

The Path To Follow

A Hevrat Pinto Publication

Chukat

398



Under the Direction of Rabbi David H. Pinto Shlita
 www.hevratpinto.org | hevratpinto@aol.com
 Editor-in-Chief: Hanania Soussan
 32 rue du Plateau 75019 Paris, France • Tel: +331 48 03 53 89 • Fax: +331 42 06 00 33

Sivan 30th, 5771
 July 2nd, 2011

Rabbi David Pinto Shlita

This Is The Decree Of Those Who Study Torah

The Midrash has King Solomon saying, "I studied the passage on the red heifer. I asked questions, I reflected, and I said: 'I will be wise,' but it was far from me [Kohelet 7:23]" (*Tanchuma, Chukat 6*). The Midrash also says, "It is not the dead that defiles, nor water that purifies. The Holy One, blessed be He, merely says: 'I have laid down a decree, I have issued a law. You are not allowed to transgress My law,' as it is written: 'This is the decree of the Torah' [*Bamidbar 19:2*]" (*Bamidbar Rabba 19:8*).

It is also written, "From where do we learn that words of Torah are firmly held by one who kills himself for them? Because it says, 'This is the Torah, when a man dies in a tent' [*Bamidbar 19:14*]" (*Berachot 63b*). Now can a dead man study Torah? This teaches us that a man must feel as if dead when learning Torah. Just as the dead do not perceive the sweetness of honey or the taste of salt, one must study Torah and fulfill *mitzvot* without any thought of a reward. He must also do so without any ulterior motives, and without calculating which reward will be greater or less. A person must not be content on just fulfilling the *mitzvot* whose reasons he understands; he must also fulfill those whose reasons he does not understand, for we fulfill them only to bring satisfaction to the Creator.

What is the reward of one who acts in this way? The Holy One, blessed be He, does good for him even if he is not worthy of it! Although the attribute of strict justice says before Him: "Sovereign of the universe, why have You given him wealth, since he does not deserve it?" He answers: I have written in My Torah, "According to its measure, He contended against her" (Isaiah 27:8), teaching us that in the measure with which a man measures, it is meted out to him (*Sotah 8b*). In the same way that he does what I have decided for him, although he gains nothing from it, I too will do for him what he asks of Me, although there is nothing to gain from it and although it is not just. This is the sense of the verse, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy" (*Shemot 33:19*), concerning which our Sages have said: "He may not deserve it" (*Berachot 7a*).

No Right to Grow Proud

Why is it said that the Torah only endures with one who kills himself for it? Just as the dead do not grow proud, one who wants to conserve what he has learned has no right to grow proud. The Sages have said, "Why are words of Torah likened to water...? This is to teach you that just as water flows from a higher to lower level, likewise words of Torah endure only with one who is humble" (*Taanith 7a*).

Whoever is humble fulfills each *mitzvah* even if he does not understand the reason for it. However one who is arrogant only acts when he understands the reason, which is why his Torah learning will not endure. Now King Solomon was very humble despite being

very wise, as it is written: "G-d gave wisdom and considerable understanding to Solomon, and breadth of heart as the sand on the seashore" (I Kings 5:9). The Sages have explained that the wisdom of King Solomon was as great as that of all Israel, and he knew the reason behind every *mitzvah* (*Tanchuma, Chukat 6*). Yet when he came to the *mitzvah* of the red heifer, he did not understand the reason for it, and he annulled himself before the sanctity of the Torah and declared: "I said: 'I will be wise,' but it was far from me." In other words: "I thought that I would be able to understand the reasons for the *mitzvot*, but since I do not understand the reason for this one, it means that I am far from understanding the Torah and I have not yet understood its deep mysteries. Even the *mitzvot* whose reasons I thought I understood, these are clearly not their true reasons, the proof being that I have not been able to understand the reason for this one."

An arrogant person, however, will not annul himself before the Torah. He will say: "Since I don't understand the reason for this *mitzvah*, it certainly does not contain anything true, and it is impossible to perform." It is in this sense that the Sages say that Torah only endures with someone who renders himself as if dead for it, meaning with someone who does not grow proud, but instead annuls himself before it. As for an arrogant person, he says of all the *mitzvot*: "They don't please me and I do not fulfill them." Hence the Torah will not endure in him.

Misinterpreting Torah

Furthermore, from the fact that a person fulfills all the *mitzvot*, he thereby demonstrates that everything he does is for the sake of Heaven. In fact if it were otherwise, he would only perform those *mitzvot* whose reasons he understood. Yet since he does them for the sake of Heaven, his heart immediately inclines before Hashem, Who commanded him to do certain things.

Rabbeinu Yona wrote, "What misinterpreting Torah refers to is being audacious enough to say things about the Torah that are not true. He says things such as, 'These verses and stories in the Torah serve no purpose,' simply because he is arrogant and proud, and he cannot interpret the point being made, and because 'it is not an empty thing for you' [*Devarim 32:47*]. Here our Sages have said: 'If it is empty, it is from you' [*Yerushalmi, Ketubot 8:11*], in that you cannot explain the point being made. The same holds true if you abandon one aspect of Torah and do not acknowledge it. You would be misinterpreting Torah in that case as well. An example would be if you say, 'What good does it do us to have Torah scholars? For if they learn anything at all, they learn it all for themselves, and we gain nothing from the merit they amass.' You would thus be rejecting the declaration in the Torah that '[G-d] will spare the entire place for their sake' [*Bereshith 18:26*]" (*Shaarei Teshuvah 3:145*).

By the Merit of Moshe

It is written, "There was no water for the assembly, and they gathered against Moshe and Aaron" (*Bamidbar* 20:2).

This is surprising: After having gathered around Moshe and Aaron due to a lack of water, the people began complaining to Moshe – not to Aaron – as we read immediately afterwards: "The people quarreled with Moshe" (v.3). Why did they do this?

In his book *Petah HaSemadar*, Rabbi Eliyahu Hai Damri *Zatzal* states that Rashi wrote that during those 40 years, they benefited from a well by the merit of Miriam, for she had waited by the side of the river to see what would happen to Moshe when he was placed on the water. Hence the well appeared by her merit and provided water for the assembly while in the desert.

As a result, since all of Miriam's merit was derived through Moshe, even when Miriam passed away and the well disappeared along with her, Moshe (the essential reason for the well's appearance) still stood before the people. Therefore why did he not give them water by making the well return through his own merit?

This explains why the people complained. It was precisely to Moshe – not Aaron – that they complained, for they believed that Moshe could make the well return through his own merit. Hence they began to protest against Moshe, not Aaron.

Why Didn't Aaron Pray?

It is written, "Aaron shall be gathered to his people" (*Bamidbar* 20:24).

We must ask why Aaron did not pray concerning his own death, as Moshe had done. Did he not want to live as much as Moshe did?

The Sages have said of Moshe, "Did he need to eat the fruit of Eretz Israel [such that he wanted to enter the land so greatly]? No, rather he wanted to fulfill the *mitzvot* that depend upon the land." Even more in regards to Aaron, we must ask why he did not also pray to enter Eretz Israel.

In his book *Tzeda LaDerech*, Rabbi Yechiya Eltschari explains that Aaron thought to himself: "Moshe wanted to enter Eretz Israel in order to fulfill the *mitzvot* that depend upon the land. As for me, it is in my own interest to fulfill the main *mitzvot* that depend upon the land, these being the 24 gifts of the *kohanim*. As a result, the people will say that I am praying to enter Eretz Israel in order to receive these gifts."

That is why Aaron did not pray to enter the land.

Why Such Haste?

It is written, "Moshe stripped Aaron's garments from him and dressed Elazar his son in them" (*Bamidbar* 20:28).

In reality, why the need for such haste? Why did Moshe immediately bring Elazar the son of Aaron to the level of "Hor HaHar" and clothe him in the garments of Aaron's priesthood while in the presence of his father? Why could Moshe have not waited until after Aaron's passing, at which point he could have then inaugurated Elazar as the *Kohen Gadol* and clothe him with the eight garments and everything that follows?

Rabbi Moshe Yehoshua Leib Diskin *Zatzal* replies that this was done in order not to cause Elazar undue suffering. If Elazar had remained an ordinary *kohen*, he would have been rendered impure by his father's death, as the law states in regards to an ordinary *kohen* whose father dies. Now Elazar received the position of *Kohen Gadol* while his father Aaron was still alive, for Moshe had clothed him with the garments of the *Kohen Gadol* and anointed him with the anointing oil. Elazar had the status of *Kohen Gadol* at that point, no longer

having the right to render himself impure for his father.

A Snake by Allusion

It is written, "Moshe made a serpent of copper" (*Bamidbar* 21:9).

In reality, Moshe had not been told to make a copper serpent. Instead he was told, "Make yourself a *saraph*" (v.8). What prompted Moshe to make a serpent made of copper?

Rashi explains it as follows: "He was not told to make it of copper, but Moshe said: 'The Holy One, blessed be He, called it *nachash* [a snake], so I will make it of *nechoshet* [copper],' one term being similar to the other."

Rabbeinu Bechaye adds to this:

"Moshe understood that Hashem wanted him to make a serpent. However He did not want to designate it by the name *nachash*, for it was the cause of sin and had introduced death into the world. Hashem therefore used the term *saraph*, using an adjective, for it possesses venom that causes *soreph* ("burning").

According to Rabbi Eliezer

It is written, "Therefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of Hashem: *Et vaHev besupha*" (*Bamidbar* 21:14).

In the Gemara we read that there were two lepers – one called *Et* and the other *Hev* – who traveled to the rear of the camp of Israel (*Berachot* 54a). Alternatively, Onkelos translates this verse as: "Therefore it will be said in the Book of the Wars which Hashem led by the Sea of Reeds."

Why did Onkelos not explain this verse according to the Gemara?

In the book *Tziun Lenefesh Chaya*, Rabbi Yechezkel Landau notes that according to the Gemara (*Megillah* 3a), Onkelos followed Rabbi Eliezer. Now according to Rabbi Eliezer, when Israel was in the desert, lepers were permitted within the camp (*Menachot* 95b).

Hence Onkelos did not want to say that the verse in question was really about two lepers who traveled *besupha* – to the rear of the camp – for according to Rabbi Eliezer, lepers had the right to be within the camp itself.

In the Light of the Parsha

His Torah Will Endure

In his book *Ben Ish Hai*, Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad wrote: " 'Then Israel sang this song: Come up, O well, announce it!' [*Bamidbar* 21:17]. It seems to me that it is known that we recite the *Birkat Hamazon* for the sake of the 'Heavenly Kingdom,' in order to draw the 'light of the intellect.' We know that in Kabbalah, the 'Kingdom' is called 'well.' Now the Aramaic translation of *einu la* [announce it] is 'praise Him,' and when the verse says: 'Come up, O well,' this means that the 'Kingdom' will receive an abundance of light above, and therefore you, below, *einu*. In other words: Praise Hashem with the *Birkat Hamazon*, 'la' – for Him – for His sake, not for your own pleasure."

I would like to add a few remarks to these sacred words:

The term *be'er* ("well") has the same numerical value as *ger* ("stranger"). Now we know that water always designates Torah, for it flows from a higher to lower level (*Taanith* 7a). The verse is saying that when a man humbles himself like a stranger for words of Torah, his Torah learning will endure and he will merit the "Kingdom."

Talmidei chachamim are called "kings," as the Sages teach: "From where do you learn that the rabbis are called kings? ... Because it is written, 'Through me, kings will reign' [*Mishlei* 8:15]" (*Gittin* 62a).

Why Were Moshe and Aaron Punished?

It is written, "These are the waters of Meriva, where the Children of Israel contended with Hashem, and He was sanctified through them" (Bamidbar 20:13).

One of the most mysterious passages in our Torah concerns the sin at the "waters of Meriva," a sin through which Moshe and Aaron were condemned to die in the desert without entering Eretz Israel along with the Children of Israel. Many opinions have been forwarded, 25 in fact, to explain the nature of the sin that caused them to suffer such a grave punishment. We shall mention just a few:

1. The view of Rashi is that they sinned because Hashem had commanded, "Speak to the rock," not "Strike the rock," and yet they struck the rock rather than speaking to it. Had they spoken to the rock, the Holy One, blessed be He, would have been sanctified before all the people, and they would have said: "If this rock, which can neither speak nor hear, has fulfilled Hashem's word, how much more should we!"

2. An opinion cited by Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra states that Hashem rebuked them for having lacked respect for the Children of Israel by saying, "Listen now, O rebels!" It is not fitting for a pious man to speak in a scornful way to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. From here the Sages learn that when a person does not respect the dignity of the community, it is as if he has desecrated Hashem's Name.

3. The view of the Rambam is that Moshe's sin was that he tended towards anger by saying: "Listen now, O rebels!" Hashem felt that a man such as Moshe should not get angry before the community of the Children of Israel in a situation where anger is not fitting. This constitutes a desecration of Hashem's Name, for they would learn from all his actions and words, hoping to attain success in this world and in the World to Come. Therefore what impression were they going to have of anger, which is an evil trait and stems only from a bad character? In fact that generation was formed of great sages, for the least important among their women was like the prophet Ezekiel, and they examined everything that Moshe said or did. Thus when they saw Moshe becoming angry, they reasoned that since he did not lack moral perfection, he would not have become angry with them unless he knew that Hashem was angry with them for having demanded water and irritated Him. However we do not find that Hashem was angry with the people when He spoke to Moshe about his matter.

4. The Ramban cites Rabbeinu Chananel in stating that their sin was that they said, "Shall we bring forth water for you" (*Bamidbar* 20:10). They should have said, "Shall Hashem bring forth water for you," as it is said regarding the manna: "When Hashem shall give you in the evening meat to eat" (*Shemot* 16:8).

5. For Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra, their sin consisted of striking the rock several times. If they had struck the rock only once, it would not have been a sin.

6. Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra cites others in stating that it was because Moshe and Aaron did not sing a song of praise over the fact that water had emerged from the rock, although the Children of Israel did sing one [see *Bamidbar* 21:17]. Moshe and Aaron were therefore punished and did not enter Eretz Israel along with the Children of Israel.

7. Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra cites others in stating that the Children of Israel said that they would make water emerge from another rock (this being derived from the expression, "Shall we bring forth water for you from *this* rock"). However Moshe was afraid of modifying Hashem's word and striking another rock. Since he did not bring water from the rock which they asked him about, they were punished because they prevented Hashem's Name from being sanctified. This is the sense of the verse, "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel" (*Bamidbar* 20:12).

8. For Abrabanel, when the Holy One, blessed be He, ordered Moshe to speak to the rock, but Moshe struck it instead, this prompted Hashem to punish Moshe and Aaron for the other sins they had committed: Aaron was punished for the sin of the golden calf, which he had made. Although he did not sin by worshipping it, he was still the reason why many people died and did not enter Eretz Israel. As for Moshe, he was punished for having sent spies and asking them to report back to the people. This was not something that the Children of Israel had asked for, nor had Hashem commanded namely to observe the nations living in their land to see if they were strong or weak, few or many. Although their intentions were good, the result was that the spies said: 'The people are greater...the cities are great and fortified.' Hence they infused the people with fear, and they protested against Hashem and Moshe. Because of these things, it was decided that they would not enter Eretz Israel, but would all die in the desert. Since Moshe had been at the root of this incident, it was just that he too should not be allowed into Eretz Israel. Because the Children of Israel had deliberately sinned, but Moshe had mistakenly sinned with good intentions, Hashem safeguarded his honor by proclaiming the decree against him within the decree against the people. Hashem was patient with Moshe, just as He was with Aaron for the sin of the golden calf. Only then did He execute, "On the day that I make My account, I will bring their sin to account against them" (*Shemot* 32:34).

9. The saintly Rabbi Anselm Astruc (cited in *Midrashei HaTorah*) states that it's possible that Moshe and Aaron, when they gathered all the assembly, did not do so in a spirit of reconciliation and assurance, but in a spirit of anger, to the point that Moshe told them "Listen now, O rebels." Instead, they should have promised the people that Hashem would take their desires into account, in order for them to believe that Hashem hears their grievances. Thus the verse states, "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel," meaning that they did not speak to the people in order to infuse them with faith that Hashem listens to the disadvantaged.

10. The opinion of the Tzror HaMor is that Moshe became angry when they asked for water because he felt that they did not need water. In fact the manna was very refined food that does not leave people thirsty. It was also found between two layers of dew, such that it almost constituted both bread and water. That is why he said, "Listen now, O rebels." In other words: "You are dissenters and protesters. Will we bring water out of this rock for you; must we help the wicked? When Hashem performs miracles, it is fitting for Him to do so for the honor of *tzaddikim* such as Daniel, Hanania, etc., but it is not fitting for evildoers." When the Children of Israel heard what Moshe was saying, they may have thought that Hashem could not perform this miracle for some given reason, for they lacked faith on account of Moshe's words. This was considered as if they had not believed, all because G-d is very strict with the *tzaddikim*.

Incidentally, it is interesting to note what Rabbi Shemuel David Luzzatto wrote in his Torah commentary: "All my life, I have avoided looking deeply into this question, lest I find something new to say and add yet another sin to Moshe Rabbeinu."

Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman

“Apparently Heaven considers us *tzaddikim*, for we were chosen to atone for *Klal Israel* with our lives. If so, we must repent completely here and now. Time is short. The road to the Ninth Fort [where the Slabodka-Kovno martyrs were massacred] is rapidly approaching. We must realize that our sacrifice will be more acceptable when it is accompanied by repentance. We will thereby rescue our brothers and sisters in America. We cannot have, G-d help us, any forbidden thoughts, for that will be considered like a blemish that renders an offering unfit. We are now about to perform the greatest possible *mitzvah*! ‘You destroyed it by fire, and with fire shall You rebuild it.’ The fire that will now consume our bodies is the very same fire that will give rise to the rebirth of the Jewish people.”

It was in this way, with these moving words, that the saintly Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman *Zatzal* said farewell to his best students from the Ohel Torah yeshiva of Baranovitch. He was then led away by the Nazis to sanctify the Name of Heaven on that bitter day, Tammuz 11, 5701. Rabbi Elchanan had escaped with a handful of youngsters, and after numerous journeys they arrived in the Lithuanian town of Kovno. Once there, they hoped to find a way of escaping to a free country, but Divine providence wanted them to arrive too late.

Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, an eye-witness to Rabbi Elchanan’s murder at the Ninth Fort, left a terrifying written account of the final moment of this saint, a man who died at the pinnacle of his life. He described Rabbi Elchanan’s face, which was marked with seriousness and yet radiated calm. No change could be heard in his words, which were not more focused on himself than usual. Nor did he try to bid farewell to his son, Rabbi Naphtali. In his final moments, Rabbi Elchanan was completely focused on the good of the Jewish people.

Deep Respect

Rabbi Elchanan, who was born in 5635 in the Lithuanian city of Birz, was closely connected with great figures of the Torah world. In his youth, he learned Torah with the *gaon* Rabbi Shimon Shkop *Zatzal* and the *gaon* Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk *Zatzal*. He even studied with the Chafetz Chaim, with whom he developed a very close bond upon his arrival in Radin to study at the “Kodashim Kollel,” which the Chafetz Chaim led.

The influence of his Rav, the Chafetz Chaim, was rooted in everything he did in life. The Chafetz Chaim harbored deep respect for Rabbi Elchanan in his heart, even though he came to him as his student. Each time that Rabbi Elchanan traveled to Radin, the Chafetz Chaim would welcome him and treat him like his own right arm. He invited him to Radin on several occasions in order to obtain his advice, usually in regards to his plans on strengthening Torah observance and Judaism.

Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman’s memory was phenomenal. It is said that he once borrowed the book *Responsa HaRivash* from his “*mechutan*,” the Av Beit Din of Novardok. He studied it for a few minutes every day over a period of a few months. Yet two years after returning the book to its owner, he was able to write down, from memory, one response from the Rivash word for word.

One Who Guards His Mouth and His Tongue

As the well-known disciple of the Chafetz Chaim, Rabbi Elchanan was very careful not to speak forbidden words, the sanctity of the mouth and tongue being famous among his students. Everyone knew that everything that emerged from his mouth would take place.

Once during Purim, a group of students were walking home from the yeshiva, and on the way they encountered a group of young men who

did not observe *mitzvot*, those for whom Purim was just a holiday to amuse themselves. These young men began to hit and scorn the yeshiva students, who fled towards the yeshiva. The yeshiva boys were followed by these young men, who entered the Beit HaMidrash. The Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, told them to leave the building, but one of youngsters called out to Rabbi Elchanan and said: “Without hands!” Rabbi Elchanan replied, “You, without hands.” A few days later, the entire town was shaken by news of a frightening rumor: The hands of the youngster who dared to call out to Rabbi Elchanan had withered and become paralyzed. This alluded to the fact that the holy Torah was defending his honor, for what the Rosh Yeshiva said had occurred to this youngster, who was now left “without hands.”

“I Don’t Have the Strength”

While he was in Baranovitch, Rabbi Elchanan once met a local Jew. Rabbi Elchanan asked him to help one of his neighbors, but the man evaded the request by saying: “I don’t have the strength.”

Not long afterwards, Rabbi Elchanan encountered the same Jew once again, but this time he was extremely weak. When he explained his situation to the Rav, he asked him why this had happened to him. Rabbi Elchanan replied, “You brought this upon yourself. Do you remember when I asked you to help your neighbor, but you refused by claiming that you didn’t have the strength? Heaven forced you to fulfill the words of your mouth and has brought you to a state of complete exhaustion.”

Rabbi Elchanan’s customs, in regards to sanctity and purity, were famous, as was his diligence in Torah study. He served as a stellar example to his numerous students. At the same time, he knew how to address each and every one. Thus, for example, when he learned that the children of Baranovitch would usually play with boxes of matches, he knew exactly what to do: He would occasionally empty entire boxes of matches and give these empty boxes to the children to play with. In this way, they could play without having to look for things that were better to avoid!

He Merited Seeing the Consolation of Zion

It is fitting to cite the account of the *gaon* and *tzaddik* Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian *Zatzal*: “I heard in London from the saintly Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman *Zatzal* in the name of the Chafetz Chaim *Zatzukal*: ‘The Sages say that the war of Gog and Magog will be threefold. After the First World War, the Chafetz Chaim said that this was the first battle of Gog and Magog, and that 25 years later there would be a second world war that would make the first one seem insignificant. There would then be a third war, a time of trouble for Jacob, but he will be saved from it. Rabbi Elchanan concluded that one must suffer the birth-pangs of *Mashiach*, but that in such times a wise man will quietly prepare himself to be worthy of seeing the consolation of Zion and Jerusalem’” (*Lev Eliyahu, Parsha Yitro*).

Guard Your Tongue!

Even When Not Intentional

Know that the prohibition against *Rechilus* [talebearing] applies even if the speaker does not intend to arouse ill will in the listener’s heart against the subject, and even if the speaker believes that the subject’s actions were right and just. For example, suppose that Shimon criticizes Reuven for something that Reuven said about him or did against him, and Reuven asserts that he was right in what he said, and that Yehuda even said the same thing. Even as a defense for his own actions, if Reuven has caused Shimon to feel hatred for Yehuda, Reuven’s statement is called talebearing. – *Chafetz Chaim*