

# The Path To Follow

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Ha'azinu

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## THE WONDERS OF G-D TOWARDS ALL MEN

In our parsha, the poem Haazinu recounts throughout its verses how the Holy One, blessed be He, bestows His beneficial influence upon the Children of Israel, in contrast to the other nations of the world. From the beginning we recite, "Ascribe greatness to our G-d" (Deuteronomy 32:3) and further on, "He would make him ride on the heights of the land ... with honey from a stone, and oil from a flinty rock" (v.13). We also read, "For the L-RD's portion is His people; Jacob is the measure of His inheritance" (v.9). Concerning this subject, Moses exhorts Israel as follows: "Remember the days of yore, understand the years of generation after generation" (v.7) in order to tell us that everything stems from the Holy One, blessed by He, Who made everything, and that all the wonders that we witness are due to Him.

Yet because of our many sins, today there are numerous people who look at all of creation without attributing any importance to G-d. They do so because they consider it as natural, as self-evident. In fact they believe that everything is natural and ordinary, yet they don't ask themselves the same questions that Abraham did, who realized that all comes from G-d and that He is the Master of the world (Bereshith Rabba 39:1). Concerning them it is said, "We lead a man by the path that he wants to take" (Makot 10b), and if he wants to invent lies to explain the world, he is not prevented from doing so. However if a man desires to arrive at the truth, he is helped, and not only does he receive his reward, but he also merits sanctifying G-d's Name. This is why it is written, "This emanated from the L-RD; it is wondrous in our eyes" (Psalms 118:23), which means that all wonders stem from G-d because He also created nature.

Yet those who don't look for truth simply say that all is natural and everything is self-evident. To these, G-d responds measure for measure. Actually, they claim that everything is natural, but we know that hateva (nature) has the same numerical value as the name Elokim. Now this Name represents strict justice (Zohar I:64), which is why such people arouse severity, both in this world and the World to Come. Consequently, nature avenges itself on the wicked, as when all of a sudden a volcano erupts and kills multitudes of people, or when an earthquake causes destruction, or when people die in tempests or violent storms. This is because nature is Elokim, strict justice, and because justice attacks the wicked in order to teach us that everything stems from G-d.

Now when severity increases in the world, it doesn't distinguish between good and bad, and even the good are punished in this world, even if it means that they will receive their reward in the World to Come. Alternatively, it can also happen that G-d performs miracles and saves them from strict justice, which for them turns into mercy. They are therefore saved as a reward for their belief that G-d also created nature. Actually, all men fall under mercy's influence, and they can change justice into mercy by the power of their faith in the Creator.

This summer I was in the mountains, and I saw an extraordinary landscape of high peaks. I was taken with trembling before the glory of G-d's majesty and all that He created in the world by strict justice in order to punish those who deny His existence, not recognizing the truth but rather inventing lies in their heart. I then clearly felt the words of King David: "How [mah] abundant are Your works, O L-RD" (Psalms 104:24). The word mah has a numerical value of 45, which means that on one hand King David sees nature as having been created by justice, and on the other hand he says that because he sensed the truth, justice transformed itself into mercy. This allows a person to attach himself even more deeply to the Holy One, blessed be He, and this is what is expressed in the poem Haazinu: "Ascribe greatness to our G-d [Elokeinu]," for the Name Elokim represents strict justice. However if we recognize the truth, then "the L-RD's portion is His people." The Tetragrammaton (here translated as "the L-RD") represents mercy, which means that justice transforms itself into mercy – all this when we ascribe glory (even that of nature) exclusively to the Holy One, blessed be He.

While I was standing like this in front of the great mountains and imposing landscape, contemplating on all of Creation that G-d made and gathering faith in Him in my heart, someone approached me and told me that he had heard in the name of the Admor of Belz that the Holy One, blessed be

He, brings the pure air of Jerusalem to Europe and the entire world. I then asked myself why in fact the Holy One, blessed be He, had created this magnificent landscape precisely in Europe, and why He had to bring Jerusalem's pure air to it.

To explain this, we shall digress slightly. Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav, "Israel knew perfectly well that there was nothing to idolatry, and they worshipped idols only as a means to permit itself public immorality" (Sanhedrin 63b). Rashi explains that a spirit of indecency seized the Children of Israel and they wanted to rid themselves of it, but a spirit of idolatry did not take hold of them. This is very surprising. Is it possible that the generation of the desert, which heard the voice of G-d speaking to them from out of the fire (Deuteronomy 4:12), and which witnessed all sorts of miracles, was drawn to lewd behavior? How was such a thing possible, especially for that generation, which even in Egypt had maintained all of its purity in this area? They had not damaged the covenant of circumcision, and they had changed neither their names, nor their language, nor their style of dress (Vayikra Rabba 32:5). Furthermore, they had sanctified themselves after passing through the 49 gates of impurity (Zohar Yitro 39a), and they had received the Torah! Did they need to go and make a golden calf in order to permit themselves this lewdness that they had so carefully protected themselves against while in Egypt?

Concerning this, it must be explained that the generation of the desert arrived at this terrible situation because it neglected Torah study. Now we know that idleness leads to boredom, which leads to indecency (Ketubot 59b) and a degree of depravity that cannot even be imagined. This is why the Children of Israel pretended to deceive Heaven by saying that they needed a leader as powerful as Moses, and that for him to be accepted by everyone (even according to Aaron), it had to be done by sorcery, which is why they made the calf. Yet inside their hearts they knew very well that all this wasn't true, and that if they had wanted to, they could have destroyed it without anyone preventing them. They only wanted to allow themselves to behave lewdly because that's what they had in mind given their negligence in Torah study and the boredom that ensued, and they were not able to save themselves from this desire.

This shows us the seriousness of neglecting Torah study, for even with as great a generation as that one, it leads to depravity, and even to idolatry, forbidden relations, and murder. Consequently, it is forbidden to take a break from the holy Torah. The goal of relaxation should only be for soul-searching in order to continue to attach oneself to G-d and to become aware of one's responsibility in the world. Everything that G-d created in His universe is designed so that man doesn't remain idle for a single moment, so that he doesn't arrive at boredom and committing grave sins. Yet when he rests, he should renew himself in his service of G-d and contemplate Creation. He should say, "How abundant are Your works, O L-RD" (Psalms 104:24). He will then know and understand Who created all of this, and his love for his Creator will increase. When he finds himself in the mountains, the pure air will inspire wisdom in him.

This is complete understandable, for G-d did everything for the Children of Israel, not for the delight of those who reject His yoke and claim that everything is natural. Such people want to allow themselves everything that is forbidden, arriving at indecency, idolatry, violence and murder. They obey all their instincts and transgress laws by even crossing some animal species with others, still thinking that G-d will continue to allow things to be, without realizing that He can also destroy everything and reconstruct everything.

This is why, in reality, even when Israel is in exile, G-d ensures that he enjoys the splendors of nature. This is due to the simple fact that contemplating the beauty of nature leads Israel to "ascribe greatness to our G-d" (Deuteronomy 32:3) and realize that everything comes from Him, contrary to those who believe that everything is natural and self-evident. In Parsha Haazinu we learn to see G-d in everything, to become aware that everything stems from Him, and to realize that we should not slacken in Torah study.

### Even on Shabbat

It is written, “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth” (Devarim 32:1).

The Chatam Sofer gives an allegorical explanation for what the Midrash says on this week’s parsha, “Is it permissible for a Jew suffering from an earache to heal it on Shabbat? The Sages have taught: Where there is the least question of danger to life, Shabbat laws are suspended” (Devarim Rabba 10:1). He notes that the poskim have discussed whether one may recite vidui on Shabbat. Is it enjoyable or upsetting for one to mention his many sins on Shabbat?

According to this explanation, we may question whether a talmid chacham who is giving a class on Shabbat may admonish someone, for admonishments are difficult to hear and may upset people. Yet during Shabbat Shuvah, say the commentators, when we can rectify all that has been damaged during the Shabbats of the year, not to do so represents a kind of “danger to life,” for it is either now or never. Hence rabbis usually speak words of Mussar on Shabbat Shuvah.

We learn this custom from Moshe Rabbeinu, who died on Shabbat. On that same day, he admonished the Children of Israel and spoke words of Mussar to them, words that appear in Parsha Ha’azinu.

This is the meaning of the Midrash’s statement, “Is it permissible for a Jew suffering from an earache” – one who has not heard reprimands and admonishment - “to heal it on Shabbat?” Here the Midrash says that “Where there is the least question of danger to life, Shabbat laws are suspended,” meaning that it is a sacred duty to speak words of Mussar and encouragement, even on Shabbat.

### I Will Heal Them

It is written, “I will kill and I will bring life. I struck and I will heal” (Devarim 32:39).

Why does the verse use the term amit (“I will kill”) in the future tense, while at same time using the term machatzti (“I struck”), which is in the past tense? Better to say, “I will kill and I will bring to life. I will strike down and I will heal.”

The author of Ohr Moshe answers this question according to the Chida in Sefat HaNachal, who cites the Sages in the Gemara: “They shall be resurrected with their defects” – in the state in which they died (infirm, blind, deaf, etc.), in order to be recognizable – “and then be healed” (Sanhedrin 91b). Thus the verse states: “I will kill and I will bring life” – even when the dead are resurrected, they will be as before, as “I struck” them. It is only afterwards that “I will heal” – I will heal them in the future.

### Forgetfulness

It is written, “You ignored the Rock, Who gave birth to you” (Devarim 32:18).

On the fundamental practicality of forgetfulness, Rabbeinu Bechaye writes in Chovot HaLevavot that without it, man would be in a constant state of despair. No joy would be able to lift him out of such despair, for he would derive no benefit from anything when he recalls the misfortunes he experienced in the past. He would also have no hope of ever finding rest from one who hates him. Since he will never forget the reason for his hostility, he will spend his entire life fearing him.

### By the Merit of Torah

It is written, “Through this matter shall you lengthen your days” (Devarim 32:47).

One day a certain woman, bitter and brokenhearted, went to the Beit HaMidrash of the Turei Zahav. Panic-stricken, she cried out: “My lord, my son is so weak that he’s about to die!” He said to her, “Am I in the place of G-d?” The woman replied, “I’m crying out and beseeching the Torah that is within my lord, for the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Torah are one.” He said to her, “This is what I’m going to do for you: The Torah that I study, from now on I am giving it to your son as a gift. Perhaps he will live by this merit, for it is written: ‘Through this matter shall you lengthen your days.’” At that point, the boy started to get better.

## In the Light of the Parsha

### Learning from the Heavens and the Earth

It is written, “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth” (Devarim 32:1).

In the Midrash our Sages teach, “The Holy One, Blessed is He, said to Israel: ‘Look at the heavens, which I created to serve you. Have they ever changed their ways? Has the sphere of the sun ever failed to rise from the east to illuminate the entire world, as it is stated: “The sun rises and the sun sets” [Kohelet 1:5]? Look at the earth, which I created to serve you. Has it ever changed its ways? Have you ever planted what it did not grow? Or have you ever planted wheat and it yielded barley? Now, they [the heavens and the earth] were created with neither reward nor loss in mind – for if they are meritorious [by fulfilling their purpose for which I created them], they nevertheless do not receive a reward, and they are not punished if they sin. Nevertheless, they have never changed their ways! How much more should you [fulfill My will], for you will be rewarded if you are meritorious and punished if you sin’ ” (Sifri 32:1).

This teaches us that man must make a logical inference from the earth: If the elements, which possess no understanding, still do the will of G-d and rejoice in doing His will as they sing before Him – and not only that, but Mount Sinai trembled when the Shechinah descended upon it – how much more should we fear G-d, for we possess a soul that originates from beneath the Throne of Glory, a soul that is a divine spark!

If someone says that this is not a fair comparison because inanimate objects do not possess an evil inclination, the answer is that G-d showed this to the Children of Israel at the giving of the Torah, when Mount Sinai trembled. He said to them, “Although I have placed the evil inclination in you, I have now given you the Torah as its antidote, and it will instill the fear of G-d in you.”

## Guard Your Tongue!

### Even if Completely True

It is forbidden to speak Lashon Harah even if it is completely true, and even if it is not said in the presence of the subject. In fact if the speaker were to say the same thing in front of the subject, it would still be forbidden. How much more so if the speaker has the audacity to say, in the subject’s presence, “you said this” or “you did that.” The sin is much worse in that case, for it arouses tremendous hatred among the parties involved, who will consider what they have heard as entirely true, meaning that the subject actually did what the speaker said he did. Otherwise, the speaker would have never mentioned it in his presence.

– Chafetz Chaim

### All the People Sinned Through Ignorance

The students were sitting in a semi-circle, listening to a lecture by the gaon Rabbi Abdallah Somech Zatzal. It was the great Zilcha Beit HaMidrash, located in the center of Baghdad, and these students were talmidei chachamim in their own right, great and well-known scholars. Among them was Rabbi Yosef Haim Zatzal (the author of Ben Ish Hai) and the gaon Rabbi Eliyahu Mani Zatzal (who later became the Rav of Hevron).

All of a sudden, appearing just at the edge of the Beit HaMidrash, were three officers from the local police station. They stayed there for a long time, quite embarrassed, reluctantly looking inside. They finally returned by the way they came, disappearing as if they were never there. During the years that Rabbi Abdallah Somech served as the Rav of Baghdad, he managed to render honor to the Torah. He established a yeshiva to which students flocked from the entire region, with a nearby Beit HaMidrash gavoha that granted smicha to dozens of rabbis. Over the course of the years, this network extended to all the Jewish communities of Iraq and Kurdistan.

Halachic questions were addressed to Rabbi Abdallah Somech from every country in North Africa, and even from rabbis in Europe. They asked him for approbations for their books, as well as for his opinion on various halachic questions. The Arabs of Baghdad also respected this Rav of the Jews.

During that time, a Jew from the Baghdad community was ensnared in a vile plot, meant to completely ruin his business and imprison him for a long time. The episode lasted some time, until finally the matter reached the desk of the wali, the governor of the city.

The governor decided that the accused had to swear on his learning to prove his innocence. The Jew took an oath, and as a result he won his case. The Jews of Baghdad felt that their friend had foiled the plot hatched against him.

However their joy did not please a certain Mussa, who was well-known in the city. This Mussa, none other than a Jew by the name of Moshe who had converted to Islam, never missed an opportunity to harass his former brothers.

He went to see the governor of Baghdad, to whom he secretly revealed the “trickery” of the Jews: “Know that oaths taken by Jews are completely meaningless. At the beginning of each year, they gather in their synagogues and publicly proclaim that they are annulling in advance all the vows and oaths which they will be taking in the coming year. This method is especially known to trick other peoples, among whom they live.”

Mussa’s words wormed their way into the heart of the governor, who felt that he had been deceived and ridiculed by a Jewish trick, a feeling that quickly turned into anger. He demanded an immediate explanation for this Jewish custom from the Rav of Baghdad himself. The three officers at the Beit HaMidrash had therefore come to summon Rabbi Abdallah Somech to the governor’s office.

Yet when these officers saw the impressive sight of the Rav sitting down and surrounded by his disciples, who were avidly drinking in his words, they were afraid. “The man that you sent us to summon seems more like an angel of G-d than a man,” they said with fear upon returning to the governor.

Boiling with anger, the governor again sent these three officers, this time warning them that if they didn’t return with the Rav of a Jews, their fate would be bitter.

Their heads lowered, the policemen approached Rabbi Abdallah Somech and conveyed the governor’s message to him. The Rav got up, arranged his clothes, and left to see the governor.

When the Rav’s disciples saw that he had interrupted his lecture to leave, they all accompanied him. Numerous other Jews who were passing by also joined this honorable group of men, at the head of which was the Rav.

The governor, who was looking out of his window and impatiently awaiting the arrival of the Rav of the Jews, was stunned by what he saw. A large swarm of people was slowly approaching his office. It was only when they were nearby that he realized they consisted of a group accompanying the Rav.

Signs of embarrassment appeared on his face as he went to greet the Rav. The great honor that the Rav was being shown, as well as the nobility of his face, had softened the governor’s heart. He held out his hand to Rabbi Abdallah and politely led him into his office, allowing his followers to enter as well.

It was as if the governor had forgotten the reason for why he summoned the Rav, for he began to speak about the state of the Jewish community in Baghdad. From there, the conversation turned to various issues, and the governor did not hide his astonishment at the wisdom of Rabbi Abdallah’s words.

It was only as the end, with obvious hesitation and almost in passing, that the governor asked if it were true that Jews annul the validity of their oaths in advance, thereby allowing themselves to make false oaths. Rabbi Abdallah, who fully understood what was lurking behind the entire conversation, smiled wide. He asked one of those present to bring him a machzor [festival prayer book]. When it was brought to him, he opened it to the page containing the Kol Nidrei prayer.

The Rav explained to the governor, “This prayer begins with the words: ‘All vows, obligations, oaths...’ and ends with the words ‘because all the people sinned through ignorance.’ We only annul oaths that have left our mouths by mistake, and only vows and oaths concerning religion, not concerning financial matters.”

The governor immediately excused himself for this embarrassing exchange, quickly changing the subject. He then said goodbye to the Rav with a warm and prolonged handshake.

From then on, the governor became a personal friend of Rabbi Abdallah Somech. He would often go to see him, especially on Shabbat and the holidays, to discuss what was happening in the world and to seek his advice on delicate state matters. During that time, Jews experienced a period of peace in Baghdad.

### Jealousy Among the Sages

The Rav of Jerusalem, the gaon Rabbi Yosef Haim Sonnenfeld Zatzal, spoke in a special way: “I have never been affected by jealousy. Yet who am I really jealous of? The Sha’agat Aryeh.”

Why? It is said that at the time of his passing, rabbis and community leaders gathered in the Sha’agat Aryeh’s room. He was lying in bed, and from time to time he asked for a particular tractate so he could look through it. He leafed through each tractate that came into his hands, then he would ask for another. One of the leaders of the community asked the shamash, who was handing books to the Rav, to hand him Ma’avar Yabok instead of a Gemara. In this way he would be able to say vidui and other prayers before his soul passed away. When the Sha’agat Aryeh realized what was happening, he smiled and said: “Not only had I no time to sin, but no time to even think of sinning. When could I have had time to sin?”

“I’m jealous of such a confession,” said Rabbi Chaim Sonnenfeld with emotion.

### Who Did Not Make me a Gentile

The book Uvdot VeHanagot Brisk cites the following story from Rabbi Zev Rosengarten Zatzal: One morning, as the gaon Rabbi Baruch Ber Zatzal returned home, he met a worker at his front door who had come to repair something. The Rav greeted him in Polish, and the worker smiled.

The Rav asked the Rebbetzin to find out why the worker had smiled when he said good morning to him. The worker told her, “The Rav thought that I was a gentile and he greeted me in Polish. I’m a Jew, and he could have greeted me in Yiddish.” When Rabbi Baruch Ber heard this, he began to tremble. He implored the worker to forgive him, for he had repented of his deed. The worker could not understand what there was to forgive, since the Rav hadn’t upset him in any way. Rabbi Baruch then explained to him the difference between a Jew and a Gentile, and the greatness of the former. When he saw that the worker understood, but forgave him all the same, he settled down.

### Thoughts of Teshuvah

One morning after Shacharit, Rabbi M. Bernstein Zatzal realized that his son-in-law, the gaon Rabbi Baruch Ber Zatzal, was pale. When he asked him how he was, Rabbi Baruch Ber said that he was greatly shaken, for he was afraid that he had issued an invalid get [divorce document]. “Why do you think that?” he asked. Rabbi Baruch Ber replied that on that day, he had found among his books a seal from the Karmayog synagogue, where the Kamenitz yeshiva had exiled itself. He was therefore a thief. Now while passing through the city of Minsk, he had been asked to help issue a get, and there is an opinion that if a sin exists among one of the judges issuing a get, it is rendered invalid!

Rabbi Baruch Ber did not calm down until he remembered that while on the road from Karmayog to Vilna, a band of robbers had attacked him. He had therefore recited vidui and repented with all his might. Since he had done teshuvah and there was no way to return the book, he was therefore not an evildoer.

### I Never Rebelled Against You

One of the disciples of the gaon Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky Zatzal recounted that he once heard the gaon saying with great enthusiasm, at the conclusion of Yom Kippur: “When I went to sleep last night, on Yom Kippur, I said to Hashem: ‘Master of the universe, forgive me. Even if my sins are numerous, I never rebelled against You. I sinned by mistake, never out of rebellion, and one who never rebels against the king is a faithful servant. That is why the King will forgive His faithful servant.’”

### Return Us, Our Father, to Your Torah

The gaon and tzaddik Rabbi Chaim Brim Zatzal recounted, “I remember that on one occasion, I was with the Chazon Ish Zatzal when he served as the Shaliach Tzibur on the day of his mother’s yahrtzeit. During the chazara, when the Chazon Ish reached the blessing, ‘Return us, our Father, to Your Torah,’ at the words ‘return us with complete teshuvah before You,’ he burst into tears that melted the heart, like someone who truly had to do teshuvah.”

– Marbeh Chaim

### His Blood Pressure Rose On its Own

In the introduction to the book Lev Eliyahu by the gaon Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian Zatzal, it is said that when he had to undergo an operation for his eyes, his blood pressure rose dramatically in the middle of the operation, putting his life in great danger. In fact he had to remain hospitalized for several weeks thereafter, but thank G-d he survived. The doctor sought to exonerate himself, saying that he was not responsible for the blood pressure rise in the middle of the operation. He had conducted several tests beforehand, and everything was normal. He just didn’t understand why his blood pressure had spiked.

Several years later Rabbi Eliyahu required another operation, which went well. When his students came to visit him, he said to them: “You certainly remember that during my last eye operation, I was in grave danger. The reason was because I had to be unconscious for the operation, and I thought that I was going to be judged in Heaven at that point. I therefore did teshuvah, thinking about my past deeds from the time I was 12 years old to the present time. Naturally, my blood pressure rose on its own, which is why I was in danger. For this operation I thought of nothing at all, and thank G-d everything went well.”

### Something Good Each Day

At the end of Yom Kippur, a youngster went to see the Chazon Ish with a question: “Yesterday, at the end of the Neila prayer, there was a great awakening in the yeshiva. Yet a few minutes later, we had barely finished praying and the one leading Ma’ariv began with the melody of an ordinary day [vehu rachum...]. What’s this abrupt change, without any transition? If that’s the way people do things, what’s the use of Yom Kippur?”

The Chazon Ish’s response, which is found in the book Ma’aseh Ish, went as follows: “We are not asked to be angels, for our fall would be even greater from there. We must only improve things and place ourselves on the right path. We do not have the strength to completely change direction. Each day, especially on Yom Kippur, we must be committed to improving something within ourselves by putting an effort into doing something good. We are not being asked for more than that.”