

The Path To Follow

Va'eira

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Rabbi David Pinto Shlita

Pride Prevents Teshuvah

On the verse, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (*Shemot* 7:3), which we find in this week's *parsha*, the Ramban cites a statement by our Sages in the Midrash: "Rabbi Yochanan said, 'Does this not provide heretics with a reason for arguing that he had no means of repenting...?' To which Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish replied, 'Let the mouths of the heretics be stopped up. "If to the scoffers, He will scoff" [*Mishlei* 3:34]: When G-d warns a man once, twice, and even a third time – and he still does not repent – G-d then closes his heart against repentance so that He may exact vengeance from him for his sins. So it was with the wicked Pharaoh. Since G-d warned him five times and he paid no attention, G-d then said: "You have stiffened your neck and hardened your heart. Very well, I will add to your impurity" ' " (*Shemot Rabba* 13:3).

Pharaoh Planned on Sending Them Away

The Ramban explains this Midrash in the following way: "Half of the plagues came upon him because of his transgressions, for in connection with them it is only said: 'Pharaoh's heart was hardened,' 'Pharaoh hardened his heart.' Thus Pharaoh refused to let the Children of Israel go for the glory of G-d. But when the plagues began to bear down on him and he could no longer tolerate them, his heart softened and he planned on sending them away on account of the onslaught of the plagues, not in order to do the will of his Creator. Then Hashem hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, for the glory of His Name."

What the Ramban wrote, namely that Pharaoh should have sent the Children of Israel away for the glory of G-d and to do His will, means that Pharaoh should have understood Hashem's greatness and power from the plagues, and he should have returned to Him and done His will, as we have previously explained. This is why the Holy One, blessed be He, sent the plague of darkness near the end, after the other plagues. It was the last plague before that of the firstborn, for Rashi wrote that in that generation, there were evildoers among the Children of Israel who did not want to leave Egypt, and all of them died during the three days of darkness.

This is why G-d waited to kill these evildoers, for by that time they would have seen the strong hand that He displayed in Egypt through all the plagues that had occurred up to that point. Then they may have acknowledged the greatness of Hashem and His kindness towards all Israel, and realized that there was nothing good to expect from the Egyptians, since they had been struck down and beaten. They would then repent and want to leave Egypt, as did the Children of Israel who always feared His word. Yet since He already sent the plagues and they did not repent – since they persisted in their rebellion and did not want to leave Egypt – He brought the plague of darkness upon them, and they died during the three days of darkness. Likewise, Pharaoh should have marveled at the miracles that he witnessed and repented. Since he did not, Hashem hardened his heart.

Incredible That Pharaoh Did Not Repent

We have learned that the Holy One, blessed be He, did not prevent Pharaoh from doing *teshuvah*. He simply hardened his heart so he would not do

teshuvah because of the severity of the plagues. It is actually incredible that the wicked Pharaoh did not repent, for the Egyptians already knew the truth of Hashem's existence, as well as His ability to do anything He desires. As the magicians told Pharaoh, "This is the finger of G-d" (*Shemot* 8:15), and it was already said concerning the plague of hail: "Whoever among the servants of Pharaoh feared the word of Hashem" (*ibid.* 9:20). Furthermore, Pharaoh himself told Moshe and Aaron after the plague: "This time I have sinned. Hashem is righteous, and I and my people are wicked" (v.27).

This is also mentioned in the Midrash, namely that Moshe warned Pharaoh for 24 days before each plague (*Shemot Rabba* 9:12). He did this in order to give Pharaoh enough time in between plagues to reflect upon the truth and repent. It is therefore incredible that he failed to do so.

Pride Prevents Teshuvah

It seems that Pharaoh did not do *teshuvah* because he considered himself to be a god, as the Sages say in the Midrash: "Only in the morning did [Pharaoh] go out to the water, because this evildoer used to boast that he was a god and did not require to ease himself" (*Shemot Rabba* 9:8). Thus we read, "Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great serpent that crouches within its rivers, who has said: 'Mine is the river, and I have made myself!' " (*Ezekiel* 29:3). Hence Pharaoh's pride prevented him from doing *teshuvah*, for he did not want to obey Hashem!

This is what we see among certain individuals who believe in G-d: Although they truly want to repent because they realize that their deeds are not good, they fail to do so because of pride. Each person must reflect upon the reality that the Holy One, blessed be He, created all the worlds, and that He alone can do what He pleases above and below. This is why we must obey His commandments and do His will, for in this way we will merit to return to Him. As it is said, "His heart will understand, and he will repent and be healed" (*Isaiah* 6:10).

Guard Your Tongue!

We Fail to Pay Attention

We have no permission to believe *Lashon Harah* – even if the speaker recounts it in the presence of the subject – if we do not hear the subject admitting it himself. This is especially true when the speaker does not recount it in the presence of the subject, but only claims that he would do so. It is forbidden to believe him for that reason.

Because of our numerous sins, however, in general we pay no attention to this whatsoever.

– Chafetz Chaim

How to Become Generous

It is written, "Aaron took Elisheva, the daughter of Amminadav, the sister of Nachshon, to himself as a wife" (*Shemot* 6:23).

The *Sefer Chassidim* believes that it is better to marry a woman who is the daughter of an uneducated but generous man, rather than the daughter of a *talmid chacham* who is beset by stinginess. Why? It is because generosity is a manifestation of a core Jewish trait. The book *Shevet Miyhuda* notes that this idea may be found in this week's *parsha*: "Aaron took Elisheva, the daughter of Amminadav, the sister of Nachshon, to himself as a wife." In other words, the main reason that Aaron married Elisheva was because she was the daughter of Amminadav, whose name proves that he excelled in *nedivut* ("generosity"). Only after this did Aaron consider the fact that she was the sister of Nachshon, who was a *talmid chacham*.

How Can One Become Generous?

It seems that the formula for becoming generous is simple and within reach of every Jew. In his book *Aleinu Leshabeach*, the *gaon* Rabbi Yitzchak Zilberstein *Shlita* provides us with some brief guidelines and adds a magnificent story:

A person must acknowledge the simple fact that the money in his possession – the cash that he has in his current accounts – is not really his, but rather a simple deposit from the Creator of the world. One who believes and acts according to this basic principle will be able to open his heart and generously give to everyone in need!

A Suspicious Object in the Hotel

In a luxurious conference room of a Tel Aviv hotel, two G-d-fearing merchants were meeting to close a large business deal, and they eventually reached an agreement and were ready to sign a contract. In such circumstances, it was customary for the buyer to place a substantial sum of money on the negotiating table. By doing so, he signals to the seller that as soon as the deal is signed, he can take the money for himself. Now the particular deal that these merchants were discussing involved an enormous amount of money, which was reflected in the fact that a large pile of bills had been placed on the table.

As it turned out, during the most intense part of their negotiations, the hotel suddenly announced that a suspicious object had been found on the premises. Everyone in the hotel was therefore told to immediately leave their rooms, including the conference room, and evacuate the building.

The two merchants got up and left, but in the ensuing chaos the buyer forgot to pick up the stack of bills that he had placed on the table!

A half-hour later, people were told that they could come back inside, and the two merchants returned to the room where they had been negotiating. However they were stunned to see that the money had disappeared, that it was gone without a trace! Every effort to find the stack of bills proved useless, and the police, who obviously had been called to the scene, were unable to find the money or the thief. News of the incident spread throughout the hotel, and many people came looking for the large stack of bills that was in the conference room, but without success.

Each Side Says, "It's Completely Yours"

Another Orthodox Jew appeared on the scene one or two days later, for he had also heard about the regrettable incident. When he entered the hotel's conference room, he noticed that one of the large vases in the room was standing a little crooked. He approached the vase, and to his utter surprise he saw a bill sticking out from underneath. Looking around him and seeing nobody, he lifted up the vase and found all the merchant's bills beneath!

He took the money and asked a Rav whether or not he could keep it, since by now the owners had apparently given up all hope of finding it. This Rav believed that it was permissible, and the person kept it. However he could not sleep on that night. After all, it was a large sum of money, an amount that one doesn't find every day, not even among major merchants or in large business deals, and he felt that he couldn't keep the money for himself.

The next morning, the man got up and asked for the name and address of the merchant who had lost his money. He contacted him and asked if he could come over, and upon arriving he told the merchant that he had found his missing money. He then placed it all on the table.

Certain that the merchant would be elated and thank him profusely, imagine his surprise when the merchant told him that he had already abandoned hope of finding it, and that he had no intention of taking it back! "The money is yours," he said, "and you can do with it as you wish." Up to now we have learned: "If two people lay hold of a *tallit* and one says... 'It's all mine,' and the other says, 'It's all mine'..." (*Bava Metzia* 2a), yet here the opposite was occurring, for each side was saying: "It's all yours!"

They Broke a Plate!

The story doesn't end here. After their conversation, the man who found the money suggested a novel idea.

"Do you have a son?" he asked the merchant who had left his money in the conference room.

"Yes, and he's waiting downstairs for me in the car."

"Well, I have a daughter, and perhaps your son would be interested in meeting her?" said the man.

A meeting was arranged within the half-hour, which was followed by several others. In the end... they broke a plate: The money now belonged to both families, who used it for the wedding, exactly as in the story of Alexander of Macedonia *Bereshith Rabba* 33:1).

In the Light of the Parsha

They Did Not Change Their Language

It is written, "I will bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt, and I will deliver you from their service. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgment, and I will take you to Me for a people" (*Shemot* 6:6-7).

The Sages teach that this passage contains four expressions of redemption, and they commanded us to drink four cups of wine during the Passover Seder in order to evoke them (*Yerushalmi, Pesachim* 10:1). In these four expressions, *Midrash Lekach Tov* sees an allusion to the four merits by which the Children of Israel were delivered from Egypt: They did not change their language, they did not change their style of clothing, they did not reveal secrets, and they did not abandon circumcision. *Lekach Tov* also cites the explanation of the *Pesikta* on the verse, "And there he became a nation – great, mighty, and populous" (*Devarim* 26:5), which teaches us that the Children of Israel flourished in Egypt: Their style of clothing, the way they ate, and how they spoke were different than that of the Egyptians. They were distinct, and they knew that they were a solitary people, separate from the Egyptians. In order to safeguard tradition, the Sages placed great importance on wearing clothing similar to what our forefathers wore. In fact this merit – that the Children of Israel did not change their style of clothing – is what enabled them to be delivered from Egypt.

From here comes the great importance that the Torah places on Jewish garments, as well as the praise of our ancestors in Egypt for having not changed their manner of dress. Jewish garments differ from those of non-Jews not only in terms of form and style, but especially by their essence and goal. The Jewish people in Egypt preserved the form and style of their garments in order to separate themselves from the views and opinions of the Egyptians on garments and their objective. In Jewish hands, garments are an instrument of choice for serving G-d and fighting the evil inclination. However they can also turn against us if not used in the right way and with the proper perspective. Garments have the power to bring a person down to the level of animals. If the Jewish people had allowed themselves to be attracted to the manner in which the Egyptians dressed, and if they had used their garments to serve their desires, they would have assimilated. They would have lost their greatness and distinctiveness as the Jewish people, and there would have been no one left to deliver. Yet by the merit of not having changed their style of clothing, and by flourishing in Egypt, the Jewish people became the people of G-d. They ended up inheriting the Torah, which is why they were delivered from Egypt.

The Children of Israel who left Egypt were known as the Generation of Knowledge. They were fed manna, which was spiritual food, bread from Heaven that was completely absorbed by the body, meaning that they had no need to relieve themselves (*Yoma* 75b). Of them the Torah says, "Your garment did not wear out upon you, nor did your feet swell these 40 years" (*Devarim* 8:4). Since they were detached from physicality, more holy and spiritual than before, they had no great need for physical garments to protect themselves from sin, and they essentially used spiritual garments: Torah and mitzvot. Since they did not need their garments, they did not wear out, for they did not "use" them. I remember that my father Zatzukal did not leave his home for 40 years, and he carefully safeguarded his eyes and his sight. He never sweated and his body never smelled bad. When someone sanctifies himself, his body also becomes spiritual and the physical laws of nature no longer apply to him.

The Torah and Eretz Israel

It is written, “I will bring you into the land about which I raised My hand to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it to you as a heritage” (*Shemot* 6:8).

The term *morasha* (“heritage”) is used twice in the Torah. The first instance occurs in the above verse, and the second instance deals with the Torah itself: “Moshe commanded us the Torah, a heritage of the congregation of Jacob” (*Devarim* 33:4).

In his book *Kol Yehudah*, Rabbi Yehudah Tsadka *Zatzal* (the Rosh Yeshiva of Porat Israel) explains that Eretz Israel and the holy Torah are directly connected to one another. It is impossible to permanently inherit the land without observing Torah *mitzvot*, for both are a heritage of the Jewish people.

The Torah is a heritage of the Jewish people, a heritage that absolutely cannot be changed. Likewise, Eretz Israel is a heritage of the Jewish people that absolutely cannot be changed. Each is connected to the other, and the Jewish people must watch over the sanctity of the land by observing the Torah. As the verse states, “He gave them the lands of nations, and they inherited the toil of kingdoms” (*Tehillim* 105:44) – so they could observe His laws and honor His decrees.

A Sign

It is written, “Give for yourselves a sign” (*Shemot* 7:9).

The author of *Hafla'ah*, Rabbi Pinchas of Frankfurt am Main, explains:

“Give for yourselves a sign – provide yourselves with a sign. The power of Egypt’s impurity had become so great that Pharaoh even tried to arouse doubts in Moshe and Aaron concerning Hashem’s power. Pharaoh said to them: You yourselves do not believe in what you are saying. You yourselves need, as it were, a sign.”

The Power of the Surroundings

It is written, “Take your staff and cast it before Pharaoh – it will become a snake” (*Shemot* 7:9).

Rabbi Meir Shapira of Lublin *Zatzal*, the founder of *Daf HaYomi*, would often say:

“We know that a person’s surroundings have a great influence on him, for better or worse. Even a refined and noble-minded person is liable to deteriorate among immoral people. The opposite is also true: A wicked person will become better and repent among people who are honest and seek to elevate themselves.

“This is the allusion contained in the staff that became a serpent. Even G-d’s staff – upon which the Tetragrammaton was engraved – became a serpent, a deadly creature, when it was cast before Pharaoh and placed in a wicked and depraved surrounding. However this venomous serpent once again became G-d’s staff when held by the hands of Moshe.”

The True Staff

It is written, “Aaron cast his staff before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent” (*Shemot* 7:10).

In Pressburg in the year 5562, the Chatam Sofer gave the following explanation for this verse:

“The Prophet Ezekiel calls Pharaoh, ‘The great serpent that crouches within its rivers’ [Ezekiel 29:3]. This is how Pharaoh described himself. Aaron came and revealed to him that he was not a serpent, but a staff in G-d’s hand to punish Israel. However Hashem’s staff was now in Aaron’s hand, and it became a serpent only when necessary. Just as Isaiah had called Sennacherib ‘the staff of My anger’ [Isaiah 10:5], likewise Pharaoh – the serpent – would become a staff of dry wood, for the true staff of G-d would swallow all the power of that great serpent.”

Wonder of Wonders

It is written, “The wheat and the spelt were not struck, *ki afillot* [for they ripen late]” (*Shemot* 9:32).

Here Rashi states, “for they ripen late – and they were still tender and able to withstand the hard [hail]. ... Some of our rabbis differed with this and interpreted *ki afillot* to mean that ‘wonders of wonders’ was done for them, insofar as they were not smitten.”

It is surprising that in the previous verse, the Torah explicitly states that the flax and barley were struck because “the barley was ripe and the flax was in its stock” (v.31). This did not apply to the wheat and spelt, so how can we say that they were saved by a miracle? It was a natural phenomenon, as the first part of Rashi’s explanation states.

The *gaon* Rabbi Moshe Feinstein *Zatzal* explains that the “wonders of wonders” which occurred was the fact that Hashem sent the plague in such a way that the wheat and spelt were not damaged, even if the Egyptians deserved to lose them. The same idea applies to the generations that clearly see that they are not good, and yet the world continues to exist: It is an even greater miracle.

According to this explanation, we can understand why the Sages introduced this “wonders of wonders,” which signified a miracle greater than others. If it designated a miracle that consists of a change in the laws of nature, what reason is there to distinguish between a lesser or greater change? When we leave the realm of natural laws, all miracles are the same! We must say that it consists of the very fact that the wheat and barley were spared while everything else was destroyed. This is something that can justifiably be described, in comparison to the strict justice that had been provoked, as “wonders of wonders.”

A Love for Torah

Just how amazing are the uplifting words of the Chazon Ish *Zatzal*, who wrote: “Study when you have the time, for it quickly flies away and you can no longer recapture it, leaving you with nothing. May a single instant be as precious to you as numerous hours, and do not tell yourself: ‘Why should I start studying this subject, since I only have a few minutes?’ Never say this, for it is illusionary and imaginary” (*Letters of the Chazon Ish* 3:60).

A Face Burning with Shame

Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv *Zatzal*, known as the Alter of Kelm, was usually content with two and a half hours of sleep each day. During the week he never got undressed, but studied diligently all night long. At times he would study for twelve hours straight, and during the wintertime he studied after the evening prayer until seven in the morning, after which he would doze off for about an hour.

When he awoke, he would immediately jump out of bed with tremendous energy, as if a thief armed with a knife was standing behind him. He did this in order to eradicate any tendency towards laziness, and to accustom himself to being energetic. Regarding that hour of sleep, the Alter of Kelm would groan and say: “Alas, I get undressed and lay down. I’m like a horse!” He would even say to himself, “My face burns with shame when I lie down to sleep!”

He would usually recite the *Vatikin* prayers during the summertime, and then study until two in the afternoon. When he lived in the city of Grodno, where he had to pray with the students in order to guide and influence them, he would study in the summertime from nine in the morning until nine at night, the local time for *Mincha*!

The Alter of Kelm maintained these practices for his entire life. Even when he was struck with a grave heart ailment, he did not change a thing, for he devoted all his efforts to learning in the same way.

There were moments when he feared that he would fall prey to fatigue and doze off. At that point, he would get up and stand for hours while learning, to the point that he would sometimes collapse due to weakness and exhaustion. While living in his summer home in Gwiger, he made himself a special *shtender* that did not have a support. This meant that he could not lean on it to sleep, for there as well he maintained his fixed schedule of learning.

Mourning at the Beit HaMidrash

Our Sages have taught that jealousy among the Sages led to their wisdom increasing. The great men of Israel throughout the generations have always symbolized the concept of “jealously among the Sages,” so as to augment their wisdom. Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld would often say that he was jealous of the father of Rabbi Yosef Karo, the author of *Beit Yosef*. Why his father? It was because he could not possibly be jealous of Rabbi Yosef Karo himself – he simply had to study and become like him!

It is said that at the conclusion of his *Sheva Berachot*, Rabbi Zelig Braverman *Zatzal* (the Rosh Yeshiva of Mea Shearim) went to the Beit HaMidrash in the Mea Shearim district. He did not return until the following Friday, something that he continued to do every week for the next 17 years, day and night, night and day. He studied Torah with a tremendous amount of energy, returning home only for Shabbat.

At the Beit HaMidrash, Rabbi Zelig did not “go” to sleep. Instead, he would sleep whenever his head dropped on account of exhaustion. Even at that point, he would dip his feet in a basin of water so as not to sleep comfortably, or for long – meaning no more than two hours a night. He did this every day, learning for eighteen hours!

When his father-in-law died, it was pointed out to him that he should not leave his family at home alone. He agreed, and so he returned home during the week. Yet even then, he did not change his ways, except for his two hours of sleep. During that time, he would sleep in a bed at home rather than on a bench in the Beit HaMidrash.

Rabbi Zelig maintained his habit of not leaving the Beit HaMidrash even when he was told that one of his sons was gravely ill. This greatly worried him, and he would pray and beseech Hashem for help, but at the Beit HaMidrash. When his son died in the prime of his life, he followed the customs of mourning and sat *shiva* for him, but at the Beit HaMidrash.

He Really Doesn’t Have the Time

People would apply the phrase, “For they are our life and the length of our days” to the *gaon* Rabbi Moshe Zartski *Zatzal*, the Rav of Krakow. For us, these are just words from the prayer book, but for Rabbi Moshe they took on real meaning. He exemplified the true meaning of diligence in Torah study. In fact during his youth, when he studied in the yeshiva of the *gaon* Rabbi Shimon Shkop *Zatzal* of Grodno, he was called Moshe *Matmid* (the diligent one).

The *gaon* Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz *Zatzal*, who was his *chavruta* in Grodno, described Rabbi Moshe’s diligence with amazement: For four and a half years straight, he remained in his corner, where he ate and slept. Kind-hearted women would usually bring him a little food at the Beit HaMidrash, for he did not leave his spot.

One of the *talmidei chachamim* who eulogized him stated that the Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Shimon Shkop, ordered all the students of the yeshiva ketanah to be assembled twice each week and brought to the main yeshiva. The sole, unique goal of this visit was for them to see Rabbi Moshe, the “diligent one,” in his corner immersed in learning without interruption. In this way, their desire to persist in learning Torah would be strengthened.

The local authorities in Grodno insisted that all residents carry their ID in their pocket at all times. One day, police officers came to the yeshiva to check IDs. Rabbi Moshe did not have his on that day, for he had left it elsewhere. A policeman asked him for his ID, but he replied that he didn’t have it.

“Then go and find it!” ordered the policeman. Rabbi Moshe lifted his eyes from the Gemara and said, “I don’t have the time.” The policeman shrugged his shoulders, continued his inspection, and then returned to him and asked: “So, your ID?”

“I don’t have the time,” Rabbi Moshe briefly replied, and then returned to his learning.

This scene occurred several times, and people were afraid that the policeman would take unusual measures. When the yeshiva students realized what was happening, they approached the policeman and explained just who this boy was, a boy who didn’t “have the time.” After describing his diligence at length, explaining that the boy did not leave his place for several days, the policeman gave in and said: “If that’s the case, then he really doesn’t have the time!”