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A MESSAGE FROM RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA

We live in a time full of trials. In particular, we see great suffering among those who do Teshuvah! They should nevertheless overcome these trials that lie in wait for them.

How difficult it is to avoid Bitul Torah (neglect of Torah study)! When a person has to sometimes choose between going to the movie theater to see the latest film that everyone is talking about, staying comfortably at home in front of the TV to watch "the game of the year" with bated breath, or simply going to a Torah class – it is indeed difficult! It is also difficult for everyone to watch what they say and to keep from speaking ill of others!

Unfortunately, today people don't hesitate to criticize rabbis or those who devote their lives to Torah, those upon whom the world stands! May Hashem forgive those who don't hesitate to condemn bnei Torah and rabbis without even trying to understand them!

How many are the impure desires that assault us throughout the entire year! We must ask Hashem to also forgive improperly controlled feelings. Yet above all, we should be careful to fulfill our responsibility with respect to others.

We know very well that for the wrong we've caused another person, Hashem forgives us only if we have first received the forgiveness of our victim.

Over the course of time, I have come to the conclusion that the suffering of Klal Israel stems from a few simple factors, and unfortunately they are very likely to continue (G-d forbid) unless each Jew purifies his heart and attaches himself to the principle values of Judaism:

1. Love for the Holy Land

Each Jew should set aside a date to go to Eretz Israel, without considering economic or political problems, and without thinking of Eretz Israel as a simple tourist destination!

2. Children's Education

Only Jewish schools are capable of helping us preserve the Jewishness of our children. The financial difficulties related to enrolling children in Jewish schools should never be an insurmountable obstacle, and moreover, without a doubt the community as a whole should invest even more in Jewish schools and education. Those who register their children at non-Jewish schools should be aware of the serious risk they pose to the future of their children's Judaism.

3. Kosher Food

We should be scrupulous in eating kosher as much outside of the home as inside of it. The consumption of non-kosher food permeates the brain

and mind of the Jew and imperceptibly distances him from Judaism. If we have doubts concerning Judaism or have difficulty concentrating in prayer, or again if we have bad thoughts when we pray, there is reason to believe that we have either eaten non-kosher food, spoken Lashon Hara (gossip), or yet even improperly judged our fellow.

4. Family Purity

This mitzvah is characteristic of Klal Israel and distinguishes it from the other nations; it is the very symbol of Judaism for all the generations. It is this mitzvah that guarantees peace in the home. The Torah tells us, "Your camp shall be holy."

For this reason, we must be absolutely vigilant to guard the kedusha (holiness) of the Jewish family. Young girls as well as married women should wear clothes that preserve their modesty, and it goes without saying that one must firmly adhere to the advice of our teachers, who forbid us to attend all festivities in which mixed dancing is tolerated.

5. Torah Study

The Rambam (Maimonides) established that even the most impoverished Jew is held to study Torah. All the more so are Jews held to study if they don't have serious problems making ends meet and if they enjoy the privilege of good health!

6. Purity of the Eyes

We should not cast our eyes upon things that don't belong to us. In fact it is written, "The eye sees and the heart desires." Of course, the eye is made to see, and it is impossible not to see, but it is possible to never cast our eyes on the forbidden. Above all, we should be careful not to look at a married woman because, whether we like it or not, man is made in such a way that bad thoughts risk overwhelming his mind.

Furthermore, our Sages have greatly underlined the extreme gravity of bad thoughts, for through them a man will voluntarily place himself in a dangerous situation. May Hashem grant that our hearts desire the best, and may you all be inscribed for a year of life, health, and prosperity. Amen.

May it be Hashem's will to grant healing and health to all the sick of Klal Israel. During this new year (which we hope will bring us only good) we have to come even closer to Hashem and serve Him with all our strength, especially if we consider the upheavals of our time, events that defy all logic and which, we hope, are the precursory signs of our true Deliverance.

May G-d make this year one in which we will see miracles and wonders having their source in chesed (mercy), not in din (severity). Amen.

IN MEMORY OF THE TZADDIKIM RABBI DOV BER – THE MAGGID OF MEZRITCH

The story is told that when Rabbi Dov Ber was eight years old, a fire broke out in the village of Lukatch where he was born. As a result, his father's house burned down and his mother was greatly saddened and began to cry. The child asked her, "Why are you crying? I've learned that in the same way that one says blessings for good things, one must say a blessing for bad things."

"No, my son," his mother replied. "I am not crying for the house, but for my father's genealogical record that burned with it. Our ancestry goes back to the Tanna Rabbi Yochanan HaSandler, and from him all the way back to King David."

"Don't cry dear mother," the child replied. "I promise that a new family tree will begin with me."

The child knew perfectly well what he foretold. He was called to take the place of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, the "father of Chassidut," and was also the father of the Ruzhin dynasty, which continues to our day.

Rabbi Dov Ber, known as the "great Maggid," was born in the village of Lukatch in 5464 (1704), the son of Rabbi Avraham, an impoverished teacher in the village. Still young, he became known for his amazing intelligence, and the Rav of the town sent him to the yeshiva of the famous Rabbi Yaakov Yehoshua, author of Pnei Yehoshua, in Lvov. There he studied with great diligence and acquired a considerable amount of Torah knowledge.

After getting married in the town on Turshin, Rabbi Dov Ber became a teacher in a nearby village. He lived there in extreme poverty. He had the habit of fasting several times a week and living a life of mortification, yet despite these fasts, his occupation was not enough for him to earn a living. All the same, he accepted this with love and never complained. He had faith that G-d would help him.

One day, as legend would have it, his wife began to cry because their children didn't have enough to eat. Incapable of restraining himself, Rabbi Dov Ber let out a heart-breaking sigh. A Heavenly voice was then heard announcing, "Dov Ber, because you sighed over your material situation, you have lost your portion in the World to Come." He began to despair for a few moments, but immediately recovered and cried out with joy: "From now on, I will serve G-d without looking for reward!"

At that instant, the legend concludes, a second voice was heard from Heaven: "Dov Ber, this joy in serving your Creator without expecting reward has given you back your portion in the World to Come. Yet from now on, you should be careful to never again bemoan your family situation, for you are not more merciful than your Father in Heaven."

Several years passed, and Rabbi Dov Ber left his occupation and became a famous maggid (preacher). He passed through all the towns and villages of Volhynia and Podolia in Russia. In every place he went, before speaking he had the habit of going out into the street and proclaiming: "Go, O sons, heed me; I will teach you the fear of the L-RD" (Psalms 34:12).

He also passed through the streets of the town and observed the people there. He looked at the laborers who worked hard and saw the merchants that stayed in their shops all day long in order to gain a meager living. He then got up on a platform, but instead of preaching

and reprimanding them, he spoke to their hearts and consoled them. Above all, he encouraged them not to lose hope, but rather to put their trust in G-d, from Whom salvation would occur in the blink of an eye. His speeches, spoken with great enthusiasm and passionate style, won the hearts of his listeners.

When the Baal Shem Tov revealed himself, Rabbi Dov Ber joined him and was among his closest disciples. The Baal Shem Tov brought him very close to himself, and it seemed that during his lifetime he was already thinking of making him his successor.

During the festival of Shavuot in 5520 (1760), all the Baal Shem Tov's great disciples came to Mezhibuzh. They had a feeling that this holiday would be the last in the life of their Rav, Rabbi Israel. He himself was laid out on his bed, eyes shut, and all his disciples were standing around and looking at him with fearful respect. All of a sudden, the Baal Shem Tov woke up, opened his eyes, and looked at his disciples and began to speak: "Today is the eve of Shavuot. No one knows what tomorrow has in store. Come closer to me and I will give you my blessing."

In speaking, he said to his disciples, "I name Rabbi Dov Ber the Maggid to replace me and lead the Chassidim. The disciples of Rabbi Dov Ber have a 'great soul', and he has all the necessary strength to guide the generation."

He continued, a smile coming to his lips: "I know that this bear [dov] has no legs [as we know, the Maggid of Mezritch's legs were feeble, and he had to walk on crutches], yet I know that he has big hands to bring hearts closer, and through his leadership he is capable of unifying all those who are faithful to Chassidut."

After the death of the Baal Shem Tov in 5520 (1760), Rabbi Dov Ber became the leader of the Chassidim. He settled in Mezritch, where the light of Chassidut went out to all Jewish communities around the world. He organized the movement, sending out representatives and spokesmen to every town. Thanks to the considerable influence of the Maggid, Chassidut spread to all social levels of the people and deeply took root in the heart of the Children of Israel. Among those who came to hear his Torah were many famous people, very great in Torah. For example, there was Rabbi Shmelke of Nickelsburg and his brother Rabbi Pinchas of Frankfurt (author of Haflaah), the brothers Rabbi Zusya of Hanipoli and Rabbi Elimelech of Lyzhansk, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (the founder of Chabad Chassidut), and others. He also modified the prayer text by instituting the use of a Sephardic format rather than an Askenaz one.

Rabbi Dov Ber excelled in many things, but above all the Chassidim spoke of his great humility.

The story is told concerning Rabbi Nachum of Chernobyl that when he went to see the Maggid of Mezritch for the first time, he asked for his advice on a way to escape pride. The Maggid responded quite simply: "Believe me, I can't give you advice about this. Normally a person advises others in a field that he knows well, but I haven't the least knowledge of pride. I really don't understand how a man can become filled with pride."

STORY OF THE WEEK

THE USHPIZIN

The holy Rav of Shinova, the son of Rabbi Chaim of Zanz, recounted the following story several times: In a village there once lived a very simple and poor man, but one who feared G-d. One Sukkot eve, he found himself without a cent to make a roof for his sukkah. He therefore went into the forest with his wife to gather tree branches with which he hoped to cover it. Evening was about to descend, yet they were still working at covering the sukkah. They feared that they might profane the festival and so they began to work with their mouths and teeth. Yet in proceeding this way they cut themselves on their lips and in their mouths. This created a great upheaval in Heaven, where it was decreed that Abraham, the first of the seven "guests" of the Sukkot, would go into the poor man's sukkah and reveal himself.

The first evening of the festival, the poor man saw someone who was standing in his sukkah. He thought that no doubt it was a needy person who was looking for somewhere to eat the holiday meal, so he said to him, "I myself am poor, and I have nothing here. However I advise you to go to the rich man who lives across from me. There you will certainly have an abundant meal."

The man replied to him, "I have not come to eat your bread or to take anything from you. I am your father Abraham, and I have come into your sukkah for you to see my face. This is the reward for the mitzvah of the sukkah that you performed with great devotion and in pain." He then instantly disappeared.

One day during Sukkot, the Tzaddik Rabbi Shemuel Abba of Zichlin was eating the holiday meal in his sukkah while expounding on the Torah. A heavy rain began to fall, yet far from interrupting his study, the Tzaddik continued to speak holy words with ever-increasing enthusiasm, until the sukkah was almost filled with water. All of a sudden he got up and let out a cry: "Abundant water cannot extinguish love!" At that very instant the clouds dispersed, the rain stopped, and the sun began to shine.

One day, the holy Rabbi Pinchas of Koritz told himself that it wasn't good to be constantly disturbed by the visit of the Chassidim and numerous other people who came to ask him for help and mercy from all sorts of situations, for this made him lose time in his service of G-d. He therefore asked G-d that men should detest him, to the point that they would never again come to him and that he would no longer have any contact with anyone. This request was granted. He isolated himself with his Creator and began to live a difficult life. He never found himself with anyone, except during prayer, when he prayed with the community.

One day, before Sukkot, he was forced to have his sukkah made by a non-Jew, for Jews didn't want to help him since they detested him. The non-Jew didn't have the necessary tools, so the Rav sent his wife to the neighbors to borrow an axe, a spade, and so on. Yet no one wanted to lend him a thing, and he had great difficulty in obtaining them.

The first night of the festival, when he finished his prayer in synagogue, he invited people to come share the holiday meal with him, but nobody wanted to eat with him because they all hated him. He was forced to enter his sukkah without any guests. Once inside, he began to invite the Ushpizin (the seven guests of Sukkot). All of a sudden, he saw that Abraham was standing outside yet didn't want to come in. The Rav asked him what he was doing, and Abraham responded, "I do not enter a place in which there are no guests."

From that day on, he asked G-d to bring him back his former state, and that he should be pleasing to his fellow man.

One day, the holy Rabbi Yitzchak Eizik of Komarna got the idea, during the festival of Sukkot, of reciting the prayer of Joseph before the prayer of our teacher Moses, contrary to tradition. He sent his son Rabbi Eliezer to the holy Rav of Ziditzov to ask him his opinion on the matter. The Rav replied, "I'm surprised that your father mentions this. Did we not see with our very eyes, during the last festival of Sukkot, that our teacher Moses entered into the sukkah before Joseph?"

THE MORAL OF THE STORY (FROM THE MAGGID OF DUBNO) THE FIRST DAY

It is written, “You shall take for yourselves on the first day ...” (Leviticus 23:40). The Torah commands us to take the lulav, etrog, addasim and aravot “on the first day”. Yet we all know that we take the Arba Minim (4 species) on the fifteenth day of Tishri, not the first. Why then does the Torah call it “the first day”?

Our Sages explain this verse with a parable:

There was once a king who ruled over several states. One of these states in particular was disobedient. Its citizens ignored commands and showed disrespect to royal officers in charge of the law. One day they were ignoring important regulations, and the next day they paid only half of their income tax. Everyone could see that they didn't fear the king's authority and that they flouted his laws.

The king became angry and imposed a fine of 15,000 gold coins on the entire state. Furthermore, to ensure that it was paid, he ordered his attendants and ministers to accompany him for about two weeks as he himself went to collect this fine.

In the interim, a letter of warning was sent to the rebellious subjects. As soon as it arrived, the nobles of the state realized that they had exceeded the king's patience, and they took it upon themselves to develop a plan to show the king that they had no intention of revolting.

Thus they decided to send nobles of the highest rank in order to meet the king at the border and promise their obedience and loyalty to him. At the exact instant that the king and his men arrived at the border, they saw the delegation of nobles coming to greet them. In bowing respectfully, they promised to submit themselves to the king's wishes.

Being satisfied to note that his punishment had produced its expected result, the king thanked the nobles for their warm welcome and demonstration of loyalty. He therefore reduced the fine from 15,000 to 10,000 gold coins.

Pleased with the success of their mission, the nobles assembled behind the king and continued their journey together to the heart of the state.

Just before arriving in the state's main city, the king once again was pleasantly surprised by the welcome afforded to him by the dignitaries and prominent members thereof. Convinced that the prominent members were henceforth on the right path in their relationship with the king, he took the decision to reduce the fine from 10,000 to 5,000 gold coins. The entire entourage headed for the city gate and the governor's residence. In approaching his final destination, the king was welcomed by crowds that shouted, “Long live the king! Long live the king!” The governor himself greeted the king with respect and offered him a gift of great value.

The king was so moved by the great outpouring of goodwill that, without hesitating, he announced that he was officially annulling the fine as a sign of gratitude, since he was so touched by their magnificent welcome.

In the month of Elul, we sound the shofar and recite Selichot. The greatest Tzaddikim fast and begin to do Teshuvah well before Rosh Hashanah. Hashem hears their prayers and accepts their Teshuvah, and thanks to their merit He diminishes our “debts” (which is to say, the punishment that Klal Israel deserves) by a third. Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, many people fast and do Teshuvah. Hashem once again reduces the punishment by a third. When Yom Kippur arrives, then the Jews of the world fast and do Teshuvah. When the King notes that we have proclaimed our faithfulness and have promised to obey His laws, He annuls the rest of our debts and erases all our punishment. The Celestial Court abolishes all our sins, and we begin on a new page.

Between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, we are so preoccupied by all the mitzvot of Yom Tom that nobody even has the time to commit sin. Then Sukkot arrives and everyone begins a new list of mitzvot (and regrettably of averot also) and we finally celebrate this new start by a festive meal. On that day – “the first day” – the Torah tells us to take the lulav in order to record our deeds on a new blank page. May it mention only mitzvot. Amen.