

The Path to Follow

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SPIRITUAL ACCOUNTING

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

May the Creator be praised for all the kindnesses that He demonstrates to us each day and at every hour. If today we wanted to write about the Creator's kindnesses towards us, time would be lacking, but His generosity would never be lacking. All the paper in the world would be insufficient to mention even the smallest part of all the kindnesses that He does for us day after day.

This is what we say in our prayers: "To Him Who alone performs great wonders, for His kindness endures forever" (Tehillim 136:4). Yes, Hashem does wonders for us at each instant. His kindness endures forever – it is eternal, without end. In the Nishmat Kol Chai prayer of Shabbat, we also say: "Even if our mouth were filled with song as the sea...we would still be unable to thank You...for even one of the innumerable myriads of favors, miracles, and wonders that You have performed for us and our fathers before us."

At the same time, we completely fail to appreciate the miracles that Hashem does for us at every moment, such as when we enjoy a pleasant sleep, during which time the Creator neither sleeps nor slumbers, but protects us at each instant. Where else do we see such a thing? For example, would a king stay awake all night in order to watch over his servants as they sleep? He would almost be enslaved to them! Yet this is typical of Hashem: He watches over His servants to protect them from all harm.

Because of our many sins, we are so accustomed to our daily lives that such an occurrence seems normal, natural, and permanent. Yet when something doesn't turn out the way we want, we are filled with rage, to the point that we no longer sense G-d's guiding hand as it protects each and every one of us. Why is this so? It is in order for man to strengthen himself, to constantly take an accounting of his life before the Yamim Noraim (Days of Awe). It is also to reflect a little upon the fact that Hashem rules the world, that in looking into the Torah He created the world for Israel, and that all of Creation is only for the sake of Torah, which is the main thing.

It is not without reason that the soul descends into this world; it is uniquely to nourish itself with spirituality. In other words, the essential thing is to transform materiality into spirituality. Hence Hashem gave us Torah and mitzvot, for they lead man to where he wants to go, and through these he discovers the secrets of Creation.

This is also why He created the evil inclination, which is also called tov meod ("very good"). This

is because it is precisely the evil inclination that causes a person to draw closer to Hashem when it tries to make him stumble. If a person masters his evil inclination, then he will uncover true light and draw closer to Hashem as a result. The evil inclination is not only found in unholy places, but also and precisely in holy places. For example, it was found with the Kohen Gadol, who was forbidden from having any impure thoughts when he entered the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, for that is where the evil inclination lurked in order to make him stumble. We find proof of this with Moshe, who was in Heaven for 40 days and was not afraid to approach G-d and the angels. Yet in the Tent of Meeting, when the Cloud covered it, Moshe could not remain there. Instead, he would immediately leave it, for there was no evil inclination in Heaven, whereas on earth – in the Tent of Meeting – such was not always the case. Hence Moshe greatly feared that the evil inclination might overpower him.

We find the same thing with Adam and Eve, who before sinning felt neither fear nor shame, for they had no evil inclination. Yet after they sinned, the evil inclination made them stumble, and they were afraid and ashamed because they had fallen from the highest level to the lowest. Since that happened to them, what can we ourselves say? How much more should we be careful not to fall into the hands of the evil inclination, be it in a holy or unholy place! It is truly frightening.

A Jew is born pure, and he must also die pure, for how can he present himself before the King in a soiled garment? Furthermore, after 120 years on earth there will be a Judge and there will be a judgment; there will be reward and there will be punishment. If someone has any doubts about this, he should even repent over such doubts, since it is written: "The judgments of Hashem are true, altogether righteous" (Tehillim 19:10). There is definitely a judgment, and a person must distance himself from the evil inclination as it seeks to chill his enthusiasm in serving Hashem, just as Amalek did, by telling him that all his wealth comes to him by chance, not through prayer. Hence he must distance himself from the evil inclination.

In order to do this, a person needs tremendous help from Heaven, and he must work diligently to avoid the grasp of the evil inclination and place himself under the influence of the good inclination.

How can we conquer the evil inclination? To do this, Hashem gave man days of spiritual awakening, days of grace in the month of Elul, in order that we may draw closer to Him. In fact the name Elul stands for Ani Ledodi Vedodi Li ("I am my

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beloved's, and my beloved is mine"). For his part, a person must first draw closer to Hashem ("I am my beloved's") and then Hashem will draw closer to him ("my beloved is mine"). Hashem knocks upon the doors of the heart of every Jew who repents, and during those days He is very close to anyone who sincerely draws closer to Him.

That being the case, we are obligated to prepare ourselves in this world through Torah and mitzvot. In this way, we will know what to

say on the Day of Judgment in the World above. We must make a special effort to spiritually awaken and strengthen ourselves in Torah, for that is the goal of Creation, transforming materiality into spirituality, especially during the Days of Awe. If we do this, Hashem will hear our prayers and we will have a good year, a sweet year blessed with all good things. We will also be inscribed, by signed decree, in the book of the completely righteous. Amen, may it be so.

The Words of the Sages

The Prayer of the Alphabet

It was nighttime, the end of the holiest day of the year, and the Neila prayer had concluded. The Baal Shem Tov and his disciples returned home from synagogue at the end of Yom Kippur. Everything was surrounded by an atmosphere of holiness and spiritual purity, and no one wished to leave at such a time. Yet when the Baal Shem Tov expressed his desire to go on a journey, everyone was inclined to do what he wanted. Alexei, the Baal Shem Tov's coachman, wasn't surprised by the sudden travel plans at such a late hour, nor by the itinerary of the unknown journey. The Baal Shem Tov was in the habit of leaving on such mysterious journeys with a group of disciples. Oftentimes, they merited a miraculous shortening of their route. Sometimes when they returned home, they didn't know why they had gone and what they had accomplished by their journey. The horses made a long trek as the passengers in the carriage, the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov, were advancing towards what would be revealed to them. The horses eventually stopped, having arrived at their destination, a distant and isolated village. The Baal Shem Tov directed his disciples to find an inn.

They were greeted by the owner, a Jew who, in order to earn a living, offered his services to all the non-Jews of the surrounding area. He was troubled and worried at the sight of such an honorable group of men standing at his doorstep. He was especially concerned before the penetrating gaze of the Baal Shem Tov, who was looking straight at him.

"Rebbe!" the innkeeper suddenly exclaimed with a broken voice. "Rebbe! I've committed a great sin. I know the full magnitude of my sins. Alas, alas, Rebbe! I thought that no one would find out..." Tears rolled down his cheeks. It was obvious that he was completely overwhelmed and shattered.

The Baal Shem Tov calmed him, asking that he sit down and gently explain what had happened. He didn't have to ask twice. The Jew felt an inner need to tell the tzaddik what was on his heart. His disciples were witnesses to the account of his story.

He began his account by saying, "Every year, I would go to a small neighboring town during the Noraim Yamim." In fact this innkeeper was the only Jew in his entire village, and throughout the year he had to pray without a minyan. Yet during the Noraim Yamim, he would travel to the neighboring town in order to pray in its synagogue.

This year as well, on the eve of Yom Kippur, he got ready to leave his home and travel to the neighboring town. Everything was set, and the innkeeper and his family left. In fact they had already traveled most of the way when the innkeeper remembered that he had forgotten to lock the door to the cellar of his inn.

This wasn't a simple problem. The cellar contained all his drinks, and it was now an open treasure. The non-Jews of the surrounding region were liable to make their way inside and completely empty it. It was already late, but the innkeeper calculated that he still had time to get back home, lock the cellar door, and return before sunset.

When he returned to the inn, the local Baron was outside waiting for him. "Lucky you arrived just in time," the Baron said, "I'm thirsty and want something hot to drink." The innkeeper had no choice but to comply. The Baron entered the inn and the innkeeper prayed in his heart that he would drink quickly and be on his way. However the situation got worse: As soon as he opened the door to the inn, all the neighbors heard and inundated his establishment with one request after another, as if there had been a proclamation in the village that the inn was now open. The more he tried to hasten things in order to close the inn, the more his clients increased. Still one more client, still one more purchase – making it impossible to close the door on these people. The Jew glanced at the clock and realized that it was too late – he no longer had any chance of reaching the synagogue before Yom Kippur. His heart was quivering from anxiety. What could he do? He had never spent Yom Kippur alone. He didn't have a regular prayer book, nor a Yom Kippur prayer book, and he didn't know the prayers by heart. Only his heart screamed with emotion.

"Sovereign of the universe," he said in a personal prayer that suddenly rose to his lips, "You are a merciful Father. You know the thoughts of man, and who knows better than You how much I wanted to be in synagogue with my fellow Jews at this time! I don't know the prayers, nor do I have a prayer book for Yom Kippur. I beg You, please accept the only prayer that I can now offer You. Like everyone else, I too want to pour out my soul before You and request a good and sweet year."

The only thing that this innkeeper knew by heart were the letters of the alphabet. He therefore began to read the letters one by one as a torrent of tears streamed from his eyes.

"Sovereign of the universe, please accept these letters," he said in his heart. "Assemble them into the proper words and intensions, and grant me a good year."

"Rebbe! I guess that you came here to reprimand me for my sin," he concluded as he turned towards the Baal Shem Tov. "I know that I didn't act properly. Please show me how to repent."

The eyes of the Baal Shem Tov shined with a special light, and a smile of contentment arose on his sanctified lips. "No need to worry," he warmly told the innkeeper. "Many years have passed since such a sincere prayer ascended to Heaven on this Yom Kippur."

Guard Your Tongue

She Herself Will Shame Him

Numerous men make the mistake of telling their wives what so-and-so did to them at the Beit HaMidrash or elsewhere. Besides transgressing the prohibition against speaking Lashon Harah, this will lead to even greater strife, for his wife will certainly bear a grudge and quarrel with the person in question, as well as encouraging him to do the same. In the end, she herself will bring shame upon her husband, which is why he must keep the matter to himself. – Chafetz Chaim

A True Fear of Heaven

During this time of prayers and supplications, it is fitting to again look into the concept of prayer and its practice so that our own prayers are accepted before Him Who dwells eternally in Heaven. This is what the mashgiach Rabbi Yechezkel Lewinstein Zatzal taught:

“Prayer is not mastered through body movements or facial grimacing, but above all by the concept: ‘Taste and see that Hashem is good’ [Tehillim 34:9]. We must each acquire a taste for prayer, in which case our prayers will be acceptable. Now in order to develop a taste for prayer, we must strengthen within ourselves the foundations of faith and confidence in Divine providence. It is something that we must simply all do.

“First, understand the meaning of the words [that one recites in prayer], and let the ear hear what the mouth is saying. Otherwise, it simply isn’t prayer, as it is written: ‘With his mouth, one speaks peace with his fellow, but inside of him he lays his ambush’ [Jeremiah 9:7]. In fact the mouth may express G-d’s praises while the heart is immersed in completely different thoughts and mundane imagery. In order to achieve genuine prayer, we must exert a great deal of effort; it is only in this way that we can learn how to pray.”

Winning Over the Creator

It is said that at every hour of the day, the Rebbe of Belz, Rabbi Aharon Zatzal, was immersed in Torah study and prayer. Whoever saw him as he prayed would tremble from the tzaddik’s intense fear of Heaven. Each of his movements was devoted to G-d, and it was not surprising that feelings of holiness infused all who saw him.

On Rosh Hashanah, he proclaimed HaMelech (“the King”) with a strong voice that moved people to repentance. His face transformed into a blazing torch, but then it became as pale as snow. Everyone tried to watch him in tears.

The same thing happened on the night of Rosh Hashanah, when he recited LeDavid Mizmor with great emotion during the meal. His words penetrated to the bone. When he arose to give a moving speech before the tekiot, just a simple glance at his face was all that a person needed for repentance. When people heard him recite, “Happy are the people who know the Teruah,” and the explanation that the Sages give to it – “Happy are the people who know how to win over the Creator with the Teruah” (Vayikra Rabba 29:4) – people were shaken to their core.

The great emotion that moved all who found themselves at his table on the night of Rosh Hashanah is completely indescribable, just as in the passage Oubau Kulam, gently recited at the Shavuot table, a song that greatly moves the soul. Everyone who heard his voice felt as if they were standing on Mount Sinai and listening to Hashem say Anochi.

Whoever saw him realized that he was above time and space, that his soul and mind hovered in the supernal worlds while his body remained on earth. This was in order to teach people by example, to show everyone just to what level a human being can elevate himself and transform even his material body into something spiritual. “We witnessed,” said one of his relatives, “his enthusiasm in prayer. We saw how, all of a sudden, he exploded like fireworks, his face burning like a torch. Despite the fact that he was known to be frail, and that all his doctors thought it was a miracle that he was still alive, no weakness could be perceived in him during prayer, something that is incomprehensible.

“His sanctified prayers did not manifest themselves in screams or shouts, but in gentle sanctity. Every word emerged from his mouth in holiness and purity, in fear and trembling. The emotions of everyone who witnessed him were elevated, to the point that they prayed with him, or they waited for him throughout that day without growing weary, so they could hear words of prayer emerging from his sanctified mouth as the words of the living G-d.”

Complete Teshuvah

In the village of Berditchev, where the tzaddik Rabbi Levi Yitzchak lived, there was a non-believer who used to ridicule the tzaddik and his chassidim. The chassidim said to him, “If you had been in synagogue when Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was praying, you would have repented.”

The man scorned them with an outburst of laughter, saying: “I’ll go, and you’ll see!” He therefore went to the synagogue, where he stood from the beginning of the prayer service until just after the Amidah, at which point he gestured mockingly to the chassidim, as if to say: “I won!”

Yet when the Rav began to recite Uba LeTzion, reciting the words “and for the penitent among Jacob” – continuously repeating them with tremendous emotion from the depths of his soul – the man could no longer bear it. The Rav’s words penetrated his heart, and he didn’t move from there until he did complete teshuvah.

Men of Faith

Happy Are You!

In the splendid book Mekor HaHaim, we learn of the great degree of holiness to which Rabbi Haim Pinto, may his merit protect us, reached in his life, one that was completely devoted to Hashem and His Torah. What follows is an account from that book:

Rabbi Makhlof Lov (whom everyone knew as Rabbi Lissa) once ran to Rabbi Haim Pinto’s home in Mogador for an extremely important and urgent matter.

In Rabbi Makhlof’s eyes, the matter was so urgent that any delay was out of the question, which is why he ran to see Rabbi Haim in the middle of the night, as he was studying.

He found Rabbi Haim’s room because of the light emerging from it. When he entered, he saw two people inside: Rabbi Haim, his face blazing with a brilliant light, and someone else, someone he didn’t recognize, but who appeared like an angel.

Rabbi Makhlof wanted to approach them, but suddenly he felt his legs give way as tremendous fear overcame him. He therefore turned around and fled!

On the following day, when Rabbi Makhlof met Rabbi Haim, Rabbi Haim said to him: “Fortunate are you, Rabbi Makhlof, for having merited to see the face of Eliyahu HaNavi!”

Upon hearing this, Rabbi Makhlof was filled with dread, afraid that he would be punished for what he saw. He asked Rabbi Haim to pray so that he would not be punished by an early death. Rabbi Haim promised to pray for him, to ask Hashem for mercy so that he would not die young.

Rabbi Haim’s prayer was accepted, and Rabbi Makhlof lived to a very great age. In fact he left this world at the age of 110. He recorded this incident in his prayer book, and his children and grandchildren, who served the descendants of the Pinto family, transmitted it from generation to generation.