

The Path To Follow

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Rabbi David Pinto Shlita

Elul – Preparing For The Days Of Judgment

The verse states, “Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your gates” (*Devarim* 16:18). From here we see just how the deeply the holy Torah sees into man’s behavior, and just how powerful the evil inclination is. Although the Torah is actually an antidote to the evil inclination, it is still difficult to conquer it with the Torah alone. We must also appoint judges and officers who will oversee our deeds so that we do not come to sin.

It is odd that the Torah mentions judges before officers, since the role of an officer comes before that of a judge, given that it is an officer who brings people before a judge! Furthermore, an officer protects a judge so that nobody attacks him. Officers should therefore be mentioned first in the verse. To explain this, we may say that these *parshiot* are read before the month of Elul, and the Sages have said that the initials of the expression *Ani ledodi vedodi li* (“I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved is mine” – *Shir HaShirim* 6:3) form the word *Elul*. The very same idea is expressed in regards to the verse, “A lion has roared; who will not fear?” (*Amos* 3:8), where the term *ari* (“lion”) is formed by the initials of Elul, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur – which are soon approaching – for who will not fear at that time? The greatest *tzaddikim* tremble before the day of judgment, and everyone prepares themselves by shuddering on Rosh Hashanah, for we are judged at that time: Who will be raised, and who will be lowered; who will die, and who will live; who will grow poorer, and who will grow richer. Although the *tzaddikim* have not sinned, they tremble for their flock, which has sinned, and they fear being caught in the sins of the generation. We must all learn from this, namely to fervently prepare ourselves for the day of judgment, and plan on bringing good defenders before Hashem. These consist of the Torah and *mitzvot*, and the more we prepare, the better things will be.

The Torah tells us to appoint “judges” and “officers” in all our gates in order to prepare ourselves for the day of judgment. In fact Hashem judges the whole world and places us on the scales. A person must therefore prepare himself correctly to prevent accusers from getting in his way. Hashem will then judge us favorably, and officers will accompany the innocent back with great honor. If the judgment is against us, however, these officers will also fulfill their mission, but this time it will consist of placing the guilty person “in prison.” We can now understand why Hashem first judges and decrees, and then an officer comes and carries out the sentence issued by the

Judge, the Holy One, blessed be He. If a person returns to Hashem through love, the power of his repentance is so great that his accusers are transformed into angels of mercy, and his intentional sins are transformed into merits (*Yoma* 86b). This only happens, however, when a person repents of his sins with a broken and contrite heart. These are the angels who accompany a person at the end of Yom Kippur, as the Sages have said: “On the night after Yom Kippur, a Celestial voice proclaims: ‘Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a glad heart, for G-d has already approved your deeds’ [*Kohelet* 9:7].”

At that incredible moment, the Holy One, blessed be He, comes closer to us, “my Beloved is mine.” He is prepared to help anyone who asks Him as the Judge of the entire world, so that no one falls into the hands of accusers and is found guilty on Rosh Hashanah. We therefore have the sacred duty of using this proximity to Hashem, which does not exist during the rest of the year, for we can thereby successfully emerge from the days of judgment. We will merit a new year of life, a year that we will use to serve Hashem, a year filled with Torah and *mitzvot*, one rich in good deeds. Amen!

Guard Your Tongue!

The Heart of the Wise

It is written, “The heart of the wise teaches his mouth and adds learning to his lips” (*Mishlei* 16:23).

In this verse, King Solomon is teaching us an amazing principle in regards to mastering one’s words: A wise man who weighs his every deed will also weigh the importance and consequences of what he is about to say.

This means that the essence of wisdom lies in a person’s ability to examine everything that emerges from his mouth, and to reflect on it. By observing all the rules that apply to speech, he does not allow himself to say anything that does not conform to the Torah.

This is what constitutes, “[He] adds learning to his lips,” namely that by watching one’s words, a person strengthens his remarks according to the teachings of the Torah. In fact we clearly see that the great men of Israel pay great attention to their words, thereby attaining lofty spiritual levels.

Even a Drunken Man

It is written, “My flesh trembles in fear of You” (*Tehillim* 119:120).

In his famous letter, Rabbi Israel Salanter wrote: “In former times, everyone was seized with fear simply at the sound of the sacred word ‘Elul.’”

In previous generations, people understood the awesome meaning of Elul. In fact just the announcement of the new moon by the Chazan was all that was needed for everyone to be seized with fright and worry about improving their deeds. We must also awaken ourselves from the sleepiness of the present time and use this month to awaken ourselves and come closer to the Creator of the universe. We should be filled with fear upon realizing that the days of judgment will soon be upon us. We can understand the essential meaning of Elul by the following parable:

One day, a soldier in the army of Czar Nicolas saw a drunken man in the middle of the night, and he asked him to identify himself. The drunken man did not respond to the soldier’s calls, nor did he divulge his identity. The soldier once again questioned the man and asked him to identify himself, and again his questions went unanswered. The third time, the soldier shouted: “I’m a soldier of Czar Nicolas, and I order you to identify yourself.” When the man failed to answer this time as well, the soldier shot him, leaving him wounded. When the two men were called into court – the drunken man because he did not respond to the soldier’s questions, and the soldier because he wounded someone – the wounded man presented his case by saying: “Why did he shoot me?” When the soldier responded that he did so because the man had refused to identify himself, the man cried out: “You clearly saw that I was swaying like a drunken man!” The soldier replied, “Upon hearing the name of Nicolas, even a drunk should become sober.”

In this regard people say, “When we hear the voice that proclaims ‘Elul,’ every man should become sober and return to Hashem, for our G-d is merciful and quick to forgive.”

Guarding Your Gates

It is written, “Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all your gates” (*Devarim* 16:18).

Why does the verse use the singular *lecha* (“for yourself”) and *she’arecha* (“your gates”)? Rabbi Chaim Vital explains as follows:

Every man has several “gates” to his body: The gate of sight, the gate of hearing, the gate of smell, the gate of speech, and the gate of feeling. It is through these gates that everything in this world – whether they be good things or bad things that lead to sin – makes their way into man. Man’s duty in this world is to place “judges and officers” at these “gates.” These are powerful agents of his will, through which he ensures that nothing undesirable makes its way into his body. This is why the Torah speaks in the singular, so that at each individual gate, we place a barrier and wall to prevent sin from making its way inside, thereby preventing our souls from becoming impure. When a person properly guards the gates of his body, he is promised what is foretold in the verse: “Open the gates, so that the righteous nation which keeps the faith may enter” (Isaiah 26:2). Thus measure for measure, if a person is careful to guard all the “gates” of his body, all the gates of the World to Come will be opened before him.

– Nachal Kedumim

Who Opens the Eyes of the Blind

It is written, “For a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise” (*Devarim* 16:19).

It is said that Rabbi Chaim Kapusi, one of the Arizal’s five disciples, was paid for teaching because it was his only livelihood. When he lost his sight in old age, however, some people suspected that it was because

he had been paid for teaching, meaning that it was almost as if he had accepted a bribe, given that the Torah states: “For a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise.” When Rabbi Chaim learned of these suspicions, it greatly upset him, for it entailed a risk of desecrating the honor of the Torah. He therefore asked the community to gather at the synagogue on Shabbat, and before all the people he gave a magnificent discourse. He concluded by saying, “Since I have heard that some people suspect me of having accepted bribes, I ask Hashem before everyone gathered here to provide a sign: To restore my sight in order for everyone to know that I have not succumbed to that horrendous sin.” He had barely finished speaking when his sight returned, at which point he descended from the podium and greeted everyone by name, a great miracle indeed! From then on, whenever he signed his name he added the words *Hashem nissi* (“Hashem is my miracle”). In his book *Shem HaGedolim*, the Chida states: “I saw his signature when he was blind. He signed standing up, and one could barely make out the letters, which is normal for someone who is blind. I also saw his signature afterwards: *Hashem Nissi Chaim Kapusi*.”

By Just Means

It is written, “Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue” (*Devarim* 16:20).

Why does the Torah use the word *tzeddek* (“righteousness”) twice?

It is because liars tend to adopt an air of truth and justice when they look for frivolous proofs in the Torah and the words of the Sages to justify their evil deeds. They also allow themselves to prove their words by means that do not stem from pure truth and justice.

It is in this regard that the Torah warns, “Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue,” meaning that even righteousness must be pursued with justice, and the end does not justify the means.

Rabbeinu Bechaye explained that the term “righteousness” is mentioned twice, once for speech and the other for action, because they must not contradict one another. Whoever is righteous with his words must also be righteous with his deeds.

The Living Dead

It is written, “The dead shall be put to death” (*Devarim* 17:6).

What does “the dead shall be put to death” mean? The person is still alive! Here the Torah is teaching us that one who commits a sin is accountable for his life, and he is immediately “dead,” as the Sages have said (*Berachot* 18b). However if there are witnesses, the judges themselves must order his execution. If there are no witnesses, and no warnings were given to the sinner, the terrestrial court does not have the power to put him to death. Yet in Heaven, the sinner is truly considered to be “dead” in any case.

– From the *Ohr HaChaim*

The Fire that Remains from Hospitality

It is written, “They shall answer and say, ‘Our hands have not spilled this blood’” (*Devarim* 21:7).

Rashi says, “Could it enter one’s mind that the elders of the court are murderers? Rather [they declare], ‘We did not see him and let him depart without food or accompanying him.’”

A wealthy man once came to see the Vilna Gaon and told him of his troubles: All his possessions had been consumed in a fire, even though he paid great attention to the *mitzvah* of showing hospitality. The Vilna Gaon asked him, “When you gave food and drink to your guests, did you accompany them out?” When the wealthy man said no, the Gaon replied: “It is for this reason that Heaven has rendered judgment, for *eshel* [hospitality] is formed by the initials of *achilah* [food], *shetiya* [drink], and *levayah* [accompaniment]. Since you did not fulfill the *mitzvah* of accompaniment, all that remained were the initials of *achilah* and *shetiya*, which together form *esh* [fire].”

Rabbi Israel Lipkin of Salant

In every era, Divine Providence sends us lofty souls that leave their mark on the generation, souls whose influence can be felt both in their generation and for numerous generations that follow.

One of these exceptional sages was Rabbi Israel Lipkin of Salant. He was neither a Rav nor a Posek, and he dressed like an ordinary man. He fled official positions, and went about like a simple Jew. However he was a great man, and in his heart a sacred fire burned like the burning bush, a divine flame that never went out until his last breath. Rabbi Chaim HaLevi Soloveitchik of Brisk considered him to be among four men whom he compared to the Rishonim, the three others being Rabbi Yehoshua Leib Diskin, his own father Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, and Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim (as told by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, the Rav of Boston).

Although a great deal of time has elapsed since his passing, Rabbi Israel's memory as the father of the Mussar movement remains alive among us, and his personality is a beacon of light to this very day.

What follows are a few stories about his life:

Rabbi Israel's faith in G-d was absolutely extraordinary. He was certain that every prayer a person made would be granted if he had absolute faith in G-d. If we should see that a person's hopes are dashed, it is solely because his faith in G-d is not absolute.

Rabbi Israel once had a discussion with Rabbi Shemuel Strashun (the Rashash) on the Talmud. Their conversation centered on the question of whether it is legitimate to have faith in G-d for things that are unnecessary. Rabbi Israel believed that a person has the right to pray for something that he sees as superfluous, but Rabbi Strashun disagreed. Thus Rabbi Israel proposed that they attempt to see what in fact was the truth. When Rabbi Strashun accepted, Rabbi Israel said, "From this moment on, I have total confidence in G-d that He will send me a watch, something that I absolutely don't need [during that era only a few people owned watches]. We will therefore see if He will send me one."

Six months passed, until one day a Christian wearing a lieutenant's uniform came to Rabbi Shemuel and said, "A Jewish soldier in my regiment has just died, but before his death he gave me a watch to give to the local Jewish rabbi." Rabbi Shemuel took the watch and thanked the lieutenant for going to all the trouble. He then remembered his conversation with Rabbi Israel and asked that he come see him. When Rabbi Israel arrived, Rabbi Shemuel gave him the watch and said, "G-d has heard your prayer and sent you this watch. From Heaven the Halachah has been proven to be according to your opinion."

When Rabbi Israel moved from his father-in-law's home, he settled in Kovno to find some work. Before anything, however, he began by going to the Beit HaMidrash to study some Torah. At that point a wealthy man from Kovno also entered the Beit HaMidrash, and when he saw Rabbi Israel he felt sorry for him. He went to say hello and asked him what he was doing in Kovno, to which he replied that he had come in search of work and wanted to go into business. The wealthy man looked at him and said, "Listen to me, my young man. You don't have the look of a merchant, and it's better for you to devote yourself to religious endeavors. I've heard that in a certain small town people are looking for a teacher of young boys. I will provide you with a letter of recommendation and they will give you the job."

Rabbi Israel refused and said, "The responsibility of teaching Jewish children is too great and heavy a burden for me – I cannot accept it. I would like to be a merchant."

The wealthy man thought for a moment, at which point he suggested that Rabbi Israel become a *shochet*, for people were looking for one in Kovno. "Absolutely not," Rabbi Israel replied. "A *shochet* must be

extremely meticulous in his work, for it is a sacred responsibility. At the slightest mistake, he could end up giving *treif* food to the whole city! I would like to be a merchant."

The wealthy man then asked him if he had any money to open up a shop, and Rabbi Israel replied that he did not. "Under these conditions, how can you start a business?" he said in shock. "It's very simple," Rabbi Israel retorted. "You are going to lend me 300 rubles to start one."

"What! What did you say?" the man began to mutter. "I'm going to lend you 300 rubles? That's a huge amount, and I don't even know you! How do I know that I can trust you? Perhaps you're a swindler, a deadbeat! Do you think I'm crazy or something?"

Rabbi Israel arose and said to the man, "Listen to me, my dear Jew. A few minutes ago you considered me to be a person of trust. You wanted to give me a position as a teacher of precious Jewish children. You had enough faith in me to put the *kashrut* of Jewish homes in my hand. Yet when it comes to lending me a little money, you already don't know me and say that perhaps I am swindler! Our father Abraham behaved differently. In material matters, he trusted his servant Eliezer, as it is written: 'His servant, the elder of his household who controlled all that was his' [*Bereshith* 24:2]. Yet when it came to spiritual matters, such as finding a wife for his son Isaac, he did not trust him. He made him take an oath."

One day a distinguished Rav was a guest at Rabbi Israel Salanter's home. Rabbi Israel offered him something to eat, and he added that the dish was strictly kosher. His guest was taken aback by this statement, and Rabbi Israel explained that for himself (Rabbi Israel), it was possible that the dish was not kosher because his earnings came from a generous disciple, one who may have been mistaken in believing that Rabbi Israel was a *tzaddik* and a *gaon*. Hence in giving Rabbi Israel money to buy this food under such a false assumption, the food would not be kosher, since the money would have stemmed from theft. However for his guest there was no question of the *kashrut* of the dish, since by taking it he became its new owner. Hence for him it was strictly kosher according to all opinions (*Tenuat HaMussar*).

For that matter, this is why Rabbi Israel said in the presence of Rabbi Fishel-Ber of Rassein, an extremely wealthy man, that it was forbidden to desecrate Shabbat for him if he fell sick, for he had the status of a thief. Rabbi Fishel-Ber recounted this to Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan, the Rav of Kovno, who did not laugh when he heard this. Instead, he thought about it for a few moments and said: "Tell Rabbi Israel that he is mistaken. It is permitted to desecrate Shabbat for him." In fact his disciples recounted that Rabbi Israel fell ill on a Sunday and died the following Friday morning, so that no one had to desecrate Shabbat for him (as heard from Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky).

Rabbi Israel was born in 5570 (1810) in the town of Zhagory, Lithuania. His father was Rabbi Zev Wolf, author of *HaGaot ben Aryeh* on the Talmud.

Rabbi Israel was first educated by his father, and then studied with Rabbi Tzvi Broida, the Rav of Salant. He was very successful in his studies, and before turning 13 he already knew the Talmud by heart.

At the age of 18 he settled in Salant, whose name he carries. Other than his greatness in Torah, Rabbi Israel was a genius in Mussar and character development.

He published an important article entitled *Iggeret HaMussar*, in which he invites the reader to study Mussar. This article spread to every yeshiva, and people began to study his holy words in detail. This marked the beginning of a great event – the Mussar movement.

Rabbi Israel Salant fell ill while in Koenigsberg in 5643 (1883). He passed away on Shevat 25, his pure soul ascending to Heaven. Rabbi Israel did not leave behind any books, but he did leave his disciples, who spread his Torah throughout the world.