

THE PATH TO FOLLOW

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Under Aegis of

Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א

11, rue du plateau - 75019 PARIS

Tel: (331) 42 08 25 40 • Fax (331) 42 08 50 85

www.hevratpinto.org

Responsible of publication Hanania Soussan

TORAH : THE KEY OF REDEMPTION

(by Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א)

The Children of Israel were to be found everywhere, as we have read. They were in the theaters, the circuses, etc., completely neglecting the study of Torah, and "they [the Egyptians] became disgusted because of the Children of Israel" (Ex 1:12). If they had frequented the synagogues and yeshivas that our Patriarch Jacob had prepared for them, the Egyptians would have neither seen them nor have "embittered their lives with hard work, with mortar and with bricks" (v.14). Moreover, they would have repaired the error of Abraham, who used those who studied Torah to wage a war. The tribe of Levi was the only one that devoted itself solely to the study of Torah.

As we have said, the Children of Israel were certainly capable of rising to great levels as a result of intensive Torah study, but "he who does not increase [his knowledge of Torah] decreases it; he who does not study deserves death" (Perkei Avoth 1:13; Taanith 31a). Thus, because they hadn't intensified their Torah study, a harsh exile was decreed for them.

To that end, the Ramban asks the following question: Why, "when the days of his abstinence are completed," must a Nazirite offer "one unblemished sheep in its first year ... one unblemished ewe ... and one unblemished ram" (cf. Num 6:10-14) as an offering? What sin did he commit? It's because, the Ramban answers, during the entire time of his abstinence he was consecrated to the Eternal (v.8), and he had to constantly perfect his purity and holiness. In light of this, he should have remained a Nazirite all his life. However, as soon as he wanted to return to his impure desires for this material world, he was required to offer a sacrifice to atone for his sins. Not being able to intensify and increase his holiness and purity, he was made to seek atonement through a sacrifice.

Once, we asked our young students at the yeshiva the following question: Those of you who are leaving to go into business – if you make it successfully in the business world, it's no doubt because you're very talented. Why then not devote all these opportunities to the diligent study of Torah, and elevate yourselves in the fear of Heaven? Why quit the yeshiva? Isn't this what your Creator asks of you?

There as well, the accusation is the same, namely that not increasing or intensifying one's Torah study proves to be damaging.

It's ultimately because the Children of Israel neglected the study of Torah that they nearly crossed the fiftieth gate of impurity without realizing it (Zohar, Yitro 39a). But the Holy One, blessed be He, never wrongs any of His creations (Nazir 23a; Bava Kama 38a). He liberated them from Egypt because they, as we have seen, were careful to retain their language, their names, and their manner of dress. Nevertheless, if they had devoted themselves to the study of Torah with the same fervor that the members of the tribe of Levi had, they would not have been made slaves in Egypt and would not have crossed through forty-nine gates of impurity. However, their slavery at least helped them to purify sparks of holiness, sparks that the bread of affliction in the Passover Haggadah alludes to. Now that a repair has been affected, "may all who are hungry come eat," explains Rabbeinu Arizal.

Nevertheless, if the Children of Israel had invested more effort into studying Torah, they would have corrected these sparks without being enslaved by the Egyptians. For, as the Zohar explains, the Torah is able to liberate us from exile, to bring the Redemption closer, and to protect us from the attacks of the evil inclination (Zohar III:270). We see in this something that is stunning: On one hand, the Children of Israel managed to repair the sparks of holiness despite the mediocrity of their spiritual state, and on the other hand they zealously watched over three fundamental tenants of Judaism. How can this be explained? It's due to the fact that they didn't fully exploit the spiritual strengths that they inherited from our Patriarch Jacob. As our Sages say, "The acts [and the strength] of the parents determine the conduct of their children" (Sotah 34a). Not having sufficiently engaged themselves in the study of Torah, and not having drawn from their souls this Divine element – the strength that comes from the intensive study of Torah – they almost crossed the fiftieth gate of impurity. And yet the Eternal, in His mercy and kindness, freed them from slavery despite everything. And if He acted this way, it was not because He was accommodating (Bava Kama 50a), but because He probed the hearts of the Children of Israel and saw that they wanted in all sincerity to be corrected. He therefore helped them and brought them to true redemption.

IN MEMORY OF THE TZADIKIM

RABBI ISRAEL ABOUHASSIRA - BABA SALI

Rabbi Israel Abouhassira was born on the day of Rosh Hashanah in the year 5650. His father was the Tsaddik Rabbi Massoud, the Rabbi of Rissani, a village near Tafilalet.

From his youth, Rabbi Israel was accustomed to getting up before dawn, and after having immersed in the mikveh of purification, he hurried to the synagogue for the morning service at *Netz HaShama* (sunrise).

He prayed with immense fervor and concentration. After the service he would study with great tenacity.

On the 12th of Iyar, 5668, his father Rabbi Massoud left this world. At the time of his passing, Rabbi Israel was 18 years old. Nevertheless he was already a Gaon, a man whose fear of Heaven surpassed his wisdom. The Jews of Tafilalet begged him to accept, despite his young age, the position of Rabbi and to be the spiritual leader of the yeshiva. Being very modest, Rabbi Israel tried to evade the responsibilities that they wanted to place on him. However, the Jews of Tafilalet knew that it would be difficult for them to find another saintly man such as him. They so insisted that he accepted to take on the duties of his father in his place.

Thus, besides the position of Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Israel was also given responsibility of the Rabbinat. The Jews of Tafilalet scrupulously adhered to his directives, and for them his words were like those of the oracle in the Holy of Holies.

In the year 5681, at the age of 31, Rabbi Israel came to visit the Holy Land. All the Gaonim and rabbis of the country went to meet him with trepidation and respect, welcoming him with great honor. His name was known and famous; he was the holy man who performed miracles and whose blessings were always answered. All the inhabitants of Jerusalem rushed to his residence in order to receive his blessing.

Rabbi Israel traveled to Sefat in order to pray at the gravesite of the Tzaddikim, as well as to pray for the hastening of the Final Redemption. With a trembling heart he approached the tomb of the Saintly Arizal, and for the next hour he prostrated on it and cried. Then, after having immersed himself in the frigid waters of the Ari's mikveh, he asked to visit the synagogue where the Ari normally prayed.

To his great surprise, access was denied him. The Jewish caretaker of the synagogue, the one who held the keys to the place, told him that it had been several years since it had closed down, and that no one dared to enter.

"Those who dared to try never came out alive," he added, concluding his explanation.

Rabbi Israel reassured him, then asked him to kindly give him the keys anyways.

Trembling with fear, the caretaker gave him the keys, all while trying to persuade him that it was best to give up on his plan.

A large crowd began to form around the Ari's synagogue, all wanting to witness this event. Tense and fearful, they carefully watched what was about to happen. Rabbi Israel took the key and pushed it into the lock of the synagogue's door.

The door, which had remained shut for many years, opened with a piercing creak. The spectators' fear began to increase. Rabbi Israel turned towards his servant and said, "Grab my coat and follow me. As long as you hold on, no harm will come to you."

With emotions running high, the Tzaddik penetrated to the inside of the synagogue, followed by his servant who didn't dare let go of the side of his coat. Rabbi Israel moved towards the Holy Ark, pushed the colorful vale aside, and opened the doors of the Ark. He took out the Sefer Torah found inside, placed it on the table, then began to read. The servant's heart almost stopped, not knowing if he was asleep or awake. The synagogue then began to fill with a great light, luminous and pure. Rabbi Israel turned towards his servant and said, "You can let go of my coat now. Nothing will happen to you. From this day on, everyone can come into this synagogue without any worry."

All the Jews who were waiting outside were overtaken with joy when they saw the Tsaddik coming out of the synagogue. They had been witness to Rabbi Israel's great saintliness. One after the other, they approached the Rabbi to kiss the side of his coat and to receive his blessing.

Rabbi Israel had great difficulty leaving the Holy Land, which he kept fond memories of. And despite his ardent desire to remain there, he decided to return to Tafilalet, to Morocco, to oversee his

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IN MEMORY OF THE TZADIKIM

(Continuation from page 2)

community, one that had been like a flock without its shepherd while he was in Israel.

The house of Rabbi Israel had become a center of attraction for the Jews of Tafilalet. People came knocking at his door day and night: The poor to ask for assistance, the sick to receive his blessing in order to get better, and the one who had a dispute with his neighbor in order to get the Tsaddik's verdict.

Once, during nighttime on Shabbat, Rabbi Israel was studying the secrets of the Torah and probing the mysteries of the world. He was so absorbed by his study that he didn't notice that one of the Shabbat candles had fallen to the floor and began a fire. A member of his family, noticing the beginnings of this fire, immediately ran towards Rabbi Israel to warn him of the danger. The entire house could have caught on fire.

Rabbi Israel took his cane and came close to the fire that was now beginning to spread. He made a sign in the air with his cane and said, "Master of the world! May the fire stop there!"

When the flames reached the spot designated by the Tzaddik, the fire suddenly went out by itself.

In the year 5724, Rabbi Israel decided to complete his most cherished plan – to move to the Holy Land. The majority of the Jews in Morocco had already left their poor exile and ascended to the land of Israel. The great captain and faithful shepherd was not the first to leave. He only accepted to leave Morocco when the majority of the Jews had already settled in Israel and cherished its land.

The news of the Rabbi's arrival in the Holy Land spread quickly, and hundreds of people came to welcome him at the port, among them being great rabbis and important figures.

From Morocco, Rabbi Israel brought with him all the books and manuscripts that he possessed. He wasn't ready to give them over to anyone. Those whom he closely knew worked for three days to pack his books, which filled more than 30 large crates and had to be transported with great difficulty by truck to the port. This immense library comprised all sorts of books: Simple commentaries, secret commentaries, ancient books, new books, etc. He also possessed books of great worth, and manuscripts of great Rabbis and of Rabbis in his family. Just Rabbi Israel's books themselves contained more than 3,000 pages of commentary on the Torah.

Rabbi Israel, a genius on both the revealed and secret aspects of the Torah, was a very modest man. Despite his great scholarship, he never considered himself worthy of all the honors that were bestowed upon him. He spoke of the great Sages of the generation with enormous deference, as if he were a dwarf standing before giants. Each time that a Talmid Chacham came to visit him, he rose in his honor and took the habit of excusing himself by saying, "Pardon me if I did not receive you with all the respect that I owe you."

One day, his son-in-law found him seated on the floor lamenting. Rabbi Israel said, "People think that I have something, or I have a special trait, but I know myself well and I have none of these. I'm afraid that in this world, I'll be awarded everything that is owed to me in the world to come, and that's why I'm lamenting."

All his life, Rabbi Israel was infused with the terrible pain caused by the suffering that followed the destruction of the Holy Temple and the exile of the Shechinah. He would always bring it to the fore by saying, "And the Shechinah, what does it say? 'They have dishonored me.'"

In the heart of the night, when all of creation was enveloped in deep silence, Rabbi Israel would sit on the floor, and from the deepest part of his being he would lament over the exile of the Shechinah and the Jewish people who were ridiculed and oppressed.

On Sunday, the 20th of Tevet 5744, Rabbi Israel fell sick from what would turn out to be his last illness. He lay dying for two weeks, during which time all of Israel implored Him who resides in the heavens to completely heal him. However the doors of heaven remained shut, and on Sunday, the 4th of Shevat 5744, Rabbi Israel was called before the Celestial Court.

The terrible news of the departure of the Tzaddik spread quickly. All the communities of Israel were affected and in mourning. Thousands of Jews cried bitterly over the loss of this great pillar that was no more.

From that day on, it would no longer be possible to reach the saint, this extraordinary Tzaddik whose majesty and splendor illuminated the entire world.

May his merit protect us. Amen.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

THE FIRST

A teaching from the Maguid of Dubno

This month shall be for you the beginning of the months” (Ex 12:2). The Torah calls the month of Nissan *rishon* (first). Hashem, Zion, the Beth Hamikdash, Mashiach and Esau are also designated as such by the Midrash. What do they all have in common?

Hashem will come and rebuild the Beth Hamikdash. He will punish Esau. Then Mashiach will come. All this will happen in the month of Nissan.

In the future (may it be as soon as possible), Hashem will show everyone that He is the First. How? The Maggid of Dubno explains this to us with a parable.

Two poor vagabonds, each roaming from town to town, decided to travel together. The first was tall, energetic, and enjoyed radiant health. He seemed never to fall sick, and never complained of being tired. He was always in good shape. The second seemed to have never enjoyed a single day of tranquility in his life. His skin was covered with wounds, his limbs hurt, and his stomach reacted badly to almost everything he ate. Pain and misery were his daily lot. His suffering was even greater because his robust companion heaped scornful and sarcastic remarks upon him.

“I’ve never seen anyone who looks so sick! By the way you’re walking, we might make it to Leipzig by spring!”

Crushed by so many ills, the poor man held his tongue and difficultly carried on his journey over the hills and valleys. Yet in his heart he uttered this prayer: “G-d, behold my suffering. See how this cruel person insults and humiliates me without stop. Please, let me finally see the day when he will get his turn to suffer because of his strength and his health. As for me, I wish that my sickness generates great happiness, not for me, but to show him the error of his ways.”

This seems like a very surprising request. How can a man come to regret his vitality and his superb physical state? How can pain and weakness be considered as a blessing?

By the greatest of coincidences, the head of the king’s army violently died that day. That man had been huge, a giant that sowed terror in all his enemies. He uprooted trees with his bare hands and used them as battering rams to knock down city gates. He would effortlessly catch boulders catapulted over fortress walls and then send them back against the enemy. Could the king now find a replacement for this legendary hero, a man known far and wide?

Some time later a second tragedy struck. The king’s doctor died. It was essential that his successor be found. And so again the king asked himself where he was going to find a person with such rare talents and endowed with such vast know-how.

A search for such men was undertaken in the whole of the country. The candidates rushed to apply for one or the other position. The king noticed one soldier of gigantic size and decided to test him.

“May the king present me with a large and robust person so that I may have a little ‘chat’ with him. I will crush him with one finger,” bragged the brutish soldier.

The king then turned to the candidate for the position of court doctor.

“Find me a person who is extremely weak, who has no hope of regaining his health, and I will cure him of all his ills,” boasted the would-be doctor.

“May it be so,” declared the king. “We will make both of you undergo the tests that you’ve asked for. Whoever succeeds will be granted the position he covets.”

The search was then on for a great strapping man to test the strength of the warrior, and for a sickly person, afflicted with the greatest amount of maladies, in order to test the skill of the doctor. The two sought-for persons were, as it turned out, found together on the same day.

They were the two vagabonds. They had just arrived in the city when one of the king’s guards found them. He forced them to pile into the carriage and brought them to the palace. Our poor, sickly stooge had trouble controlling his anxiety in that particularly testing moment. His companion added to his torment by unceasingly bragging about his strength and continually harassing him with sarcastic remarks.

The two men were introduced before the king. The first was sure of himself, thinking that he was going to be put into the cavalry. He even stuck out his chest to better show off his strength. The king looked at him for a moment before addressing himself to his servant: “He’ll do perfectly.”

Our daring friend awaited for someone to hand him a cavalry uniform, but instead he found himself thrown into the air by the would-be head of the royal army. The soldier had thus passed the test that he himself had drawn up. Attention then turned to the tiny sickly man. Already half-dead of fright, he barely heard the words of the king.

“Bring this wretch to the doctor and have someone inform me of how his health is progressing.”

A few weeks later he was unrecognizable. His wounds had amazingly healed and he could finally taste the joy of being in good health.

In the future, Hashem will overturn the laws of the world as we know them. It will be impossible to give a natural explanation to events. He will raise the most humble and modest to greatness and power. He will afflict those who have used their strength to harm their fellow, as the bully who pointed to his strength to verbally torment his sickly companion. The day will come when Hashem will obliterate the strength of the nations that rule the world. He will make them as insignificant as the dust of the earth.

This will be the proof that He is the *Rishon*, the Cause of all that occurs. Hashem will liberate the nation that has known endless suffering, a nation that has always been at the mercy of others, rejected and hated by all. It will suddenly become powerful and the entire world will want to be its ally. It is what the Midrash says: In the month of Nissan, the first month, Hashem will send us Mashiach, called *Rishon*. He will punish Esau, the firstborn (*rishon*) of Jacob. Then he will build the Beth Hamikdash, also described as *Rishon*. The world will finally clearly recognize that Hashem, and only Him, is *Rishon*. It is He Who controls our lives and makes history unfold according to His plan.

“On that day HASHEM will be One and His Name will be One” (Zec 14: 9).

EISHET CHAYIL

SHABBAT CANDLES – PART VI

Where Should the Shabbat Lights be Lit?

24. It is a mitzvah to light the Shabbat lights near the table where the Friday night meal will take place. This is so that their light can be seen during *Kiddush* and the meal itself, which is part of *Oneg Shabbat* (the joy of Shabbat).