

# The Path To Follow

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## Unity Rectifies Afflictions And Abolishes Suffering

**O**n the verse that states, "If a person will have on the skin of his flesh a *s'eit*, or a *sapachat*, or a *baheret*" (*Vayikra* 13:2), the author of *Chochmat Hamatzpun* states: "The Ramban said concerning the lesions in question that they were not at all natural and did not exist in the physical world. When the Children of Israel behave correctly with G-d, His spirit constantly protects them and maintains their bodies, their clothes, and their homes in good order. Yet if it happens that one of them sins, some unsightly thing appears in that person's flesh in order to show that G-d has distanced Himself from him. This only happens, however, in a place where G-d has chosen and where He resides. Consequently, these lesions, which are supernatural phenomenon, only appear if a man has great merit, since even the Children of Israel, the chosen people, are only afflicted by this in the chosen land. It is actually a place where a person can calmly devote himself to knowing G-d, and where the *Shechinah* can reside. All this emerges from what the Ramban wrote." [Editor's Note: When the Jewish people live in their own land, we know that the *Shechinah* actually rests upon them, as evidenced by the expressions: "Whoever lives in Eretz Israel is considered to have a G-d" (*Ketubot* 110b), and "G-d reigns in Eretz Israel" (*Zohar* I:108b)].

This appears very surprising. Why does *tzara'at* affliction only strike a person in Eretz Israel, to the exclusion of all other lands? Moreover, the Torah informs us that when G-d punishes, it is in order to lead a man on the right path after he has sinned. Why would G-d only do this in Eretz Israel? Finally, we note that in reality, even in other lands G-d sends calamities and lesions upon sinners. What does this mean?

We will attempt to explain this as best possible. Eretz Israel is a symbol of unity, for at the time of the world's creation, G-d formed the earth beginning from the Foundation Stone (which was later in the Temple – *Yoma* 54b; *Shir HaShirim Rabba* 3:18), and it was from there that the whole world was unified. Man is also a symbol of unity, for the dust with which he was created was collected from all corners of the world (*Sanhedrin* 38a; *Perkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 11), which is a mark of unity. Hence a man damages this unity when he speaks ill of his fellow, for in so doing he separates people, which is why his house, his body, and his possessions are struck first.

When troubles strike someone living outside of Eretz Israel, he should realize that he deserves them, for they come to him from Jerusalem, where one of the three gates of Gehinnom are found (*Eruvin* 19a). Why is it found there? It is in order to bring forth trials that are destined for the entire world. Actually, every Jew has a profound connection with Eretz Israel, even if living elsewhere, as Adam did. Whoever attacks a man's integrity should realize that he harms the unity of Israel and that he will have to suffer the consequences. It is simply that outside of Israel, these afflictions take on a different form.

We have therefore answered our two questions. It is true that everything comes from Eretz Israel, which is essential to the whole world and the source of everything destined for it. It is equally true that there are tragedies and afflictions even outside of Eretz Israel, yet they are different. Why all this? As we know, the Holy Land, and Jerusalem even more, and the Holy of Holies even more so, are the holiest and most important places in the world. Of them it is written, "The eyes of Hashem your G-d are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year's end" (*Devarim* 11:12). Eretz Israel is the place of G-d's abode, and just as He is unique in the universe, the Children of Israel are unique in the world (see *Zohar* II:16b). They should therefore live in unity, without pride or pretension, in order for G-d to live among them. They should learn this from the fact that the unity of the world begins from Eretz Israel, even if men are not worthy of

the land's holiness. Therefore one who prides himself (*mitnase*) strikes at G-d's unity, the unity of Eretz Israel, and the unity of the Jewish people. Such a person is punished measure for measure by the affliction that is called *s'eit* (from the same root as the word *hitnassut* ["pride"]), as well as by other lesions (*sapachat* and *baheret*), for he has damaged the clarity (*behiruf*) of unity and he did not achieve unity (*sapachat*).

We will now explain the different types of lesions and their causes. *Sapachat* is formed by the same letters as *sach taf*, where *sach* designates speech and alludes to gossip. *Taf* has the same numerical value as Lilit (one of the names of the forces of evil), meaning that in speaking ill of others, we strengthen the *kelipah* (impurity) in the Holy Land so that it can settle there. Gossip brings about lesions and leprosy (*Arachin* 16a); hence we are struck by *sapachat*.

As for *baheret*, the letters of this word recall the expression *harat olam* ("the birth of the world"), for slander truly ruins all of creation, and therefore it is punishable by *baheret*. Finally, we have already explained that *s'eit* signifies pride, which damages the unity of G-d, the unity of Eretz Israel, and the unity of the Jewish people.

Having said that one who sins through gossip affects the unity of all these things, we may now respond to the following objection that was once presented to me: Why is a man rendered impure if a small portion of his body is afflicted with lesions, yet he is pure if his entire body is afflicted, as it is written: "[I]f the affliction has covered his entire flesh, then he shall declare the affliction to be pure" (*Vayikra* 13:13)?

This is also a part of G-d's kindnesses. It suggests that if a person sins a little, the lesions are minor. Hence to prevent him from continuing in this path, he is warned by small lesions on his body or house so that he repents with the help of the *kohen*. Nevertheless if he commits many sins, lesions attack his entire body, and then the Torah tells us that he is entirely pure because G-d in His goodness does not wish the death of the wicked, but rather that he repents and lives (*Ezekiel* 33:11). G-d does him the favor of rendering him pure so that he repents and does not lose all hope because of the gravity of his sins. This is comparable to the case of the red heifer: The one who burns it becomes impure, whereas the ashes of the heifer purify the impure (see *Bamidbar* 19:8,19). Thus was His wisdom decreed, and it is forbidden to contest His way of directing the world or to object to the *mitzvot* that He gave us.

It is possible that this is the connection between *Parsha Tazria-Metzora* and *Parsha Shemini*, for in the latter it is stated that the *Shechinah* only descends upon the Sanctuary and the Children of Israel when they observe the laws of family purity (*tazria*) as well as proper speech (*metzora*), for otherwise the *Shechinah* will leave them (see *Shabbat* 33a). In addition, the Gemara teaches that the Temple was destroyed because of gossip and baseless hatred (*Yoma* 9b).

The statement in *Parsha Tazria*, "When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male" (*Vayikra* 12:2), speaks of a woman who obeys her husband, lives with him in peace and tranquility, and caters to his every need. The phrase "and gives birth to a male" means that she does his will (see Rambam, *Hilchot Deot Sotah* 12a), for it is as if she had conceived her husband. To him, she is like a mother who takes care of her baby, hears his cries, and has pity on him. Thus if they are meritorious and live together in peace and holiness, the *Shechinah* resides among them. However in the opposite case, a fire devours them (*Sotah* 17a; *Pesikta Zutah, Bereshith* 2:23) and they become inflamed with forbidden desires, with fire being the only thing that remains (*Kallah Rabbati* 1). Therein lay the connection between the two *parshiot*. How can we arrive at complete unity and the rectification of all that has been damaged? It is by guarding our words and observing the laws of family purity.

### As Representatives of Hashem, the Kohanim are at the Head of Society

Although the laws dealing with leprosy are among the most severe in the Torah and contain many details, leprosy in and of itself is still not enough to render a person impure or isolate him. As specified in the Torah, then repeated in tractate *Negaim* and restated in the Rambam's *Hilchot Tumat Tzara'at* (ch. 9), impurity also depends on what the *kohen* says. Even if the *kohen* is young or unsophisticated, the sage explains the situation and he decides to free or isolate him. Elsewhere we find that Torah rulings also depend on the *kohen*, as in the case of the unintentional killer who is sent to a city of refuge. Concerning him the Torah states, "He must dwell in his city of refuge until the death of the *Kohen Gadol*" (*Bamidbar* 35:28).

To explain this, the Sages have said that the *kohen* is the one who represents G-d's Sanctuary among the Jewish people. The *Kohen Gadol* is therefore the head of these representatives, meaning that he is at the head of the community of Israel. We also find in *Parsha Shoftim* that in the head court, located "in the place that He shall choose," the natural Sanhedrin will be composed of *kohanim* from the tribe of Levi. Consequently the death of the *Kohen Gadol* marked the end of an era for the entire people, and as such it was a time for ending the punishment of the unintentional killer. Such a person had been chassed from his land and from society, as it is said concerning the first murderer in *Parsha Bereshith*: "A fugitive and a wanderer shall you be on the earth" (*Bereshith* 4:12). He is therefore excluded from the society in which he killed a person. However when the *Kohen Gadol* dies (thereby renewing society), he is no longer excluded from it.

The same applies to leprosy, which entails an exclusion from society. As opposed to a person who becomes impure by contact with a dead body or by a bodily emission (resulting in exclusion from one or two camps, depending on the case), the leper is excluded from all three camps. The Sages have said that this exclusion occurs because he distanced people in society by speaking improperly. By itself the "plague" (*nega*) demonstrates that Hashem's hand has "touched" (*nega*) him by putting a sign in his flesh with leprosy (whereas if his entire skin is completely white, without a distinctive sign, he is pure). This excludes him from the company of G-d's people. However the plague itself does not exclude him until Hashem's representative, the *kohen*, confirms his condition. The *kohanim* are the ones who stand between Hashem and His people. They are the ones who bring the offerings of the people to their G-d, and who return the blessings of G-d to His people. The *kohanim* are not like the rest of the people, who inherit a parcel of land, for Hashem Himself is their inheritance. The Gemara discusses whether the *kohanim* are really the messengers of G-d or the messengers of the Jewish people (*Yoma* 19ab). However as *Tosaphot* state (passage beginning with *MiEika*), the question centers only on how they are perceived and the *halachic* consequences of their mission. They are not true emissaries sent by the people, but instead are those whom Hashem has chosen, as it is written: "Now you, bring near to yourself Aaron your brother and his sons with him from among the Children of Israel, that he may be a *kohen* to Me" (*Shemot* 28:1). This means that the *kohanim* were to stand, as it were, between Hashem and the people.

The Midrash states: "The Sages have applied the following passage to Miriam: 'Let not your mouth bring guilt on your flesh, and do not tell the messenger that it was an error. Why should G-d be angered by your words?' [*Kohelet* 5:5]. 'Let not your mouth bring guilt on your flesh' – do not give one of your members the permission to make your entire body sin. 'And do not tell the messenger' – this is Moshe, as it is written: 'I send a messenger before you' [*Shemot* 23:20]. 'That it was an error' – as it is written: 'we have sinned' [*Bamidbar* 12:11]. 'Why should G-d be angered by your words?' – it was these words about which it is said, 'The wrath of Hashem flared up against them, and He left' [*Bamidbar* 12:9]."

What does all this mean?

We must realize that there are two cases in which a person risks speaking ill of others: The first is when a person has the opportunity to say bad things about someone who is inferior to him, for perhaps he has some faults or weaknesses. However it is possible that what that person says about him is false, in which case he will have acted improperly by having lied. The second is when a person says bad things about someone who is greatly superior to him, such as a *tzaddik* or a very honest man. Consequently, even before that person has checked the veracity of what he suspects – before checking if it is true or false – he has already proven his lowliness by having had the nerve to utter something against such an upright man. The difference between the two cases is that in the first, the wrong consists entirely in that the person has spoken a lie. At such a point, he may excuse himself by saying, "I was mistaken. What I said was wrong!" However in the second case, the wrong consists in having dared to think anything bad about a great man, which is even worse if that thought was a lie. At that point, the person cannot excuse himself by saying, "I was mistaken," for this in no way takes away from the fact that he dared to open his mouth against an upright man.

This is what the Holy One, blessed be He, meant by the words: "Not so is My servant Moshe. In My entire house he is the trusted one ... Why did you not fear to speak against My servant Moshe?" (*Bamidbar* 12:7-8). In other words, "From the beginning you tried to harm him without justification. Are you going to say that you do not realize this? And yet, you were not afraid to speak against My servant Moshe." Such is the meaning of, "and do not tell the messenger that it was an error." All this notwithstanding, "Why should G-d be angered by your words?" That is, regardless of whether a person has said the truth or not, Hashem has in any case forbidden people from speaking against a man of his stature.

## Eishet Chayil

### The Daughter of the King is All Glorious Within

The book *Ma'alat HaMiddot* states that women must conduct themselves with great discretion, as it is written: "The daughter of the king is all glorious within; her raiment is of golden settings" (*Tehillim* 45:14). In the *Yerushalmi* (*Shabbat, Perek bema isha*), our Sages say that a woman must not venture into public places on a weekday all decked out in her finery, for in that case she will draw people's attention, and it is to her great shame for people to stare at her. Jewels are only given to a woman so she may adorn herself at home before her husband, in order to please him. This is why she should remain at home in her finery. She should not go around with it everywhere, thereby putting herself and others in danger. This is what happened to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob. Because she did not stay discreetly at home, she brought misfortune upon herself. King David said, "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine in the inner chambers of your home" (*Tehillim* 128:3), for a woman's entire praise is that she remains inside the home and not appear in public.

## **Rabbi Shemuel Strashun – The Rashash**

Rabbi Shemuel Strashun was neither a Rav, nor an Av Beit Din, nor a Rosh Yeshiva, nor was he responsible for a community. Rather, he was only a resident of Vilna. Nevertheless, he was known throughout the world as a spiritual giant.

Rabbi Shemuel Strashun followed in the footsteps of the Vilna Gaon, who said that all science, as well as the observation of nature, helps us to understand true wisdom, that of the Torah. Such was the method of Rabbi Shemuel. From his writings we see that he possessed a vast knowledge of Hebrew grammar, as well as being familiar with math, geography, and history, and fluent in German and Polish. Yet above all, he is known for his work entitled *HaRashash*. Rabbi Shemuel wrote commentaries on every page of every tractate of the Talmud. These are renowned for the great scholarship that they bear witness to, their subtlety of reasoning, and for the marvelous logic and straight, sharp intelligence that runs through them. The Torah greats of the generation stated, "In his book, Rabbi Shemuel literally summarized everything that deals with understanding the Talmud."

Nevertheless, in addition to all these fine skills, Rabbi Shemuel Strashun was known for his humility and extreme modesty.

Rabbi Israel Salanter recounted the following story to illustrate his humility:

One day, Rabbi Israel and Rabbi Shemuel Strashun found themselves together in the same town. A discussion began between them concerning faith in G-d, namely whether it is useful to have faith for something that is not necessary. Rabbi Israel believed that a man has the right to pray to G-d for something that he considers to be superfluous, whereas for Rabbi Shemuel, a man has no right to ask G-d for something that he does not need. To Rabbi Shemuel, a man's prayer is only heard if it deals with things that he absolutely cannot do without.

Rabbi Israel then proposed that they test their views to see which was right. Once Rabbi Shemuel accepted, Rabbi Israel said, "From now on, I trust in G-d that He will send me a watch, which is not necessary for me because I have absolutely no need for one. We will see if He will send me it." They warmly shook hands and departed, each waiting to see what would happen.

Six months passed, until one day Rabbi Shemuel was in his library studying Torah and heard someone knocking lightly at the door.

"Enter," he said. "Come into the room."

A young Christian, tall and clothed in a lieutenant's uniform, came inside.

Rabbi Shemuel interrupted his study and asked, "How may I help you?"

"I have something to say to you," the lieutenant began. "A Jewish soldier in my regiment just died, but beforehand he asked me to do him a favor. He had a watch – his only possession in the world – and since he had no family or close friends, he asked me to bring it to the local Jewish Rabbi. The Jews of Vilna told me that this was you, which is why I've brought you his watch."

Rabbi Shemuel took it and thanked the lieutenant for having gone to all the trouble. When he left, Rabbi Shemuel began to reflect upon this bizarre incident. He looked at the watch and thought about it long and hard. Then all of a sudden, the memory of his discussion with Rabbi Israel of Salant came to mind. Was it possible that Heaven had sent the watch to Rabbi Israel? After all, did he not say, "From now on, I trust in G-d that He will send me one"? On the other hand, perhaps it was a coincidence? These thoughts jostled in his mind and gave him no rest. He wanted to immerse himself again in his studies and forget this whole strange incident, but he couldn't. He had in his mind the image of Rabbi Israel, and it wouldn't leave him. He called his son Matityahu and asked him to go and bring Rabbi Israel of Salant to see him.

Rabbi Israel arrived, and Rabbi Shemuel gave him the watch and said, "G-d has

heard your prayer and sent you this watch. You have been proven to be correct from Heaven."

When Rabbi Israel recounted this story, he always added: "It was simple for Heaven to send me a watch. When a person has faith in G-d, He responds to prayer. But for Rabbi Shemuel not to be been ashamed to recognize this, that was far from simple, and it was far greater than the first matter." Rabbi Israel would end by saying, "Rabbi Shemuel is a *tzaddik* with great humility. I am certain that his commentary on the Talmud will be welcomed by all."

Rabbi Israel's prediction proved correct. The Torah of the Rashash became a foundation and aid for all who study Gemara intensively, from young boys to the greatest scholars. If a person notices something obscure in the way that the Gemara expresses itself – yet neither Rashi, *Tosaphot*, the Maharsha, the Maharam, or the Maharshal point this out – one must go to the Rashash for help, and among his books one will find the answer to every such difficulty.

Rabbi Shemuel Strashun was born on Heshvan 18, 5554 (1794) in Zaskovich. He was the son of Rabbi Yossef, the Rav of the city.

At the age of 13 he married the daughter of Rabbi David Strashun, who was living in the village of Streszyn (commonly called Strashun). After several years, people began to call him after his father-in-law, and the name stuck.

At the home of his father-in-law, who was a wealthy man, Rabbi Shemuel Strashun was able to study Torah in tranquility. Their village was destroyed during the Napoleonic wars, however, and his father-in-law Rabbi David took his family to the large city of Vilna and purchased a house for him there. He also established a Beit HaMidrash and began pursuing his business ventures there, whereas his son-in-law Rabbi Shemuel continued to study Torah. In Vilna he met Rabbi Avraham Danzig, the author of *Chayei Adam*, and became his student.

Even after the death of his wealthy father-in-law, Rabbi Shemuel continued to diligently study Torah without having to worry about his sustenance. He continued to write his glosses and commentaries while his wife successfully managed their business ventures.

Some elderly Torah scholars of Vilna recounted the following story:

One of the top figures in the army, who always purchased merchandise on credit, once spoke to Rabbi Shemuel's wife and said, "I am leaving Vilna now, and I would like to pay you for what I owe. However I want your husband to certify in writing that I have repaid all my debt."

His wife went to the Beit HaMidrash and asked her husband to interrupt his studies for a moment to come to the store. However he refused, saying: "G-d's Torah is worth more to me than thousands in gold and silver – I cannot interrupt my studies." He added, "What would you have done if I were dead and this man had come to demand that you bring me back from the grave to certify that he had repaid his debt? Thank G-d that I am still alive and studying Torah!"

His wife returned to the store and told the army leader everything her husband had said, word for word. He was pleased by what he heard, and he was content on paying his debt with her signature testifying to the fact.

The Rashash lived a long time, dying at the age of 78 on 11 Adar II, 5632 (1872).

## Concern for Other People's Money

Reb Shmuel, the *shamash* of the *tzaddik* Rabbi Israel of Rozhin, was astonished by his request to summon the Rav of the town, Rabbi Shlomo, who was an expert in Halachah. "Now?" he asked, "late in the afternoon before Shabbat?"

The *tzaddik* of Rozhin had stopped on route in the town of Skola to spend Shabbat there. He had already gone to the *mikveh* and was wearing his Shabbat clothes, when all of a sudden he began pacing back and forth in the courtyard. After a certain time he stopped, his gaze fixed on an invisible point. He then gave the order to his assistant to have the Rav of the town brought to him.

The Rav hurriedly made it to the house where the *tzaddik* was staying. What was there that was so pressing? For what reason had he been summoned exactly when preparations for Shabbat were being made?

The *tzaddik* asked him to sit down next to him and began to recount a story. The Rav was astonished at the moment that the *tzaddik* had chosen to do this.

The story concerned a Jew that had all the best character traits. He was honest, served G-d faithfully, and studied. He was also very rich. Even though he was very busy, he found time to help the needy, and his generosity was legendary. He also fixed times for the study of Torah. "This Jew," said the *tzaddik*, "was already old, and he had sons who feared G-d and who walked in his ways."

He was so well-known for his honesty that many people entrusted their money to him for safekeeping. Sums of money that were subject to litigation remained with him until a verdict had been reached. Widows and orphans chose him to be the faithful custodian of their money. Of course, whenever asked, he promptly gave back what had been entrusted to him.

One day this rich man had an opportunity to enter into an excellent business agreement with the authorities. According to all projections, he was to make a substantial profit from the deal, and what's more is that there was no risk involved.

Those interested in the deal were asked to entrust a sizeable amount of money as collateral. The contract stipulated that it was to be promptly signed at the time requested by the authorities. There was also a clause which stated that failure to comply with any of the contract's provisions entailed the immediate loss of all money put forth as collateral.

The merchant accepted the deal, but then discovered that he did not have the necessary amount of money required for collateral. A thought then came to him: Since the money requested by the authorities served only as a guarantee, and since he had a great deal of money with him that was sitting around and doing nothing, of what importance was it to those who had entrusted it to him where this money was? What did it matter if it was in his table drawer or in the state treasury? He thought it over well, and concluded that it was permitted for him to use the money as collateral.

Everything had been written up and was ready to sign at the bureaucrat's office. Then, all of a sudden, disaster struck! The bureaucrat in question hated Jews, and he devised a terrible plot: He stipulated that the contract had to be signed on Shabbat.

During Shabbat itself, the merchant was told that he had to come and sign it!

The merchant carried himself about in his house as if he had been hit by a ton of bricks. His doubts gave him no rest. What was he to do? One way or the other, the situation was tragic. Was he going to sign on Shabbat? It was inconceivable – it was a public desecration of Shabbat! And if he didn't sign? Many people's money would go up in smoke!

His heart melted when he thought of the distress that those poor people would experience when they would come to reclaim their money, and he was absolutely terrified. And now there was someone knocking at the door! It was an employee that came to invite him to the government office where he was to sign the contract. Without thinking he got up, his head frantic with many thoughts. Completely incapable of controlling his actions, he followed the man like a robot. He arrived at the bureaucrat's office, approached him, and signed the contract.

Then he repented. All of a sudden, he realized what he had done. Trembling seized him and he fainted. He regained consciousness, but didn't know exactly what was happening around him, and his memory was slightly impaired.

He got better only slowly. Though no longer bedridden, he was still weak, and he never returned to his previous state of health. He stopped seeing people and no longer left his home other than for communal prayers. He no longer returned to his business. He thought of only one thing: Returning all the money that people had entrusted to him. At the end of several months, he died of grief and anguish.

When his soul ascended on high, a discussion arose in the Celestial Court. Were the merits of his generosity going to be enough to atone for the grave sin of desecrating Shabbat in public, or was he to be first punished for his sin? Opinions in Heaven were split, and it was finally decided to entrust the decision to the world below. That which would be decided on earth would be carried out above.

"The Rav is a pillar of Halachah in our time," continued the *tzaddik* to the one who was sitting and listening attentively before him. "Let him decide." At that point, the Rav understood the urgency of the situation. He examined the case deeply, and after thinking it over well, while keeping in mind the opinion of the *poskim*, he announced the following verdict:

"It was obviously forbidden for him to desecrate Shabbat in order to avoid a loss of money. Yet despite everything, we can't simply judge him as a desecrator of Shabbat. During his entire life, never did he commit a sin with the aim of acquiring money. What happened was that he was concerned for the money of Jews, and it was for them that he let himself get ensnared. He has already received his punishment by having suffered in this world. Now he is clear of all punishment and his place is in Gan Eden."

A contented smile appeared on the face of the *tzaddik*. "Blessed be He Who gives His wisdom to those who fear Him," he said with satisfaction. "In the Celestial Court, the verdict has been accepted and the soul of this Jew has already been brought into Gan Eden. Let's go to synagogue. The sun will soon set."