

THE PATH TO FOLLOW

Nº 5 CHAYEI SARAH

בס"ד

Publication

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Responsible of publication Hanania SOUSSAN

SARAH'S LOVE FOR ALL

(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)

Regarding Sarah, our Sages say, "During all her life, a cloud of Glory hovered over her tent, a flame continually burned there, and the dough that she kneaded was blessed" (Bereshith Rabba 60:9). Some questions may be asked here:

1. Why is it that these three things expressed Sarah's righteousness?

2. The verse says, "And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her" (Gen 23:2). In the word ולבכתה ("and to weep for her"), the letter כ is smaller than the others. What does this teach us?

3. It is written, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18), and Rabbi Akiva explains that "this is a fundamental principle of the Torah" (Bereshith Rabba 24:7). This requires thought: Why is it written *reiahcha* ("your neighbor") and not, for example, *haveirecha* ("your friend")? Even better: Why is it precisely the love of one's neighbor that constitutes this fundamental principle of the Torah? Are there not other commandments in the Torah that could also constitute, by themselves, fundamental principles?

The Divine Presence dwelled in Sarah's home because she helped Abraham. This is the meaning of the cloud; it revealed the Divine Presence. The flame revealed her respect for the commandments, as it is written, "For a commandment is a lamp and the Torah is light" (Pr 6:23). Sarah performed all the commandments of the Torah to perfection, without any ulterior

motives. The dough that she kneaded demonstrated that she loved to receive guests, and Sarah excelled in so doing. Her dough was blessed, for sometimes she prepared bread for a certain amount of guests, then suddenly her home would fill up with a greater number than expected, yet she would always have enough for everyone. It was in this way that she was kindhearted in everything she did.

When Sarah passed away, the home became devoid of the life that once filled it. It was then that Abraham understood to what point she was a help and support to him, and how exceptional a woman she was. In addition, he saw that the cloud, the flame, and the blessing of the dough disappeared with her. When Abraham came to give his eulogy and to weep for her, the word ולבכתה is used. It is written with a small כ, which can also be read as לבתה (from the Hebrew word for "house"), and signifies that Abraham wept for his empty home. He wept because of the great void that Sarah's death had left. It was only in those moments that Abraham felt how much her modesty hid her love, to the point that no one had noticed her greatness. This is what he expressed in his eulogy and his by tears.

What is the meaning of the words "your neighbor" in the verse, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself", and why is it not written "your friend"? It is to indicate that even if someone acts wrongly towards you – and even hates you – you are required to love and respect him. The word רעך ("your neighbor") can be rearranged as כך רע ("wicked to you"). Despite his wickedness to you, love him as yourself. In so doing you will turn his heart, for he will think, "This man, despite the wrong

that I've done to him, loves me." And this will bring him to repentance.

In a time when so many men were idolaters and hated Abraham and Sarah, these two bestowed an immense love upon all, as they brought back to G-d those who were far from Him. This is the reason why Rabbi Akiva said that it is a fundamental principle of the Torah.

In the past, people were prepared to die in order to sanctify G-d's Name. They loved their neighbor, even if they were wicked. But men have weakened from generation to generation. If such is the case, how can we observe the commandment of loving our neighbor if he acts wickedly towards us? What's more, how is it possible to command everyone to feel the exact same way about his neighbor as himself?

The Sages tell of a man who came to see Hillel the Elder and said, "Convert and teach me the entire Torah in the time that I can stand on one foot." Hillel responded, "That which you hate, do not do to your neighbor. Now go study" (Shabbat 31a). Why did he answer this way? Why didn't he tell him to "love your neighbor as yourself"?

We know that before the giving of the Torah, the Children of Israel needed a 49-day preparation period. Concerning this subject, the Gaon Rabbi Israel Salanter wrote that the 49 days were to prepare for the 48 virtues necessary to acquire the Torah (see Perkei Avoth 6:6). The 49th day was the one in which they reviewed everything that they had learned, so as to be ready to receive the Torah. It is only in ridding oneself of one's

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Prayer is never in vain (continuation from page 1)

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faults that man can acquire the Torah, which belongs to G-d (Perkei Avoth 6:10). It is certain that it is only when one has erased all the bad thoughts in one's heart – then and only then – can one love one's neighbor. This is because conflict and hate of one for another stems from jealousy, from animosity, from slander, etc. Whoever has acquired the Torah, and has firmly instilled in himself the virtues that it teaches, manages without any difficulty to feel a perfect love for his neighbor. It is thanks to acquiring Torah that one arrives at a love for all Jews.

Our Sages say, "The study of Torah and its light directs us in the right path" (Yerushalmi Hagigah 1:7). It is the Torah that allows us to eliminate our faults one after the other, and to feel a great love for our neighbor, even if he has acted wickedly towards us. But this happens only if we study Torah with this goal in mind, and acquire the character traits that it demands of us.

One who has no knowledge of Torah – who never in his whole life studied it – lacks savvy in basic life-skills, and thus cannot love his neighbor. How much more is he incapable of loving a wicked neighbor! In order to understand that this love constitutes a fundamental principle, and is not just one commandment among many, one must study a good deal. This explains why Hillel didn't say to this would-be convert, "Love your neighbor as yourself", but rather the inverse: "That which you hate, do not do to your neighbor." Which is to say that, in the same way that you wouldn't want someone to do you harm, you shouldn't do harm to others; in the same way that you don't want others to speak badly of you, you shouldn't speak badly of them. This also means that you don't give someone something to eat that (because it either tastes bad or isn't permitted) you wouldn't want to eat yourself. Language such as this is understood by non-Jews, and a would-be convert who never studied Torah can grasp it. However, to understand "love your neighbor as yourself", which contains all the Torah, one must study it, and that's not something that can be accessed solely through intellect.

From here, we now come to understand how we can achieve a love for all Jews. "All Jews are responsible for one another" (Shavuot 39a); each soul is tied to that of others. If someone feels the divine part inside himself, he will automatically feel that the soul of his neighbor is tied to his own. His soul brings him towards the other, since both of them are similar and originate from the same source. Both of them come from that place, which is found under the Throne of Glory, the source of all souls (Zohar III:29b).

Concerning the Cherubim that topped the Holy Ark, the Torah writes, "And make one Cherub from the one end, and one cherub from the other end" (Ex 25:19). These

Cherubim, which symbolized the unity and love of G-d for His people, were not separated from one another, for they were "spreading out [their] wings above, covering with their wings over the cover, with their faces towards one another" (Ex 25:20). The Mercy Seat covered the Ark of the Covenant, which itself contained the Tablets of the Law (Ex 25:16). This symbolized that the Torah should be in man's heart, in his innards, as it is written, "Your Torah is in my innards" (Ps 40:9). With respect to the verse that states, "The Holy One in your midst" (Hos 11:9), the Sages say, "It is as if the Holy One resided at the center of your innards" (Taanith 11a). The "Holy One" means the Torah.

If the Cherubim symbolized the unity of Israel, why were they placed in the Holy of Holies? It would seem that it would have been preferable to place them on the outside, to show that G-d's Presence reigns over Israel when we are united. By this, people could draw the lesson that they must conduct themselves with brotherly devotion one towards the other.

In fact, the essential part of loving one's neighbor is hidden in the heart, having no external manifestation. This means that one must love others as oneself, and not with respect to others. One can only feel this love when the Torah is in our beings, just as the Tablets of the Law were in the Ark of the Covenant. This covenant is one between all Jews, and since the Torah is a covenant (Shabbat 33a) and the words of the Torah are an oath (Pesachim 38b), it is really an oath for a covenant and for love between all Jews. How can we do this? The answer lies in the depths of the heart, just like with the Cherubim who were placed in the Holy of Holies. An allusion to all this is found in the first and the last letters of לוחות ברית ("Tablets of the Law"). The first letters form the word לב ("heart"), and the last form תיית, which is an abbreviation for *Talmud Torah* ("study of Torah"). For it is through the study of Torah and the love found in the heart that one manages to love his neighbor.

It is written, "And they shall make for Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell in their midst" (Ex 25:8). If G-d can make His Divine Presence dwell on wood and stone, how much more can He make His Presence dwell in man, who He created with His own hands (Kohelet Rabba 3:14). But this can only happen if men have the right basic character traits, in the same sense as it is written, "Upright conduct precedes the knowledge of Torah" (Leviticus Rabba 9:3). How does one arrive at this? By taking the example of the Patriarchs, who did it by the study of Torah, and likewise Sarah, who did so by her heartfelt love. If we model our behavior on theirs, great will be our reward in this world and the next. Amen.

IN MEMORY OF THE TZADDIKIM

Rabbi Yossef Haim - The Ben Ish Chai

Our revered teacher, Rabbi Yossef Haim, better known as the Ben Ish Hai, was born in Baghdad on Av 27, 1834. After the disappearance of his illustrious father, which occurred on Elul 13, 1859, he succeeded him as head of the prestigious community, the inheritor of the Jewish Babylonian tradition.

It was in 1860, the morning of Shabbat Teshuvah, that he rose to the podium of the large synagogue to give his first course. It should be noted that he gave his lesson not in the capacity of Chief Rabbi, for all his life he refused the slightest official position. Everyone understood that G-d had bestowed upon Rabbi Yossef both immense wisdom and a marvelous gift for teaching, as well as incredible speaking abilities. From then on the Ben Ish Hai, in the same way as King Solomon, didn't stop instructing the people in all the mysteries of the Torah, even the most secret ones. He did this as much by his courses as by his books. To familiarize his audience with divine truths, he employed a vocabulary understood by all. He didn't hesitate to turn to everyday examples, or to anecdotes, to draw everyone's attention, retain it, and in this way transmit to everyone sacred knowledge. It must be underlined that in regards to this, besides his veritable encyclopedic knowledge of Torah, nothing of the human realm was unknown to the Ben Ish Hai. Hence to spiritually uplift people to the highest levels, he first spoke to them in language they understood.

Every Shabbat, during speeches that could sometimes last three hours, he explained the Parsha of the week to the community. In addition, each morning at the end of Shacharit, while still enwrapped in his Tallit and crowned with his Tefillin, he delighted the faithful with mountains of Halachot adorned with Talmudic and Midrashic narratives. Then for a half-hour he alternated between teaching the volumes of Orah Chaim and Yoreh Deah from the Shulchan Aruch. To conclude a study cycle that ended every four years, the Ben Ish Hai organized a great feast for the learned of the city, the costs of which he assumed himself. At this occasion, he would delight his audience by means of a discourse teeming with marvelous *Chiddushim* (novel interpretations) of Torah and Kabbalah.

Happy were all the tens of thousands of men and women who had the privilege to see and hear him during four great Shabbats of the year: Shabbat

Teshuvah, Shabbat Hagadol, Shabbat Zachor, and Shabbat Parah. His lessons then lasted four hours, but because his audience was held captive by his teachings, his charm, his pleasantness, and his well-known humility, these four hours always seemed too brief. "The sound of his voice," said his biographers, "evoked the sound of the sea." A great love for Eretz Israel, and in particular for Jerusalem, emanated from each of his words.

Having never accepted the least of positions, the Ben Ish Hai enclosed himself (sometimes for entire days) in his office to study and write. He would interrupt himself only for guests, and would receive with his regal bearing all those who came to consult him, greeting them with incomparably great joy and humility. By appearing at the entrance to his study, the least of his students could see the Ben Ish Hai rise, rush to meet him, make him sit beside him, and listen attentively. In the same way, the Ben Ish Hai would rise to see each of his guests off, accompanying them until the entrance of his home.

He carefully watched over the absolute purity of his food in the minutest of details, even to the choice of those who served him. In regards to this, we must make it clear that for six years out of seven, the Ben Ish Hai imposed on himself a daily fast. He thus applied the Sages' interpretation to the Torah verse concerning the Hebrew slave, a verse that states, "Six years he shall serve, and in the seventh he shall go out free" (in other words, he shall be free from his *Yetzer Hara*, his evil inclination). That was but one of the mortifications and personal strictures that he demanded of himself. Thus, in the full heat of summer, when a blistering heat embraced Baghdad, he did not permit himself to eat watermelon solely for the purpose of not getting carried away by his desire. For this he waited until Rosh Hashanah, at which time he recited the blessing of *Shecheyanu* ("Blessed are You ... Who has granted us life ... and enabled us to reach this occasion").

Rabbi Yossef Haim, the legendary Ben Ish Hai, left this world on Elul 13, 1909. He left us with works on Torah and Kabbalah that cannot be overlooked, veritable wellsprings of knowledge from which each of us can drink.

May his merit protect us, as well as all the Jewish people. Amen.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

Personal responsibility (A teaching of the Maggid of dubno)

Regarding the Biblical verse that states, “For this commandment that I command you today is not hard for you” Rabbi Mena said “And if it is too difficult, it is because of you. Why? It is because you didn’t make an effort to study Torah” (Jerusalem Talmud, Pe’ah 1). Here is how, on his part, the author of *Od Yosef Chai* explained this verse:

What does this make us think of? To a dignitary, who sent his servant abroad to ask one of his friends to purchase a powerful and energetic donkey because the local donkeys were, in fact, known for their weakness.

Having arrived at his destination, the servant made it to the friend in question and told him of his mission. Now imagine the servant’s surprise when seeing the friend return from the market, not with a donkey, but with a simple pound of barley.

“Go back to your master and give him this on my behalf!” the man said.

The servant obeyed, and once back in his country he made it to his master as soon as possible. Finding him holding court with some important individuals, he gave him his friend’s gift. There was an outburst of laughter, and the courtiers of the dignitary asked, “Is this really your friend, this man who not only didn’t get a donkey for you, but more than that, even allowed himself to make fun of you by sending you some barley? He knows perfectly well that we don’t lack barley in this country!”

However one of the courtiers, noticeably wiser than the rest, began to speak. He said, “You are mistaken! This man didn’t have any intention to ridicule you, but rather to give you a lesson in wisdom. If he sent you this barley, it is to explain why he didn’t purchase a donkey as you wanted.”

As everyone asked him to explain his viewpoint, he added, “Your friend wanted to show you that if the donkeys of this area are frail, the responsibility is entirely yours. This is what, as it were, he wanted to tell you: ‘You think that the donkeys of your country are weak. You also asked me to purchase for you a donkey from here, animals renowned for their strength. But you are mistaken, for your donkeys and our donkeys are identical. Both of them are capable of carrying the same loads. The only problem is that you are cheap to the point that you feed only straw to your donkeys. How, in that case, can they become strong work animals?’ It was in order to tell you this that he sent the pound of barley. Make an effort to give the same amount each day to your donkeys, and you will see that it won’t be long before they regain their strength and become capable of carrying heavy loads.”

The lesson behind this story: There are so many people who show signs of fatigue, incessantly saying

that they find no satisfaction in studying Torah. They say, “It’s difficult for me to study Torah. It’s difficult to perform the commandments, and I don’t find any pleasure in doing so.” They describe the Torah and Judaism as being distant. The proof, they say, is that they can’t manage to learn or understand anything.

It is to these individuals that Rabbi Menachem, in the Jerusalem Talmud, responds: “And if it is too difficult, it is because of you. Why? It is because you didn’t make an effort to study Torah.” In other words, it is in yourselves that the void is found, the void that you then project on the Torah and the commandments. The reason is that you don’t put any effort into studying the former and performing the latter. If were to apply yourselves just the slightest bit to learn and understand our Holy Torah, you would then discover the joy that its study results in.

Eishet Chayil

Reading of the Torah, Hallel, and Musaf

- Women are not obligated to go to synagogue to hear the reading of the Torah. However, by measure of piety, certain women will go to hear the reading of the Torah in synagogue on Mondays, Thursdays, Shabbat, and holidays. On Shabbat Zachor, according to certain authorities, they are obligated to listen to the Parsha.

- On Shabbat, when we raise the Sefer Torah, women must rise and say “*VeZot HaTorah...*”

- Women can look at the Sefer Torah even if they are impure. However, it is forbidden for them to go into the area reserved for men and to look at the Sefer Torah from close.

- Women are exempt from the Shabbat weekly Torah reading (which consists of two readings of the Hebrew text and one reading of the Targum – *Chenayim Mikra Ve’Echad Targum*).

- On Rosh Chodesh and holidays, women are exempt from reciting *Hallel* (except on the first night of Pesach, when they recite it with the blessing). If they wish to recite *Hallel* on Rosh Chodesh and holidays, they may do so, but without reciting the blessing.

- Women are exempt from saying the *Musaf Amidah* on Rosh Chodesh, Shabbat, and the holidays, for this *Amidah* is not a prayer in which we implore G-d for mercy. In addition, this mitzvah is tied to a specific time, and thus women are exempt from it. Certain authorities believe that women are obligated to recite the *Musaf Amidah* on Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur because we implore G-d for mercy. Likewise on Yom Kippur, they are obligated to say the *Neilah Amidah*, for there we recite numerous supplications.

- Women have the right to read the *Shema*. They have the right to listen to a man sing, which in fact they regularly do when coming to synagogue to hear the prayer service.