

THE SPIRITUAL GUARDRAIL IN THE BUILDING OF MAN

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "If you build a new house, you shall make a guardrail for your roof so that you will not place blood in your house ki yipol hanofel [when the fallen falls]" (Devarim 22:8).

The commentators, among them Rabbeinu Bechaye, have asked why the verse employs the redundant expression ki yipol hanofel, rather than simply stating pen yipol ("lest one falls"). We need to understand what lesson we must learn from this verse, since it is clear that anyone building a home is obligated to put a guardrail on his roof for safety reasons. Therefore what is the Torah teaching us here?

In reality, a person must establish fences – guardrails – for himself in order to keep his distance from materiality. In fact if he does not safeguard himself against the calls of the material realm, and instead gives in to sensory desires, even permitted ones, he will inevitably end up with spiritual ruins.

We sometimes see people who take a spiritual stumble, and often we're convinced that it's because they sinned. In reality, a person does not necessarily experience a spiritual decline after a sin; it may occur because his heart allowed itself to be drawn to the dictates of his desires. Now if he does not pull himself together, but continues on this downward trend, he will end up falling and endure a spiritual death!

The proof comes from a teaching of our Sages on the verse, "Upon the testimony of two witnesses or three witnesses shall the dead die" (Devarim 17:6). The Sages questioned the expression "shall the dead die," which is a contradiction in terms. He is either dead – in which case he cannot be put to death – or he is alive – in which case he cannot be called dead. The text should have written "shall the living die." The Gemara replies that he is already regarded as dead (Berachot 18b), and the Ba'al HaTurim explains that even while alive, the wicked are called dead.

In reality, a person who sins is immediately regarded as dead, especially when he harms the roof of his soul, which leaves him after being defiled. Thus deprived of a soul, he finds himself at the level of an animal, a living being without a soul, as it is written: "Man has no pre-eminence over an animal, for all is futile" (Kohelet 3:19). Killing him means taking the life of a body without a soul.

This is the meaning of the redundancy cited earlier, for ki yipol hanofel means: At first he sinned and blemished his soul, causing it to flee. This is the first fall. Then came the second fall, when the

body in turn died. A person who does not want to reach that point must surround himself with guardrails, thereby preventing a first fall, as it is written: "You shall safeguard My charge" (Vayikra 18:30). Here our Sages explain: "Make a keeping to My keeping" (Moed Katan 5a; Yebamot 21a), and the Mishnah states: "Make a fence around the Torah" (Pirkei Avot 1:1). The Rambam explains this as referring to the laws instituted by the Sages to distance man from sin.

Writing along the same lines, the author of Pe Eliyahu states that we must never stop improving our character traits, as our Sages teach: "Regarding aged scholars...the older they get, the more composed their minds become" (Kinim 3:6). By knowing how to preserve their fine character traits, Torah scholars maintain all their wits despite their advanced age. As the uneducated age, however, their minds grow dull because their character flaws become more pronounced, the result being that their thoughts become increasingly muddled.

Hence we must always strive to consolidate our gains in Torah study and mitzvot observance, lest we fall twice, G-d forbid. In fact a person who fails to make an effort to spiritually elevate himself, preferring instead to maintain his current status, will lack ambition and drive in serving Hashem. He will practice Judaism without desire or pleasure, such that he will end up vehemently rejecting it. This is the meaning of the verse, "Vehaya [And it will be], because you will hearken [eikev; literally 'heel']" (Devarim 7:12), which Rashi explains in citing the Sages: "If you heed the minor commandments, which one tramples b'akevav [with his heels]." An individual who respects the mitzvot that people have a tendency to neglect safeguards himself from the routine practice of Judaism and the habitual faults that eventually drive people to reject it. We should therefore be careful to practice mitzvot with joy, for in Scripture the term vehaya always signifies joy. Cheerfulness and self-sacrifice create this fence, this guardrail that surrounds the practice of mitzvot, allowing us to constantly elevate ourselves in serving Hashem.

Their Closeness to Hashem

Because of their closeness to Hashem, Jews also need to remain vigilant with respect to simple mitzvot and minor details. In fact a person's conduct must be irreproachable in all respects if he is close to the king. Furthermore, we are not like the other nations of the world, among whom G-d examines only the gravest of sins. For Jews, even the most insignificant sins are counted, meaning



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sins that a person tends to trample upon, as King David said: “Why should I be fearful in the days of evil, when the injunctions that I trampled upon will surround me” (Tehillim 49:6). That is, even the mistakes that only resulted from a person’s heels will be considered as outright sins.

The Torah alludes to this as well by stating: “If you build a new house, you shall make a guardrail for your roof” (Devarim 22:8). This means that a person who wants to spiritually elevate himself must ensure that his body is always pure, like new, and without any trace of sin. He must establish fences and safeguards for himself, barriers

that he must constantly strengthen and reinforce. For example, if a person builds a house, no matter how beautiful, and yet forgets to build a fence around the construction site, he is responsible for anyone who ventures too close to it and gets injured. The same applies to a person himself: If he simply observes mitzvot without adding fences and safeguards, his behavior is liable to lead to an irreversible loss, for a spiritual fall is inevitable without fences. Indeed, it is as if he has already fallen. Now the second fall is but the consequence of the first, for a person who observes mitzvot without attempting to strengthen them with an ironclad barrier has already fallen.

The Words of the Sages

The Value of a Piece of Bread

It is written, “A perfect and honest measure shall you have, so that your days shall be lengthened on the land that Hashem your G-d gives you” (Devarim 25:15).

This Divine commandment, concerning the importance of remaining vigilant against the slightest possibility of theft, has raised many halachic questions and concerns among the great men of Israel, embodying the concept found in the verse: “Who is like you, O Israel” (Devarim 33:29). This is the very same concept described in the following story, which was told by the maggid Rabbi Shlomo Lewinstein Shlita:

The mashgiach of the Tchebin yeshiva, the gaon Rabbi Mordechai Rimer Zatzal (whose son is married to a daughter of Rav Yosef Sholom Eliashiv Shlita), was interned in a concentration camp during the Holocaust. He endured severe hunger in addition to typhus, and his health began to steadily deteriorate. One day he felt that if he didn’t eat anything soon, he would die of starvation.

With tremendous difficulty, he exerted a great effort to drag himself out of his barracks, where he saw only snow and ice. Standing before him was another prisoner who was holding four pieces of bread in his hands, the difference between life and death under the circumstances.

Rabbi Mordechai realized that the Jew with whom he had come face-to-face had stolen the bread from the kitchen. He also knew, however, that there was no chance that he would give him any of his own free will.

Since he had nothing in hand, Rabbi Mordechai gathered what was left of his strength and pushed the man, who slipped on the ice. The bread went flying in every direction, and Rabbi Mordechai grabbed one of the pieces and fled.

That piece of bread saved his life, for it cured his illness and enabled him to survive the Holocaust.

Afterwards, when Rabbi Mordechai went on to become a respected and well-known talmid chacham, he never stopped blaming himself for stealing that piece of bread. One day he had the courage to ask Rav Eliashiv what the halachah was: Had he acted correctly by stealing the piece of bread, and if not, what should he do to redeem himself?

In fact his question was three-fold:

1. Had he been permitted to take the bread?
2. Even if he had been permitted, should he look for the owner of the bread to pay him for what he stole?
3. If he had to pay for what he stole, how could the bread’s value be measured – by its current value, or by its value at the time, amid the pain and destitution of the camp?

The Community Fund

To answer the first question, he said that since the other Jew had four pieces of bread, taking only one piece did not endanger his life.

Therefore the issue was not a matter of knowing which life took precedence, but only if he was allowed to take something from another person without their permission in order to save his own life.

The answer to this question is that he did have the right to save his own life by causing someone to incur a loss. This is why the Gemara states that a person is permitted to set fire to a stranger’s field in order to save his life when pursued by enemies (see Bava Kama 20b). However the halachah is that a person who saves his life at the expense of someone else’s money must subsequently repay him for his loss.

Hence he had to repay the man from whom he had stolen the bread. Since he did not know his identity, he had to pay the community fund in the hope that the man in question might also benefit from it, this being a form of compensation.

More Expensive in the Desert

This left the remaining question: How much should he pay? Would it be the current value of such bread, or the value it held in the concentration camp?

Rav Chaim Kanievsky Shlita reasoned that he should perhaps pay the value of the bread at the time that the theft occurred. Despite the fact that there was no explicit source for such reasoning, we may bring as proof the Midrash’s account of how Abraham treated his guests.

The Midrash recounts that Abraham asked all of his guests, those who ate in his home, to thank the Creator of the food they received. If a guest refused, he “obligated” him to do so. How did Abraham do this?

He said to his guest, “If you don’t want to thank the Source of all this food, because you think that it all belongs to me, then you must pay me for your meal.” He would then present them with a bill detailing everything they ate and drank, with the total being an exorbitant amount.

The guest would be taken aback by the bill, asking how Abraham had reached such an outlandish sum. After all, he had just consumed a small portion of bread and meat, as well as a tiny amount of water!

Abraham answered, “You are in the middle of a desert, where everything is much more expensive than in a populated area.”

Upon hearing this logical response, the guest concluded that it was better to thank the G-d of Abraham.

From this Midrash, Rav Kanievsky deduced that a person who seeks to repay someone for bread eaten in the desert cannot accomplish it by paying the same amount that the bread costs in the city. Instead, he must pay according to the value that the bread has in the desert.

The Reward of a Mitzvah

It is written, “You shall surely send away the mother and take the young for yourself” (Devarim 22:7).

What is the reward of the mitzvah we call shiluach haken, letting the mother fly off in order to take the young?

The Midrash states, “The reward for some mitzvot is wealth, and for others it is honor. And what is the reward of this mitzvah? If you have no children, I will give you children” (Devarim Rabba 6:6).

When a person fulfills a mitzvah, G-d does good for him and grants him long life. Hashem says: “If you follow the mitzvah of shiluach haken, even if you are sterile and without children, by your life I swear that I will give you children!” – for it is written: “You shall surely send away the mother,” and if you do, “the young [you will have] for yourself.”

– Yalkut Shimoni

He Precedes the Disease with the Cure

It is written, “[W]hen the fallen falls” (Devarim 22:8).

Why is he described as “the fallen”? He hasn’t yet fallen! Hashem says, “I know that in the future he will fall, but I do not want this accident to result from your own sin.”

A Failure to Help

It is written, “Because of the fact that they did not greet you with bread and water on the road” (Devarim 23:5).

Did the Children of Israel need the help of Ammon or Moab? During the 40 years that they spent in the desert, the Children of Israel were nourished by the manna, the quails, and Miriam’s well. The Clouds of Glory protected them from the harsh environment and attackers, in addition to illuminating their way in the desert.

In reality, Ammon and Moab are being criticized here for their lack of common decency: It is the most basic of things to offer food and drink to travelers. What punishment did Hashem reserve for them? “An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the congregation of Hashem” (Devarim 23:4). Therein lay the lesson that we must learn here: We must see what happens to those who fail to help others who do not need it – and especially to those who fail to help others who need it!

The Great Importance of Kindness

It is written, “For you, it will be tzeddakah before Hashem your G-d” (Devarim 24:13).

Why is it written “before Hashem your G-d”? Three hosts walk before Hashem: “Tzeddek [righteousness] will walk before Him” (Tehillim 85:14), “A fire will consume before Him” (Tehillim 50:3), and “Before Him went a plague” (Habakkuk 3:5). Which is the most important and cherished? It is tzeddek, for it is written: “For you, it will be tzeddakah before Hashem your G-d.” Generosity, kindness is found before G-d.

Rabbi Yudan says, “All this in order to show you the power of kindness, and to make the givers of charity understand just how great their reward is, for kindness itself stands as their merit before G-d.”

– Midrash Shochoer Tov

Like a Greedy Fly

It is written, “Remember what Amalek did to you” (Devarim 25:17).

Who is Amalek?

Amalek is a cipher for am lak – a people who, like a dog, come to lick Israel’s blood.

Rabbi Levi said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Halafta: “With what may Amalek be compared? With a fly that is greedy to get at an open wound.” Hence the comment that Amalek was like a dog that is greedy to get at Israel.

Indeed, as Rabbi Nathan taught, Amalek [was so greedy to get at Israel that he] was willing to travel a distance of 400 parasangs to make war against Israel in Rephidim.

– Pesikta D’Rav Kahana 3:8

In the Light of the Parsha

It is written, “[If] you see among the captives a woman who is beautiful of form” (Devarim 21:11).

In reality, this law applies only to the righteous who are not Hashem’s servants, and the Torah only mentions it in regards to the evil inclination. Even if they are not exempt because they were never guilty of any sin, the fact remains that these righteous men were not prepared for a spiritual war, nor did they agree to all the sacrifices required in the struggle against the evil inclination, nor did they do more than what was strictly necessary to fight it. Furthermore, when faced with the trial of the “woman who is beautiful of form” – a non-Jewish woman who was taken captive because of her beauty – they immediately stumbled because the evil inclination has dominion over fighters in time of war.

The Torah therefore warns us so that the truly righteous, Hashem’s servants, can learn from this. This allows us to see what happens to those who fail to work on themselves, to those who quickly fall under the control of their evil inclination, which they have not made an effort to chase from their hearts.

We often see men who wake up in the morning and head to the Beit HaMidrash in order to study. Yet instead of overcoming their evil inclination during prayer, as they did by getting up in the morning, they fall asleep in the middle of the prayer service or waste their time chatting before it begins.

What they gain by waking up on time, they lose during the prayer service, for in order to fight the evil inclination and have complete control of himself, a person must wage a constant fight against it throughout his life. A person cannot be content with the few instances in which he succeeds in leaving his bed in the morning to go and study Torah. Because such people neglect to wage such a fight, we quickly discover through their deeds that they have not really subjected themselves to Hashem, even if they are successful in overcoming their desires from time to time.

Guard Your Tongue

Talebearing

A talebearer is someone who goes from person to person saying, “This is what So-and-so said about you,” or “this is what So-and-so did to you,” or “this is what I heard that So-and-so did or wants to do to you.” Even if such remarks do not contain anything derogatory about the person in question, even from the talebearer, and even if the person in question would not deny it, it is still talebearing.

– Chafetz Chaim

Arriving on Time

Regrettably, we sometimes meet Jews who arrive in synagogue after the prayer service has started, a few minutes after in the best of cases, and then leave a few minutes before the end. In order to reach the Amidah and pray with everyone else, they have to skip several passages being recited by the congregation. During one of his lessons, Rav Zilberstein Shlita told a story about the life of Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik Zatzal, who once received a visit from a boy who had been diagnosed with a serious illness. The boy was to undergo an operation, and he wanted to know how he could strengthen his faith during that critical time.

Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik advised the boy to strengthen his faith in two ways: First, he was to commit himself to having a Seudat Hoda'ah, a meal to thank Hashem, once he was cured. Second – and this was the most important thing – he had to commit himself to reciting the entire prayer to perfection!

Rabbi Moshe explained to the boy that this didn't mean he had to pray in an unreasonable or onerous manner. It simply meant he had to make sure that he arrived on time to pray, and that he prayed with the congregation from start to finish, meaning from Birkot Hashachar to Aleinu Leshabeach. He added that the boy should maintain this commitment for an entire year.

The sick youngster committed himself to doing everything he mentioned, at which point something incredible happened: He was completely cured of his grave disease! It was a miracle.

That said, why wait for hardships to assail us before we strengthen our observance of prayer? We can strengthen ourselves while perfectly healthy, right up to our 120th year!

This may be the right time to discuss the issue, and to call out those who arrive late and leave early, in order to convince them to stop such behavior.

These people need to remember that Heaven will hold them accountable for the influence that their conduct had on their friends – those who saw them arriving late, and who proceeded to do the same. We sometimes see prominent talmidei chachamim arriving late for prayer. They should remember that people are watching them, and as a result they may think that arriving late is acceptable. Such behavior may also become permanently engrained in them, for they may reason that if a talmid chacham behaves as such, how much more should they! Indeed, they won't be able to act otherwise, and those who arrive late will be held accountable for it.

– Barchi Nafshi

He Will Have Children

The Rebbe of Belz, Yissachar Dov Rokeach Zatzal, would usually walk along the city streets after the Passover Seder to see how the common folk were behaving on that night. From one house he could hear the voice of a simple Jew who was enthusiastically concluding the Ga'al Israel blessing. The man then immediately began to recite the Amidah.

When the Gabbai, who was accompanying the Rebbe, burst into laughter, the Rebbe replied with great emotion: "This Jew has placed

deliverance next to prayer, and I'm certain that his prayer will be answered! He has no children now, but soon he will."

Keva is Ekev

"Rabbi Eliezer says, 'He who makes his prayer a fixed task, it is not a [genuine] supplication.' What is meant by a fixed task? Rabbi Yaakov bar Idi said in the name of Rabbi Oshaiah: 'Anyone whose prayer is like a heavy burden on him.' The Sages say: 'Whoever does not say it in the manner of a supplication' " (Berachot 29a).

It seems to me that the word keva (fixed task) is formed by the same letters as ekev (heel), because from the moment prayer begins, a person waits for the blessing of the "heel" (i.e., the Sim Shalom blessing found at the end), at which point he thinks: "When will I reach that blessing so the prayer service will end?" At that point, his prayer becomes similar to a "fixed task," and it shows in his "heel."

Likewise, concerning the opinion that a "fixed task" means that it is not a genuine supplication, it is because it was recited in a hurry. If it had been recited as a genuine supplication, it would have taken more time.

– Benayahu

The Faithful Ones - Accounts from the Tzaddikim of the Pinto Family

Rabbi Israel Nadjara is Waiting for Us

Rabbi Haim Pinto, may his merit protect us, would usually journey from place to place in a miraculous way. During one such journey, he took someone with him.

Here is what happened:

The gaon Rabbi David ben Hassin Zatzal was known as a great poet. He lived in Meknes, which was quite a distance from Mogador. During the middle of the night, Rabbi Haim arrived at his house, woke him up, and said: "Come with me to Mogador. Rabbi Israel Nadjara is waiting for us there."

Rabbi David hesitated a little, for the journey from Meknes to Mogador would take many hours. He then said, "How can I go? My wife could wake up in the middle of the night, see that I'm not home, and be terrified!" Rabbi Haim reassured him: "With G-d's help, we will leave and return quickly, before your wife even wakes up." Rabbi David remained hesitant. He then told Rabbi Haim, "Because of my wife, I just can't leave." Rabbi Haim continued trying to persuade him: "I promise you that we will leave and return, and that your wife won't notice a thing." They then left on their journey. The two travelers departed from Meknes in a miraculous way. Once in Mogador, they met the poet Rabbi Israel Nadjara Zatzal, who had descended from the World of Truth to meet them, and together they sang songs and piyutim. Rabbi Israel Nadjara promised to appear before them every Rosh Chodesh so they could sing together. From then on, Rabbi Haim Pinto went to see Rabbi David ben Hassin every month, and together they journeyed from Meknes to Mogador in a miraculous way to sing songs and piyutim with the poet Rabbi Israel Nadjara.

– As heard from Rabbi Aharon Hassin Zatzal,
Rosh Av Beit Din of Essaouira and grandson
of the poet Rabbi David ben Hassin Zatzal