *Kinnim*, end). They receive renewed energies to serve their Creator scrupulously, as they did all their lives. It is related about Maran HaRav Shach, zy”a, that when he was connected to a feeding tube at the age of one hundred and seven, he wept over the fact that now he would be deprived of making blessings over food. Just as negative traits intensify with age, so do good qualities become more deeply-ingrained as one gets older. In Judaism, the word for elder is זקן, an acronym for the phrase זה קנה חכמה (this one has acquired wisdom) (*Seder Olam Rabbah* 30).

When Rav Shach was already an old man, his disciples once saw him enter the Beit Hamidrash with a little girl at his side. When they asked him who she was, he suddenly remembered that she had asked him to help her cross the street. Since he was so immersed in his learning, he did not realize that he had brought her all the way to the Beit Hamidrash.

If we study the word וילך (*Vayelech*), we see that the first letter ו' and the last letter כ' when added together, have the same *gematria* as Hashem's Name. The middle letters ך' and ך' have the *gematria* of forty, a hint to the Torah, which was given after forty days and nights. If a person follows the path of Torah and mitzvot, Hashem's Name rests upon him and provides him with protection wherever he goes (הולך). Since tzaddikim and *talmidei chachamim* always go in the way of the Torah, in their old age, when their strength is ebbing, Hashem remains with them. Their mind is lucid until their last moments. This is unlike the ignoramus, whose mind turns to mush in his later years.

The Chafetz Chaim says that there are two types of people. The first are those who are constantly concerned with fulfilling Hashem's word to the letter. On the other end of the spectrum are those who declare (*Yeshayahu* 22:13), "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." These people pursue money and earthly pleasures. I would like to add a third type of people. They are the ones who believe in Hashem and perform mitzvot, but at the same time, enjoy materialism and continuously seek ways of fulfilling their dreams. They often sanction questionable activities, which essentially contradict a Torah lifestyle.

All of the above sections of mankind will meet their fate. But none knows when that will be. There are numerous instances of young, healthy people who die suddenly. Conversely, there are terminally ill patients who outlive the doctors' dire predictions and recover against all odds.

The wise person will take stock of his life and analyze in which category he fits. Does he spend his days in learning Torah and performing mitzvot, or in frivolity and materialism? If he finds that he is straddling two diametrically-opposed worlds, he should try to rein himself in and sanctify his life for Hashem's sake. In this manner, he will ascend heavenward well-prepared.

Chazal tell us (*Avot* 2:4), "Do not believe in yourself until the day you die." No one may say that he is perfect, for as long as a person lives, his *Yetzer Hara* beats within his heart, constantly seeking to trip him up.

Hashem did a kindness with us by granting us the Days of Mercy and Forgiveness. This is a period when a person can pull the brakes on the rat-race of life, in order to contemplate his actions. Are they according to the Torah and mitzvot, or, *chalilah*, otherwise? By deciding to go on the proper path, he will merit *siyata di'Shemaya* to ascend to the Heavenly Court with a clean and pure soul, worthy of great reward.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu taught us that Hashem alone holds the key to life. Even one as great as a king cannot control his life-span.
- ◆ The older *talmidei chachamim* become, the wiser they become. Conversely, ignorant people become less intelligent as they age. This is because one's character traits become more deeply ingrained as he gets older, for better or for worse.
- ◆ As long as a person lives, he can change his ways and improve. This will not be possible once he reaches the Upper World. Shlomo Hamelech depicts this graphically in Kohelet, in his statement "A live dog is better than a dead lion."



A Momentous Metamorphosis

“Moshe went and spoke these words to all of Israel”

(Devarim 31:1)

Moshe Rabbeinu told Am Yisrael the words of the covenant, as recorded in parashat *Nitzavim*. There it says, “See – I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the bad” (*Devarim* 30:15). Further (vs. 19), it says, “You shall choose life.” He told them

additional conditions upon which the settlement of the Land was contingent. What is the significance of Moshe's "going," that this needs to be stated in this pasuk (*Devarim* 31:2), "Moshe went"? And why does this parashah repeat what he already said in the previous parashah?

The Ohr Hachaim, quoting the *Tanna*, Rabbi Yonatan ben Uziel, explains that Moshe went to the nation in order to teach them Hashem's word. The Ramban (*ibid.*, vs. 2), among others, states that Moshe left the camp of Leviyah and went to the camp of Yisrael, in order to take his leave of the people. According to the simple meaning of the pasuk, though, Moshe went to the nation in order to transmit the covenant with Hashem, and not in order to say farewell.

When one adds the letter 'א to the word וילך (and he went) and divides it in two, it reads וי אלך (Woe that I am going). Moshe Rabbeinu told the nation, "I am one hundred and twenty years old today; I can no longer go out and come in, for Hashem has said to me: You shall not cross this Jordan" (*Devarim* 31:2). Rashi expounds that the words "I can no longer" mean "I am not allowed." Moshe Rabbeinu explained to the nation that the authority to lead them had been taken away from him and given to Yehoshua. With these words, Moshe Rabbeinu was teaching the nation that a man's days in this world are measured, and his strength is limited. Only Hashem decides his fate. Therefore, it would be wise to take to heart the words of parashat *Nitzavim*, a tried and true method of attaining eternal life.

This may be the connection between the simple meaning of the pasuk and the words of Rabbi Yonatan ben Uziel. Moshe took his leave of Bnei Yisrael immediately before his death. His last will and testament to them was that they fulfill the covenant as delineated in parashat *Nitzavim*. This sharpens a person's focus on the injunction (*Avot* 2:4) "Do not believe in yourself until the day you die."

Some years, parashat *Vayelech* is read on Shabbat Shuvah. This hints to teshuvah. One should “go,” exerting himself in order to reach a level of true teshuvah in Hashem’s eyes.

Regarding Yom Kippur, the pasuk states (*Vayikra* 16:30), “For on this day He shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you from all your sins, before Hashem shall you be cleansed.” This pasuk enjoins a person to repent before his Maker. On Yom Kippur, one is closer to Hashem than at any other time. Therefore, it is a day most auspicious for teshuvah. Numerous people are corrupted by the frivolities of this world. The *kelippah* of defilement clings to them on all sides. Nevertheless, when Yom Kippur arrives, they fast like all good Jews, and even go to the synagogue to pray and ask forgiveness. This seems to contradict the way they live during the other 364 days of the year. How can this be explained? It is due to the very special closeness with Hashem that is available only on this exalted day. People cannot remain indifferent to its magnetic force. Every Jew, according to his level, feels the singular properties of this unique day.

The Torah states (*ibid.*, vs. 29) that Yom Kippur falls on the 10th of Tishrei. This is because mankind is sustained by the ten *sefirot*. On this day, the Kohen Gadol entered the Inner Sanctum of the Beit Hamikdash and offered *ketoret* to Hashem (*ibid.*, vs. 12-13). How can this be sanctioned, as it included lighting a fire, an open prohibition on Yom Kippur? Why doesn’t the sanctity of the day outweigh the Avodah in the Mikdash?

The One Who forbade has the authority to permit. Hashem allows certain acts to be done in order to bring glory to His Name, even though they seem to violate a mitzvah. Another example would be *brit milah*. A *brit* is done to recruit another soldier into the service of Hashem. For this reason, it is permissible to perform a *brit* on Shabbat, and even on Yom Kippur, in spite of the forbidden aspects involved. So too, is it with the offerings brought on Yom Kippur.

In the days of the second Beit Hamikdash, one of our enemies ordered Yosef Meshita to enter the holy Temple and remove any item he desired. Desecrating the sanctity of the Beit Hamikdash in this manner would facilitate its destruction. Yosef entered and withdrew the golden Menorah. When the gentiles saw this, they took it for themselves. They instructed him to re-enter, and this time, he could take whatever he wished. But this time, he refused. "It is enough that I angered my Maker once," he declared. "I will not anger Him again." They tortured him to death for his refusal (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:22).

How could Yosef Meshita become transformed into a new person in such a short time? From a criminal who lacked morals, he became an instant tzaddik, guaranteed a portion in the World to Come. It was the *kedushah* that he experienced when in the Beit Hamikdash that influenced him so strongly. What he saw left such an impression on him that he did complete teshuvah and died *al kiddush Hashem*. Regarding this man, and others like him, our Sages state (*Avodah Zarah* 10b), "There is one who acquires his portion in the World to Come in but a brief moment." How awesome is the power of teshuvah; it changes man's destiny from one extreme to the other!

The Avodah in the Beit Hamikdash contained distinctive levels of purity and sanctity. The lighting of the Menorah and slaughtering of the *korbanot* there could not be compared to the service in any other place. Nowadays, we unfortunately do not have the Beit Hamikdash. But we do have a miniature Sanctuary. This is the Beit Hamidrash, which contains an element of the holiness of our destroyed Temples. Regarding the beauty of the Beit Hamidrash, we are told (*Tehillim* 34:9), "Taste and see that Hashem is good." After tasting the sweetness of Torah, one realizes how good it is. Yom Kippur is a day auspicious for coming close to Hashem, for He is especially close to us on this day. Just as one who wishes to warm himself sits near the fireplace, so should one who wishes to come close to Hashem and taste the Torah utilize the special properties of Yom Kippur.

Hashem enjoys each of us (*Shemot* 25:8), “They shall make a Sanctuary for Me – so that I may dwell among them.” Each person is a miniature Mikdash (see *Nefesh Hachaim* 1:4). The Avodah in the Beit Hamikdash can teach us how to serve Hashem correctly in our daily lives. One who sacrifices an offering must ensure that his thoughts are appropriate, for improper thoughts invalidate the *korban*. So too, if one has inappropriate thoughts, *chalilah*, or transgressed a sin, he must do complete teshuvah so that Hashem can reside within him.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu told Am Yisrael the words of the covenant recorded in parashat *Nitzavim*. Why did Moshe go to Bnei Yisrael, and why was it necessary to repeat what had already been stated? The Ohr Hachaim says that Moshe went to take his leave of the people. But according to the simple explanation, it would seem that Moshe went to them to inform them of the covenant.
- ◆ The word וילך (and he went), adding the letter 'א can be divided in two: וי אלך (Woe that I am going). Moshe was telling the nation that man's days are numbered. He should therefore utilize his time correctly. In his will, Moshe repeated the words of the covenant.
- ◆ Parashat *Vayelech* is often read on Shabbat Shuvah. This transmits the message that one must “go,” exerting himself to do teshuvah.
- ◆ In spite of the *kedushah* of Yom Kippur, acts usually forbidden were done in the Beit Hamikdash on that day. These were not acts of desecration. On the contrary, they enhanced the sanctity of the day, done in fulfillment of Hashem's order.
- ◆ Yosef Meshita agreed to enter the Beit Hamikdash and remove a holy vessel. After removing the Menorah, he refused to go in once again. He was killed for his refusal. A Heavenly Voice emanated and said that he would receive a portion in the World to Come. How could a rasha, who impudently entered the Mikdash, convert to a tzaddik in an instant, meriting a portion in *Olam Haba*?

- ◆ Yosef Meshita was affected by the sanctity of the Beit Hamikdash. He was aroused to lofty levels of teshuvah. He sacrificed his life for *kiddush Hashem* and thereby merited eternity.
- ◆ Today, we have no Beit Hamikdash. We must, instead, enter the Beit Hamidrash, a miniature Sanctuary, and involve ourselves in Torah, which also has the power to influence a person positively.



Returning to Hashem

“Moshe went and spoke these words to all of Israel”

(Devarim 31:1)

The word וילך (He went) can be divided into the words (adding a letter א) וי אלך (Woe to me for going). This parashah is often read on Shabbat Shuvah. Moshe was delivering the classic Shabbat Shuvah lecture. He was rebuking Bnei Yisrael for all their “goings” that had not been for the sake of Heaven.

Shabbat Shuvah is the time when one should awaken to return to Hashem in complete teshuvah for all his sins. He may have frequented questionable places or done dubious deeds. He should never ask why he was beset by hardships during the previous year, but rather, accept everything that transpired as Heaven-sent, and therefore necessary for his growth. This is the essence of real teshuvah. Our Avot embodied this mindset. They certainly had difficulties, but they never had grievances toward Hashem regarding them. They accepted their lot with perfect love, recognizing Hashem’s hand in everything that transpired. They understood that whatever happened was for their ultimate benefit, even if they could not grasp what that benefit was, due to their limited scope of knowledge (see *Shemot Rabbah* 6:4). Although the Avot could have

challenged Hashem's ways, they sanctified themselves above and beyond their natural instincts, accepting His decrees with love, no questions asked.

Shabbat Shuvah is named after the *haftarah* read then. We read (*Hoshea* 4:2), "Return, Israel, unto Hashem, your G-d, for you have stumbled in your iniquity." The word **וְשׁוּב** (unto) has the same letters as the word **יָדַע** (know). A person is enjoined to do complete teshuvah, until he attains clear knowledge of Hashem, realizing that all Hashem does is for his benefit.

On Shabbat Shuvah, the lights of the first seven days, which were apparent during the first Shabbat of Creation, the Shabbat immediately following Rosh Hashanah (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 782), are rekindled. On the first Rosh Hashanah of Creation, Hashem placed Adam Harishon in Gan Eden and warned him against eating of the Tree of Knowledge. Adam was persuaded to sin by Chava, his wife, and was subsequently expelled. That first Shabbat, Adam recognized his sin and repented. He proclaimed (*Tehillim* 92:1-2), "A psalm, a song for the Shabbat day. It is good to thank Hashem and to sing praises to Your Name." When Hashem saw how remorseful Adam was and how he appreciated the loftiness of Shabbat, a sample of *Olam Haba*, He forgave his sin.

Adam Harishon regretted his act and did complete teshuvah. Therefore, he merited atonement. Adam taught us the definition of teshuvah. In order to receive forgiveness, one must recognize his sins and confess them. By returning to Hashem, one merits forgiveness for his sins. In order to merit Hashem's constant vigilance, he must be one with Him on Shabbat Shuvah. Connecting oneself with Hashem on Shabbat Shuvah will enable him to be close with Hashem throughout the year to come.

This Shabbat has a distinct energy, for its entire essence is one of peace. We are accustomed to greet one another with the words "Shabbat Shalom." Every Shabbat contains this element of peace, but this Shabbat, above others, when one returns to Hashem, is capable of bringing peace upon the entire world.

Why did Hashem delay the creation of mankind until the sixth day? It was so that man would be greeted by a wonderful world. Had Adam appreciated the beauty inherent in the world which Hashem had set before him, he might not have sinned. The sixth day of Creation, when Adam made his appearance, alludes to the sixth day of Sivan, the day of *Matan Torah* (see *Shabbat* 88a; *ibid.*, *Rashi*). Hashem stipulated with Creation that it would endure only on condition that Am Yisrael accepted the Torah on the sixth of Sivan. Adam's creation on the sixth day is a reminder of this precondition.

The word *בששי* (on the sixth), adding one for the word itself, is numerically equivalent to 613. Adam was made of 613 limbs, corresponding to the 613 mitzvot. Each limb has a corresponding mitzvah (see *Sha'arei Kedushah* 1:1). The knowledge that he was created after everything else enabled Adam to feel the burden of responsibility for all of Creation. The entire world was made for man, whose purpose is to study the Torah, given on the sixth of Sivan. Yirmeyahu Hanavi (33:25) declares, "If not for My covenant [being studied] day and night, I would not have established the laws of the heavens and the earth."

Transgressing any mitzvah of the Torah carries with it the risk of undermining the very pillar of the world. The world is in danger of destruction without the life-force of Torah. Therefore, Hashem granted mankind the option of rectifying himself through the creation of teshuvah. The Shabbat after Adam sinned was called "Shabbat Shuvah," named after the teshuvah which he did after sinning.

With his teshuvah, Adam bequeathed to all of mankind the message that it is never too late to repent. Had Adam been created earlier in the week and waited for the salving spirit of Shabbat in order to repent, Hashem may not have waited that long. He might not have allowed the world to exist until then, *rachmana litzlan*. By being created on the sixth day, just before the onset of Shabbat, Adam was able to utilize the power of Shabbat and repair the breach caused by his deed. In this manner, he brought rectification to the world, as well, imbuing it with the power to endure.

Regarding Yom Kippur, the pasuk states (*Vayikra* 16:30), “For on this day He shall provide atonement for you to cleanse you from all your sins, before Hashem shall you be cleansed.” Hashem promises the penitent that all of his sins will be atoned. But this is only concerning sins between man and Hashem. Sins between man and his fellow man are not forgiven on Yom Kippur, until one has appeased his friend (*Yoma* 85b). How great is Hashem. He is prepared to forego His own honor, forgiving sins between man and Heaven, but does not overlook sins between man and his fellow man until one mollifies his friend. Only after receiving complete forgiveness from one’s fellow man, are these sins forgiven.

How tremendous is the status of those who repent, to the extent that our Sages state (*Berachot* 34b), “In a place where *ba’alei teshuvah* stand, perfect tzaddikim cannot stand.” *Ba’alei teshuvah* merit this singular distinction because they cast their arrogance from their shoulders and faced their sins head-on. They furthermore took the effort to repent their sins. Frequently, when we slight a fellow man or take what is not rightfully ours, we find it extremely difficult to confess and ask forgiveness. Shame and humiliation overtake us. But one who overcomes these feelings, admitting to his sins, merits reaching a distinguished place, to which perfect tzaddikim do not have access.

The *haftarah* of Shabbat Shuvah opens with the words “Return, Israel, unto Hashem, your G-d, for you have stumbled in your iniquity” (*Hoshea* 14:2). In Tehillim (90:13), we read, “Return Hashem, until when? Relent concerning Your servants.” Here, too, we find the word “return.” What is meant by asking Hashem to return? And what is the connection between the two instances?

When Bnei Yisrael sin time and again, Hashem does not hurry to mete out punishment. The words in Tehillim “Relent concerning Your servants” indicate that He displays tremendous patience toward them, in the hope that they will rouse themselves from their slumber and repent their wrongdoings. He takes solace, as it were, that the day of their repentance will arrive. But when the Attribute of Justice demands retribution, Hashem is forced, so to speak, to punish His people. This, then, is the

reason for using the word “return” in reference to Hashem. He changes His mind, as it were. Originally, He was patient with His people, awaiting their teshuvah. But when the *Middat Hadin* stepped in, He felt it necessary to punish them. He does this in a way that they should realize that they overstepped the bounds and they must do teshuvah promptly.

In this parashah, Moshe Rabbeinu told Bnei Yisrael, “I am one hundred and twenty years old today” (*Devarim* 31:2). He was hinting at the day of death, when a person will bid farewell to the world. He will then ascend to the Heavenly Court and give an accounting for his deeds.

Our Sages exhort us (*Avot* 2:4), “Do not believe in yourself until your dying day.” Man is mere flesh and blood, a combination of bestial instincts and passions. The *Yetzer Hara* constantly seeks ways to make him sin (see *Sukkah* 52b). Therefore, it is imperative to constantly be on the lookout, seeking Hashem’s closeness, for this is man’s ultimate good (*Tehillim* 73:28). Only when one goes in Hashem’s ways can he be sure that he is walking the right path, which will eventually bring him to *Olam Haba*.

The haftarah of Shabbat Shuvah continues (*Hoshea* 14:3), “Take words with you and return to Hashem.” Since no man knows when his last day will be, he must take these “words” to heart and repent before his Maker, spending his entire life doing teshuvah. This is in line with Chazal’s warning (*Avot* 2:10), “Return one day before you die.” There are countless cases of people who were the picture of health, yet suddenly died.

One attempts to make fitting preparations for an important event. He makes every effort to come properly prepared, so that he is well-attired and knows what to say. So too, he will surely wish to arrive well-prepared to face the Heavenly Court. How tremendous will be the shame of one who did not prepare himself in time, but arrives with armfuls of sin. This would be like one standing before a panel of judges who are ready to indict him, but instead of preparing a good line of defense, he appears with nothing other than the evidence of his crime.

It is our sacred mission to take advantage of this wonderful Shabbat, which contains the light of Creation, and return to Hashem and His Torah.

In Summary

- ◆ The word וילך (He went) can be divided into the words (adding a letter 'א) וי אלך (Woe to me for going). Moshe was bemoaning the “goings” of the people which were not for Hashem’s sake.
- ◆ Parashat *Vayelech* is read on Shabbat Shuvah. There we read, “Return, Israel, unto Hashem, your G-d.” One is exhorted to do teshuvah, to the extent that he reaches a clear recognition of Hashem.
- ◆ Adam Harishon taught us proper teshuvah. On the first Shabbat of Creation, he repented and was forgiven. Being at peace with one’s Maker on Shabbat Shuvah affords him the opportunity to be in this state throughout the year.
- ◆ Why was man created specifically on the sixth day? Perhaps, had he been created earlier and developed a true appreciation for Creation, he would never have sinned. The sixth day of Creation hints to the sixth of Sivan, when the Torah was given. The purpose of Creation is for the sake of accepting the Torah. The word בַּשְּׁשִׁי (on the sixth), adding one for the word itself, is numerically equivalent to 613. Adam was made with 613 limbs, corresponding to the 613 mitzvot. Man’s purpose is to perform mitzvot.
- ◆ Had Adam been created earlier and sinned, who knows if Hashem would have waited until he did teshuvah on Shabbat? He may have destroyed the entire world on account of his sin.
- ◆ The word “return” is stated about Hashem and about Am Yisrael. When Am Yisrael sin, Hashem withholds His anger and does not punish them immediately. But when the scales become too heavy in their discredit, Hashem changes His mind, as it were, and brings them punishment as a message that they overstepped the bounds.
- ◆ The continuation of the *haftarah* “Take words with you and return to

Hashem” mean that they should take these words to heart. Since no one knows when he will die, he should spend his entire life doing teshuvah.



Moshe – The Quintessential Leader

“Moshe went and spoke these words to all of Israel. He said to them: I am one hundred and twenty years old today; I can no longer go out and come in, for Hashem has said to me: You shall not cross this Jordan”

(Devarim 31:1-2)

The sefer *Ateret Tzvi* asks why Moshe “went out” instead of gathering the nation together by means of the trumpets, which was the usual method of assembling the people. The author replies according to the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 96:3), which quotes the words of *Kohelet* (8:8), that there is no authority on the day of death. Moshe’s time was now up. Hashem hid the trumpets so that they should not be used. Moshe was born and passed away on a Shabbat (*Zohar* II, 88b), for Hashem fills the years of tzaddikim to their maximum (*Kiddushin* 38a). The trumpets were forbidden to be blown on Shabbat. Thus, Moshe had to go to the people on his own and gather them together.

Further in the parashah, we read (*ibid.*, 31:14), “Behold, your days are drawing near to die.” The Midrash relates (*Devarim Rabbah* 9:9) that the day Moshe passed away, he wrote thirteen Sifrei Torah. Twelve were distributed among the *shevatim*, and one was placed in the Aron. The *Ateret Tzvi* finds this baffling. Moshe died on a Shabbat; how could he write Sifrei Torah on that day? The *Ateret Tzvi* quotes the Tur (*Orach Chaim* 292) and the Bach (*ibid.*, 2), who prove that Moshe did not die on Shabbat, but on Erev Shabbat. He was buried on Shabbat, at Minchah

time. We are still left wondering how he could possibly write thirteen Sifrei Torah in one day.

The *Ateret Tzvi* has another question: How could the nation leave Moshe's body until Shabbat? As it is known, it is forbidden to leave a corpse overnight (*Rambam, Sanhedrin* 15:7). I would like to suggest that when Moshe realized that he would die, and that his prayers had not been accepted, he ceased praying. At that moment, he made peace with his fate and was already considered dead. But his actual death was on Shabbat. Chazal inform us (*Devarim Rabbah* 11:4) that Moshe was half-human and half-divine. His divine self never died. Therefore, Hashem Himself buried Moshe (*Sotah* 9b). Moshe Rabbeinu ascended alive to Heaven. He remained living, inside fire. This is alluded to in *Tehillim* (8:6), "You have made him but slightly less than the angels."

What was uppermost in Moshe's mind as he was preparing for his death? Transmitting to Bnei Yisrael Hashem's message. He did not call them with the trumpets (even according to the opinion that he did not die on Shabbat), for his way was always to come toward the people. In Egypt, Moshe was instructed to (*Shemot* 10:1), "Come to Pharaoh." We also find (*ibid.*, 4:18), "Moshe *went* and returned to Yitro, his father-in-law," (*ibid.*, 4:29), "Moshe and Aharon *went* and gathered all the elders..." (*Bamidbar* 16:25), "Moshe stood up and *went* to Datan and Aviram." Regarding Moshe's going to Pharaoh, the Zohar states (II, 34a) that Hashem told Moshe, "I will go together with you." Each Jew has a *nitzotz* of Moshe within him. Whenever a person chooses to do a good deed, the *Yetzer Hara* wages war against him. Hashem stands at his side, protecting him from all evil, just as He protected Moshe in the palace of Pharaoh.

Moshe invested great effort into going to the nation. For this reason, Hashem granted him Heavenly assistance, as He had when Moshe went to Pharaoh. How could Moshe manage to transmit Hashem's message to the entire nation without the aid of loudspeakers? In this, too, Moshe was teaching them a lesson. When a person is involved in a mitzvah, he has nothing less than the Presence of Hashem at his side. He is infused with

supernatural powers and can accomplish tremendous things. Moshe succeeded in speaking to the entire nation and writing thirteen Sifrei Torah in one day (*Devarim Rabbah* 9:9). An angel taught Yosef Hatzaddik seventy languages in one night (*Sotah* 36b). His adherence to the Torah granted him supernal powers. Yaakov Avinu taught Yosef all of the Torah teachings he had amassed in the Beit Hamidrash of Shem and Ever by the time Yosef was a mere lad of seventeen years. This, too, was above the laws of nature.

Moshe, our quintessential leader, wished to meet with each and every member of his flock, offering him inspiration and encouragement. Words of Torah need strengthening. This is why he made the effort to go out to the people (*Berachot* 32b).

Chazal inform us (see *Parashat Derachim* 8 on the *Midrash*) that had Moshe Rabbeinu entered the Land, he would have built the Beit Hamikdash, which would subsequently never have been destroyed. He would also have sealed the entrance to Gehinnom. Moshe was devastated upon hearing that he was denied entry into Eretz Yisrael. But he did not languish in gloom. He spent his last days transmitting Hashem's word to Am Yisrael. He spoke to them individually and left them a most precious legacy – a Torah Scroll for each tribe.

The day of David Hamelech's death was a Shabbat (*Shabbat* 30b). On that day, he learned Torah without pause. The Angel of Death was thus prevented from taking his *neshamah*. What did he do? He caused a rustle in the trees, interrupting David's learning for a moment. In that instant, he swooped down and claimed David's *neshamah*. This incident clearly indicates that one who is connected to the Torah is protected from the Angel of Death.

Not only was Moshe Rabbeinu a singular *talmid chacham* who was bound with Torah, he was the very ambassador of Torah, the one who brought it to us. The Netziv relates (*Ha'amek Davar, Shemot* 4:27) that Aharon HaKohen would kiss his brother, Moshe, the way one kisses a Sefer Torah. We have no concept of who Moshe was. Even the Angel of

Death held no sway over him. Moshe never gave thought to the day of death, for he was one with Torah, the elixir of life (see *Shabbat* 88b). Torah is eternal, and Moshe's *sefirah* is *netzach*, meaning eternity (see *Zohar* III, 243a). Only after Hashem asked him to refrain from further prayer, did Moshe realize that his time had come.

Moshe wrote the Sifrei Torah on his day of death. Until then, he did not believe that he would succumb to death. In truth, Moshe did not die but was taken by Hashem. Only on his last day here, did he understand that his purpose in this world had been accomplished. Moshe was partially divine and therefore had the ability to write thirteen Sifrei Torah in one day. Moshe's powers are above our level of comprehension.

Every Erev Shabbat, the tzaddik, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy" a, used to go from Mogador to Meknes, a long distance. He would visit Rabbi David Chassin, zt" l, a great liturgist, who wrote beautiful songs to Hashem. They would sing together through the night. Then Rabbi David would escort Rabbi Chaim home. Many unnatural points are demonstrated in this story.

One must always bear in mind that he is capable of action only *bisiyata di'Shemaya*. Although Moshe told the nation, "I am one hundred and twenty years old today; I can no longer go out and come in," he still went out toward the people and wrote thirteen Sifrei Torah on that day. Hashem was with him, as He is with all who do His will.

Observing the actions of our great men instills us with *emunah*. In Morocco, the children were educated in faith from a young age, not waiting until they reached yeshiva days. The Chafetz Chaim quotes the words "I am Hashem" to mean the following: If a person thinks he is "I," he will never believe in Hashem. But if he acknowledges that "I" refers to Hashem, then he will come to belief. One must realize that Hashem resides inside him. One who lives with this awareness will be able to transcend the boundaries of nature, as we find regarding Moshe Rabbeinu.

The Leadership Is Transferred to Yehoshua

The pasuk states (*Devarim* 31:7), “Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him before the eyes of all Israel, ‘Be strong and courageous, for you shall come with the people to the Land that Hashem swore to their forefathers to give them, and you shall cause them to inherit it.’” Rashi expounds that Moshe was telling Yehoshua that the elders of the generation would be with him, and he should follow their opinion and advice. But Hashem told Yehoshua that he would bring Bnei Yisrael into the Promised Land, even against their will. This act would be according to Yehoshua’s opinion. How could Moshe differ from the word of Hashem?

Hashem told Yehoshua that he could bring the nation into the Land without the help of the elders, on one condition. That is, if he had the same level of faith in Hashem as Moshe before him. Moshe knew his disciple well. He knew that Yehoshua was exceedingly humble and did not have the authority to lead the nation on his own. Therefore, Moshe suggested that Yehoshua should take along the elders for added support.

We previously asked how Moshe could have written the Sifrei Torah on the day he died, since it was Shabbat. In truth, he committed the words to writing not on the day of his actual death, but the day he realized that his death was imminent. Part of his preparation for death included writing these Sifrei Torah. Until then, he did not believe he would be taken.

With full realization of the fantastic powers which he had, Moshe believed he would remain alive. But when he saw that his prayers were not accepted on High, it dawned on him that he would soon die. He prepared himself properly, day by day. This is in fulfillment of our Sages’ injunction (*Avot* 2:10), “Repent one day before you die.” With supernatural strength, he wrote thirteen Sifrei Torah before Shabbat descended.

Everything comes from Hashem. Every step of our lives is pre-ordained on High, possible only with *siyata di’Shemaya*. One must feel this in all areas of life. Waking up in the morning, once again given the gift of sight, is nothing short of a miracle. All is in the hands of Heaven, except fear of

Heaven (*Berachot* 33b). And when a person aspires to greater spirituality, exerting himself to do a mitzvah, he receives assistance (see *Shabbat* 104a). For this reason, we are told not to postpone doing a mitzvah (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 201). Although one's level of *yirat Shamayim* is in his hands, there is an element of *siyata di'Shemaya* at play, as well. But one must make the first move. Moshe taught the nation, prior to his death, that those who are involved in Torah are above the laws of nature.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The sefer *Ateret Tzvi* asks why Moshe “went out” instead of gathering the nation together by means of the trumpets, which was how it had always been done before. Moshe Rabbeinu passed away on Shabbat, when trumpet-blowing is forbidden. How, then, could he write thirteen Sifrei Torah, as we are told he did on his day of death? According to those who claim he did not die on Shabbat, why didn't he blow trumpets to assemble the people?
- ◆ In Hashem's order to Moshe to “go to Pharaoh,” He intimated that He would go along with him. With every step a person takes to do a mitzvah, Hashem is at his side. Moshe wanted to gather the people directly, without the aid of the trumpets, because he wanted to be together with them, as Hashem stood beside him.
- ◆ How could Moshe gather all the people without loudspeakers, and how could he manage to write thirteen Sifrei Torah in one day? Nature bows to those truly involved in Torah. Who was a greater advocate for Torah than Moshe Rabbeinu? Those who study Torah receive a tremendous amount of *siyata di'Shemaya*. In one night, Yosef succeeded in learning seventy languages from the angel. By the time he was seventeen years old, he had mastered learning from Yaakov all that he had learned from Shem and Ever.
- ◆ Moshe went directly to the people since he wanted to strengthen each and every one, inspiring them to reach greater heights. As their leader, he felt responsible for each and every member of his flock.

- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu prayed fervently to enter the Land and truly believed he would not die beforehand. Only after Hashem told him to stop praying, did he prepare himself for death.
- ◆ Whatever happens to us is from Hashem. Every breath we take is a Heavenly gift. Although one's level of *yirat Shamayim* is in his hands, there is an element of *siyata di'Shemaya* at play, as well. The Zohar teaches that Hashem went with Moshe to Pharaoh's palace. Whenever one goes to do a mitzvah, he receives Heavenly escort.
- ◆ Moshe told Yehoshua that he would lead the people with the help of the elders. But Hashem told Yehoshua that he would lead the nation alone. Hashem was assuring Yehoshua that he had the ability to lead the nation on his own, just as Moshe had. But Moshe, his teacher, recognized his abilities and understood that he would be overwhelmed with this job, so he suggested that he take help from the elders.



Torah Exists Even in Exile

“So now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the Children of Israel, place it in their mouth, so that the song shall be for Me a witness against the Children of Israel”

(Devarim 31:19)

Hashem commanded Moshe to tell Bnei Yisrael to commit the Torah, called a “song,” to writing. This would serve as a constant reminder that Hashem was the One Who brought them salvation, redeeming them from bondage and bequeathing them the Land of their forefathers. When people have it good, they tend to forget where their good fortune comes from. This is in line with the pasuk (*Devarim 32:15*), “Yeshurun became fat and kicked.” Since Hashem is all too familiar with man's mind, He

ordered that the Torah should be written before Bnei Yisrael entered the Land. In this manner, the wealth and blessing in the Land flowing with milk and honey would not blind them to the Giver of all good.

Adam Harishon had everything he could want. But he disobeyed the command not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. In order not to feel complacent and conceited, due to abundance of materialism, tzaddikim throughout the ages separated themselves from it all.

The parashah continues (*Devarim* 31:20), “For I shall bring them to the Land that I swore to their forefathers... and if they turn to gods of others and serve them, it will provoke Me and annul My covenant.” This song is evidence that Torah will not be forgotten from Am Yisrael, and Bnei Yisrael will not fall into the clutches of the *Yetzer Hara*. At times, people think that they owe nothing to Hashem. Their wisdom and their destiny are their own doings, they aver. In truth, it was Hashem alone Who created us with wisdom, understanding, and intellect. Therefore, we must heed His commands and fulfill His Torah. One should never yield to the suggestions of the *Yetzer Hara*, who disguises himself as our creator.

The Gemara relates a fascinating incident (*Bava Kama* 117a): Rav Kahana, who lived in Bavel, once killed an informer. He took upon himself the burden of exile and relocated to the yeshiva of Rabbi Yochanan in Eretz Yisrael. Before his journey, he visited his teacher, Rav, to receive his parting blessing. Rav instructed him that for seven years, he should listen to all of Rabbi Yochanan’s *divrei Torah* without asking questions. Only after seven years, did he have permission to ask questions and offer explanations of his own. Rav Kahana accepted these words and went on his way.

Upon Rav Kahana’s arrival, Reish Lakish told Rabbi Yochanan, “A lion has ascended from Bavel.” Hearing of Rav Kahana’s erudition, Rabbi Yochanan sat him among the seven front rows of disciples. Rabbi Yochanan wished to evaluate his new disciple’s level of learning, so he asked him something. But, true to his teacher’s instruction, Rav Kahana did not reply. When the Torah scholars saw this, they assumed that Rav

Kahana was not as learned as they had thought, so they placed him further back. Rabbi Yochanan plied him with question after question, but Rav Kahana kept his peace. And each time he did not answer, he was moved further and further away from his mentor, until he sat at the very back of the Beit Hamidrash.

Rav Kahana prayed, “May the seven rows which I was removed from occupying serve the place of seven years of silence.” From then on, when he was asked a question, he responded accordingly. With each response, he was brought one row closer to his teacher, until he finally sat at the very front. Rabbi Yochanan was very old and his eyebrows covered his eyes. He asked that his eyebrows be lifted so that he might gaze at the lion that had ascended from Bavel.

We might insert here an interesting fact. Rabbi Yochanan had the strength to teach Torah and offer his own insights, but he did not have the strength to raise his own eyebrows. Regrettably, we have energy for all sorts of materialistic pursuits, but when it comes to spirituality, we are suddenly overcome with weakness.

When Rabbi Yochanan looked at Rav Kahana, he noticed a slight smile playing on his lips. He felt somewhat slighted, and in punishment, Rav Kahana was decreed to die. The next morning, Rabbi Yochanan’s disciples explained that Rav Kahana had not been smirking at all. He had a natural cut in his lip, which gave the impression that he was grinning. Rabbi Yochanan visited the grave of Rav Kahana and found a snake entwined around it. Rabbi Yochanan commanded it, “Let the mentor see his disciple,” but the snake did not give way. Rabbi Yochanan commanded it, “Let the friend see his comrade,” but the snake still did not move. Then Rabbi Yochanan said, “Let the disciple see his teacher,” and the snake moved immediately. Rabbi Yochanan cried out, “My mentor! My mentor! Arise and come study Torah with me!” Rav Kahana replied, “Since so much time has elapsed, I no longer desire to return to *Olam Hazeh*.”

Why did Rav Kahana consider the seven rows from which he was removed to be the equivalent of seven years of silence? Let us use the

exhortation of Pirkei Avot (4:14) to understand this topic: “Exile yourself to a place of Torah.” When a person abandons his home and family and all that is familiar in order to learn Torah, he is demonstrating a tremendous level of love and dedication to the Torah. Rabbi Akiva left his home for the duration of twenty-four years in order to grow in Torah and establish disciples (*Ketubot* 62b). Moshe Rabbeinu left the luxuries of Pharaoh’s palace to dedicate himself for Hashem and His nation. Therefore, he deserved to serve as their faithful shepherd. There was a famous Rabbi who would spend three months traveling to his mentor, spend one day in his presence, and spend another three months returning home (*Chagigah* 5b). Because exiling oneself to a place of Torah is so significant, Hashem told Avraham (*Bereishit* 12a), “Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house.”

Rav Kahana originally left home in order to fulfill the dictum “Exile yourself to a place of Torah.” His teacher instructed him to remain silent for seven years to indicate that greatness in Torah is attained only by unceasing exertion. The method of the *Yetzer Hara* is to dig a ditch for one who is ascending the ladder of Torah and *yirah*. This is why the danger of climbing is very great. One must be extremely vigilant not to fall into the pit of doom prepared by the *Yetzer Hara*.

Rav Kahana’s good name preceded him, as Reish Lakish testified, “A lion has ascended from Bavel.” Due to his fame, his teacher told him to go slowly and carefully, so that he should not, *chalilah*, suffer negative consequences. But Rav Kahana did not obey this directive perfectly, and allowed himself to transfer the seven years to the seven rows. This was the cause of his downfall. Rabbi Yochanan acted strictly with him, and this caused Rav Kahana’s untimely death. Nevertheless, Rav Kahana’s self-sacrifice in exiling himself to a place of Torah elevated him. Rabbi Yochanan’s words were accepted on High, and Rav Kahana was considered to be his mentor.

Am Yisrael’s *zechut* to emerge from Egypt with great wealth, receive the Torah, and enter Eretz Yisrael, was due to their privation during the years of living in the *galut* of Goshen. Immediately before his death,

Moshe Rabbeinu specified that the nation should write down the words of Torah. They should never feel that the Egyptian exile was sufficient to keep them on the straight and narrow. On the contrary, when they would live securely in their Land, they must exert themselves in Torah, never relaxing.

Moshe's message contained an element of consolation for the long, bitter exile which the nation would eventually face. Even when they would be expelled from their Land, they would still be able to grow in Torah, in line with the words, "Exile yourself to a place of Torah." Moshe knew that with exile would come depression, preventing the people from delving into Torah as they had on their Land. He reassured them that even on foreign shores, Hashem would continue to be with them. If they displayed a true desire to be one with Torah, Hashem would grant them *siyata di'Shemaya* to grow in Torah even in exile.

Moshe exiled himself, so to speak, to a place of Torah, with his ascent to Heaven. He therefore merited the Torah being called by his name. Yosef merited being called "Yosef Hatzaddik" for he held fast to his father's Torah teachings even in the defilement of Egypt. He glorified Hashem's Name in that rancid place of immorality. Before their moving meeting, Yosef sent wagons to his father, to hint to him that he still remembered which *sugya* they had learnt together last (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 94:3). The word עגלות (wagons) contains the words ע' גלות (seventy, exile). This alludes to the fact that one who exiles himself to a place of Torah merits understanding the seventy aspects of Torah. Bnei Yisrael merited acquiring Torah after the *galut* of Egypt in the merit of the Torah studied by Yaakov and the Shevatim in Goshen. Throughout our history, we find Torah giants who illuminated the world with their Torah even from their native countries of darkness and defilement.

Galut is an opportunity for rectification and atonement for sin. Let us utilize exile correctly, repairing whatever is necessary. Hashem holds our hand, so to speak, during our long and bitter exile, as the pasuk states (*Tehillim* 91:15), "I am with him in distress." We deserve *galut* when we do not observe the Torah during times of freedom. The dangers of *galut*

serve as a wake-up call, arousing us to repent and once again sing the praises of Torah.

In Summary

- ◆ Hashem exhorts us to serve Him even when we are showered with good. We should never, *chalilah*, forget from where all our bounty came.
- ◆ Rav Kahana, a disciple of Rav, ascended to Eretz Yisrael to learn Torah from Rabbi Yochanan. Rav instructed him to hide his vast Torah knowledge for seven years. He was relocated to the back of the Beit Hamidrash because he was considered ignorant. Then, he felt the time was ripe to reveal his greatness.
- ◆ Why did Rav Kahana consider moving back seven rows as being exiled for seven years?
- ◆ Rav Kahana wished to exile himself to a place of Torah. Since he did not obey his mentor, Rav, perfectly, he was punished by the strictness of Rabbi Yochanan.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu taught the nation that throughout the long years of *galut*, Hashem is with us, never removing His gaze from His people.



Ha'azinu



Lofty Pursuits

*“Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and may
the earth hear the words of my mouth”*

(Devarim 32:1)

What do the heavens and the earth have to do with the message which Moshe was about to impart to Bnei Yisrael? The heaven and earth are an analogy to man, who is comprised of both spiritual and physical aspects. This is illustrated in the incident with Yeravam ben Nevat (*Sanhedrin* 102a). Hashem, as it were, grabbed hold of Yeravam, and said, “Repent, and you, and I, and ben Yishai will walk together through Gan Eden.” What is the significance of Hashem “grabbing hold” of Yeravam? It is certainly a manner of speech, as we often find in the Torah. Other examples are (*Shemot* 22:23), “My anger was enflamed,” (*Devarim* 34:12), “The mighty hand,” etc.

Hashem was telling Yeravam that He wished to strengthen the bond between Himself and Yeravam’s upper self, i.e., his *neshamah*. This was hinted at by “grabbing hold” of him. Whenever a person does teshuvah, he abandons his old ways and re-connects to his upper self, the *neshamah*. “Earth” represents man’s earthly nature. When Moshe rebuked

the people before His death, he spoke both to their soul and to their body, corresponding to heaven and earth.

In response to Avraham's asking (*Bereishit* 15:8), "My L-rd, Hashem... Whereby shall I know that I am to inherit it (the Land)?" Bnei Yisrael suffered Egyptian exile. What was wrong with Avraham's question that it warranted such a terrible punishment? In truth, our exile in Egypt was more of a consequence or an answer to Avraham's question than an actual punishment. Avraham was aware of the tremendous *kedushah* of Eretz Yisrael. His question was in what merit would his children be found worthy of connecting to the Holy Land. To this, Hashem replied (*ibid.*, vs. 13), "... and they will serve them (the Egyptians), and they will oppress them." Eretz Yisrael will be acquired through the pains of exile.

The Gemara states (*Berachot* 5a) that three things are acquired through suffering: Torah, Eretz Yisrael, and *Olam Haba*. The very suffering in exile created our nation's bond with Eretz Yisrael, by strengthening their spiritual side and weakening their physical side. This proved them worthy of inheriting the Land which was under Hashem's constant surveillance (see *Devarim* 11:12).

The Midrash relates the following incident (*Shemot Rabbah* 52:3): A disciple of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai moved to a faraway land. He succeeded in business and became fantastically wealthy. When he returned to Eretz Yisrael, his comrades were exceedingly jealous of him. Noting this, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai instructed his pupils to follow him to a nearby valley. As they all stood around, Rabbi Shimon called out, "Valley! Valley! Fill up with gold coins!" Then Rabbi Shimon told his disciples, "Take as much as you wish. But bear in mind that it will be at the expense of your portion in *Olam Haba*." They hurried to return all that they had taken and went on their way.

What would have been so terrible if they would have taken some of the money? They would have been able to devote themselves better to Torah study and to helping others financially. They could have used this money for Shabbat expenses and for other mitzvot. Certainly, all the money in

the world does not equal the reward of a single mitzvah. Why, then, could they not take some of the gold for themselves?

Torah is acquired through suffering. In order to connect one's spiritual side to the Torah, he must weaken his physical self. Rabbi Shimon's disciples had to strengthen themselves and reduce their physical pleasures in order to reinforce their connection to Torah. Therefore, they declined the gold coins.

A tall man can see further than a short one. Similarly, in the spiritual realm, the more elevated one is, the greater is his power of vision. The merit of Torah helps a person see what is obscured from others. He realizes that the day will come when he will have to give a personal accounting. On the other hand, one who is tied down to earthliness will find it much more difficult to feel Hashem's Presence. Materialism obstructs his view of the truth. Therefore, it is imperative to fortify one's spiritual side, while nullifying the earthly.

Our commentators (see *Shelah Hakadosh, Shavuot, Torah Ohr*) explain that "heaven" is the Written Law, and "earth" is the Oral Law. The essence of Torah is certainly from heaven, but that which is derived from the Torah belongs to the earth. Bnei Yisrael are people of the earth, but by connecting to those things which originated on High, they can raise themselves higher. This is the meaning of Moshe's words, "And may the earth hear the words of my mouth." When earthly creatures of flesh and blood pull themselves upward, the earth itself becomes elevated to the level of the heavens. This is in line with Rashi's explanation (ibid.). He says that the heavens and earth were chosen as witnesses, for they exist forever. They prove that it is possible to overcome the *Yetzer Hara* by means of connecting the earth with the heavens, i.e., the Oral Law with the Written Law.

Chazal tell us (*Berachot 33b*), "All is in the hands of Heaven, except fear of Heaven." All one's personal needs, be they spiritual or physical, are in the hands of Heaven. Yet the most spiritual quest of all, that of *yirat Shamayim*, is in his own hands.

This is because *yirat Shamayim* depends on man's free will. Hashem refuses to interfere in this area. Since man is associated with heaven, due to his lofty *neshamah*, which is a spark of Divinity (*Pardes Rimonim* 32a), Hashem provides each person with all of his needs in order to attain *yirat Shamayim* and serve Him properly. All that man is accountable for is his level of *yirat Shamayim*, the area in which he must exert himself. *Yirat Shamayim* is the adhesive which brings together one's lofty level with his physicality.

"One mitzvah leads to another, and one sin leads to another" (*Avot* 4:2). One who demonstrates his desire to do mitzvot and spends his life in this pursuit is helped by Hashem, Who offers him more and more opportunities for mitzvot.

I was once asked to accept two additional avrechim to my kollel. I replied that there was no room. The man said that these were outstanding avrechim, who were worthy of becoming great Torah leaders. I acquiesced, but had no idea where I would find the money to support them. That very day, a man called me up, stating that he wished to donate a specific amount to the kollel. This amount was exactly what it cost me to support these two young men. This is perfect proof that man must do his part, with goodwill and hard work, and Hashem will help him succeed.

One Yom Kippur, an unfamiliar man came to pray at our Beit Hakeneset. Throughout the day, he stood and prayed, like a son confessing before his father. I approached him and asked where he had eaten his pre-fast meal. He stated that he had not eaten for the past two days. I invited him to my home, but he stated that immediately after the fast ended, he had to travel out-of-town. After questioning him further, I discovered that his destination was a place of ill repute. I was in utter shock and rebuked him accordingly. "For two days you have not eaten," I began. "You are dressed in white and stand in penitence before your Creator. And you intend to hurry off to sin as soon as the day ends?!" This is the definition of the maxim "All is in the hands of Heaven except fear of Heaven" (*Berachot* 33b). A person can do all the right things, dress in white, fast, and pray,

but if he does not make up his mind to be a *yarei Shamayim*, he will never manage to be one.

I heard the following in the name of Maran Harav Shach, zy”a. Pharaoh was a self-proclaimed deity, who claimed that he created the Nile, and, indeed, the entire world (see *Shemot Rabbah* 5:14). He therefore never had to take care of his needs, he averred (ibid., 9:8). He would arise especially early each day and secretly take care of his needs in the Nile. Hashem commanded Moshe to appear before Pharaoh when he was relieving himself at the Nile. When Moshe came and told Pharaoh to send out Bnei Yisrael, Pharaoh flatly refused, claiming to be a god, so why should he hearken to the G-d of the Jews? (ibid., 5:14).

This is very strange. Pharaoh knew that Moshe saw him taking care of his bodily needs. Who was he fooling by claiming to be a god? Rav Shach explains that a person has the power to fool even himself. He is capable of justifying his actions, to the point that he has convinced himself that he is right.

This is due to a lack of connection with one’s upper self. One simply becomes a mass of materialism, claiming (*Devarim* 8:17), “My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth!” This is similar to Pharaoh’s claim of creating the Nile (*Yechezkel* 29:3).

The pasuk states (*Shemot* 1:1), “And these are the names of the Children of Israel who are coming to Egypt; with Jacob, each man and his household came.” Chazal comment that the words “and these” add on to the previous ones mentioned (see *Shemot Rabbah* 1:2). Only those people recorded in sefer *Bereishit*, who accepted upon themselves the suffering of Egypt in order to merit acquiring Torah and Eretz Yisrael, came there. This excluded the sons of Eisav and Yishmael. The name Yisrael is mentioned here, for it denotes importance (*Eitz Hada’at Tov, Vayechi*). Because Bnei Yisrael agreed to accept suffering, they merited important positions.

The Chiddushei HaRim asks why the pasuk states, “who *are coming* to Egypt” and not, “who *came* to Egypt.” He answers that those of our nation

who will agree in the future to go into exile and accept suffering upon themselves will merit to be part of Bnei Yisrael. Thus we can say that these people “are coming to Egypt” at any given time.

The pasuk (Shemot 1:1) says that the Children of Israel came “את יעקב” – with Yaakov.” The word יא contains the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This alludes to the fact that Bnei Yisrael merited receiving the Torah, which is compiled of these letters. The entire purpose of their suffering was to strengthen the bond between heaven and man’s spiritual side, and weaken the earthliness of man.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu begins the song of *Ha’azinu* with the words, “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and may the earth hear the words of my mouth.” The “heavens” refer to man’s upper self, whereas the “earth” is his lower self.
- ◆ Hashem decreed *galut* upon Am Yisrael in response to Avraham’s query, “Whereby shall I know that I am to inherit it (the Land)?” Avraham was asking how Bnei Yisrael could strengthen their spiritual connection with Eretz Yisrael. Hashem decreed upon them the suffering of exile in order to refine them for the privilege of living in the Holy Land. Suffering would bring them to the level necessary for inheriting the Land, a spiritual place, constantly under Hashem’s supervision.
- ◆ Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai showed his disciples a valley full of gold coins. But he warned them that if they took this wealth, it would weaken their spiritual level.
- ◆ Man’s spiritual side is far-seeing, like a tall person who can see great distances. But man’s physical side sees only the here and now, like a midget, who cannot see very far.
- ◆ Heaven and earth themselves testify that it is possible to conquer the *Yetzer Hara* by connecting man’s lower self to his upper self, thereby lifting his earthliness to a more elevated level.
- ◆ Hashem provides man with all his needs in this world. All He asks is for

us to have *yirat Shamayim*. This is the meaning of “All is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of Heaven.”

- ◆ One who makes the attempt to do mitzvot will receive Heavenly assistance.
- ◆ Rav Shach said that a person can fool even himself, since he is subjective. One should beware of this failing.
- ◆ Bnei Yisrael accepted the suffering of exile in order to merit inheriting the Holy Land. They were the only ones worthy of this distinction, not Eisav or Yishmael.



Bedrock of Belief

“The Rock! – perfect is His work, for all His paths are justice; a G-d of faith without iniquity, righteous and fair is He”

(Devarim 32:4)

Am Yisrael are going through hard times. Enemies from both within and without threaten to annihilate us. We must know that if we are faced with troubles, it is an indication that Hashem wishes to awaken us to do teshuvah. “The Rock! – perfect is His work” indicates that Hashem behaves toward His creatures measure for measure. If they go on the path of righteousness, He showers them with blessing. But if, *chalilah*, they violate His wishes, the *Middat Hadin* steps in and reminds them to do teshuvah.

“All His paths are justice; a G-d of faith without iniquity, righteous and fair is He.” Everything that Hashem does to a person is in perfect synchronization with his own acts. Often, we find tzaddikim who suffer and, conversely, resha'im who have it good. How can this be explained

rationally? Rashi elucidates: Hashem is trusted to pay the tzaddikim their due reward in the World to Come. Although their remittance may take a while to arrive, it will surely be paid in full. Since Hashem desires that the tzaddikim receive full compensation in the World to Come, the world of true and everlasting reward, He may deprive them of ease and comfort in this world, so that when their time comes, they can immediately enter the gates of Gan Eden and bask in the pleasure of the *Shechinah*.

Hashem does not withhold payment from anyone. If a rasha ever did a good deed, Hashem grants him reward in this world, so that he should come to the Next World and pay up for his numerous misdeeds (see *Devarim* 7:10). We are shortsighted, and therefore cannot comprehend Heavenly accounts. But arming ourselves with the belief that Hashem is perfect and just, without iniquity whatsoever, we are expected to justify the judgment of Hashem and accept it lovingly. We must constantly reinforce the understanding that whatever He does is true and just.

If Hashem strikes at His children, there must be a good reason. If a person faces hardship, he must know it is his own doing. Chazal inform us (*Yevamot* 63a) that any calamity which befalls the world, even among the nations, is in order to awaken Am Yisrael. Since Hashem dearly loves His children, the Chosen People, He sends us messages to awaken us, by striking at the gentiles. This is so that we should take a lesson and correct ourselves. But when Hashem observes that we ignore our messages, He strikes closer to home. We feel the whip of His wrath on our own backs (see *Drashot HaRan* 6). This scenario plays itself out in the case of the *metzora*. First, spots appear on the walls of his home. If he does not get the message, the malady develops and spots appear on his utensils and clothing. If he is still blind to the signs, and refuses to repent, Hashem is left with no choice but to bring the spots upon his body, hoping that finally, he will do teshuvah for his wrongdoings (see *Rambam, Tumat Tzara'at* 16:10).

Just as Hashem relates to us with perfection, so must we relate to Him. This is in line with the pasuk (*Devarim* 18:13), “You shall be wholehearted (*tamim*) with Hashem, your G-d.” Our Avot were exemplary in the quality

of wholeheartedness. They followed Hashem exclusively, unquestioningly accepting His judgments with love (see *Shemot Rabbah* 6:4).

Avraham hurried to do Hashem's bidding to bring up Yitzchak on the altar, without asking questions or raising any doubts. This was in spite of the fact that Hashem had promised him previously (*Bereishit* 21:12) "Through Yitzchak will offspring be considered yours." Throughout his *nisyonot*, Avraham demonstrated subservience and steadfastness to Hashem, fully believing that if Hashem was bringing this challenge his way, it indicated that he had the wherewithal to stand up to it, no questions asked.

At the beginning of his odyssey, Avraham investigated and searched for the true manager of the world. He did not rest in his quest until he found the Resolution to his uncertainties (see *Rambam, Avodah Zarah* 1:3). After discovering Hakadosh Baruch Hu, he took a vow of silence upon himself, as it were. From that point on, his questions ceased, and he walked wholeheartedly with Hashem.

David Hamelech writes (*Tehillim* 8:4), "When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You have set in place." It is sufficient for a person to gaze at the luminaries, and, indeed, any aspect of Creation, in order to arrive at the conclusion that Hashem is the only G-d, and He made all of this come into being. What right, then, does he have to question Hashem's management of the world? If Hashem created it, He surely knows how to run it.

On the grave of my grandfather, the tzaddik, Rabbi Chaim Pinto Hakatan, zy" a, in Casablanca, he is describes as "the perfect one (*tam*)."
Who is perfect? One who walks wholeheartedly with Hashem, without questioning His ways.

At the Pesach Seder, we refer to four sons, one of whom is the *tam*, or perfect one (*Mechilta, Bo* 18). What is the distinction of the *tam*? He has questions, but he does not express them, out of honor for Hashem's Name. This is why, when a deceased person passes on, his relatives and friends accept the justice of his death with the words "Blessed be the

true Judge” (see *Berachot* 10:3). Although the passing of a loved one is tragic and painful, those who fear Hashem immediately recite this *berachah*, announcing that they believe wholeheartedly that Hashem is perfect and His deeds are righteous. It is our short-sightedness which, at times, blocks our vision to this reality.

In the various audiences which I accept around the world, thousands of people come to me, pouring out their hearts over their difficulties. I often hear them bewailing their lot, crying out, “Why is Hashem doing this to me?” When I hear such complaints, I turn around the tables. I tell them that instead of asking questions, they should introspect and resolve to improve in some area. This will arouse the Heavenly Attribute of Mercy upon them, removing from themselves the Attribute of Justice. If a person is faced with troubles, he should search his actions until he finds that which needs improvement.

At times, Hashem may punish or even take away a tzaddik. This is not due to any sin on his part, but because he sacrifices his life for the congregation, atoning for the sins of the generation (see *Shabbat* 33b). When Am Yisrael note that Hashem takes the crown from their heads prematurely, they must check their ways and awaken of their own accord, figuring out why they were met with this tragedy and what is incumbent upon them to mend. It is fitting for people to ask “Why is Hashem doing this to me?” not as an accusation, but as a means of doing teshuvah. But first and foremost, one must clearly comprehend that if Hashem has struck him, he was deserving of it. Afterward, he can confront the work ahead of him.

In parashat *Lech Lecha*, we read (*Bereishit* 17:1) that when Avraham was ninety-nine years old, Hashem appeared to him and instructed, “Walk before Me and be perfect.” Avraham was expected to walk wholeheartedly before Hashem, unhesitatingly. And when he served Hashem, he was meant to serve Him wholeheartedly without any personal motives, simply because it was Hashem’s will.

Regarding Noach, the Torah tells us (ibid., 6:9), “Noach was a righteous man, perfect in his generations.” Noach served Hashem with absolute inner truth, with no interest in self-aggrandizement. When Hashem informed him of the upcoming Flood, Noach behaved with righteousness and piety. He did not do this in order to be saved, but out of love for Hashem and a true desire to fulfill His wishes.

Just as a mother feeds her baby without expecting anything in return, simply out of love, the Avot and other tzaddikim of our nation serve Hashem wholeheartedly and sincerely, without thought of reward, simply because love of Hashem is a fiber of their being.

As long as Avraham’s challenges affected only himself, he did not ask questions, but justified Hashem’s decrees with love. Yet when it came to the fate of others, he prayed and supplicated Hashem to change things, begging Him to transfer from the Seat of Judgment to the Seat of Mercy. We find this regarding the case of Sodom and Amorrhah. Avraham spared no energy in beseeching Hashem for their pardon. He tried his luck time and again (ibid., 18:23-32). But when he realized that there was not a single tzaddik to justify the existence of Sodom, he made peace with Hashem’s verdict and asked no more questions.

Let us adopt the attitude of our great men, who serve Hashem unwaveringly. They have no personal interests whatsoever. Furthermore, they accept Hashem’s decree with unfailing faithfulness and love, without asking questions. One should cling to the ways of the tzaddikim and walk wholeheartedly with Hashem. This, in essence, is Hashem’s *middah*, that of “The Rock! – perfect is His work.”

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The words, “The Rock! – perfect is His work” indicate that Hashem behaves with a person measure for measure, for better or for worse. The words “For all His paths are justice” state that all that He does is correct. At times, due to our short-sightedness, we fail to see the justice in

everything. How can one have grievances, knowing he never sees the full picture?

- ◆ We, too, must behave with wholeheartedness, as we are enjoined, “You shall be wholehearted with Hashem, your G-d.” In spite of his many ordeals, Avraham served Hashem wholeheartedly. Hashem enjoined Avraham to walk before Him wholeheartedly. Not only during times of stress, but in all his acts, he was expected to behave with perfect wholeheartedness, because that was Hashem’s will.
- ◆ Noach was “perfect in his generation.” He did Hashem’s will wholeheartedly, not out of the desire to be saved from the Flood.
- ◆ When a person passes on, his relatives accept the justice of his death, even though it is not easy. They understand that Hashem manages the world with true justice. He alone knows what is ultimately good for a person. When suffering befalls a person, he should analyze his actions and introspect in which area he needs improvement. Let him never, *chalilah*, have grievances toward G-d.



Solely Serving Hashem

“Hashem alone guided them, and no other power was with them”

(Devarim 32:12)

Moshe is advising the people that in order to feel Hashem’s individual supervision, as alluded to in the words “Hashem alone guided them,” one must honestly feel that Hashem is the sole force in his life. One should never straddle two worlds, partially devoting himself to the One Power, and partially sucked up in the quicksand of earthliness and materialism, which are in the domain of the *Sitra Achra*, the “other power.” When a person is not determined to dedicate all his love to Heaven and fails to

feel that Hashem is the only dominating force in the world, he loses a sense of Hashem's love toward him and His individual intervention in his daily life.

For example, when a man stands in prayer before Hashem, his eyes may be in the siddur, but his head is in his upcoming business deal. Before he closes his siddur at the end of his prayer, he has already closed the deal in his mind. Is it possible for such a person to feel fired up in his prayer? Certainly the message of "Hashem alone guided them" is completely lost on him, for he maintains a connection with "other powers." They may take the form of money, or other physical objects that occupy a large portion of his thoughts. They have the magnetic qualities of drawing him away from Hashem.

The word **בדד** (alone) is numerically equivalent to ten, hinting to the ten *sefirot* by means of which Hashem sends blessing and goodness upon the entire world in general, and upon man, the crown of Creation, in particular. "Alone" is a word connoting separation. It is only when a person separates himself from the passions of this world and coronates Hashem, and only Hashem, upon himself, does he become influenced by the good which comes down through the ten *sefirot*. But when a person does not have the good sense to serve Hashem alone, he is dealt with measure for measure. Hashem removes His direct blessing through the ten *sefirot*.

The word **בדד** also alludes to the ten sayings with which the world came into effect (see *Avot* 5:1). Anyone with intelligence understands that the world was created by Hashem's word, without any intervention. Just as He alone made this world, so must man serve Him perfectly, without including outside factors, which are liable to cool off his Avodat Hashem and distance him from his Maker. The word **בדד** also alludes to the Ten Commandments, i.e., the Torah, in the merit of which the world exists.

One who strives to take these words to heart will have true peace of mind. He will be led by Hashem in all his actions and merit *siyata di'Shemaya*. There is no greater calming feeling than the awareness that

whatever happens to a person is Divinely ordained. This thought soothes a person into a sense of security, knowing that Hashem is guiding his every step.

One must train himself to internalize the pure perception of “Hashem alone guided them.” He should not adulterate this outlook with thoughts of “other powers.” Sadly, there are many people who are pulled by two opposing forces. On the one hand, their hearts desire to connect to Torah. But on the other hand, their *Yetzer Hara* incites them toward modernity and advancement, which are often nothing other than “other powers” in disguise. They distance a person from Hashem and cause him to feel coldness toward, and even mock, all things holy, *rachmana litzlan*.

How painful it is to observe people whose eagerness for earthliness drove them away from their source. In their zeal to acquire more materialism, they lost their Jewish identity, becoming just like the nations of the earth. Their hearts turned so cold toward anything Jewish that they no longer have the ability to take pleasure in doing mitzvot or hearing an interesting insight on the *parashat hashevuah*. How sorry is the state of the person who has dulled his sense of satisfaction in spiritually because he is sunk in the lime of lust for materialism. He has blinded himself to the true pleasure of observing Hashem’s *hashgachah* and the sweetness inherent in the Torah.

The Ben Ish Chai (*Shanah Rishonah, Ha’azinu*) explains that this pasuk refers to *Acharit Hayamim*. When Hashem’s kingdom will reign supreme, He alone will rule the world, and all “other powers” will disappear. The entire reality of the world will undergo a transformation, and all will perceive Hashem’s miraculous management of it (see *Yeshayahu* 11:9; *Yirmeyahu* 31:33). Hashem will be One and His Name will be One (*Zechariah* 14:9). Scripture describes the transformation of the world then. All foreign powers will dissolve. The third Beit Hamikdash will descend from heaven, without Am Yisrael having to construct it. Hashem’s Kingdom will be revealed in its full glory, and all will recognize that He alone guides the world, and no other power is with Him.

Goodness and blessing will proliferate in the world, to the extent that the wolf will live peacefully with the lamb. Wars will be a thing of the past, as the *Navi* states (*Yeshayahu* 2:4), “Nation will not lift sword against nation, and they will no longer study warfare.” Hashem will implant a special blessing in the ground. A person will plant a wheat seed and immediately, prepared bread will sprout. One will plant a cotton seed, and a prepared garment will germinate. A person will place a grape by the side of his home, and he will discover a vat of choice wine. These examples of the future are beyond comprehension, for they are so different from what we are used to (see *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Tehillim* 881; see *Shabbat* 30b; see *Ketubot* 111b).

In order for a person to fully appreciate the wonders of the future, he must feel Hashem’s guiding force in his everyday life. When one wholeheartedly believes that Hashem is upholding the world, with no outside forces, it will be that much easier for him to have trust in the wonderful reality of the future, when Hashem will be One and His Name will be One.

The *Yetzer Hara*, that devious devil, does all in his power to persuade a person to “have his cake and eat it, too.” He convinces a person that it is possible to believe in Hashem while flirting fleeting frivolities. A person should accustom himself to believe exclusively in Hashem. Once he reaches the World to Come, it will be too late to conquer his *Yetzer Hara*, for by then, his *Yetzer Hara* will be a thing of the past (see *Sukkah* 52a). If a person wishes to perceive Hashem’s kingdom in the future world, he must exert himself in this world, the world of deed. Through connecting to Torah, he will merit attaining the ultimate awareness of Hashem: that “Hashem alone guided them” (*Devarim* 32:12).

David Hamelech avers (*Tehillim* 24:3), “Who may ascend the mountain of Hashem, and who may stand in the place of His sanctity?” The higher one climbs a mountain, the closer he is to the top, and the more distant and uninterested he is in the lower levels. All his sights are set upon the summit. The more one attaches himself to Hashem and His Torah, the more he severs himself from earthliness. He finds no interest anymore in

materialism. His sole desire is to cleave to Hashem alone and be guided by His loving Hand, with no foreign powers involved whatsoever.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ In order to feel Hashem's individual supervision, one must feel that He is the sole force in the world. One should beware of combining love of Hashem with the pursuit of physical pleasures.
- ◆ The word **בדד** is numerically equivalent to ten. In order to receive the influence of the ten *sefirot* by which the world is sustained, one must feel that Hashem alone is guiding the world.
- ◆ The word **בדד** also alludes to the ten sayings by which the world was created. Just as Hashem created the world alone, so is the Torah, founded on the Ten Commandments, the foundation for the world. Torah observance is imperative in acquiring Hashem's individual guidance.
- ◆ The Ben Ish Chai says that this pasuk is referring to the End of Days, when a new level of reality will be the order of the day. In order to fully appreciate the miracles of that time, one must make the effort now to believe only in Hashem.



Song of Salvation

“For how could one pursue a thousand, and two cause a myriad to flee, if not that their Rock had sold them out, and Hashem had delivered them?”

(Devarim 32:30)

This parashah is read during the High Holy Days. It reminds a person of the end of one who does not observe the Torah and mitzvot. The words

of this parashah were fulfilled in the dark days of the Holocaust. Thousands of Jews were crowded into cattle cars, overseen by a mere few German soldiers. Although the Jews outnumbered them many times over, they were powerless to help themselves. They met their end *al kiddush Hashem*, accepting Hashem's decree.

Parashat *Nitzavim*, opening with the words (*Devarim* 29:9) "You are standing today" is also read during the High Holy Days. Many commentaries say that this pasuk refers to the day of Rosh Hashanah, when Am Yisrael stand before Hashem in judgment. The connection between these two parshiyot lies in the words (*ibid.* 32:20), "For they are a generation of reversals, children whose upbringing is not in them." Bnei Yisrael live a double identity. At times, they are close to Hashem, but at other times, they are so far removed from Him that they fashion *avodah zarah* from wood and stone, elements which Hashem created for man's sake to serve Him, not to rebuff Him. Am Yisrael spiraled downward at a dizzying speed, until they hit the level of casting off Hashem's burden from themselves, as the pasuk states (*ibid.*, 15), "Yeshurun became fat and kicked. You became fat, you became thick, you became corpulent – and it deserted G-d, its Maker."

When Am Yisrael stand before Hashem in judgment, they immediately regret their wrongdoings. In their hearts, they resolve to never repeat their past iniquities. But time passes, and with it, their heartfelt resolutions. Their lofty levels drop, and they return to their former sins, like a dog that goes back to his vomit (see *Yoma* 86b).

On Tishah b'Av, we read Megillat *Eichah* (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 559). We bewail the young, vibrant Kohanim who flung themselves into the flames which burnt down their beloved Beit Hamikdash (see *Ta'anit* 29a). We mention the incident of Channah and her seven sons, who died *al kiddush Hashem*. We cry for Am Yisrael, who breathed their last by the rivers of Bavel after attempting to quench their thirst from salty foods. The canteens they were given were filled not with water, but with air, and they died on the spot (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Yeshayahu* 421).

Why do we bemoan the fate of Am Yisrael, remembering all the destructions, pogroms, persecutions, and massacres which they endured? How was their lot different from that of other nations, who also endured devastation, in which millions perished?

When we weep on Tishah b'Av, it is not only the departed whom we mourn. There is a decree that the dead are forgotten (*Pesachim* 54b). The tears are for the cause of our sorrow, the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. Our holy Temple stood in full majesty, at the helm of our nation. Daily *korbanot* atoned for sins and removed Hashem's wrath from His people. Our bitter tears demonstrate our deep longing for the *Shechinah*, the Avodah of the Kohanim and their special garments, the *ketoret*, the miracles that occurred in the Beit Hamikdash, and the songs of the Levi'im.

If not for the *churban*, we would be spared the terrible decrees of *galut* and all the associated suffering (see *Eichah Rabbah*, Introduction 23). Every day, we supplicate Hashem in the Shemoneh Esrei, "Restore our judges as in earliest times and our counselors as at first." Only when Heavenly-appointed judges and prophets lead our people are we guaranteed national security. A leader of the nation has the power to arouse the people to do teshuvah. The main reason for our tears, then, besides for those who fell, is the loss of our Beit Hamikdash, and, with it, the *Shechinah*. While the nations of the world live in wild abandon, similar to the animals of the jungle, interested only in their bestial selves, Am Yisrael has a higher calling. They seek Hashem's closeness and therefore bemoan the loss of the Beit Hamikdash, the place where Hashem's *Shechinah* was most concentrated.

In the future world, the song of *Ha'azinu* (one of rebuke) will be converted to the Song of the Sea, regarding which, the pasuk says (*Shemot* 15:1), "Then Moshe and the Children of Israel chose to sing this song." Rashi (*ibid.*) explains that the Torah is hinting here to *techiyat hameitim*. When the dead will arise from their graves, Am Yisrael will surround Moshe and sing the Song of the Sea one more time. They will reach a level

of loftiness, the likes of which they acquired at the sea, when their enemies lay dead at their feet.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Am Yisrael reached untold lows, for they are a nation of duplicity, as mentioned in *Ha'azinu*, which is read in the season of the Yamim Noraim. Some commentaries explain that the words “You are standing today” refer to Rosh Hashanah, when Bnei Yisrael stand before Hashem in judgment.
- ◆ Every year on Tishah b'Av, Am Yisrael mourn their fallen. Aren't there many other nations which experienced destruction of one form or another? They don't seem to lament for generations upon end. Am Yisrael's mourning is compounded by the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash and the loss of the *Shechinah* from our midst. These were the causes for all future suffering.
- ◆ We await the day when the song of *Ha'azinu* will be converted to the Song of the Sea, as the pasuk states, “Then Moshe and the Children of Israel chose to sing this song.”



Perception of His Presence

“See, now, that I, I am He – and no god is with Me. I put to death and I bring to life, I struck down and I will heal, and there is no rescuer from My hand”

(Devarim 32:39)

The double wording of “I” lends added emphasis to the message that Hashem is alone in the world. Rashi explains this pasuk to mean that there is none like Hashem, for He rules over all kings and is Master of all

worlds, upper and lower alike. This pasuk is meant to awaken us to Hashem's existence and help us perfect our service of Him. This is in line with the pasuk (*Devarim* 4:39) "You shall know this day and take to your heart that Hashem, He is the G-d."

How does a person attain knowledge of Hashem? It does not come on its own. One must plow his way through the process of investigation until he arrives at this truth. Avraham Avinu was the quintessential seeker of Hashem. He spent years searching for the truth until he finally found it, absolute and unvarnished (see *Rambam, Avodah Zarah* 1:3).

All attest to the black of night and to the whiteness of the moon. But when it comes to recognizing Hashem, the *Yetzer Hara* blinds man's eyes and claims that everything is mere happenstance. Therefore, seeking Hashem is a difficult process. But those who attempt to do so will eventually succeed. Our Sages exhort us to believe one who has said that he toiled and succeeded (see *Megillah* 6b). But when a person fails to recognize Hashem of his own volition, Hashem brings various challenges his way. They are intended to awaken him from his self-induced stupor and encourage him to seek Hashem's closeness.

At the time of the Exodus from Egypt, Hashem performed tremendous miracles so that Bnei Yisrael would clearly realize, beyond any doubt, that Hashem is the only G-d. Each plague was a combination of great miracles. For instance, at the plague of blood, only the waters of the Egyptians turned bloody, whereas the Jews continued to drink clear, fresh water, even when Jew and gentile drank from the very same cup. Similarly, in the plague of wild beasts, all the predators throughout the world converged upon Egypt in order to punish the Egyptians. But they kept away from the Jews. Likewise, at the plague of hail, fire and water made peace to take vengeance against the Egyptians. During each and every plague, Hashem changed the laws of nature to prove His might and His management of the world (see *Ramban, Shemot* 13:16).

In order for Am Yisrael to follow Moshe, Hashem's emissary, they had to witness His tremendous strength. Only after this, did they agree to

follow Him into the barren and sultry Wilderness. The pasuk states (*Shemot* 13:18), “The Children of Israel were armed when they went up from the land of Egypt.” Rashi explains that the word חמושים (armed) derives from the word חמוש (one-fifth). Only one-fifth of the Jewish nation left Egypt. All the rest perished during the plague of darkness. They could not bear the thought of separation from Egyptian dominion and preferred remaining Pharaoh’s slaves to becoming servants of Hashem. How can we understand this, after they had witnessed all the miracles that Hashem performed for them and experienced the cruelty of the Egyptians toward them?

This is the working of the *Yetzer Hara*. With his crafty cunning, he obscures man’s vision of the truth, to the degree that evil is portrayed as good and good as evil (see *Yeshayahu* 5:20). In order to find Hashem, one must exert himself. Only through extensive search, can a person recognize Hashem’s sovereignty and follow Him. Those who chose to remain behind in Egypt not only did not seek Hashem, but blinded themselves to all His miracles, done before their very eyes.

Regarding Avraham, when he went to bring his beloved son, Yitzchak, on the *Akeidah*, through tremendous self-sacrifice, the pasuk states (*Bereishit* 22:4), “Avraham... perceived the place from afar.” Some commentaries explain (see *Noam Elimelech*, *Bechukotai*) that Avraham Avinu, with all of his greatness, felt that he was “afar” from Hashem. He was ready and willing to wholeheartedly yield to Hashem’s word, in spite of the difficulty involved. Nevertheless, he felt distant from Hashem, sensing that he still had a way to go in acquiring clear recognition of Him.

In *Aleinu L’shabe’ach* at the end of the Morning Prayer, we recite, “All the world’s inhabitants will recognize and know...” In the future, knowledge of Hashem will be so real that everyone will sense it absolutely. No one will be able to escape awareness of Hashem’s sovereignty. Throughout history, those who wish to know Hashem can do so, and those who wish to deny Him can do so, too. But in the future world, there will no longer be free will. All will unequivocally recognize His Presence and that there is none beside Him.

Rivka Imeinu was a young girl when she acknowledged Hashem's Presence on her own. In merit of her righteousness, the water rose to her (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 60:5). Rivka grew up in a house of sinners and idolaters. Yet, through the darkness of her decadent environment, she discovered the spark of Hashem's Presence. This was because she put effort into this endeavor. Her brother, Lavan, though, never sought closeness with Hashem and constantly chased after money. His name attests to his wickedness. The word לבן means white. Everything was clear to him, like the color white. Nonetheless, he shook off the shackles of knowledge of Hashem, preferring the ostensible freedom of pursuing physical pleasures. He remained evil all his life.

Hashem placed more righteous women in Lavan's environment, as a second chance at change. These were his daughters, Rachel and Leah. Even then, Lavan ignored the truth staring him in the face and refused to submit himself to Hashem. Lavan was known as a smart and cunning fellow (see *Ba'alei Tosafot, Bereishit* 29:22), but his wisdom did not prevent him from acting foolishly. This is the power of the *Yetzer Hara*, who blinds the eyes of the wise.

It is man's moral obligation to remove all influence of the *Yetzer Hara* from himself so that he can attain knowledge of Hashem. Seeking Hashem is not a one-time deal. Rather, it is a constant task, 24/7. If one is not always on the alert to maintain his bond with Hashem, the *Yetzer Hara* is liable to overcome him and seize whatever he managed to acquire until now. The pasuk "You shall know this day and take to your heart" means that a person must acquire knowledge about Hashem. But that is not enough. He must then internalize what he knows, so that it does not leave his consciousness.

In Summary

- ◆ The pasuk "See, now, that I, I am He" emphasizes Hashem's uniqueness in the world. How does one achieve this understanding? Through exertion and investigation. It cannot come on its own. When a person does not

come to acknowledge Hashem on his own, Hashem brings suffering upon him in the hope of awakening him.

- ◆ Hashem performed tremendous miracles in Egypt, in the Wilderness, and at the sea. This was in order to imbue Am Yisrael with perfect faith in Hashem's complete rulership.
- ◆ The *Yetzer Hara* blinds people to the truth. This was the case with those who refused to leave Egypt. They preferred the slavery of the Egyptians over Hashem's rule.
- ◆ Regarding Avraham, the pasuk states that he "perceived the place from afar." Although he was prepared to sacrifice himself for Hashem's sake, he still felt "far" from Him. He did not feel that he had reached the ultimate understanding of Hashem. Conversely, Lavan chose to blind himself to the truth, in spite of the many opportunities to recognize it.



Gems on Parashat Ha'azinu



Torah – Stipulation for Survival

“Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and may the earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drop like the rain, may my utterance flow like the dew”

(Devarim 32:1-2)

Moshe Rabbeinu called the heavens and earth as witnesses. They testified to his warning to Bnei Yisrael, to uphold the Torah and cling to its mitzvot. Otherwise, the Land would disgorge them. The initials of the opening words of this parashah, האזינו השמים ואדברה ותשמע, are numerically equivalent to twenty-two, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, of which the Torah is comprised. With these words, Moshe made his message monumental. It was incumbent upon the nation to observe the Torah or they would be expelled from the Land. The word לקחי (my teaching) is a further allusion to Torah, as the pasuk in Scriptures states (*Mishlei* 4:2), “For I have given you a good teaching (לקח טוב), do not forsake My Torah.”

Hashem and Am Yisrael are essentially one, interconnected and interdependent (see *Zohar* III, 231). Therefore, even when Bnei Yisrael

transgress and abandon Hashem, they hasten to repent and return to Him once again.

A man once had his finger cut off and lost. It was found only a few hours later. After a long and complex operation, surgeons succeeded in re-connecting the finger. When Bnei Yisrael sin and are exiled from their Land, they eventually awaken from their slumber. When Hashem observes their bereavement at the absence of the *Shechinah*, and their strong desire to return to Him, He delivers them from their enemies and returns them to their Land. He once again becomes one with them, sanctifying them with His holiness, as “Hashem, the Torah, and Yisrael are one” (see *Zohar* II, 90b). May we merit the day when Hashem will redeem us forever, and all the exiles will gather from the four corners of the map, settling the Land in security.



Witnesses of Worth

“Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and may the earth hear the words of my mouth”

(Devarim 32:1)

Why is there a difference in expressions regarding the heavens and earth? Let us precede our answer by stating that “giving ear” and “hearing” are two different acts. “Giving ear” denotes listening through concentration. One “gives ear” when he does not want to miss a single word. “Hearing,” on the other hand, does not demand one’s full attention.

The tzaddikim are lofty, compared to the heavens. They have hardly any connection to earthliness, while ordinary people are called “inhabitants of the land – *amei ha’aretz*.” Whereas tzaddikim are spiritually inclined, the rest of the nation is bonded with physicality. In order for the tzaddikim to hear what is said by the ordinary people, they

must pay undivided attention, for they are far removed from the goings-on on earth. Moshe turned to the “heavens,” i.e., the tzaddikim, and instructed them to come closer to “earth.” He asked them to give heed to these things, and bear witness to them. Tzaddikim are considered living even after death (*Berachot* 18a). Therefore, they are fitting witnesses to what transpires on earth.

On a journey to the Ukraine, where I visited various Batei Kenesiot and gravesites of tzaddikim, I discovered an interesting phenomenon. Great tzaddikim who were world-famous often prayed in small, unassuming synagogues. One would expect such holy personalities to have prayed in majestic edifices. Why did they choose, instead, to frequent simple structures? It was due to their humbleness of heart. The closer they came to Hashem, the more they appreciated His greatness and their own insignificance. They did not seek honor and prestige, only to serve Hashem with submissiveness and subordination.

It is to these giants of our nation whom Moshe turns, requesting that they leave their place on High and hear what is said below. They are the witnesses for us, who dwell on earth, that we keep the Torah perfectly.



Gratitude – A Gratifying Attitude

“The Rock! – perfect is His work, for all His paths are justice; a G-d of faith without iniquity, righteous and fair is He”

(Devarim 32:4)

Moshe Rabbeinu was rebuking the nation for demonstrating ingratitude toward Hashem and straying after false gods. How could Bnei Yisrael ignore all the wonderful things Hashem had done for them, to the point that they turned their backs to Him in such a coarse manner? In order to

perceive that Hashem is “a G-d of faith without iniquity,” we must have clear vision. When a person fails to note Hashem’s unending kindness with him, his vision is impaired. Hashem is the essence of good; therefore, His sole desire is to do good for others. If a person fails to perceive this good, believing that he was dealt a difficult hand, he should know he is mistaken. Just as one makes a blessing over a good tiding, so must he make a blessing over a seemingly bad tiding (*Berachot* 54a). Even that which seems bad is ultimately the best thing for the person. With his limited and superficial sight, he may fail to realize this at the time.

Am Yisrael came to sin through a lack of awareness and correct analysis of the situation. They failed to realize that even when it seemed that Hashem was venting His wrath upon them, it was for their own benefit, so that they might repent. They did not have the foresight to understand this.

Whatever happens to a person is for his good, for Hashem is a “G-d of faith without iniquity.” We are simply lacking the wisdom to sense this. If we accustom ourselves to believe that whatever happens to us is for our benefit, we will be capable of making a blessing over the bad just as over the good. For everything which we perceive as bad is always a blessing in disguise.



Vezot Haberachah



A Blessed Message

“And this is the blessing that Moshe, the man of G-d, bestowed upon the Children of Israel before his death”

(Devarim 33:1)

The Ohr Hachaim asks why this parashah begins with the letter ו' (וזאת), since this letter indicates connection, and this parashah seems to be the beginning of a new topic.

We might answer according to the words of the Ramban (ibid.), who explains that the words “the man of G-d” indicate that Moshe’s blessing had significance. Since Moshe was a man of G-d, and beloved by Him, his prayers were desired and accepted on High. The letter ו' connects this parashah with parashat *Ha’azinu*. Previously, the people were warned of the consequences of forsaking the Torah, and informed about the great blessing they would receive for going in its ways. This parashah continues along this line. As he was nearing his end, Moshe wished to part from Am Yisrael with the impression of *berachah* and all things good, in addition to the blessing of parashat *Ha’azinu*, and not, *chalilah*, the imprecations of the past. Not only did he bless them before his death, but he promised that all of the previous curses would be converted to blessing.

The words “And this is the blessing” allude to the pasuk (*Devarim* 4:44), “And this is the teaching that Moshe placed before the Children of Israel.” When Moshe blessed Bnei Yisrael, he mentioned all of the blessings inherent in the Torah, which elevates a person both spiritually and in the physical realm. He wished that this blessing, too, should influence them positively. Chazal teach (*Berachot* 18a), “Tzaddikim are considered alive even after death.” Moshe continues to live within his nation, blessing them with eternal blessing.

In parashat *Va’etchanan* (*Devarim* 4:25), we read, “When you beget children and grandchildren and will have been long in the Land.” Rashi says the word וְנוֹשְׁנָתֶם (and will have been long), numerically equivalent to 852, hints to the fact that Bnei Yisrael were slated to have been exiled after dwelling in their land for that amount of years. But Hashem did an act of kindness with them and exiled them after only 850 years. This was in order to avoid the fulfillment of the end of that prediction (*ibid.*, 26), “You will surely perish quickly.” This is further referred to in the words of Daniel (9:14), “Hashem hastened the calamity and brought it upon us, for Hashem, our G-d, is just in all His deeds.” By bringing the exile two years early, Hashem spared Bnei Yisrael’s eternal annihilation. They will eventually merit complete redemption. The blessing, albeit in disguise, that Bnei Yisrael would be evicted from their Land two years early, was in the merit of the Torah, which Moshe evoked.

Parashat *Ha’azinu* is read during the Yamim Noraim. During these days, one is awakened to introspection. This parashah is capable of arousing one to repentance. Moshe Rabbeinu calls the heavens and earth to bear witness to the covenant which Moshe enacted between Hashem and His people. It contains the verse (*Devarim* 32:46) “He said to them: Apply your hearts to all the words that I testify against you today... to be careful to perform all the words of this Torah.” This is an injunction to open their eyes and their ears to words of Torah. This will prevent their going in the ways of wickedness and draw them to good.

At the end of parashat *Ha’azinu*, we read that Hashem told Moshe (*Devarim* 32:49), “Ascend to this mount of Avarim, Mount Nevo, which is

in the land of Moav... and see the Land of Canaan that I give to the Children of Israel as an inheritance.” The name of the mountain, עבריים, alludes to Am Yisrael, the העברים (the Hebrews), as we are referred to in *Shemot* (5:3), “The G-d of the Hebrews happened upon us.” By Moshe ascending Mount Nevo in the land of Moav and gazing at Eretz Yisrael, he implanted a special power into the Hebrew nation to repel the forces of impurity on the one hand, while adhering to the morals of Torah on the other. In this manner, Hashem’s *berachah*, as expressed by Moshe, was doubled and tripled.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ The Ohr Hachaim asks why this parashah begins with the letter 'ו, a letter used for connection.
- ◆ The Ramban says that Moshe was a “man of G-d,” and therefore, his blessings were fulfilled. Moshe blessed Bnei Yisrael and, in addition, told them that if they went in the way of the Torah, all the curses in *Ha'azinu* would be converted to blessing.
- ◆ Rashi states that Bnei Yisrael were meant to remain in their Land for 852 years prior to being exiled. Hashem did a kindness with them by hastening the exile, so that they would not suffer complete annihilation, *chalilah*. This is in the merit of the power of Moshe’s blessing.



The Greatness of Gratitude

“And this is the blessing that Moshe, the man of G-d, bestowed upon the Children of Israel before his death”

(Devarim 33:1)

We don’t find that any other prophet blessed the nation before his demise. Even if there were those who left the nation with their good

wishes, these words were not recorded for posterity, for they had no relevance for future generations. Why did the Torah see fit to record Moshe's blessing prior to his death, and what is its underlying message for posterity?

We find that Moshe delineated a specific *berachah* for each *shevet*. Why wasn't it enough to give the entire nation one general blessing, as we know that "all Yisrael are responsible for one another" (*Shavuot* 39a)?

Moshe understood that his status was due only to his people. Had he not been appointed by Hashem to redeem Bnei Yisrael from Egypt in order to grant them the Torah and lead them through the Wilderness, he would never have attained the lofty levels which he did (see *Berachot* 32a). Moshe, therefore, felt a tremendous sense of gratitude toward his nation. When he blessed them, he mentioned that they had preceded "We will hear" with "We will do." At that moment, they were transformed to the level of angels. In the merit of this utterance, Moshe ascended to Heaven and mingled with the angels.

After the sin of the Golden Calf, Hashem told Moshe (*Shemot* 32:7), "Go, descend – for your people that you brought up from the land of Egypt has become corrupt." Rashi expounds, "Go, descend from your elevated position." All Moshe's greatness and glory depended upon the spiritual state of the nation. After they sinned, they no longer deserved the Torah. Moshe, therefore, was worthy no longer of remaining on High and learning Torah from the mouth of Hashem.

Moshe was like a font overflowing with *hakarat hatov* toward Am Yisrael. He thus saw a need to bless them before his death, expressing his deep gratitude to them. Moshe did not make do with one single blessing for everyone, but took pains to bless each *shevet* individually, according to his status and needs. He felt thankfulness toward each and every tribe, for he had gained something unique from each one.

In order for each member of Bnei Yisrael to feel that Moshe was addressing him directly, Moshe exerted himself to bless them according to their tribes. The Torah recorded his blessing for posterity to transmit

the message of the importance of *hakarat hatov*. This feeling of *hakarat hatov* is individual, each person exhibiting it according to his level. David Hamelech, too, exemplified this exalted *middah*. Thus, we find that he called Achiqoel, “my Rebbe, my guide, my intimate” (see *Sanhedrin* 106b) because David learned something from him. Similarly, he instructed his son, Shlomo, to repay those who had done him a good turn by allowing them to eat at his table (see *Melachim I*, 2:7).

The Torah states (*Devarim* 4:44), “And this is the teaching.” From here we learn that Moshe wrote a separate Sefer Torah for each *shevet*. During his lifetime, the Sefer Torah had been in Shevet Levi’s possession. Just as a father writes a will so that his sons know clearly who inherits what, in order to prevent quarreling after his death, Moshe blessed the nation and bequeathed a Sefer Torah to each tribe. This would obviate any future fight over the inheritance of Torah after his death. Each *shevet* had a part in the Torah.

Whoever recognizes the benefits bestowed upon him by his friend will recognize the benefits which Hashem showers upon him. And whoever denies the goodness of his friend will eventually deny the good of Hashem (see *Midrash Hagadol, Shemot* 1:8). This is alluded to in the fact that after we finish reading the last parashah in the Torah, *Vezot Haberachah*, which teaches us the lesson of *hakarat hatov*, we immediately return to Chumash *Bereishit*, which describes Creation and is replete with *emunah* in Hashem. This faith is actualized by the demonstration of *hakarat hatov* to Hashem for His wonderful world. Through expressing gratitude for the wonders of Creation, and admitting that it lacks nothing, one reaches a level of perfect faith. In parashat *Vezot Haberachah*, Moshe displayed gratitude toward his nation. Its reading flows directly into the reading of parashat *Bereishit*, where the Creation is described, causing an outpouring of gratitude and praise to Hashem.

The last letter of the Torah is a 'ל, ending the word ישראל. And the first letter of בראשית is a 'ב. Together, they form the word לב (heart), which has the same *gematria* as the word כבוד (honor). Whoever opens his heart toward his fellow man, revealing genuine gratitude for the good he has

done toward him, will eventually show honor toward Hashem, called the “King of Honor.”

In parashat *Bereishit* (chapter 3), the incident of Adam’s sinning by eating from the Tree of Knowledge is recorded. When Hashem turned to him in rebuke, Adam squarely placed the blame on Chava, his wife, who had seduced him to sin by eating of the forbidden fruit. The commentators (quoted by Rashi) state that Adam’s claim that his sin was caused by “the woman whom You gave to be with me” showed a lack of gratitude to Hashem. Instead of thanking Hashem for the wonderful gift of a wife, he blamed her for his sin. As a result of this deficiency, Adam lost out. Hashem chased him out of Gan Eden, and he spiraled downward (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit* 28). Chazal state (*Pesikta Rabbati, Parashah* 14) that Adam descended due to his lack of *hakarat hatov* in not appreciating the wife Hashem had given him.

Parashat *Bereishit* continues with the account of Kayin and Hevel (chapter 4), who brought offerings to Hashem. Kayin had originated the idea of demonstrating gratitude toward Hashem in this manner. How, then, could he have fallen to the low level of killing his own brother in a fit of envy?

Kayin was the mastermind behind the concept of offering sacrifices to Hashem. But his sacrifice was not superior, for it was brought from flaxseed, which alludes to the halachic prohibition of *kilayim* (see *Shelah Hakadosh, Ta’anit, Matot Masei* 21). In offering such a *korban*, Kayin was pronouncing that although he admitted to a Creator, he wished to feel free to do as he saw fit. He felt no inclination to bow to the word of the Torah.

Hevel was not the initiator. He took his cue from Kayin. But he offered the choice sheep of his flock. When Kayin observed his brother outshining him in the *middah* of *hakarat hatov*, he was extremely jealous. Chazal relate (see *Tanchuma* 9) that at that moment, the world was divided. The flocks belonged to Hevel, while wheat fell under Kayin’s domain. They shared their possessions with each other.

When Kayin eventually killed his brother, he demonstrated the opposite of *hakarat hatov*, murdering his brother after they had agreed to live and let live. He chose to ignore the kindness of his brother, who provided him with wool – clothing, and focused on his own envy, instead.

The trait of denying the good of others was ingrained in Kayin already when he offered the grains of flax, an allusion to hybridism. This offering hinted to a prohibition, and thus could hardly be called superior. Moreover, Chazal teach that he offered rotting fruits. This indicated a lack of *hakarat hatov* to Hashem and to the bounty of Creation with which he had been blessed. By mocking his brother's graciousness in dividing the world between them, he eventually became deficient in *hakarat hatov* toward Hashem. But Kayin's downward spiral did not end there. Even after Hashem allowed him to live by placing a sign on his forehead, the pasuk states (*Bereishit* 4:16), "Kayin left the presence of Hashem." Rashi expounds, "Like one who steals the Supreme Knowledge," leaving Gan Eden in a way that demonstrated his denial of Hashem's omniscience. He did not acknowledge gratitude toward Hashem for renewing his life.

The Kabbalists relate (*Tikkunei Zohar* 112) that Moshe Rabbeinu's *neshamah* had the same root as that of Hevel, who excelled in the trait of *hakarat hatov*. Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, contained a *nitzotz* of the *neshamah* of Kayin, who denied Hashem's goodness. By Yitro's exemplary acts, he rectified Kayin's flaws. He did this by means of the offerings which he brought after converting (*Shemot* 18:12), thereby atoning for the faulty one which Kayin had brought.

All of Moshe's movements were directed by *hakarat hatov* toward Hashem and Bnei Yisrael, and even toward inanimate objects. The first few plagues struck a chord of *hakarat hatov* in Moshe's heart, as he refused to smite the Nile, for it had shielded him as a newborn (see *Shemot Rabbah* 9:10). The earth, too, had helped him by accepting the body of the Egyptian, whom Moshe had killed with the Heavenly Name. Therefore, Aharon was asked to strike the earth to bring on the plague of lice. Moshe exemplified the trait of *hakarat hatov*. He was most deserving

of the honor of having the Torah called by his name, as Hashem said (*Malachi* 3:22), “Remember the Torah of Moshe, My servant.”

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why did Moshe specify a different *berachah* for each *shevet* instead of giving them all one general *berachah*? Moshe keenly felt that his lofty spiritual level was in the merit of Bnei Yisrael. He therefore felt a tremendous sense of *hakarat hatov* toward them. He did not suffice with a general blessing, but blessed each *shevet* individually, so that everyone would feel his personal blessing. Moshe felt gratitude toward each and every one of the *shevatim*, from whom he gained knowledge. The Torah recorded Moshe’s *berachot* as a lesson for future generations about the wonderful trait of gratitude.
- ◆ Whoever recognizes the good of his friend will eventually recognize the good of Hashem, and vice versa. Adam Harishon blamed Chava for his sin, thereby denying Hashem’s kindness toward him. Similarly, Kayin murdered Hevel, even though he had demonstrated his recognition of Hashem’s good by being the first to offer Him a *korban*. His failing was that he offered something that was intrinsically forbidden, since it was *kilayim*. This was not a fitting offering and demonstrated that, in fact, he lacked true gratitude to Hashem, Who created the world.
- ◆ Kayin, likewise, denied Hevel’s kindness in sharing his wheat with his older brother. This ultimately brought Kayin to kill his brother and deny Hashem’s sovereignty.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu had the same *neshamah*-root as Hevel, who recognized Hashem’s goodness. He offered the choicest sheep of his flock. Moshe, too, demonstrated *hakarat hatov* to even inanimate objects, such as the Nile and the earth. Yitro, who contained a *nitzotz* of Kayin, rectified the latter’s deeds by bringing superior offerings to Hashem.



Exclusion for the Sake of Inclusion

“And this is the blessing that Moshe, the man of G-d, bestowed upon the Children of Israel before his death”

(Devarim 33:1)

All the tribes merited receiving Moshe’s blessing before his death, except for Shevet Shimon. Rashi states that Shimon’s blessing was included in Yehudah’s, in the words (ibid., vs. 7), “Hearken, O Hashem, to Yehudah’s voice.”

Why wasn’t Shevet Shimon found worthy of receiving his own blessing from Moshe? And why was his blessing included in that of Shevet Yehudah as opposed to any other *shevet*? Rashi elucidates. Moshe had misgivings about blessing Shevet Shimon, due to the incident in Shittim with Zimri, their *Nasi*. Why should the entire tribe be punished for the sin of an individual? The fact that the rest of the tribe remained alive proved that they themselves had not sinned. Why, then, were they deprived of Moshe’s direct blessing? Why did Moshe show them disfavor before his death, by reducing their honor in this way? Wasn’t he worried that Shevet Shimon would eventually turn their backs to the Torah, called by his name? For they might view his lack of blessing as though he were writing them off from Hashem’s Torah.

Moshe wrote Sifrei Torah for each *shevet*. Shevet Shimon, too, received a Torah Scroll written in Moshe’s hand. Originally, Moshe had written only one Sefer Torah, which was presented to Shevet Levi. But the other tribes came to him with grievances. They, too, wished to have a part in Hashem’s Torah. He mollified them by writing a separate Sefer Torah for each tribe. This would help them feel a bond with the holy words of the Torah. Moshe bequeathed the message to all of Bnei Yisrael that the Torah does not belong exclusively to Shevet Levi, but to the entire nation. The Torah is accessible to all who wish to partake of it.

Although Moshe did not bless Shevet Shimon directly, the Sefer Torah he presented to them was in lieu of a blessing. He could not bring himself to openly bless them, as the memory of Shittim was still fresh in his mind. Twenty-four thousand fellow Jews had fallen in the plague, attributed to Shevet Shimon. A hairsbreadth separated them from total annihilation. Pinchas stood up and saved the day by avenging Hashem's honor, in an act of zeal and self-sacrifice.

In an indirect way, Shevet Shimon was responsible for Moshe's death at this time. Hashem ordered Moshe to avenge the Midianite nation, and afterward, he would meet his death. As long as Moshe delayed fighting the Midianites, who had incited Bnei Yisrael to sin with immorality and the idolatry of Ba'al Peor, he would remain alive (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 785*). Moshe had no choice but to fight the Midianites, who had caused the death of thousands of his nation. Bnei Yisrael did not want Moshe to go to war, knowing that he was sealing his fate. But Moshe did not take personal interests into consideration. His only concern was the honor of Hashem. By fighting the Midianites, he avenged Hashem's honor, as well as that of Bnei Yisrael.

Moshe's *neshamah* was intertwined with that of Bnei Yisrael (see *Mechilta, Yitro 1*). Certainly a disaster of such proportion, with so many dying in a plague caused great pain to Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe was afraid to mention Shevet Shimon by name, for fear of arousing Heavenly prosecution against them.

Moshe merely put on a show of anger in order to appease the *Middat Hadin* and keep it at bay. But in his heart, Moshe had no grievances toward Shevet Shimon whatsoever. Moshe's withholding blessing from them did not come from a place of resentment. On the contrary, it was out of love toward them and a desire to protect them from the *Middat Hadin*.

With the words "Hearken, O Hashem, to Yehudah's voice," our Sages comment that Moshe blessed Shevet Shimon with the following: Their prayers should always be accepted in Heaven, and the *Middat*

Hadin should not take vengeance upon them for nearly causing Am Yisrael destruction. Moshe continued (*Devarim* 33:7), “And return him to his people.” Shevet Shimon should be considered one of the *shevatim* of Hashem.

Moshe opened his blessing to Klal Yisrael with the words (*ibid.*, vs. 5) “He became King over Yeshurun when the heads of the nation gathered.” Shevet Yehudah represents kingship, broadly encompassing Shevet Shimon. Part of Yehudah’s mission was to protect Shevet Shimon from the wrath of the other tribes, preventing them from taking revenge for their fallen brothers.

Shevet Shimon felt Moshe’s love toward them, which only made them feel closer to him. Proof of this is that when Moshe passed away, the entire nation mourned him, including Shevet Shimon.

Of course, the Torah never ends (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 10:1). As soon as we complete parashat *VeZot Haberachah*, finishing the reading of the entire Torah, we begin the cycle anew. What is the connection between Moshe Rabbeinu’s death, in *VeZot Haberachah*, and the creation of mankind, in *Bereishit*?

The death of tzaddikim provides atonement and prevents the destruction of the world, when the *Middat Hadin* demands justice (see *Moed Katan* 28a). The death of tzaddikim allows the world a rebirth, as indicated in the Creation of *Bereishit*. Homiletically, the Ba’al Haturim states that the last letters of the phrase **ברא אלוקים** spell the word **אמת**. In the merit of the atonement brought by the death of the righteous, who were involved in the Torah of truth, the world is renewed and is considered recreated.

It is the atonement afforded by the death of the tzaddikim which spares the world from returning to its former state of nothingness, shrouded completely in darkness. The tzaddikim, who are replete with Torah knowledge, are capable of igniting a spark in the darkness which envelops the world with their passing. Thus, the world is recreated. In parashat *Bereishit*, we read (1:2), “The Divine Presence hovered upon the surface

of the waters.” This Divine Presence is the holy *neshamah* of the righteous, which spent its years in this world surfing the sea of the Torah. As we know, water is an allusion to Torah (*Bava Kama* 17a), as the *Navi* states (*Yeshayahu* 55:1), “Ho, everyone who is thirsty, go to the water.” This water protects the world from calamity and catastrophe, protecting its inhabitants from the strict hand of justice.

Before even the Creation of the world, Hashem contemplated a Jewish nation (*Bereishit Rabbah* 1:4). He always envisioned a people comprised of twelve tribes, the שבטי י-ה. In their merit, the world, also created with the Name, י-ה, would endure. The Arizal (*Sha’ar Hakavanot, Drush Aleinu L’shabe’ach* 1) tells us that there are twelve gates in Heaven, corresponding to the Twelve Tribes. The connection between parshiyot *Vezot Haberachah* and *Bereishit* is very clear. The creation and survival of the world, is in the merit of the Twelve Tribes, who correspond to the twelve gateways of prayer in Heaven.

When Moshe assembled the nation in order to bless them, Shevet Shimon stood there together with Shevet Yehudah, who protected them from the *Middat Hadin*, which stood against them for their dastardly deed with the daughters of Moav. Although Shevet Shimon was not mentioned separately, Moshe made it a point to bless them, just like the rest of the tribes. The world rests on the shoulders of all twelve tribes. Yeshayahu *Hanavi* proclaims (26:4), “כי ב-י-ה ה' צור עולמים” – For in G-d, Hashem, is the strength of the worlds.” The world is sustained in the merit of the Twelve Tribes, the שבטי י-ה. By blessing all of them equally, Moshe was indicating that his death was not due solely to the sin of Shevet Shimon. Rather, it was atonement for the entire nation. The last word in the Torah is ישראל and the first word is בראשית. The initials of these two words spell י”ב, the Twelve Tribes upon which the world stands.

The initials of the words וזאת הברכה, though, is numerically equivalent to eleven. This seems to denote the exclusion of Shevet Shimon from the calculation of the Twelve Tribes. Moshe, who wrote the Torah by the word of Hashem, decided to omit Shimon’s name from the recording of the *berachot*, in order not to arouse the *Middat Hadin*, as mentioned

above. In order to convey the message that he was not angry with them, though, he hinted to their inclusion in the Twelve Tribes in the initials of the last and first words of the Torah. Moshe blessed all of the Shevatim equally, for they uphold the entire world.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The *berachah* to Shevet Shimon is hinted to in the *berachah* of Yehudah. Why didn't Moshe bless Shevet Shimon individually? Wasn't he concerned that they would feel a sense of isolation and insult at his seeming stance of ignorance toward them? And why did Moshe choose to couch their blessing in that of Yehudah?
- ◆ Why did Moshe hold the entire Shevet Shimon responsible for Zimri's sin? If they themselves didn't die in the plague, obviously they weren't responsible for it.
- ◆ Moshe did not completely exclude Shevet Shimon; proof being that he presented them with a Torah Scroll, just like the rest of the *shevatim*. For his part, Moshe truly desired to confer blessing upon them. But he was afraid that the *Middat Hadin* would step in, as their *Nasi* had caused a tremendous plague in Am Yisrael, as well as a war of revenge, which eventually resulted in Moshe's death.
- ◆ Moshe blessed the tribe of Yehudah with the words "Hearken to Yehudah's voice." He asked that the prayers of Shevet Yehudah be heard on High and not be impeded by the *Middat Hadin*. The words "And bring him to his people" indicate that Shevet Shimon was still included in the Twelve Tribes. The phrase "He became King over Yeshurun" hints to Shevet Yehudah, who would demonstrate the power of the king in bearing responsibility for Shevet Shimon, including him in Am Yisrael, without distinction. For this reason, Moshe included Shevet Shimon in the blessing of Yehudah.
- ◆ Parashat *Vezot Haberachah*, which records Moshe's death, is intrinsically connected to parashat *Bereishit*, describing Creation. The death of the righteous atones for the inhabitants of this world and allows the world to

endure. The Arizal relates that there are twelve gateways in Heaven, corresponding to the Twelve Tribes, from whom Moshe took his leave in parashat *Vezot Haberachah*.

- ◆ The initials of the words **וזאת הברכה** is numerically equivalent to eleven, intimating the exclusion of Shevet Shimon. This was in order to ward off the *Middat Hadin*. The last word in the Torah is **ישראל** and the first word is **בראשית**. The initials of these two words spell **י"ב**, the Twelve Tribes, in whose merit the world stands. Shevet Shimon is still a vital part of the Twelve Tribes.



Royal Recognition

“He became King over Yeshurun when the heads of the nation gathered”

(Devarim 33:5)

Chazal relate (*Rosh Hashanah* 34b) that on Rosh Hashanah, Hashem asks Bnei Yisrael, “Recite pesukim of *Malchuyot* before Me, so that you may coronate Me upon yourselves.” The word *Malchuyot* (prayers of kingship) is written in the plural form as a reminder that He is King of all worlds, above and below. I would like to add that this plural form indicates a command for all of Am Yisrael to coronate Hashem, through brotherliness and unity. When the nation is a whole unit, joined in *achdut* and love, as one man with one heart, they can truly crown Hashem as their King.

Unity among our nation is reflected by great joy on High. All the *neshamot* of Am Yisrael are interconnected, created with a Divine image (*Pardes Rimonim* 32a). When they crown Hashem as King, they do it “when the heads of the nations gathered.” But when friction and faction split the nation, Hashem’s Name cannot rest upon them. They are then unable to coronate Him.

The last letters of the phrase **יְחַד שְׁבִטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל**, adding one for the phrase itself, are numerically equivalent to the Name **י-ה-ו-ה**, with each letter spelled out, as well as to the word **אדם**, adding one for the word itself. When unity reigns, Bnei Yisrael become transformed, and Hashem's Name is sanctified, finding a comfortable resting place among the nation. The words of parashat *Nitzavim* (*Devarim* 29:9) "You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your G-d: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all the men of Israel" are enacted to perfection. On Rosh Hashanah, the hues and shades which comprise our nation converge before Hashem, merging into a brilliant tapestry of loyalty to His Kingship.

In Pirkei Avot (4:4), we read, "Be exceedingly humble in spirit." The Ba'al HaTanya (*Likutei Torah, Nitzavim*) expounds: "Each person has traits which his friend lacks. Therefore, everyone needs each other. The form of our nation can be compared to the human body. The head is obviously the most important part of the body. Nevertheless, it is the legs which support the entire body. Blood would be let from the feet in order to cure the upper limbs. Therefore, the head cannot be complete without the feet.

"All of Bnei Yisrael are one solid unit. Even if one considers himself the head and his fellow Jew the feet, he cannot attain perfection without his friend's contribution. What he lacks, his friend provides. Therefore, it is fitting for everyone to subject himself to his fellow man. This approach will encourage *achdut* with one another, as well as unity with Hashem, Who has no beginning and no end. But one who separates the importance of the head and the feet, believing he is superior to his fellow Jew, falls under the clutches of the *Sitra Achra*, the one in control of the world of separation.

"Rosh Hashanah is the time when the *neshamot* of Am Yisrael return to their source. This is 'when the heads of the nations gathered.' The 'head' is a reference to man's thoughts, which may have strayed into forbidden territory. With Rosh Hashanah, they become unified for Hashem's sake."

Moshe Rabbeinu was equal to all of Klal Yisrael (see *Mechilta, Yitro* 1), simple and significant alike. The head represents the people of stature, while the feet represent the ordinary folk. Regarding Moshe, the pasuk says (*Bamidbar* 12:2), “Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth.” How did Moshe, head and shoulders above the rest of mankind, maintain an approach of humbleness? Through feelings of modesty and self-effacement. He understood that without the backing offered by the simple people, who were considered the feet of the nation, he would never have succeeded in becoming the head. This is in line with the words of the Ba'al HaTanya, cited above. It is the feet which stabilize the body and uphold the head; they are crucial for the entire system to function optimally.

Hashem's order to Moshe after the sin of the Golden Calf encapsulates this idea. There, He stated (*Shemot* 32:7), “Go, descend – for your people... has become corrupt.” Chazal interpret this to mean (see *Berachot* 32a) that since Bnei Yisrael damaged their spiritual level, Moshe, too, had to descend in his spiritual level. All that he had achieved was only in their merit. With their sin, they caused a breach in the unity of the nation, they effectively cut off Moshe's legs, so to speak, and he could no longer bear the title of “head.” We find that as long as Hashem was angry with Bnei Yisrael, He did not display the same level of love toward Moshe as previously (see *Rashi, Devarim* 2:17). Only after Hashem forgave their sin, did the *Shechinah* return to Moshe.

When Moshe descended Har Sinai, he began kissing the people in order to re-connect with them. He desired to return the connection between head and heel. When Moshe had been in Heaven, he had reached the level of the angels. He was greater than the nation of sinners by light-years. In order to return the body of our nation to its former status, he had to reconnect the head with the feet. This is what he accomplished by kissing the people. By doing this, he lowered his dignity. But to him, it was well-worth the price of the nation's unity, which was eventually restored. The entire nation is one single unit, as explained previously by the Ba'al HaTanya.

With the nation's sin, Moshe felt a deficiency in himself. He therefore lowered himself to their level and kissed them, bringing them closer to him, so that they would rise once again, and he would, too.

The first part of Moshe's blessing is "He became King over Yeshurun when the heads of the nation gathered." The secret of Am Yisrael's survival is the unity which they share, young and old alike. Together, they comprise the Jewish nation.

In parashat *Vayeitzei*, we read (*Bereishit* 28:12), "And he dreamt, and behold! A ladder was set earthward and its top reached heavenward; and behold! angels of G-d were ascending and descending on it." Yaakov's ladder is an analogy to our people. When a ladder is "set earthward," i.e., when there is unity among all strata of society, then "its top" can reach "heavenward." The simple man, considered the foot, helps the tzaddik, who is then capable of reaching the very heavens. The "angels of G-d" are the tzaddikim and the simple people, the "head" and the "heel" of our nation.

Both the last word in the Torah, **ישראל** and the first word, **בראשית**, contain the word **ראש** (head) within them. Even one who is "at the end of the line," seemingly insignificant, is considered a head, just like the one who stands at the helm of our nation. The head gains support from the feet. Without the support of the little guy, the big boss would be out of business. The "head" and the "foot" are interconnected and draw strength from one another.

Rosh Hashanah is the day when everyone is elevated to the status of "head." The words (*Devarim* 29:9) "You are standing today" refer to Rosh Hashanah, when Am Yisrael stand before Hashem in judgment. The word *Nitzavim* (standing) is a form of praise for the nation. All of Am Yisrael, the young and old, stand together, united as one, with no distinctions between the classes, to crown Hashem as their King. This causes them to emerge innocent in judgment.

The words "your heads" is an allusion to the head of the body, whereas "your water-carriers" refers to the foot, for water travels downward.

When Am Yisrael demonstrate the stability that comes with harmony, the simple and the significant bring merit to one another. This gives Hashem the ability, as it were, to inscribe and seal them for a year of life. The recitation of *Malchuyot* teaches that just as a king cannot rule without a nation (see *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 3), so too, can the tzaddikim rule the nation only when the people express their support.

When Am Yisrael stand in unity on Rosh Hashanah, crowning Hashem together, the heads of the nation, those who are the thinkers and intellectuals, connect with the ordinary folk. This elevates the level of the lower people, akin to the feet, to that of the others, who are like the head. Without the simple people, the heads cannot grow in Torah knowledge. We find that Moshe attributed his stature solely to the merit of Bnei Yisrael.

The word *יחד* (together) is numerically equal to twenty-two, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet with which the Torah is written. When the Torah giants connect to the simple people, they merit understanding Torah concepts. This is in line with David Hamelech's assertion (*Tehillim* 119:99), "From all my teachers I grew wise, for Your testimonies are a conversation for me." David was humble enough to learn even from those of smaller stature than himself. He merited kingship because he humbled himself before everyone and was ready to learn from anyone. Since he fulfilled the end of the verse (*Devarim* 33:5) "when the heads of the nation gathered," he merited the beginning, "He became King over Yeshurun." David Hamelech merited Torah and royalty, for he exemplified the maxim (*Derech Eretz* 8) "The Torah is acquired only by one who is humble of spirit."

During the Yamim Noraim, it is imperative to correct matters between man and his fellow man. This will enable us to stand before Hashem as one cohesive unit. When a person does teshuvah regarding only matters between himself and Hashem, his teshuvah is incomplete, for his deficiencies in matters between himself and his fellow man prevent him from becoming bonded with them, and from together coronating Hashem as King.

Korach “took himself” (*Bamidbar* 16:1) to the side, disputing Moshe’s authority. He was punished measure for measure, separated from the nation forever, swallowed by the ground. He was drawn into Gehinnom, as he drew himself away from the people.

Not only did Korach incite a rebellion, he caused a rift in the Torah itself, by mocking the mitzvot of tzitzit and mezuzah. While *achdut* in Am Yisrael and adherence to the Torah brings about the fulfillment of the maxim “Hashem, the Torah, and Am Yisrael are one” (see *Zohar* II, 90b), when there is conflict among the nation, there is a schism between the other factors in this equation, as well.

The Ba’al HaTanya expounds on the pasuk “You are standing today.” He says, “This parashah is always read before Rosh Hashanah, alluded to in the word “today.” The day of Rosh Hashanah is the day of man’s creation, a day when all the *nitzotzot* of the *neshamot* stand at attention before Hashem.

“The heads of your tribes... from the hewers of your wood to the drawers of your water...” Ten distinct classes are mentioned here. This corresponds to the ten levels of man’s soul. Each person is on a distinct level, together comprising the congregation of Bnei Yisrael, divided into ten categories.

This indicates how important it is to correct matters between man and his fellow man. Dissension is liable to prevent Hashem’s coronation on the Day of Judgment. Man was created on Rosh Hashanah (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 782). Hashem connects man to the Upper Worlds, as stated in our holy sefarim (see *Zohar* II, 75). From him, all worlds gain sustenance. Since the days of Adam Harishon, every generation stands before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah. All the *nitzotzot* of the *neshamot* of Klal Yisrael become elevated then. When there is, *chalilah*, dissension among the nation, the *Shechinah* is terribly pained, for blessing is prevented from coming upon the world.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Hashem asks Am Yisrael to coronate Him in unity. The last letters of the words **ישראל שבטי יחד** are numerically equivalent to **אדם** (man). Through unity, the nation attains the form of **אדם**, and Hashem's Name is sanctified by them.
- ◆ Pirkei Avot states, "Be exceedingly humble." The Ba'al HaTanya explains that everybody has a head and feet, which are interdependent. So, too, Am Yisrael is comprised of men of status as well as simple people. The great people must humble themselves in order to learn from the simple ones.
- ◆ When Bnei Yisrael sinned with the Golden Calf, Hashem told Moshe to descend from his exalted level. The head cannot exist without the feet. Moshe descended the mountain and kissed the people, in order to renew his connection with them. The idea of connecting all strata of society is also found in the pasuk, **תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה קהילת יעקב** – The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the congregation of Israel." The word **מורשה** (heritage) hints to the **ראש** (head), and **יעקב** (Yaakov) hints to the **עקב** (heel). The words "A ladder was set earthward and its top reached heavenward" also allude to this connection.
- ◆ The word **יחד** (together) is numerically equal to twenty-two, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, with which the Torah is written. When the nation is united, they merit understanding Torah concepts. In order to unite before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah, there must be a spirit of teshuvah between man and his fellow man.



A Nation United

*“Fortunate are you, O Israel; who is like you?
O people, delivered by Hashem, the Shield of
your help, Who is the Sword of your grandeur;*

your foes will try to deceive you, but you will trample their haughty ones”

(Devarim 33:29)

On Simchat Torah, when I read this parashah, I am filled with inner joy. Before his death, Moshe hinted, with these words, that each and every Jew, no matter his level, is connected to our holy nation.

Each of the four species, which we take on Sukkot, represents a different category of people in our nation (*Vayikra Rabbah* 30:12). All the groups bundle together to form the combination necessary for this mitzvah. Our nation is comprised of more distinguished members and less so. But together, they complete the totality of our nation. We must unite with our fellow Jews in spite of, or maybe because of, our differences. Every Jewish heart has a spark which can burst into flame at any time. One should never repel a fellow Jew for his lack of diligence in mitzvot. On the contrary, he should be brought close, in the hope of helping him return in teshuvah.

Immediately before his death, Moshe wished to emphasize the importance of *achdut* among Am Yisrael. Therefore, he imparted messages of the importance of unity. Why, then, is this parashah read on Simchat Torah, and not on the holiday of Sukkot, when we hold the four species? Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah is a day designated for rejoicing with the Torah; why is the message of unity imparted on this day?

Moshe Rabbeinu's message is that the nation must maintain unity not only on the days which are designated for such, but throughout the year. Although we do not take the four species on Simchat Torah, their message remains. The nation's mutual accountability is what allows the blessings to persist.

The holiday of Simchat Torah unifies Hashem, the Torah, and Am Yisrael, for they are fundamentally one (see *Zohar* II, 90b). On Simchat Torah, Am Yisrael dance with the Torah before Hashem, demonstrating the strong, eternal bond between them.

At the end of parashat *Vezot Haberachah*, we read (*Devarim* 34:5), “So Moshe, servant of Hashem, died there, in the land of Moav, by the mouth of Hashem.” Moshe’s death is juxtaposed with the message of unity, for he embodied brotherhood, devoting his entire life to tend to his flock. Moshe was prepared even to have his name erased from the Torah in order to preserve the Jewish nation (see *Shemot* 32:32). He accepted one and all, dispensing advice and priceless pearls of wisdom to anyone who called himself a Jew.

The precepts of the Torah apply to all Jews. This is what unifies Am Yisrael and brings them close to their Creator. The very name משה is related to the word ימוש, which we find in the phrase (*Yeshayahu* 59:21), “ודברי אשר שמתי בפִּיךָ לא ימוש מפִּיךָ... – ... And the words that I have placed in your mouth will not be withdrawn from your mouth.” In order to maintain mutual accountability, as we were taught by Moshe, we must uphold the Torah and not swerve from it, because it alone is what enables us to feel true love and brotherhood.

On Simchat Torah, all are invited to come up to the Torah for an *aliyah*. Everyone is recognized then, regardless of his status. This is another aspect in the atmosphere of mutual bonding which is prevalent on that day. We try to re-enact the feeling of “one man with one heart” that prevailed at Har Sinai.

Regarding the four species, the Torah states (*Vayikra* 23:40), “You shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of a citron tree.” The pasuk emphasizes that it must be “for yourselves,” to imply that this mitzvah must not be done through a messenger, but by the person himself. Although the four species allude to unity, each person is enjoined to take his own species for this special mitzvah, thereby strengthening *achdut*.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Before his death, Moshe Rabbeinu emphasized the importance of unity. He averred that every Jew, regardless of his spiritual standing, is connected with the Jewish nation.

- ◆ Each of the four species alludes to a different type of Jew. All are bundled together to imply that regardless of one's level, he must be unified with the rest of the nation. Why do we read this parashah on Simchat Torah, and not on Sukkot, the holiday when we take the four species, which represent unity?
- ◆ Moshe taught the nation that they should maintain unity throughout the year, not only on designated days. When unity is maintained on the designated days, the entire year is affected positively.
- ◆ The end of the parashah describes Moshe's death. Moshe was the paradigm of unity, exerting himself throughout his life to unite the people.
- ◆ The Torah specifies, "You shall take **for yourselves** on the first day the fruit of a citron tree." Although the four species allude to unity, each person is enjoined to take his own species for this special mitzvah, thereby strengthening *achdut*.



A Novel Approach

“Yehoshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom, because Moshe had laid his hands upon him, so the Children of Israel obeyed him and did as Hashem had commanded Moshe”

(Devarim 34:9)

Why was Yehoshua singled out from among all the elders and members of the Sanhedrin to be chosen to lead the people after Moshe, traverse the Jordan, and allocate the Land? Chazal relate Yehoshua's extraordinary devotion to Moshe (*Rashi, Shemot 24:13*). When Moshe ascended to Heaven, Yehoshua waited the full forty days by the mountain for Moshe's return. In the merit of this dedication and adherence to his

mentor, Yehoshua received his portion of manna at his feet, even though he was outside the camp (*Yoma* 76a).

The Torah describes Yehoshua as (*Shemot* 33:11), “a lad, [who] would not depart from within the Tent.” Yehoshua would arise early each day and arrange the benches in the Beit Hamidrash (see *Bamidbar Rabbah* 21:14). He thus saved time for the people who came to learn there. Often, I wonder whether I could ever acquire the *zechut* of setting up the seats in the Beit Hamidrash for those who pray and learn there ...

Why was Yehoshua called a “lad” at the age of approximately fifty? We find that Yosef Hatzaddik, too, was called a “lad” (*Bereishit* 37:2). Rashi explains that Yosef acted childishly. Certainly, this is not the intention here regarding Yehoshua.

Yehoshua was called a “lad” for he possessed a *joie de vivre*, a certain upbeat, youthful attitude concerning *divrei Torah*. He would approach Torah study with his Rebbi, Moshe, with the excitement of novelty. In this manner, he fulfilled the injunction (see *Yalkut Shimoni Mishlei*, 937; *Pesikta Zutra Va’etchanan* 11:1), “On each day, they (words of Torah) should be new in your eyes.” One should not do mitzvot by rote, lacking enthusiasm and eagerness.

From where did Yehoshua learn this novel approach to Torah? From none other than the quintessential mentor, his teacher, Moshe. At the age of one hundred and twenty, Moshe told Hashem (*Devarim* 3:24), “You have begun to show Your servant.” The words “You have begun” indicate Moshe’s sense of novelty, which beat in his heart each time that Hashem revealed Himself to him, as though it was the first time. Now we can understand Yehoshua’s special standing from among all the elders of the generation, and why he was chosen to continue Moshe’s legacy. He clung tenaciously to Moshe’s approach regarding novelty and enthusiasm in Torah and therefore merited leading the people to the land of their dreams after Moshe’s passing.

The Gaon, Rabbi Yehudah Rakow, shlita, quoted to me the Beit Halevi: “One who wishes that his children should become *talmidei chachamim*

must apply himself to this task while he is yet young. All his thoughts and aspirations should be geared toward his children. This will allow them to grow in Torah and *yirat Shamayim*.”

One who grew up in a secular environment might feel despair at reading these words. I would like to encourage them by stating that every *ba'al teshuvah* is considered a newborn. If, from the moment he returns to Torah, he behaves responsibly regarding his children's upbringing, he will merit seeing true Jewish *nachat* from them.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Why was Yehoshua singled out from all the other Torah giants to lead the nation after Moshe's death? Yehoshua clung to his master with every fiber of his being. When Moshe ascended to Heaven to bring down the Torah, Yehoshua pitched camp at the foot of Har Sinai. He would always arise early to arrange the benches in the Beit Hamidrash.
- ◆ There is another element to Yehoshua's personality which afforded him the cherished stature of leadership. Yehoshua was called a “lad,” for he was filled with youthful energy regarding Torah study. He inherited this prized approach from his mentor, Moshe.
- ◆ Whoever wishes to have children who are *talmidei chachamim* must work toward this goal from a young age. A *ba'al teshuvah* is considered a newborn. As soon as he returns to Judaism, he should put his all into his children's education in the path of Torah and *yirah*.



The Quality of Endurance

“And by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of all Israel”

(Devarim 34:12)

All of Moshe’s actions were on behalf of Bnei Yisrael. This is alluded to in the words, “before the eyes of all Yisrael.” On Simchat Torah, we end the reading of the entire Torah with the reading of parashat *Vezot Haberachah*, and immediately begin the cycle anew, as we read parashat *Bereishit*. Herein is described the Creation of the world in six days, culminating with the onset of Shabbat. The entire world was created in order to uphold the Torah. We must take a lesson from Moshe, who consecrated his life for the sake of Klal Yisrael and Hashem’s Torah. Of course, we do not have the ability to reach Moshe’s level, part man and part angel, but it is our moral imperative to emulate him. Without aspirations for greatness, we will never be like him in any way. If we reach for the stars, at least we won’t get our hands full of mud.

Concluding the reading of the Torah can leave a person with a feeling of emptiness. Therefore, we immediately return to parashat *Bereishit*, to invigorate ourselves with the freshness of the new.

The last word in the Torah is *Yisrael* and the first word is *Bereishit*. The entire Creation, described in *Bereishit*, is for the sake of Bnei Yisrael. Chazal interpret the word ראשית (beginning) as referring to Bnei Yisrael and the Torah, both called by this name (*Yalkut Shimoni, Yeshayahu 452*). The purpose of the world is that Am Yisrael should study Torah. For this reason, Hashem contemplated Am Yisrael even before creating the world (see *Bereishit Rabbah 1:4*).

The Zohar relates something fascinating (I, 252b-253a). Before creating this world, Hashem created many worlds, which He subsequently destroyed. Why did He destroy His handiwork, and what is unique about

this world, for it to be chosen to endure? This subject is replete with mysteries, but we will try to explain it on our level.

This world is the only one which is founded upon the holy Torah, as the Zohar states (III, 161a), “He looked into the Torah and created the world.” Since the mitzvah of teshuvah is an integral part of Torah, the world is based on teshuvah, as well. Teshuvah has the power to annul harsh decrees. Therefore, even if man perverts their ways, the world can continue in the merit of their teshuvah. The previous worlds which Hashem created lacked the elements of Torah and teshuvah. They could not endure, for they would not have the power to persist even after sin.

At the end of parashat *Vezot Haberachah*, Moshe alludes to his breaking the *luchot* because of the sin of the Golden Calf (*Devarim* 34:12, *Rashi*). The Gemara informs us that Hashem allowed Bnei Yisrael to sin with the Golden Calf in order to demonstrate to the world the power of repentance. Since teshuvah upholds the world, Hashem allowed the world to continue. We see from here that three items preceded the Creation of the world: Torah, Am Yisrael, and teshuvah (see *Pesachim* 54a). And in their merit, it continues functioning.

If a person wishes to merit renewal, he must adhere to the precepts of teshuvah, which refines a person of the dross of his misdeeds. The last letters of the phrase (*Bereishit* 1:1), “בראשית ברא אלוקים” – In the beginning of G-d’s creating” spell the word אמת (truth). The ticket of admittance to life in this world is acknowledgment of the truth of the Torah, and behaving according to this truth. If one fell short in his deeds, he should repent completely.

On Simchat Torah, we read of the mitzvah of Shabbat, for Shabbat (שבת) and teshuvah (תשובה) are intrinsically connected. The first Shabbat of Creation was the day Adam Harishon repented (see *Pesikta D’Rabbi Eliezer* 18). Through Adam’s teshuvah, he paved the path to teshuvah on Rosh Hashanah, the day the gates of Heaven are opened to accept our remorse and repentance.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The Torah ends with a description of Moshe's acts on behalf of Am Yisrael, and immediately afterward, begins with a description of Creation and Shabbat. Man's entire purpose is for the sake of observing the mitzvot. Man's moral obligation is to emulate Moshe Rabbeinu in his service of Hashem.
- ◆ Before creating this world, Hashem created other worlds, which He destroyed. What is unique about our world, affording it endurance?
- ◆ The Zohar states that Hashem created the world according to a blueprint, the Torah. The Torah contains the mitzvah of teshuvah, which allows the world to continue existing even after mankind sins.



Back to the Beginning

“And by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of all Israel”

(Devarim 34:12)

“In the beginning of G-d's creating the heavens and earth”

(Bereishit 1:1)

The Torah is immeasurable and limitless (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 10:1). Therefore, we are enjoined (*Avot* 5:22), “Delve in it and continue to delve in it for everything is in it.” The more one probes into the depths of Torah, the more gems he will unearth, which he never knew existed. As soon as we finish the Torah reading of *Vezot Haberachah* on Simchat Torah, we immediately begin the reading of Bereishit. Torah is a never-ending cycle. Wherever one thinks it ends, he will find it just beginning.

The Zohar relates (II, 161a) that Hashem used the Torah as a blueprint with which to create the world. He made the world according to its secrets and hidden hints (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 1:1). Similarly, Chazal relate (see *ibid.*, 1:4) that Hashem contemplated Am Yisrael even before the world came into being. They, too, looked into the Torah, as it were, before the Creation of the world (see *ibid.*, 8:7). This is the natural connection between the last pasuk in the Torah with the first pasuk, “Before the eyes of all Israel” and, “In the beginning of G-d’s creating.” Bnei Yisrael were partners with Hashem in the Creation of the world.

Bnei Yisrael demonstrated their intimate relationship with Hashem once again, as they stood at the shores of the Yam Suf. There, they declared (*Shemot* 15:2), “This is my G-d.” After witnessing the miracles at the sea, they had crystal-clear recognition of Hashem as the Master of the world. This is like someone who proclaims, “This is the one most fitting to marry my daughter.”

The commentators ask how Bnei Yisrael were capable of comprehending Hashem’s greatness. They had just recently emerged from the grime and slime that was Egypt, sunk in the quagmire of the forty-nine levels of *tumah*, a small step away from the nadir of the fiftieth degree of depravity.

This was not the first time that Bnei Yisrael “met up” with Hashem, so to speak. When was their previous encounter? It was when Hashem and Am Yisrael looked into the Torah to create the world. Together, they observed how the world would be established upon the Names of Hashem, as recorded in the Torah. When Bnei Yisrael encountered Hashem once again, at the sea, they could proclaim with certainty that “This is my G-d.”

A further example of Bnei Yisrael’s clear recognition of Hashem’s awesomeness came in the form of their unhesitating declaration, “*Na’aseh v’nishma* – We will do and we will hear” (*Shemot* 24:7). This proclamation went against the norm. Usually, one inspects merchandise, and only afterward, does he say if he is interested in it. How could Am Yisrael aver

that they would observe the Torah without having any prior knowledge of what it contained?

It was their previous perception of the Torah, before Creation, which afforded them a glimpse into its greatness and grandeur. They had no need to find out what was written in it a second time, in order to decide that this was meant for them. They shouted, “*Na’aseh v’nishma*” not out of impulsiveness, but from a strong sense of association. The impression that the Torah made on them way back, before the world was even created, was enough to convince them that Torah is essential for the world’s existence.

When Am Yisrael proclaimed, “*Na’aseh v’nishma*,” a Heavenly Voice cried out, “Who (מי) revealed this secret to My children, which the ministering angels use?”

The letters of the word מי (who) can be transposed to spell the word ים (sea). The message of the Heavenly Voice was: “The sea revealed this secret to My children.” When Bnei Yisrael stood safely at the other side of the sea, seeing the *Shechinah* with their very eyes, they were overcome with a feeling of déjà vu. This was not their first encounter with the *Shechinah*. They had originally perceived it at the beginning of Creation. Now, with their proclamation of “This is my G-d,” they affirmed their faith. This confirmation allowed them the ability to accept the Torah with joy and fervor, wholeheartedly proclaiming “*Na’aseh v’nishma*.”

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The Torah has no end. This is demonstrated by our custom to read the first pasuk of the Torah immediately upon completing the last pasuk.
- ◆ Hashem looked into the Torah and created the world. Chazal relate that Bnei Yisrael were partners in this. This is alluded to in the connection between the last pasuk of the Torah, “Before the eyes of all Israel” and the first pasuk, “In the beginning of G-d’s creating.”
- ◆ Bnei Yisrael’s cry at Kriyat Yam Suf “This is my G-d” indicates a clear perception of Hashem’s might. How did they reach this level of clarity

such a short time after emerging from the defilement of Egypt? It was because they had previously perceived Hashem's greatness, when they looked into the Torah, together with Him, at the beginning of Creation.

- ◆ When Am Yisrael came to accept the Torah, they proclaimed, "*Na'aseh v'nishma.*" They had no need to ask what was written in the Torah, for they already knew. At that point, a Heavenly Voice cried out, "Who revealed this secret to My children, which the ministering angels use?" The letters of the word מִי (who) can be transposed to spell the word יָם (sea). When Bnei Yisrael witnessed the revelation of the *Shechinah* at the sea, they were overcome with a feeling of déjà vu. The message of the Heavenly Voice was: "The sea revealed this secret to My children." They remembered the first time they had witnessed Hashem's *Shechinah*. It was with the Creation of the world. This gave them the courage to say "*Na'aseh v'nishma*" unhesitatingly.



Tied Tightly to the Torah

"And by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moshe performed before the eyes of all Israel"

(Devarim 34:12)

The Torah begins with the story of Creation and ends with the words "Before the eyes of all Israel." The world was created for the sake of Bnei Yisrael. This is explicitly explained by the commentaries (*Rashi, Bereishit* 1:1). Rashi (ibid.) states that the word ראשית (the beginning) has two interpretations: It can refer to Bnei Yisrael or to the Torah. These two interpretations actually complement each other. Hashem created the world for Bnei Yisrael. When are Bnei Yisrael found worthy of living in this world in peace and security? When they are involved in Torah, the

foundation of the world. The Zohar explains (II, 161a) that Torah is the blueprint of the world. Hashem used the Holy Names contained in the Torah as a means of creating the world.

In order for the world to function optimally, and Am Yisrael to endure, it is incumbent upon them to study the Torah and live by its precepts. A life of Torah validates Creation in general, and Am Yisrael's existence, in particular. The first and last words of the Torah indicate that Creation is contingent upon Am Yisrael's adherence to the Torah.

Chazal compare Am Yisrael to a living Sefer Torah (*Zohar* III, 152a). The Torah contains 613 mitzvot. A person has 613 organs, each one corresponding to another mitzvah. A Sefer Torah which is missing a letter is rendered invalid (see *Rambam, Tefillin* 1:2) and must be repaired or buried. So too, a person who is remiss in a specific mitzvah is incomplete. The body part which corresponds to that mitzvah cannot reach perfection, and is therefore considered maimed.

When a Sefer Torah is flawed, it is either repaired or buried. The mitzvah of reading from the Torah cannot be performed on this scroll, but we accord it honor even when it is damaged. Yet when a person is defective in his deeds, he is not considered to be damaged goods. Why are we so strict with an actual Torah Scroll, yet lenient and forgiving regarding mitzvah observance? We should be stringent with ourselves, observing all mitzvot without exception, so that we are worthy of the title "The Perfect Man."

The last letter of the opening word of the Torah, *בראשית*, is a 'ת', while the last letter of the closing word, *ישראל*, is a 'ל'. Together, they are numerically equal to four hundred and thirty. This is the number of years of exile in Egypt (from the time that Avraham was informed of the exile until the Exodus) (*Shemot* 12:40). The correlation between these words and the years of their *galut* indicates that Am Yisrael are the nation worthy of receiving the Torah, after the cleansing process of their years in exile.

The last letter of the Torah, ך, alludes to the word לימוד (study). The prime aspect of Torah is its study. The sole purpose of Bnei Yisrael's redemption from Egypt was to give them the Torah, so that they would study and uphold it. We find many people who dance enthusiastically with the Sefer Torah on Simchat Torah or at a *hachnasat Sefer Torah*. They willingly offer generous donations for the cause of writing a Sefer Torah. But when it comes to studying Torah and observing its commands, they are a closed book. Their former fervor is a thing of the past. Dancing and donating are tremendous privileges, but do not exempt a person from his primary obligation, which is to study Torah. People calm their conscience by honoring the Torah rather than by learning it. However, after 120 years, when a person will be summoned to the Heavenly Court, he will have to provide a report of all his deeds. If he had the opportunity to learn Torah but did not utilize it, he will be taken to task. How imperative is Torah study, for study brings to action.

The letter ך can be divided into three letters: ך, ך, ך. The letter ך, the smallest letter, teaches that Torah can endure only in one who humbles himself before it (see *Derech Eretz Zuta* 8). The more one lowers himself, the greater the Torah will elevate him. The letter ך, tallest of the letters, indicates that one becomes elevated through study.

In *Navi*, (*Shmuel I*, 9:3-10), we read of the account of the lost donkeys of Kish, father of Shaul. When Shaul could not find the animals, he decided to ask Shmuel Hanavi for his advice. The pasuk relates (*ibid.*, 17-18), "Shaul approached Shmuel inside the city gate and said: Tell me, please, which is the house of the seer? Shmuel answered Shaul, saying: I am the seer." Chazal state that Shmuel's statement of "I am the seer" contained a trace of arrogance. Hashem is punctilious with His tzaddikim to a hairsbreadth (see *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Shmuel* 108; *ibid.*, *Tehillim* 760). For proclaiming himself a seer, Hashem punished Shmuel. When the time came to anoint David as king, Shmuel's level of *ruach hakodesh* departed, and he was at a loss when facing Yishai's sons. Humility must be an integral part of the *ben Torah*, for this trait is what nourishes *talmidei chachamim*, allowing them to flourish.

The letter ך alludes to the sixth day of Creation, when man made his debut in the world (*Bereishit* 1:26-30). Man's main purpose is the study of Torah, which upholds the world. When one learns Torah, he becomes an active partner in Creation. The letter ך hints to the head (ראש), the place of thought and intellect. In order to be a partner with Hashem in Creation, one must constantly consider Hashem's will and how he can best fulfill it.

The last letter of the last word of the Torah (ישראל) and the initial of the first word (בראשית) spell the word לב (heart). Man's mind and heart must be dedicated to Hashem, subject to His will. The Ben Ish Chai (*Shanah Rishonah, Bo*) explains that the tefillin of the head correspond to man's intellect and the tefillin of the arm are parallel to the heart, at one's left side. While donning tefillin, one must have in mind that he desires to serve Hashem with his mind and heart.

The heart hints to unity, as we find at *Matan Torah* (*Shemot* 19:2), "Yisrael encamped there, opposite the mountain." Chazal interpret the word ויחן (encamped), written in the singular form, to indicate that they accepted the Torah unified, as one man with one heart. This is further indication that the precondition and fundamental element of Torah study and mitzvah observance is *achdut*. When there is no harmony among the nation, the Torah cannot exist within them.

Batya, daughter of Pharaoh, forsook a life of luxury as a princess for the sake of joining the Jewish nation. What possessed her to leave behind wealth and comfort in order to be part of a suffering, tormented people? It was their unity that drew her to join them. When Batya observed their *achdut* and how they maintained their Jewish identity by not changing their names, their language, or their dress, she realized that this was a special nation, cut of a different cloth. All the torture in the world will not repress them. Even as their bodies are crushed, their spirit remains staunch. It is the element of unity which preserves the nation, breathing into them the breath of life. They are able to study Torah and perform the mitzvot with greater alacrity when they are one.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The Torah opens with the account of Creation and closes with the words **לעניני כל ישראל** (Before the eyes of all Israel). The purpose of the entire Creation is for the sake of **בראשית**, which are Am Yisrael and the Torah. When do Am Yisrael merit the world being created for their sake? When they uphold the Torah.
- ◆ Am Yisrael are compared to a Sefer Torah, since a person contains 613 organs which correspond to the 613 mitzvot. A Sefer Torah with a missing letter is invalid. So too, a person who is lax in a specific mitzvah is considered maimed. Just as we are careful to show respect even to an invalid Sefer Torah, so should we respect our bodies, which are considered living Sifrei Torah, and not allow them to be deficient in mitzvot.
- ◆ The first word of the Torah, **בראשית**, ends with the letter **ת'** and the last letter of the last word, **ישראל**, is a **ל'**, together numerically equivalent to 430. This is the number of years that Bnei Yisrael suffered the Egyptian exile (from the time that Avraham was informed of the exile until the Exodus). Only after this period, were Bnei Yisrael found worthy of receiving the Torah.
- ◆ The last letter of the Torah is a **ל'**, for the primary aspect of the Torah is its study (**לימוד**) . Dancing with the Torah and donating to Torah causes are wonderful, but dedication to Torah study is imperative.
- ◆ The letter **ל'** can be divided into three letters: **י', ו', ר'**. The letter **י'**, the smallest letter, teaches that Torah can endure only in one who humbles himself before it (see *Derech Eretz Zuta* 8). The more one lowers himself, the more the Torah will elevate him. The letter **ל'**, tallest of the letters, indicates that one becomes elevated through Torah study.
- ◆ The first word of the Torah is **בראשית** and the last word is **ישראל**. They hint to the word **לב** (heart). Man's mind and heart must be dedicated to Hashem, subject to His will.



Gems on Parashat Vezot Haberachah



A Three-ply Cord

“The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the Congregation of Yaakov”

(Devarim 33:4)

Torah is called by Moshe’s name, as the pasuk says (*Malachi 3:22*), “Remember the Torah of Moshe, My servant.” Parashat *Vezot Haberachah*, in particular, is called by Moshe’s name, for the above pasuk contained therein. This parashah is read on Simchat Torah, the day after David Hamelech’s *ushpizin*, which is Hoshana Rabbah. What is the connection between David Hamelech and Moshe Rabbeinu, to justify the juxtaposition of their holidays?

David Hamelech cherished the Torah above all, as he attested in Tehillim (119:97), “O how I love Your Torah! All day long it is my conversation.” Moshe was the embodiment of Torah, sacrificing his life to bring it down to his nation (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim 942*). The initials of דוד and משה, adding one for the unit, numerically equal the *gematria* of the word אדם (Adam). Adam Harishon bequeathed seventy years of his one thousand years of life to David Hamelech, out of pity for this lofty

neshamah, which was originally destined to die on the day of its birth (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit 41*). By immersing himself in the Torah, called by Moshe's name, David Hamelech succeeded in rectifying the *neshamah* of Adam, which had been tainted by his sin with the forbidden fruit.

Moshe Rabbeinu, therefore, also had a share in rectifying the *neshamah* of Adam Harishon. The connection between Moshe and David, then, is that they both played a part in healing Adam's *neshamah*.

In the sefer *Nachal Sorek*, the Chida quotes the pasuk in *Navi (Melachim I, 1:1)*, "King David was old, advanced in years." He asks (*Haftarot, Haftarat Chayei Sara 1*) how David could be called old, as he passed away at the age of seventy. He was called old because his life completed the last years of Adam Harishon, who reached the ripe old age of 930. Adding another seventy, David was considered to have lived one thousand years. The last letters of the words דוד (זקן) בא בימים – David was old, advanced in years" spell the word אדם (Adam).

The seventh day of Sukkot corresponds to David Hamelech. On Simchat Torah, we finish reading the Torah, ending with the death of Moshe Rabbeinu. We immediately begin anew Sefer *Bereishit*, which tells about Adam Harishon. In this manner, we bond together these three exalted personages.



Glossary



Acharit Hayamim – the future world, days of Mashiach and third Beit Hamikdash

Achdut – unity

Ahavat Hashem – love of Hashem

Akeidah, Akeidat Yitzchak – the Binding on the Altar of Yitzchak

Avak lashon hara – sinful speech which can lead to lashon hara

Aveirah, aveirot (pl) – sin

Avodah – the service in the Beit Hamikdash

Avodah zarah – idolatry

Avodat Hashem – service of Hashem

Avot – the Patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov

Avrech, avrechim (pl) – young Torah scholar

Ba'al Teshuvah, ba'alei teshuvah (pl) – (lit. master of return) one who has returned to Jewish observance

Ba'alei Mussar – Masters of Ethics

Baruch Hashem – Thank G-d

Bat Kol – Heavenly Voice

Bavel – Babylonia

Be'ezrat Hashem – with the help of Hashem

Bedikat Chametz – search for chametz, conducted the evening before Pesach

Bein Hazmanim – intercession between study semesters in yeshiva

Beit Din – rabbinical court

Beit Hakeneset, Batei Kenesiot (pl) – house of prayer, synagogue

Beit Hamidrash, Batei Midrashot (pl) – house of study

Beit Hamikdash – the Holy Temple

Ben, bnei (pl) – son

Berachah, berachot (pl) – blessing

Bikurim – first of the produce from the seven species, brought to the

Beit Hamikdash

Bitul Torah – time wasted from Torah study

Bnei Yisrael – the Children of Israel

Brit milah– circumcision

Chachamim – (lit. wise people) – Sages, teachers

Chag, chagim (pl) – Jewish festival, holiday

Chalilah – G–d forbid

Chalitzah – the renunciation of a levirate marriage

Chametz – leavened bread

Chas v'shalom – May G–d have mercy

Chatan – groom

Chavruta – study partner

Chazal – our Sages, may their memory be for blessing

Chessed – acts of kindness

Chillul Hashem – desecration of Hashem's Name

Chizuk – encouragement

Chuppah – wedding canopy

Churban – the destruction, of the Beit Hamikdash and Yerushalayim

Chutz la'aretz – Diaspora

Daf Hayomi – a program to learn one page of Gemara every day, which is completed in approximately seven and a half years

Derech erez – proper behavior, character refinement

Eirev Rav –gentiles who joined the Jewish people at the Exodus

Emunah – belief, faith

Erev – the eve of (Shabbat)

Even Hashetiyah – foundation stone

Galut – exile

Gematria – numerical value

Gematria katan – (lit. "small gematria") the numerical value of the sum obtained by dropping the zeroes from the numerical values of all the letters and then adding them up

Get – bill of divorce

Geulah – redemption

Hachnasat Sefer Torah – ceremony of bringing in a new Sefer Torah

Haftarah – reading from the Prophets after the Torah reading on Shabbat

Hakadosh Baruch Hu – Hashem

Hakarat hatov – Gratitude

Halachah, halachot (pl) – Jewish law

Halachic – according to Jewish law

Hilula – celebration conducted on the anniversary of a tzaddik's death

Kabbalah – hidden facets of the Torah

Kabbalat HaTorah – the receiving of the Torah

Kallah – bride

Kashrut – permissible foods

Kedushah – holiness

Kelippah, kelippot (pl) – force of impurity

Kiddush Hashem – sanctification of Hashem's Name

Kilayim – planting two species together, which is forbidden by the Torah

Kippah – skullcap

Kodesh hakodashim – Holy of Holies, the innermost section of the Beit Hamikdash

Kohen Gadol – high priest

Kohen, Kohanim (pl) – priest

Kollel, kollelim (pl) – Torah institution for married men

Korban, korbanot (pl) – offering, sacrifice

Kriyat Shema – the recital of the Shema

L'havdil – to separate the holy from the mundane

L'shem Shamayim – for the sake of Heaven

Lashon hara – evil speech, slander

Luchot, luchot habrit – the Tablets of the Covenant

Ma'aser Sheini – tithe brought to the Beit Hamikdash in specific years

Machzor – special prayer book for the holidays

Mashiach – the Messiah

Matan Torah – the Giving of the Torah

Mayim acharonim – practice of washing the hands before Birkat Hamazon

Mazal – destiny

Menorah – Candelabra

Merkavah – Chariot of the Shechinah

Mesirut nefesh – self-sacrifice

Mezuzah – parchment containing Torah verses, commanded to be affixed to every doorpost

Middah, middot (pl) – trait

- Middat Hadin – Divine Attribute of Judgment
Middat Harachamim – Divine Attribute of Mercy
Midrash – homiletical teachings of the Sages
Mikveh – body of water for ritual immersion and purification
Minchah – the Afternoon Prayer
Minyan – quorum of ten men necessary to conduct prayers
Mishkan – the Tabernacle
Mitzrayim – Egypt
Mitzvah, mitzvot (pl) – good deed; commandment
Mizbeach – Altar
Mussar – Jewish ethics
- Nachat – joy or pleasure from another's accomplishments
Nasi, Nesi'im (pl) – prince, leader of the Jewish people
Navi – prophet
Neshamah, neshamot (pl) – soul
Netzach – eternity
Niddah – a woman who became impure due to her menstrual cycle; the mitzvah concerning this
Nisayon, nisyonot (pl) – test, challenging situation
Nisuch hamayim – the ceremony of pouring the water on the Altar at Sukkot
Nitzotz – Kabbalistic term for a spark of a neshamah
- Olam Haba – the World to Come
- Parashah, parshiyot (pl) – chapter
Parochet – Curtain in the Beit Hamikdash
Pasuk, pesukim (pl) – verse
Payot – side locks

Pirkei Avot (or Avot) – the Chapters of the Fathers

Rachmana litzlan – May G–d's mercy be upon them

Rasha, resha'im (pl) – evil person

Rechilus – gossip

Ruach hakodesh – Divine inspiration

Sanhedrin – the High Court

Sefarim hakedoshim – holy books of Torah thought

Sefer – book

Sefer Torah, Sifrei Torah (pl) – Torah Scroll

Sefirah – behavior by which we perceive Hashem

Segulah – act or talisman to gain merit

Selichot – special prayers said prior to the Yamim Nora'im

Seudat hodayah – meal of thanksgiving to Hashem

Shacharit – the Morning Prayer

Shamayim – Heaven

Shechinah – Divine Presence

Shemirat Shabbat – Shabbat observance

Shemittah – the mitzvah of leaving the Land fallow every seven years

Shemoneh Esrei – prayer containing eighteen blessings, recited three times a day

Shevet, shevatim (pl) – tribe

Shiur – Torah lecture

Shivah – seven days of mourning

Shlita – may he live many good years, Amen

Sitra achra – the Satan

Siyata di'Shemaya – help from Heaven

Siyum – completion of a tractate (and celebration thereof)

Sugya – a topic in Gemara

Sukkah – temporary dwelling, which is used on the festival of Sukkot

Talmid chacham, talmidei chachamim (pl) – Torah scholar

Tannai'm – Sages of the Mishnah

Techiyat hameitim – resurrection of the dead

Tefillah, tefillot (pl.) – prayer

Tefillin – phylacteries

Teshuvah – (lit. return) repentance, return to Hashem

Tikkun – rectification

Tikkun Chatzot – nighttime prayers in commemoration of the churban

Tumah – impurity

Tzaddik, tzaddikim (pl) – righteous man

Tzedakah – charity

Tzeniut – modesty

Tzitzit – four-cornered garment with fringes, worn by men and boys

Viduy – prayer of confession, recited on Yom Kippur

Yam Suf – the Sea of Reeds

Yamim Nora'im – High Holy Days

Yerushalayim – Jerusalem

Yeshiva – rabbinical college

Yetzer Hara – evil inclination

Yetzer Hatov – good inclination

Yetziat Mitzrayim – Exodus from Egypt

Yibum – levirate marriage

Yirah, yirat Shamayim – fear of Heaven

Yovel – the fiftieth year, after seven shemittah cycles

Zechut – merit

Zechut avot – merit of the forefathers

Zt"l – May the memory of the tzaddik be for a blessing

Zy"a – May his merits stand by us