

The Path To Follow

Nitzavim Vayeilekh 410

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Accepting Heaven's Decrees with Joy

It is written, "Moshe went and spoke these words to all Israel. He said to them, 'I am one hundred and twenty years old today. I can no longer go out and come in' " (*Devarim* 31:1-2). There are several things that we need to understand here. First, we are not told where Moshe went in the expression, "Moshe went and spoke." Furthermore, how is it possible for Moshe to have gone somewhere, since he himself said that he could no longer come and go? It is also difficult to understand the beginning of the verse, "[He] spoke all these words," which is followed by the repetition: "He said to them." From the first verse, we know that Moshe began speaking to Israel, so why the need for the repetition?

Since the Shabbat on which we read this *parsha* is near Rosh Hashanah and the Days of Awe, let us first explain what the Prophet Hosea meant when he said: "Return, O Israel, to Hashem your G-d, for you have stumbled in your iniquity. Take words with you and return to Hashem" (*Hosea* 14:2-3). We need to understand the meaning of the expression "take words with you," for it does not say which words a person must take with him in order to return to Hashem.

We may say that the prophet is telling the Children of Israel not to raise any questions about the way Hashem directs the world. For example, when person experiences misfortune, it is natural for him to think: "Why me?" "Why did this happen?" He can't imagine that his sins are the cause, "for you have stumbled in your iniquity." Hence the passage states, "Take words with you," meaning that everyone must take the questions and things that he wants to say, and he must carry them without letting them out of his mouth. He should be content on repenting, knowing that everything has happened on account of his sins.

This is what Moshe was telling the Children of Israel: "Moshe went and spoke these words to all Israel" – he told them not to ask pointless questions, but to accept Heaven's decrees with love. They would therefore spend their entire lives in *teshuvah*, for a person cannot know when he will die. As the Gemara teaches, "Rabbi Eliezer said, 'Repent one day before your death.' His disciples asked him, 'Does one know on what day he will die?' He replied, 'All the more reason for him to repent today, lest he die tomorrow, and thus his whole life is spent in repentance' " (*Shabbat* 153a). When someone experiences misfortune, he should focus on doing *teshuvah* rather than asking questions.

Don't Complain

Moshe used the same language as the Prophet Hosea, and he "spoke these words" as did Hosea: "Take words with you." This means that a person must not ask questions or complain against Hashem, but instead he should attribute everything to his own sins, which have caused these apparent misfortunes. That is why Moshe said these words to all Israel, in order for them to realize that when misfortunes arise, they must not complain about Hashem's ways. They must never say to Him, "Why has this happened to me?" Every person must say, both to others and himself, that it was certainly his own sins that were the cause.

The Torah first says, "Moshe went," which echoes what is written in the Gemara: "The word for 'walk' means nothing else but death, as it says: 'Behold, *holech lamut* [I am going to die] [*Bereshith* 25:32]" (*Sotah* 12b). Moshe said to them, "Know that today is my last day in this world, and even the greatest *tzaddik* cannot be sure of not sinning until his final day," as our Sages have taught: "Do not be sure of yourself until the day you die" (*Pirkei Avot* 2:4). Hence it is forbidden for a person to question

Hashem until the day of his death, for on each day there exists the chance that he may sin, and Hashem will punish him for his sins.

This is the meaning of, "Return, O Israel, to Hashem your G-d." In other words: Until your final day, when the soul returns to the place from which it came and cleaves to the light of the King's countenance once again (for the soul of every Jew is a divine spark, since what Hashem breathed into a body comes from Himself – see Ramban on *Bereshith* 2:7), you must repent, even until that very last day, for your sins have made you stumble. A person must attribute his misfortunes to his own sins, without complaining to G-d. He must also take words with him to say – on account of "return to Hashem" – and he must attribute everything to his own sins.

Several Principles of Teshuvah

We may also say that the term *ad* ("to") comes from the same root as the term *edut* ("witness"). This means that Moshe told the Children of Israel to do such complete *teshuvah* that Hashem could witness that they would never return to their sins. As the Rambam wrote, "What constitutes *teshuvah*? That a sinner should abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart to never commit them again. Similarly, he must regret the past, and He Who discerns all concealed things will witness that he will never commit that sin again" (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:2).

There may also be another allusion here: The term *ad*, read backwards, becomes *da* ("know"), providing us with some of the principles of *teshuvah*. We have already mentioned the first, namely that *teshuvah* is not complete unless the One Who discerns all concealed things witnesses to the fact that a person will never commit that sin again. Furthermore, the person himself should clearly realize that he will never commit that sin again; he must regret his deeds and take it upon himself to never commit them again. His *teshuvah* should not be partial, but complete.

Once Moshe said these things to the Children of Israel, he began to transmit what Hashem told him. Hence it is written, "He said to them," for up until that point he had spoken to them about one thing, and now he was dealing with something completely different. The verse first uses a term whose root is *dibur*, which connotes severity. However it then uses *vayomer*, which designates a gentler way of speaking (see *Makkot* 11a; *Mechilta, Yitro BaChodesh* 2), for Moshe was speaking about the conquest of the land and its inheritance by the Children of Israel, which would make them rejoice.

Guard Your Tongue!

Another Problem

The prohibition against *Lashon Harah* applies even when a person reveals nothing new to the listener. If the listener already knows what another person has said about him, but did not think about its implications, it is still prohibited to inform the listener of it.

For example, suppose that the court rules against Reuven, and Shimon meets him and asks about the ruling. If Reuven says, "The court ruled against me," and Shimon replies, "They were harsh with you," this is called *Lashon Harah*, for by making such a statement – although nothing new was revealed to Reuven – animosity will be aroused in his heart. – *Chafetz Chaim*

A Sage is Greater than a Prophet

Extract from a Eulogy for Rabbi Haim Pinto Zatzal

Adapted from the Manuscripts of Rabbi Maimon the son of Rabbi Avraham Abohbot Zatzal (Delivered in the City of Essaouira)

My teachers! The name of the great Rav, whose fame spreads around the world, is well-known, and now he has left this world. That is why his honor demands that we eulogize him, he who was a Torah scholar and a kabbalist of G-d, a *seraph* endowed with wings. In order to praise him, it is not enough to mention a few of his virtues, he who was filled with kindness as a pomegranate is filled with seeds, and who carried the crown of Torah. He was an ocean of wisdom, a river of insight, and he was crowned with humility and a good reputation, which surpasses all else.

Woe to me, for my innards are overcome by this passing of a sage, who is greater than a prophet, and from whose mouth gems emerged. He explained the crowns of the letters, and he derived the slightest details of the *halachot* from them. Tears drip from our eyes on account of the sage who has left us, the crown of the generation, the spiritual leader of the Diaspora.

Where did this saint of divine origin go, this sage from whose lips poured myrrh, a man pure in Torah and the service of G-d? He was like a fawn, teaching Torah to the community and running like a gazelle towards all sacred causes; he was a bubbling spring in the Gemara and the study of Talmudic problems.

Every week he went to knock on the door of generous donors to collect *tzeddakah* for the poor, always having pity on the widow and the orphan.

Happy is the woman who gave birth to him! He was a cemented cistern that does not lose a drop. Happy are the eyes that saw the radiance of his face, for it was like seeing the face of G-d! Everyone obeyed him, his voice being pleasant and rhythmic, able to render glory and rejoice in the *Simchat Beit HaShoeva*, a Rav as great as Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Akiva, a man of stature.

The Tanna states in the name of Rabbi Shimon: "There are three crowns: The crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of kingship. Yet the crown of a good name [*i.e.*, a good reputation] surpasses them all" [*Pirkei Avoth* 4:13]. There is a problem here, for at first there seems to be three crowns, and yet we count four. What is the reason for this?

We find an allusion to the fact that when the Sanctuary was erected, there were three crowns: The crown of the Torah, held by the 70 elders and other sages such as Nadav and Avihu, Pinchas and Caleb, who merited the crown of the Torah; the crown of royalty, held by Moshe Rabbeinu, who was "king over Yeshurun;" and the crown of priesthood, held by Aaron and his sons.

Yet none among these men, all of whom carried a crown, was able to participate in the construction of the Sanctuary, until the arrival of Betzalel. He had a good reputation, superior to all these things, as well as the good reputation of his ancestors, who had sanctified G-d's Name in public: Hur was killed for the sanctification of the Divine Name, and Judah the son of Jacob, who was his ancestor, sanctified the Name of G-d in public. That is why Betzalel had the merit of building the Sanctuary, because of his good reputation, which surpassed all else. His name is understood to be significant as well: He was a shadow [*tze]* of G-d [*E-L*], which is why he had the merit of building Hashem's Sanctuary.

This *tzaddik* who left us also had a good reputation, known throughout the country, and his name, Haim, is used to describe the Torah, which is called an *Etz Haim* ("Tree of Life") for those who support it. Rabbi Haim merited life, which is Torah, and he merited longevity.

Wealth is Useless on the Day of Wrath

We know that this world is compared to the eve of Shabbat, and the World to Come is compared to Shabbat. These are two consecutive days, one in which there is a great deal of work, and the other in which there is a great deal of rest, namely Shabbat, during which time the soul rests and finds delight after the work of the previous day. The same applies to this world, in which man exhausts himself and endures numerous trials so he can merit the World to Come and rest in it.

Hence we find that when the *tzaddikim* die, it is said that their souls find rest. The opposite is said of the wicked, who enjoy tranquility in this world but experience great upheaval in death. Thus for Nebuchadnezzar, who experienced the greatest tranquility in this life, his bones were shaken in the World to Come. For someone to merit rest in that world, he must prepare provisions: Giving *tzeddakah* to the poor, showing mercy, and helping his fellow.

The Midrash recounts that when our ancestors, pious men, collected *tzeddakah* for the poor, they once entered a courtyard to ask the man of the house for a donation. At that point they heard him telling his wife to prepare some lentils for his son's breakfast because it would not cost too much (since lentils were cheap). At that point the Sages said, "Let us leave this place quickly, for someone who is stingy in regards to himself, how much more stingy will he be with others!"

In the meantime, the man of the house heard what they were saying, and he quickly summoned them back and gave them a generous donation. He said to them, "Why were you hesitant?" They replied, "We heard you telling your wife to prepare a plate of lentils because they weren't costly. We therefore reasoned that you were much less likely to give *tzeddakah*."

The man replied, "I do not forsake *mitzvot*, and I give the best that I have for *tzeddakah*," for this world is compared to the eve of Shabbat, and the World to Come is compared to Shabbat – a world entirely of rest. We must not rest in this world, but instead we must live here temporarily. Whoever tries to live permanently is an ignoramus, as was the case with Nebuchadnezzar, who made this world his primary focus. He said, "The might of my hand made me all this wealth" [*Devarim* 8:17], a reference to great Babylon, which he made into a kingdom to glorify himself.

However things reached such a point that he challenged Heaven, and so the Holy One, blessed be He, struck him upon the mouth until he himself recognized that the inhabitants of the earth are nothing. All the people in this world who act as if they are here forever are called dead, and nothing will remain of their wealth. They are as empty as dust, which has no substance, and all their wealth will be useless on the day of wrath, whereas *tzeddakah* saves from death.

Filled with Kindness

This *tzaddik*, our teacher the holy kabbalist Rabbi Haim Pinto, may his merit protect both us and all Israel, performed *tzeddakah* and acted in righteousness even at an advanced age. He possessed the attribute of kindness, being concerned with all the inhabitants of his city, and he would commonly bury the dead and weep for them.

He was attentive to the misfortunes of Jews, especially the *talmidei chachamim*, and each time that trials came upon them – be it because of expulsions or war in the communities of the city of Essaouira, which were started by cruel Muslims – he was there for them. The residents of the city suffered from hunger and thirst, and young men and women were taken into captivity. Their homes were destroyed, they were pursued, and for them it was a decree from Heaven.

Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol

Elul 26, which this year [2008] corresponds to Sept 26, marks the passing of the *tzaddik* and kabbalist Rabbi Haim Pinto *Hagadol*, may his merit protect us all. As the Sages teach, “The *tzaddikim* are greater in death than in life.” Each year we witness numerous miracles and wonders that have saved many Jews – believers and sons of believers – who come to pray by the grave of the *tzaddik* in Morocco. They travel there to pray to Hashem for the merit of the *tzaddik* to act in their favor and save them from every misfortune and disease.

In books of Chassidut, great emphasis is placed on the incredible accounts of the *tzaddikim*, on the power of faith in the Creator of the world and the *talmidei chachamim*, through whose merit we are delivered. In honor of Rabbi Haim Pinto’s Hilloula, we have put together some amazing accounts that we recently heard from our teacher, Rabbi David Hanania Pinto *Shlita*.

The Power of the Merit of the Fathers

The great *tzaddik* Rabbi Yosef Benvenisti *Zatzal* of Jerusalem, the descendant of the *gaon* and author of *Knesset HaGedolah*, often traveled to Morocco as an emissary of Sephardic *kollelim* in Jerusalem. He was sent to collect funds for the needs of the *bonei Torah* in Jerusalem.

Being in Morocco, there was not a single day that he did not travel to the grave of Rabbi Haim Pinto *Hagadol*, may his merit protect us. Furthermore, even once he returned to Jerusalem, he would send a letter every month to his grandson, who lived in Morocco, along with some money for *tzeddakah*. His grandson was to take this money and bless it by the grave of Rabbi Haim. He acted in this way until his final day.

Several people from Jerusalem once asked Rabbi Yosef why he went to so much trouble to honor the memory of Rabbi Haim. What was the reason behind it?

The great *tzaddik* Rabbi Yosef Benvenisti replied, “One who possesses the merit of the fathers understands the meaning of the merit of the fathers, and one who does not possess the merit of the fathers does not understand its tremendous value. I also possess the merit of the fathers, and I understand its value. I therefore send money so people may pray for me by the grave of Rabbi Haim Pinto, may his merit protect us.”

The Coin Disappeared

The Assaraf family of Agadir understands and appreciates the name and honor of the *tzaddik* Rabbi Haim Pinto, never missing an opportunity to attend the yearly Hilloula organized in Mogador. They also participate in a large way by sponsoring the generous buffet in honor of the Hilloula, bringing joy to everyone gathered there in honor of the *tzaddik*. A few years ago, this family was unable to participate in the Hilloula of the *tzaddik*, as they were accustomed to doing, because their young daughter swallowed a coin that she had been playing with.

The x-rays taken of the child clearly showed the coin lodged in her lungs, and the family was urged to travel to France for emergency surgery to remove it.

Before leaving for France, they contacted our teacher, Rabbi David Hanania Pinto *Shlita*, to ask him for permission to go to

Paris with the child and not participate in the Hilloula. Our teacher told them to ask the doctors for an additional x-ray, and to travel to France if the coin had not moved. Hence the Assaraf family had another x-ray taken of the young girl, as they had been instructed to do. The coin, however, had disappeared and her lungs were in perfect condition!

The family told no one of the x-ray results, and they immediately left for Mogador to have time to participate in the Hilloula. It was early in the morning when they arrived, and at the grave of the *tzaddik* they began to sing, rejoice, and praise the Name of Hashem for the great miracle He had performed for their little girl.

Everyone who participated in the Hilloula repeatedly heard the story of the miracle that this family had experienced because of their desire to participate in the Hilloula of the *tzaddik* Rabbi Haim Pinto.

At that point, the great surprise was that there were no doubts as to the source of the miracle, for lying on the grave of Rabbi Haim Pinto was a silver coin, similar to the one that the child had swallowed while playing!

I Won’t be Needing You

Mrs. Georgette Elkaim traveled to Morocco seven years ago in order to pray by the graves of the *tzaddikim*. The taxi driver who was bringing her asked, “Why are you going to visit the dead? Don’t you have something else to do? Go visit the living instead!”

Mrs. Elkaim replied, “If that’s so, then tomorrow I won’t be needing you.”

“Why?” asked the driver.

“Because tomorrow I plan on going to Mogador, where I will visit the grave of Rabbi Haim Pinto *Hagadol*. Since I see that visiting such places upsets you, I prefer to drive with someone else, someone who appreciates and respects our *tzaddikim*, who even in death are called alive.”

The Moroccan driver continued to ridicule Mrs. Elkaim. He said that she was wasting her time and money on visiting the graves of the dead. Suddenly, as he was speaking, he became mute before her. In fact he turned white and was unable to say a word.

At that point it dawned on him that this happened as a direct result of his words against the great men of Israel. It was because he had scorned the honor of the *tzaddikim*, who in death are called alive.

Regretting his actions, he immediately brought Mrs. Elkaim some candles so she could light them by the grave of the *tzaddik* and ask that he be forgiven. Thus she quickly made her way to the grave of Rabbi Haim Pinto *Hagadol* to publicly sanctify Hashem’s Name.

She succeeded, for during the time that she was praying from the bottom of her heart by the grave of the *tzaddik* Rabbi Haim Pinto, she made a call to the driver’s cell phone and told him that she was now praying by the *tzaddik*’s grave.

It was then that a great miracle occurred: As Mrs. Elkaim was speaking to the driver, he suddenly regained the ability to speak! In fact it was as if he had never been mute, for he began to speak as normally as before. Naturally he thanked Mrs. Elkaim for her prayers, and he also thanked Rabbi Haim Pinto the *tzaddik* and the Creator of the world. At that point he took it upon himself to honor the *tzaddikim*, who in death are greater than in life.

Addressed to the Individual

It is written, “You are standing today, all of you” (*Devarim* 29:9).

The Midrash states, “Why does *Parsha Nitzavim* immediately follow the curses? It is because when the Children of Israel heard the 99 curses, without mentioning the 49 curses from the book of *Vayikra*, they turned pale and said: ‘Who can possibly endure these?’ Moshe began to reassure them: ‘You are standing today, all of you’ – You have provoked the Omnipresent to anger many times, yet He has not made an end of you. Indeed, you still exist before Him.”

This is truly surprising: Why did the Children of Israel not turn pale when they heard Moshe pronounce the curses from the book of *Vayikra*, in *Parsha Bechukotai*? Why did they turn pale only now, when they heard the 99 other curses?

Rabbi Gershon Ashkenazi *Zatzal* responds that the curses of *Parsha Bechukotai* were pronounced in the plural. Now in the Midrash we read, “Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Akiva: ‘Any misfortune confined to the individual is a real misfortune, but any misfortune not confined to the individual is not such a misfortune’” (*Devarim Rabba* 2:22). (This is the source of the saying, “The misfortune of all is a small consolation.”)

Hence it follows that the curses of *Parsha Bechukotai*, which were pronounced in the plural, did not excessively worry the Children of Israel, for each of them thought: “These curses aren’t addressed to me, but to the community.” They were therefore not concerned with them and did not turn pale. Yet in this week’s *parsha*, in which the curses are pronounced in the singular and are addressed to each individual, the Children of Israel did worry and turn pale.

Being Led Astray

It is written, “You saw their abominations and their detestable idols, of wood and stone, of silver and gold that were with them” (*Devarim* 29:16).

Rabbi Shlomo Tzadok *Shlita* explains the repetitive and lengthy expression, “of wood and stone, of silver and gold.” After all, idols represent absolutely nothing, and nothing changes if they are of silver or gold, or of wood or stone.

He states, “The Torah had to mention both silver and gold, wood and stone, in order to hint to us that just being amazed or allowing ourselves to be impressed by the silver or gold that covers them, or by the artwork that they represent, is absolutely forbidden.”

Why is this the case? It is because doing so pushes the mind towards things meant to deceive. This also contains an allusion to the fact that silver, gold, and the success they bring leads a person astray by idols.

Where Moshe Went

It is written, “Moshe went and spoke these words to all Israel” (*Devarim* 31:1).

Where did Moshe go? The saintly Ohr HaHaim explains this based on what is written in the Zohar, namely that 40 days before a person’s death, his soul leaves the body and heads for its resting place in the world above. The *tzaddikim*, great Torah figures, experience this even beforehand, while still alive.

This is what the verse means by saying, “Moshe went.” The spirit of Moshe – the spirit of life and the soul that were in him – began to prepare for the world above. Moshe Rabbeinu already sensed this process taking place, and he knew that his end was near. Hence he

spoke to the Jewish people and addressed his final words to them.

Another explanation is given by Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra in his commentary on the Torah: “He went from tribe to tribe in order to inform them of his impending death, telling them that they should not be afraid.” Along the same lines, the Sforno states: “After Moshe completed the matter of bringing them into the covenant, he took the initiative of comforting the people as they contemplated Moshe’s imminent death, for he did not want his passing to sadden their celebration of entering the covenant, as reflected in the verse: ‘Let Israel rejoice in its Maker’ [*Tehillim* 149:2].”

In the Light of the Parsha

Moshe Rabbeinu’s Good Advice

It is written, “You are standing today, all of you” (*Devarim* 29:9). The Midrash states, “Just as the day is sometimes clear and sometimes dark, likewise when darkness falls upon you, the light of the world will enlighten you. When will this happen? It is when you form a single bundle, as it is written: ‘You are all alive today’ [*Devarim* 4:4].” Normally, when somebody takes a bundle of reeds in his hand, he cannot break them all. However even a small child can break a single reed. Likewise the Children of Israel will only be delivered when they become a single bundle, as we say on these days: “When they are united, they can welcome the *Shechinah*.” Explaining the word “all” that appears in this verse, the Midrash states: “It is only when you are all united that you stand today all alive, and even when the curses reach you, the light of the Final Redemption will shine for you.”

We may also cite another statement of the Midrash: “Rabbi Eliezer HaKappar said in the name of Rabbi: Great is the power of peace, for when the Children of Israel form a single bundle, even if there is idolatry among them, strict justice does not strike them, as it is written: ‘Ephraim is joined in serving idols; let him be’ [*Hosea* 4:17]” (*Tanchuma, Shoftim* 18).

We also find in the Zohar, “When a people live in peace and harbor no quarrelsome individuals in their midst, G-d has compassion on them and strict justice is not invoked against them, even though they worship idols. This is in harmony with the verse, ‘Ephraim is joined in serving idols; let him be’” (Zohar I:200b). If the Children of Israel, who carry the name of Ephraim, are united as one, then even if they worship graven images, meaning idols, they are left alone and not punished.

Rashi explains, “Whose [sins] were worse: Those in the generation of the flood or the generation of the dispersion? The former did not raise their hands against G-d, whereas the latter did raise their hands against G-d to wage war against Him. Yet the former were drowned, but the latter did not perish from the world! The generation of the flood were thieves and there was strife among them, and so they were destroyed. But [the others] conducted themselves with love and friendship” (Rashi on *Bereshith* 11:9).

After all that has been said – besides the fact that Moshe reassured the Children of Israel by telling them that even if all the curses are fulfilled, Hashem would not destroy them, and He would show them the light of the Final Redemption – Moshe also gave them some advice on how to be saved from the curses, namely to always be united. In that case, Hashem would have pity on them and the curses would not be fulfilled.