

The Path To Follow

Tetzaveh

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Under the Direction of Rabbi David H. Pinto Shlita

www.hevratpinto.org | hevratpinto@aol.com

Editor-in-Chief: Hanania Soussan

32 rue du Plateau 75019 Paris, France • Tel: +331 48 03 53 89 • Fax: +331 42 06 00 33

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Rabbi David Pinto Shlita

A Jew's Deepest Desire is to Fulfill His Creator's Will

It is written, "And you, command the Children of Israel, and they shall take for you pure, pressed olive oil for illumination, to kindle the lamp continually" (Shemot 27:20).

"May our master teach us: When do we circumcise a child? Our Sages taught: A minor is circumcised on the eighth day. Why? Just as Isaac was circumcised [likewise we do the same]. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said, 'Behold, is there anything more beloved to a man than his own son? What does the father do? He takes his son and circumcises him!' How can he do such a thing? Rabbi Nachman bar Shemuel said, 'Only because it is the will of his Creator. The father performs the mitzvah with joy, even though he sees his beloved son's blood being shed.' Rabbi Chanina said, 'Not only that! The father makes the day of circumcision a day of rejoicing, and he incurs great expense to pay for the celebration, although there is no commandment for him to do so.'" (Tanchuma, Tetzaveh 1).

This Midrash is very surprising. What connection is there between the mitzvah of circumcision (and how Jews perform it) and this week's parsha? From this Midrash we see that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai focuses on something astounding, namely that by circumcising his son, a man harms what is most important to him. When the Midrash expresses its surprise at this and asks how it is possible, that a loving father can do such a thing to his son, Rav Nachman bar Shemuel responds: "Only because it is the will of his Creator." What does he add by this response? It is obvious that he does so in order to fulfill Hashem's mitzvot! How does this help us to understand something that is so surprising, namely the performance of the mitzvah of circumcision by a father who loves his son? Where does he obtain the incredible moral strength to cut the flesh of his beloved son?

To explain this, we must first examine the way in which the verse expresses itself: "And you, command...and they shall take for you." What does "and they shall take for you" mean? It would have been better to say, "so that they take for you."

The Sages have said, "And you, command – this is a form of encouragement, for now and all the generations" (Midrash Hagadol). The Baal HaTurim underlines that Israel is likewise commanded ("command the Children of Israel") both in regards to the Menorah and the continual burnt-offering, for these two mitzvot must be performed each day, and they entail a financial loss. There is therefore a need for encouragement, which is why these mitzvot are given in the form of a command.

Hashem addressed Moshe and said to him, "And you, command the Children of Israel – although this mitzvah entails great difficulty, for it involves a financial loss, and a man loves his money more than his own body, nevertheless command the Children of Israel to carry it out, and encourage them." Hashem told him, "they shall take for you – they will certainly heed your voice and bring what is necessary, despite the difficulty and financial loss involved. You will then realize the magnitude of their devotion to mitzvot, and you will be assured that they will bring it to you and obey your orders." The Holy One, blessed be He, here revealed to Moshe the nature and character of the Children of Israel, who give when demands are made

of them. In fact they obey, heed the word of Hashem, and turn neither to the right nor to the left from anything they are commanded to do.

This concept is confirmed by the Midrash: "And you, command – the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: 'I am making you king. Just as the people of a king obey his orders, you too must give them orders, and they will fulfill them'" (Tanchuma, Tetzaveh 6). The Holy One, blessed be He, was thus telling Moshe that the Children of Israel would carry out his decrees, even though they entailed a financial loss.

We can now explain the connection between the mitzvah of circumcision and this week's parsha. Intellectually, the mitzvah of circumcision is among the most difficult to carry out, for it means cutting off the flesh of a powerless baby that has just been born! Not only that, but it is the baby's father, the one who produced him and loves him, who has received this command. Yet it is precisely this mitzvah that all Israel fulfills with joy and enthusiasm. No Jew thinks of avoiding it because he loves and has pity on his son. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai correctly highlighted the spiritual level of the Jewish people, who fulfill this difficult mitzvah with great devotion. Rav Nachman bar Shemuel revealed the source of this power, the strength to fulfill the mitzvah of circumcision, in one short phrase: "Only because it is the will of his Creator." This is the characteristic of a Jew, one that gives him the strength to carry out the mitzvah of circumcision. The Jewish soul yearns to do the will of its Creator. Before all other feelings or emotions arise in the heart, there is a powerful desire that surpasses all else, the desire to do the will of Hashem. This is an inherent quality of every Jew, regardless of identity. It is through the power of this desire that a Jew completely devotes himself and gives his son to fulfill the will of Hashem. Rabbi Chanina strengthens this idea by saying, "Not only that! The father makes the day of circumcision a day of rejoicing, and he incurs great expense to pay for the celebration, although there is no commandment for him to do so." He rejoices when his son is circumcised, and invariably he does it gladly (in his desire to obey Hashem), not because of a sense of obligation or out of fear. The proof is the joy that he experiences, which only arises when a person feels that he is in complete harmony with his deeds and is satisfied by his actions. When a person can fulfill his yearning and desire to do the will of Hashem, joy bursts forth and arises, and he spends money to make it a day of celebration.

Every Jew possesses this virtue, this yearning to bring satisfaction to the Holy One, blessed be He, and to fulfill His word with devotion. Yet sometimes, over the course of time, this virtue becomes covered with dust and sleeps due to the evil inclination and the desires of the world. We must therefore awaken and renew it, as the Rambam states: "He wants to be part of the Jewish people, and he wants to perform all the mitzvot and eschew all the transgressions; it is only his evil inclination that presses him" (Hilchot Gerushin 2:20).

This is what Hashem told Moshe in this week's parsha: When you give them orders, you will immediately see that "they will take for you." What is foremost among a Jew's will and desire is to fulfill the mitzvot of the King – and with devotion, no less – even if it entails a financial loss. This offers a marvelous explanation for the mitzvah of circumcision.

ר"ד



The Holy Shekel

The author of Ketav Sofer (son of the Chatam Sofer), who served as the Rav of Pressburg, put a great effort into obtaining permission from the Hungarian government to allow the Orthodox communities to separate themselves from the Jewish community in general – which was under the sway of the reformists – and to enjoy autonomous status. His goal was to build separate institutions that would be organized only in accordance with the laws of the Shulchan Aruch, without any intervention from the various streams of the Reform Movement.

When he obtained what he had asked for, everyone understood that this victory was the result of the seeds planted by his father, the Chatam Sofer, who made great efforts to organize Orthodox Jews under the banner of the Torah. At that point, the Ketav Sofer summoned all the gaonim and tzaddikim of Hungary to a solemn assembly meant to reinforce spiritual life and encourage greater vigilance in matters of Torah.

This assembly brought together the crème-de-la-crème of Hungarian Jewry, its scholars and rabbis, and of course only Torah matters were discussed. At one particularly exalted moment, the Ketav Sofer came to the podium and addressed the public amid complete silence: “My teachers, on an occasion as great as this, it is an honor for me to show all the esteemed guests a valuable object that I inherited from my father. He himself inherited it from his father, and so on from generation to generation, from father to son, all the way back to the Temple. Even though it has no commercial value, we keep it as a treasure that no amount of money can equal. It is a shekel hakodesh, which was used in the time of the Temple.”

The Ketav Sofer added, “It is the only coin of this type that exists today in the Jewish world. During this solemn occasion, I would like to show the coin to all the participants, who no doubt would be interested in seeing it. I will therefore have it passed around the audience so everyone can look at it and then pass it to his neighbor. In the end, please have it returned to me.”

In fact there was tremendous interest among the participants, all of whom examined the shekel very closely, and with a love for all things sacred. It was an inspiring moment as the shekel passed from hand to hand.

Suddenly, someone was overheard saying: “Where’s the shekel?”

As it turned out, the shekel was lost! The Ketav Sofer arose, very emotional, unable to understand how this had happened. He addressed the assembly: “I have no doubts that the shekel has disappeared without malicious intent on the part of anyone here. It’s possible that someone has mistakenly mixed the coin with one of his own. This is why I would please ask everyone, kindly forgive me, to check their pockets in see if by chance the shekel is among any coins they may have.”

The participants complied, but the shekel was not found.

Seeing that his first attempt was fruitless, the Ketav Sofer suggested, if everyone agreed, that each person should search his neighbor in the hope that the shekel would be found. However a certain elderly man, a great scholar among the disciples of the Chatam Sofer, vehemently opposed this suggestion, begging the participants to please wait fifteen minutes before acting.

Everyone agreed, but when the fifteen minutes elapsed and the shekel still hadn’t been found, the man stood up and once again asked for another fifteen-minute delay. The participants, however, were no longer willing to wait. Hence they refused this strange request, one that seemed completely senseless. However the Ketav Sofer knew that this elderly man was one of the great disciples of his father, and so he asked the participants to agree to his request, which they did.

Once this new period of time had elapsed, people began to suspect the elderly man, and yet he requested once again, with tears in his eyes, that another fifteen-minute delay be granted, promising that he would make no more requests.

Had it not been for the Ketav Sofer, then the participants – who were now extremely agitated – would certainly not have agreed to another delay. They had barely agreed to it, when suddenly the Ketav Sofer’s shamash entered the hall with good news: “If found the shekel!”

The shamash explained that when he had taken a tablecloth outside in order to shake it clean, he apparently tossed the shekel out of it at the same time. When he walked by the place where he had shaken the tablecloth, he found the shekel lying among the crumbs that had fallen there.

At that point, everyone turned to the elderly man and asked him to explain his strange behavior. He arose and said, “I am among the disciples of the Chatam Sofer. When I received an invitation to this important assembly, which has gathered all the great men of Hungary, I thought that it would be worth it to bring with me something that everyone would be interested in seeing. You see, I also possess a shekel that dates back to the time of the Temple, one that has been passed down from generation to generation. I therefore brought it with me to show all the participants.

“However when I heard from the son of the Rav, the Ketav Sofer, what great importance he attached to his own shekel, I abandoned my idea so as not to offend him. When his shekel was lost and the suggestion was made that everyone should search the pockets of his neighbor, it was clear to me that my own shekel would be found in my pocket. It is easy to imagine the enormity of the Chillul Hashem that would have been caused if the shekel had been found among one of the disciples of the Chatam Sofer.

“There’s no doubt that anything I would have said in my defense – namely that I also possess a similar coin – would not have been believed in the least. That is why I made every effort to delay the search, and at the same time I prayed for Hashem not to put me in such a terrible and shameful situation, so that an enormous scandal would not erupt because of me.”

The elderly man finished by presenting his shekel and saying, “My prayer was heard, and the shekel was found. Here is my own shekel.”

After the man had finished his story, the Ketav Sofer turned to the stunned crowd and said, “We should thank G-d that this ended well, and that we were able to avoid a desecration of His Name. For who would have believed the elderly man? Apparently, everyone was persuaded that there was no other such coin in the entire world.

“At the same time, this should teach us the extent of the Torah’s commandment to judge our neighbor favorably. Even in situations where all signs clearly point to someone’s guilt, we must still continue to look for something that can work in his favor.

“If we have gathered here to learn just this, it will have been worth the effort!”

A Lamp for Kingship

It is written, “An eternal decree for their generations” (Shemot 27:21).

Because of our many sins, we no longer have the Temple. Nevertheless, we still have synagogues and houses of study, where the mitzvah “to light the lamp” is also appropriate.

The Sages teach that whoever lights a ner (lamp) in synagogues and houses of study will merit kingship, as it is written: “Ner begot Kish. Kish begot Saul” (I Chronicles 8:33) and, “There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish, son of Abiel” (I Samuel 9:1).

If he was named Abiel, why was he called Ner? Because he would light a ner (lamp) in synagogues and houses of study. It is also for this reason that he merited King Saul as his descendant.

– Midrash Hagadol

Wisdom to the Wise

It is written, “You shall speak to all the wise-hearted people, whom I have invested with a spirit of wisdom” (Shemot 28:3).

According to the laws of nature, an empty vessel can be filled, whereas a filled vessel cannot receive anything more.

Nevertheless, things are different with the Creator: A vessel that is filled with wisdom can acquire still more, whereas a vessel devoid of wisdom cannot receive any. In fact it is said, “You shall speak to all the [already] wise-hearted people, whom I have invested with a spirit of wisdom,” and likewise it is said: “He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who know how to reason” (Daniel 2:21).

– Lekach Tov

The Judgment of the Breastplate

It is written, “Aaron shall bear the judgment of the Children of Israel upon his heart” (Shemot 28:30).

How did the Breastplate render judgment?

When one of the tribes sinned, the stone upon which its name was engraved would take on an appearance of copper. Upon seeing this, the kohen would learn that the transgression stemmed from that tribe. Lots were then drawn to identify the sinner, who was then judged.

– Midrash Hagadol

The Blessing of the Altar

It is written, “And unleavened breads” (Shemot 29:2).

We need to understand the impact that the offerings had: For each type of food offered upon the altar, the category to which it belonged was blessed in the world.

All kinds of bread were blessed because of the “unleavened breads” and “showbread” that were brought as offerings. Likewise, all the fruits of the earth were blessed when the firstfruit were brought.

One day Rabbi Yonatan ben Elazar was sitting beneath a fig tree, and the tree was full of beautiful figs. When the dew fell, the figs filled with honey, which dripped to the ground. The wind mixed it with earth, and a goat came by and dropped milk into the honey, and the milk and honey were mixed together. He summoned his students and exclaimed, “Come and witness a sample of the World to Come!”

In Praise of the Altar

Another explanation: The following story is told about a Torah scholar who traveled to Jerusalem each year. The inhabitants of the city realized that he was a great man of Torah, and so they said to him: “Come live among us, and we will pay you 50 gold coins!”

He said to them, “I have a vineyard that is more valuable than anything you could possibly offer me. It produces three crops a year, allowing me to fill 600 barrels of wine that I can sell at a good price. The first crop produces 300 barrels, the second crop 200 barrels, and the third crop 100 barrels.”

Refusing the offer of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, he returned home to his vineyard. All this abundance only comes about through the wine libation that is offered upon the altar. Without it, all the good things in the world disappear.

– Midrash Tanchuma

In the Light of the Parsha

Yielding Before the Tzaddik

It is written, “And you, command the Children of Israel, and they shall take for you pure, pressed olive oil for illumination, to kindle the lamp continually” (Shemot 27:20).

I would like to explain this verse allegorically. The tzaddik, by the power of his sanctity, is the one who can kindle the souls of the Jewish people, consecrated to the service of Hashem.

Thus it is written: “And you” – the tzaddik; “command the Children of Israel, and they shall take for you pure... olive oil” – a Jew is to bring his soul to the tzaddik, for the term hashemen (“the oil”) is formed by the same letters as neshama (“soul”).

“Pressed...for illumination” – a Jew must break his entire being and yield before the tzaddik, who is “illumination,” for he illuminates the eyes of Israel.

“To kindle the lamp continually” – the tzaddik continually kindles the soul of a Jew, for the lamp alludes to the soul, as it is written: “A man’s soul is the lamp of Hashem” (Mishlei 20:27).

The Malbim

The Malbim, Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel, is universally known throughout the Jewish world as one of the greatest of Bible commentators, his works being found in almost every Jewish home. He was a genius, an extraordinary man who was fully versed in every field of Torah. He was about 20 years old when he started being called a “Prince of Torah,” and all the great men of his era had enormous respect for him.

Rabbi Yossef Dov Soloveitchik, the Brisker Rav, once said that the Malbim’s explanation of the passage, “When I shall seize the appointed time, I shall judge with fairness. The earth and all its inhabitants are melted. I have firmly established its pillars” (Tehillim 75:3-4) could not be given by a man unless he was imbued with Ruach HaKodesh.

The Malbim began to write his commentaries and explanations on the Bible and Talmud at the age of 13. In the introduction to his book *Artzot HaChaim*, he writes: “When I was 13 years old, as a solitary bird in the nest of wisdom, my soul was awakened to the enchanted voice of a love for study, a voice that sang in my ear. The spirit of Torah that had always accompanied my fathers then aroused my mind from sleep, and thus the rapid plume of a scribe was in my right hand. I wrote and brought forth new explanations, and the hand of G-d gave me strength.”

Due to his great reputation in Torah and the strength yet gentleness of his words, he was appointed as the Rav of Wreschen (district of Posen) in 5598. He stayed there for seven years, and during this time he established numerous institutions aimed at strengthening religious life.

Over the course of his life, the Malbim was appointed as the Rav of various communities: Kempen, Prussia (for his contemporaries, he was known as “the Kempener”); Bucharest, the capital of Romania; Koenigsberg, Germany; and Mohilev, Russia. His various travels from town to town and country to country testified to the fact that he found no satisfaction in the rabbinate, for by his nature he was very bold. He was a man of truth, one with firm opinions, a man who never flattered those who could help him. He fought against unbelievers who introduced “reforms” into religion, as well as against the wealthy who did not give enough to support the poor. All this made him many enemies, those who pursued him without respite. He was also denounced as an “enemy of the state.” However Rabbi Meir Leibush did not let allow any of this to affect him, and he continued to lead the fight for truth and integrity. Those who understood the purity of his heart and his way of life loved him enormously. They came to see him in droves so they could hear his discourses and benefit from his sanctified words.

The Malbim lived for 69 years, his name forever being enshrined among the great commentators of the Bible.

The Importance of the Kohen Gadol’s Garments

The Rambam explains (Guide to the Perplexed 3:45) that Hashem ordered the kohanim to be clothed in sumptuous garments of great quality, sanctified clothes that glorify them, “for the multitude does not estimate man by his true form, but by the perfection of his bodily limbs and the beauty of his garments.” When his physical appearance is faultless and his garments are magnificent, most people consider this to be an indication of great perfection.

In our mind’s eye, let us try and picture the Kohen Gadol in all his sanctity, glory, and purity through the service in the innermost part of the Temple, the Holy of Holies. Is it not as if a Heavenly prince were standing there to serve, with a crown of holiness on his head? All of Hashem’s people are gathered together, their eyes following him with reverential fear, and absorbing the radiance of his sanctified service. At that point the Children of Israel taste a little of eternal life, thoughts of teshuvah stirring within them like rivers, like wellsprings of pure water. In the eyes of everyone, the Kohen Gadol is considered a symbol of purity and holiness, a man who connects the Children of Israel to their Father in Heaven. The best of the people serve in the most sacred place of Eretz Israel, the Temple in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the Torah also commands us to take simple people into consideration, those who understand few things, and whose views of the Kohen Gadol are based upon his garments.

The Gemara recounts, “It is related of King Ptolemy that he brought together 72 elders and placed them in 72 [separate] rooms, without telling them why he had brought them together. He went to each of them and said, ‘Translate for me the Torah of Moshe your teacher.’ G-d then guided each of them, and they all had the same idea and wrote for him: ‘...Moshe took his wife and his children, and made them ride on a carrier of men [i.e., a camel]’” (Megillah 9a). They conceived of this translation so that Ptolemy would not say, “Moshe your teacher had neither horse nor camel” This shows us just how well the Sages understood the way that people in general conceive of lofty subjects. If they had written that Moshe “made them ride on a donkey,” it would have resulted in a loss of honor for Moshe and his Torah, because for Ptolemy and those like him, a man’s greatness is measured according to his wealth and external appearance. For such people, a Moshe who made his family ride on a donkey could not have been a leader. It is up to us to distinguish between someone who is truly intelligent, and another person who is average, one whose thoughts are guided by whimsical notions and who is incapable of recognizing things according to their true nature. Instead, he focuses only on external and superficial elements, according to which he decides whether or not he will demonstrate respect. – Ma’ayanei Chaim

Guard Your Tongue!

Even for an Ignoramus

Know that the prohibition against speaking Lashon Harah applies even in regards to an ignoramus, for he too is considered part of the nation of G-d’s emissaries who were taken out of Egypt. All the more is it forbidden to speak Lashon Harah of a talmid chacham, in which case the speaker’s violation is much worse. The Sages tell us, “Anyone who speaks about the strayings of a talmid chacham falls into Gehinnom.” Furthermore, by speaking Lashon Harah, one may violate the prohibition against shaming a talmid chacham, the severe punishment for which is known, “for he scorned the word of Hashem” (Bamidbar 15:31). – Chafetz Chaim