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**Rabbi David Hanania
 Pinto Shlita**

CHEVRAT PINTO
 207 West 78th Street
 New York - NY 10024
 Tel: 1 212 721 0230
www.hevratpinto.org
hevratpinto@aol.com

Editor-in-Chief:
Hanania Soussan

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEN OF GOODNESS

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "Rather, to my land and to my kindred shall you go and take a wife for my son, for Isaac" (Bereshith 24:4).

Abraham made Eliezer swear to take a wife for Isaac from his homeland, from Haran. In his Torah commentary, the Ran asks why Abraham guided his servant to the daughters of his homeland, completely excluding those of Canaan, since both peoples were idolaters! How were the inhabitants of Haran different than those of Canaan?

Abraham knew that, despite being idolaters, the people of Haran were endowed with a certain degree of goodness. Now anyone who possesses this attribute will eventually improve and become better, even if at first they seem to be acting badly. In fact it is written, "The world is built on kindness" (Tehillim 89:3), for everyone is a world in microcosm, and if he possesses this character trait, he can "build himself" and improve. Hence this character trait existed in Haran, but was lacking among the Canaanites.

In fact the land of Canaan harbored the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose inhabitants ridiculed the concept of kindness and charity. In these cities, anyone who begged for money or gave to charity was killed on the spot. Furthermore, the king of Sodom had told Abraham, "Give me the people and take the possessions for yourself" (Bereshith 14:21), his goal being to control those people.

The inhabitants of Haran, on the other hand, despite also being idolaters, possessed the virtue of chesed. For example, when Lavan heard that Eliezer had arrived in town and noted the jewelry given to his sister Rebecca, he coveted Eliezer's wealth and went out to meet him with the purpose of killing him. When Eliezer saw Lavan arriving armed, he spoke G-d's Name and "vanished" with his ten camels. Forced into realizing that he could not defeat him, Lavan then exclaimed: "Come, O blessed of Hashem! Why should you stand outside when I have cleared the house, and a place for the camels?" (Bereshith 24:31). Here Rashi comments, "when I have cleared the house – of idolatry." Lavan did this because he had certainly thought of welcoming Eliezer into his home, and he knew that Eliezer would not agree to stay in a house filled with idols. This is difficult to understand: If Lavan had initially gone out to kill him, why did he intend on inviting him to stay in his home? Actually, even while going out to commit such a grave act as murder, Lavan thought that it may not be possible for him to defeat Eliezer. At that point the attribute of generosity, which slumbered in him until then, awakened and he cleared his house of idols so he could welcome Eliezer if he couldn't defeat him.

This is why Abraham made Eliezer swear to look for a girl only from Haran, whose inhabitants were capable of goodness.

Thus Eliezer found Rebecca, this great righteous woman who did not follow the ways of the ungodly

people around her. In fact when she arrived in Beersheba, she saw Isaac from afar and bowed to the ground, for she perceived the Divine Presence above him. (Isaac had merited the Divine Presence after the Akeidah, for angels taught him Torah for three consecutive years.)

Why did the young girls accompanying Rebecca not bow as well? Because they did not perceive the Divine Presence. Likewise, all the girls of Beersheba who regularly saw Isaac did not revere him either! None of these girls were capable of discerning the Shechinah that hovered over him. Only Rebecca, who was a righteous woman, was capable of doing so, which is why she bowed.

Yet what was it that made Rebecca a righteous woman? It was the development of exceptional kindness, which was deeply rooted in her. It was this characteristic which Eliezer perceived, for here was a young girl of three years old who was offering water to his entire entourage as well as his camels! With her limited strength, she drew water numerous times until all the camels had finished drinking, meaning at least 25 gallons per camel (the amount that a camel can drink), and there were 10 camels! This represents an enormous quantity of water, to which we must add the water that she brought for the men accompanying Eliezer. It was this attribute of chesed which she developed that gave her the energy to draw such large amounts. Hence as soon as she arrived at Isaac's home, she benefited from the blessing of Sarah in the bread, in the candles, and in the cloud.

Additional Years

Our Sages say, "The mere conversation of the servants of the Patriarchs' household is more important than the Torah of their descendants" (Bereshith Rabba 60:8). In fact numerous Torah passages containing fundamental principles are written briefly and by allusion, whereas the journey of Eliezer, Abraham's servant, is described in a repetitive and detailed way! How are Eliezer's words superior to other Torah teachings?

The answer is that they contain the fundamental concept of kindness, the virtue upon which the world stands. This is why Eliezer searched for a kind-hearted girl, meticulously examining Rebecca with this in mind. It is also why the deeds of kindness performed by our Matriarch Rebecca are stressed in this account.

In this regard, the Gemara relates the story of an Amora who let out a heavy sigh, wept, and then arose and laughed. He was asked why he did this, to which he responded that he had wept when the angel of death came to find him, for his time on earth had reached its end. He then began to laugh when he saw G-d preventing the angel from taking his soul. Since he had been generous and kind with others, G-d gave him good years over and above his allotted time. To this he added, "Whoever shows kindness to others will also be judged for his sins with kindness."

It is Possible to Earn an Honest Living

Honesty and fairness in business have been instilled in us from the time of Abraham, the father of our people. In fact when he had to acquire a parcel of land in order to bury his wife Sarah, the Torah explicitly states: “Abraham weighed out to Ephron the price that he had mentioned...400 silver shekels in negotiable currency” (Bereshith 23:16).

The proceeding stories describe extraordinary business practices that were followed by our scholars, those who increase peace and harmony in the world.

Rabbi Shraga Feivel Frank, the father-in-law of both Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Epstein (the Rosh Yeshiva of Slobodka) and Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer (the Rosh Yeshiva of Etz Chaim) was a businessman. A Jewish client from another town once came to his store in order to purchase a large number of furs.

The client asked Rabbi Shraga Feivel for a certain discount, given that he was purchasing such a large amount of merchandise. Rabbi Shraga Feivel responded, “This is my price, and I’m sticking to it so that a certain profit remains. I won’t lower the price, and I have no intention of bargaining. Anyone not satisfied with it is free to go see other merchants in town.” Upon saying this, Rabbi Shraga Feivel gave him the addresses of several other fur merchants.

The client therefore left his store and went to see his competitors. After visiting various merchants, he realized that Rabbi Shraga Feivel’s price was the lowest. He therefore returned to his store and decided to purchase the furs at his initial price.

“I’ll sell you the furs, but not at the price that I initially quoted. I’ll give you the discount that you want,” he declared.

Stunned, the client exclaimed: “But you adamantly refused to give me a discount, all while knowing that I would go elsewhere! Yet now that I’m ready to accept your price, you’re offering me the discount that I asked for?”

Rabbi Shraga Feivel explained: “As soon as you left my store, I thought about it and realized that the quantity of fur that you wanted to buy from me was large indeed, and that I could in fact grant you the discount you wanted and still earn a respectable profit. In that case, there’s really no reason for me to be stubborn about it.

“Now that you’ve returned to purchase furs at my store, I must put into practice what I had decided in my mind. In fact King David said, ‘A psalm by David. Hashem, who may sojourn in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy mountain? One who walks in perfect innocence and does what is right, and speaks the truth from his heart’ [Tehillim 15:1-2]. Likewise every morning we affirm, ‘A person always has to fear G-d in private and in public, and to speak the truth from his heart.’ I must apply the principles taught by King David, the singer of Israel, as well as the words of my daily prayer. Since I realized that it was wrong to refuse the discount that you had asked me for, I will now sell you furs at the price I decided upon after you left. In fact each of us has the duty to ‘speak the truth from his heart.’”

Consistency Bears Fruit

Rabbi Eliezer Keiser, a student of the Tiferet Aharon of Mattersdorf, owned a shop. One day, someone arrived and asked for the price of a

pair of shoes. Rabbi Eliezer informed him of the price, at which point the client immediately paid. When Rabbi Eliezer saw that he had not tried to bargain with him (as was the norm) and had instead quickly decided to pay, he gave him his change while giving him an automatic discount at the same time.

In the book Beit Israel, where this story is found, Rav Eliezer explained his position: “I thought that you would try to bargain, like everyone else does, in order to get a discount. At that point, my intention was to lower the price and sell it to you at a discount. Since you didn’t negotiate, however, and since I don’t want to break my habit of speaking the truth from my heart, I gave you the discount.”

It is also said that Rabbi Avraham Meir Ziswein opened a bookstore and had prospered to the point of becoming a great merchant, supplying books and religious articles to numerous retailers.

He would speak as little as possible, conducting business with pure faith and great confidence in G-d. He would sit in his store among his clients and study the Gemara or mishnayot. He determined the price of each book he sold based on every possible discount that he could offer to his clients. Thus when a client inquired about a book, he gave him the set price without adding or subtracting a penny. He then returned to his learning without trying to influence or persuade the client in any way.

Someone once insisted that he lower his price, to which the Rav replied: “According to my calculations, this is the minimum price at which I can earn a profit” – and that’s all he said.

Surprisingly enough, by his exceptional consistency the Rav was able to grow his business much more than other merchants, who used sweet words as well as pressure tactics and persuasion to sell their wares.

The book Beit Yaakov recounts the following story: Before becoming the Rav of Tchebin, the gaon Rabbi Dov Berish Weidenfeld (the author of Dovev Mesharim) was a charcoal merchant. His meticulousness and honesty in business were typical of everything he did in life. He was committed to everything that he said, meaning that he never went back on his word, not even for all the money in the world.

One client recounted the following incident: “One day I ordered a few sacks of charcoal from Rabbi Dov Berish for a certain date. A few days later, he said he had learned that the price of charcoal was about to drop. He therefore advised me not to be in such a hurry to buy, since it would be unfortunate for a Jew to lose money to non-Jewish retailers, who were rich.”

Rabbi Dov Berish, the main charcoal dealer, focused more on his clients than his vendors, despite the large profit that he could have made!

Guard Your Tongue

He Transgresses a Prohibition

If anyone peddles remarks from one person to another by saying: “This is what So-and-so said about you,” or “this is what he did,” or “this is what I heard he did to you,” or “this is what I heard he plans to do to you” – such a person is called a talebearer. This applies even if he recounts nothing detrimental, even if his intentions are not bad, and even if he would not deny it.

– Chafetz Chaim

In the Footsteps of our Fathers

Sharing the Pain of Others

It is written, "It was after the death of Abraham that G-d blessed Isaac his son" (Bereshith 25:11).

Here the Sages explain that the Holy One, blessed be He, consoles mourners. This is also found in Rashi's commentary on Sotah 14a: "[He] blessed – He consoled him over the death of his father and gave him the blessing for mourners." The Chafetz Chaim writes, "Yet because of our many sins, many treat this mitzvah lightly. Especially when poor people are in mourning, no one opens their door. But the contrary is true. The grief and loss of the poor are all the harder to bear, since these unfortunate ones derive pleasure from nothing else except their children. ... Indeed, his friend may be separated from him, but he is all the nearer to G-d. Thus Scripture states, 'Hashem is close to the brokenhearted' [Tehillim 34:19]. How great is the recompense of those who comfort and speak encouragingly to them" (Ahavat Chesed 3:5).

I Never Felt Pain

Sharing the pain of others, understanding them and being involved in their distress, is a characteristic that we find among the great men of Israel.

For example, it is said that on Simchat Torah, a Holocaust survivor whose heart had been severely broken went to see the gaon Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman Zatzal, the Rav of Ponevezh. The Rav was asked, "Rabbi, how can we help him?"

The man began to cry out, expressing himself amid a storm of emotions. Yet the Rav, who understood the man and fully recalled the principle that "we cannot judge someone on his pain," consoled him immensely, saying to him: "If we think of the dead who were murdered for the sanctification of G-d's Name, they are now in the abode of the holy Tanna Rabbi Akiva and his companions. No one can equal them, and happy is their lot. We who remain are miserable, we whose lives were spared from the fire. We are the ones for whom people should weep. For the holy ones, there is really no reason to weep; they are in a good place."

At another time, the Rav of Ponevezh recounted what he had heard from a Holocaust survivor when the Belzer Rebbe, Rabbi Aharon Rokeach Zatzal, was saved from the massacres in Poland and traveled in 5703 to Hungary. There he was told the terrible news that none of his seven children, nor any of his grandchildren, had survived. One of the old chassidim tried to console him, giving him the customary blessing that he "should know no further pain."

The Rebbe took him by the hand and exclaimed in trembling, "Do you suspect me of ever having experienced pain? Not in the least! Never in my life have I felt any pain!"

Like Child's Play

The following story, and the marvelous lesson it contains, was told by the gaon Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch Shlita in his book Ta'am VaDa'at: "One day the gaon Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski Zatzal went to visit the revered Rav of Lodz, the gaon Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim Meizel Zatzal, and presented his book Acheizer as a gift to him. Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim was happy to receive it, saying that he thought it was a marvelous book.

Rabbi Chaim Ozer asked him, "When will we have the pleasure of reading a book that you have written?" Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim replied, "I already have a book."

Surprised, Rabbi Chaim Ozer said: "If you have a book, show it to me!" He replied, "Come with me." He then showed him a drawer filled

with IOUs that he obtained in order to repay loans for Torah scholars, widows, and orphans. He explained that this was his book, "the book of the generations of man," a reference to good deeds. He added that he was so occupied with this book that he had no time to write a book like Rabbi Chaim Ozer's.

Rabbi Chaim Ozer didn't say a word. Yet on his deathbed, not long before he died, he recounted this story to the gaon Rabbi Yosef Mishkovsky Zatzal, who was next to him, and said that he now realized and fully understood that Rabbi Eliyahu Chaim was indeed correct: A person's main book, the one that he brings with him into the next world, consists of his good deeds in this world.

This is a fitting place to add a story that appears in the book HaChafetz Chaim Vepoolo. It recounts what Rabbi Chaim Ozer said, near the end of his life, to his friends as they tried to learn from his vast experience.

"In the past, during my youth, I thought that the most important thing for a person such as myself was to find as many novel Torah interpretations as possible and to write Torah commentaries. Yet now the writing of a book seems like child's play compared to the need to support widows and orphans, the poor and Torah scholars!"

In the Light of the Parsha

A Blessing Agreed to by All

It is written, "And Hashem blessed Abraham in everything" (Bereshith 24:1).

Concerning the verse, "And Hashem rained down upon Sodom" (ibid 19:24), our Sages say: "Wherever 'And Hashem' occurs, it means Him and His heavenly court" (Bereshith Rabba 51:2). Similarly for Abraham, since it is written, "And Hashem blessed," it means that Hashem and His heavenly court blessed Abraham. But what does "Hashem and His heavenly court" really mean? Our Sages explain that it consists of the instance in which the attribute of mercy and the attribute of justice are in agreement. Either the attribute of justice agrees with the attribute of mercy to reward, or the attribute of mercy agrees with the attribute of justice to punish. The righteous develop the attribute of mercy to such a degree that the attribute of justice is forced to agree with it. On the other hand, the wicked amplify the attribute of justice to such a degree that the attribute to mercy is forced to agree with it. Furthermore on the verse, "And G-d remembered Noah" (Bereshith 8:1), Rashi explains: "This Name represents the divine attribute of justice, which was converted to the divine attribute of mercy through the prayer of the righteous. However the wickedness of the wicked converts the divine attribute of mercy to the divine attribute of justice, as it is said: 'And Hashem saw that the evil of man was great.... And Hashem said, "I will blot out..."' [Bereshith 6:5-7], although that Name is the Name of the divine attribute of mercy."

Such was the case with Sodom: Its inhabitants were so wicked that even the attribute of mercy agreed to punish them. Yet in the case of Abraham, even the attribute of justice wanted to bless him. It sometimes happens that G-d blesses a man and showers him with goodness, but the attribute of justice disagrees. Here it was the opposite, for Abraham was blessed by "Him and His heavenly court," meaning that the attribute of justice not only approved of G-d's blessing, but also joined in it. This entire incident is beneficial to the Jewish people, for sometimes Hashem desires to bless His people, but the attribute of justice disagrees, claiming that they are not worthy of such a blessing. Yet here, the heavenly court agreed with G-d to bless Abraham, and since "the deeds of the fathers are a sign for their children," the attribute of justice must also agree to bless Israel and to join in this blessing.

Connecting to the Source

It is written, “Sarah died in Kiryat-Arba, which is Hebron” (Bereshith 23:2).

Rabbeinu Bechaye explained why the text mentions two names for the same place (Kiryat-Arba and Hebron).

Kiryat-Arba is called Hebron because the soul of anyone buried there unites (mithaberet) on high in the city of G-d with the four (arba) camps of the Shechinah. This is why the Patriarchs sought to be buried in this place, namely that from there, souls merit to be reunited (leit’haber) with their source, which is the Throne of Glory. Hence the meaning of “Kiryat-Arba, which is Hebron.”

Before Every Merchant

It is written, “Four hundred silver shekels over la’socher [in negotiable currency]” (Bereshith 23:16).

The Chida explained this verse allegorically: Each letter in the term socher appears immediately after, in the Hebrew alphabet, each letter in the term nezek (“damage”). The term over means “before,” as in the expression over le-asiatan (“before doing”). Now Ephron, who was greedy, believed that making this deal could damage him financially. As King Solomon said, “One overeager for wealth has an evil eye. He does not know that cheser [want] may befall him” (Mishlei 28:22). For Ephron, the letters of socher became cheser.

This is a lesson that every merchant must always remember, for before a socher (merchant) lay nezek (damage) and cheser (want). If a merchant fulfills Hashem’s will by not transgressing several prohibitions (not to steal, not to oppress, not to deceive), he will be successful. On the other hand, he will experience both damage and want if he transgresses them.

Finally, let us cite a proverb of our Sages: “The salt of money is decrease” (Ketubot 66b). Since salt is a preservative, this alludes to the fact that by giving tzeddakah, a person can become a successful merchant.

Suddenly Generous

It is written, “They ate and drank, he and the men who were with him” (Bereshith 24:54).

The Chatam Sofer notes that at first the verse states, “Food was set before him” (v.33), for at the time they did not yet know who Eliezer was, nor why he had arrived. Hence they only gave him to eat, not his men or companions, to whom they only provided water for washing their feet.

However as soon as they learned that Eliezer was a messenger of the wealthy Abraham, and that he had arrived to ask for Rebecca’s hand in marriage to his master, they suddenly became generous and invited the entire delegation to eat at their table: “They ate and drank, he and the men who were with him.”

Silent

It is written, “These were the years of Ishmael’s life” (Bereshith 25:17).

The Gemara explains that this verse allows us to deduce that Jacob stayed with Eber for 14 years to study Torah (Megillah 17a). This is surprising, for why is this part of Jacob’s life not explicitly mentioned in the Torah, but instead is only deduced through the number of years of Ishmael’s life?

From here the gaon Rabbi Moshe Feinstein derived a fundamental and extraordinary principle in serving Hashem: Whoever serves G-d, even at the highest level, must not grow proud of his deeds and behavior. Did Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai not teach, “If you have learned much Torah,

do not claim special credit for yourself, since for that very purpose you were created” (Pirkei Avoth 2:8)? Even for a Torah scholar at the level of Rabbi Yochanan, there is no reason to grow proud, and how much more does this apply to us! How so? It is because a person with the ability to study Torah and serve G-d at a higher level is only fulfilling the goal of his existence. In that case, why should he grow proud?

This is the reason why the Torah is silent on Jacob’s continuous study of Torah for 14 years.

All Settled in their Proper Places

It is written, “And afterwards, Abraham buried Sarah his wife” (Bereshith 23:19).

Rabbi Shimon said, “When Abraham brought Sarah there for burial, Adam and Eve arose and refused to accept her. They said: ‘Is our shame not great enough already before the Holy One in the other world on account of our sin, which brought death into the world, that you should come to shame us further with your good deeds?’

“Abraham answered, ‘I am already destined to make atonement before the Almighty for you, so that you will never again be shamed before Him.’

“Abraham then buried Sarah his wife, meaning after Abraham had taken this obligation upon himself. Adam then returned to his place, but not Eve, until Abraham came and placed her beside Adam, who accepted her for his sake. Hence the text says, ‘And afterwards, Abraham buried [et] Sarah his wife’ – the augmenting particle et indicates that the burial included, as it were, Eve. Thus they were all settled in their proper places.”

– Zohar I:128

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

Going into Exile

In Elul of 5604, a year before the passing of Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol, may his merit protect us, the city of Mogador was destroyed during the war between Morocco and France. Numerous inhabitants, along with their wives and children, young and old alike, were prevented from leaving the city until the situation returned to normal. How could this be? Why did the tzaddik not pray for G-d to prevent war from coming to the city? By the power of his great holiness, he could have protected everyone, especially the city of Mogador, so that it would not be destroyed! As our teacher Rabbi David Pinto Shlita explains, however, we know that when the tzaddik foresaw this terrible decree, he annulled it by replacing it with exile. Hence he preferred telling everyone to go into exile rather than to lose their lives by remaining in the city. Among those who left was the tzaddik Rabbi Haim himself. However there were no donkeys or wagons available at the time, which is why he left the city on foot with his family. As he was escaping, a Gentile arrived and wanted to strike the Rav, but his hand immediately withered, preventing him from lifting it. It was a miracle. The Rav was already old at the time, and leaving the city wasn’t easy for him. Hence his son, the tzaddik Rabbi Hadan Zatzal, carried him upon his shoulders and walked for an entire day without tiring. They eventually reached safety in the city of Azgar.

It was there that they went to see a righteous Gentile, Haz Abdallah, who was the governor of the city. He provided them with an honorable living, protected the entire family, and saved them from hunger and all harm. At the end of the war, when calm returned, Rabbi Haim and his family left the governor and returned to Mogador. The Rav thanked him for all the kindnesses that he had shown, and he blessed him with a benediction for him and all his descendants after him.