

PARSHA

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SELF-SACRIFICE FOR THE FULFILLMENT OF MITZVOT

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel, saying: On the tenth of this month, let each one take a lamb for each parental home, a lamb for each household" (Shemot 12:3).

G-d commanded the Children of Israel to bring Him an offering from among the herd, for the ram was the god of the Egyptians. By slaughtering and offering it to G-d, the Children of Israel would demonstrate that they had no connection whatsoever to the paganism of Egypt. Offering the paschal lamb required great self-sacrifice on the part of the Children of Israel. Indeed, Hashem commanded them to tie these lambs to their bedposts four days before slaughtering them so they could verify that they had no blemishes. Now the Egyptians would have been overcome with anger upon seeing the Jewish people preparing to offer their god as a sacrifice. However the Children of Israel were not afraid, and they cleaved to G-d's command and fulfilled it at risk to their own lives. Starting from the second year of the exodus from Egypt, they again began to fulfill the mitzvah of the paschal lamb. Nevertheless a few men, having become impure due to carrying Joseph's bones, could not join their brothers in fulfilling this mitzvah. Hence they went to Moshe and said, "Why should we be diminished by not offering Hashem's sacrifice at its appointed time among the Children of Israel?" (Bamidbar 9:7). They also implored Moshe to ask G-d if it was nevertheless possible for them to offer the paschal lamb like the rest of the people. Seeing their great desire to fulfill Hashem's word, Moshe spoke to Hashem, Who told him that the men could fulfill this mitzvah afterwards, on Iyar 14, which was a month after the festival of Passover. Thus we read, "In the second month, on the fourteenth day, in the afternoon shall they make it, and they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs" (v.11).

Not only did these men correctly celebrate Passover and bring an offering to G-d, they were also worthy of being at the origin of the mitzvah of Pesach Sheni ("Second Passover"). In fact they so yearned to fulfill Hashem's commandments that He gave them Pesach Sheni, an extra and new mitzvah. This serves as a great lesson for us all, teaching us just to what point we should want to fulfill G-d's mitzvot.

The principle stated in the Mishnah is well-known: "One mitzvah brings about another, and one transgression brings about another" (Pirkei Avot 4:2). Thus when G-d sees us fulfilling a mitzvah with joy and enthusiasm, He gives us the opportunity to fulfill another mitzvah and augment our merits.

The more we express our desire to fulfill Hashem's commandments, the more He protects us from sin and grants us additional opportunities to obey Him.

Conversely, whoever openly transgresses G-d's word and in no way regrets not fulfilling Torah mitzvot, such a person will neither be blessed nor protected by G-d. The more he sins, the more Hashem will send him opportunities to sin even more, to the point that he will constantly be transgressing.

Furthermore, Hashem links good intentions with deeds (Kiddushin 40a). Thus if we yearn to fulfill a certain mitzvah, but for whatever reasons we cannot, G-d will consider it as if we had indeed fulfilled it. Not only that, but He will send us an additional mitzvah, as if we had actually fulfilled the original one, according to the principle that "one mitzvah brings about another."

Judging by Disappointment

Almost all of us can attest to intensely wanting to fulfill G-d's word, yet being prevented by the grind of our daily routine. We should then conduct a simple test in order to assure ourselves that this desire is a priority for which we are prepared to make every effort, not just a simple wish like so many others.

Imagine that someone has chosen some lottery numbers to play. Yet when he goes to purchase a ticket, he discovers that the ticket counter is already closed.

Clearly he will return home disappointed, but on the following day when he sees that the very same numbers he wanted to play actually won the jackpot, his pain will be indescribable. In fact he will be incredibly upset that he lost such a golden opportunity. Likewise, we should search our souls and ask ourselves, following the loss of a mitzvah, if we are as frustrated as the person who went to purchase a lottery ticket but discovered that the ticket counter was closed. Or are we deeply disappointed, like the person who realizes that the numbers he chose – but could not play – ended up winning the jackpot? The picture is one of extreme distress. The fact is that we are naturally drawn to material possessions, and only someone of exceptional character will truly feel distressed when a mitzvah he sincerely desires to fulfill has escaped him. The more we accustom ourselves to thinking about the value of the mitzvot and their great reward, the more our desire to fulfill them will increase, even if at great cost and tremendous self-sacrifice. We also have the explicit promise that whoever invests his energies in the fulfillment of mitzvot will receive additional opportunities from G-d to perform good deeds, to the point of constantly enjoying goodness and kindness.



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Under the Direction of
**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 Shovevim

We currently find ourselves in the middle of a period known as Yemei HaShovevim, a period that begins on Parsha Shemot and ends on Parsha Mishpatim. In fact the term Shovevim is formed by the initials of Shemot, Va'eira, Bo, Beshalach, Yitro, Mishpatim (we add Terumah and Tetzaveh during leap years, the initials of which are Tat). These days are known to strengthen us in serving Hashem, as well as in holiness and purity, by helping us work on our character traits. Chassidim and people of exceptional piety have the habit of fasting during these days in order to advance in the ways of holiness.

The Levush (685) mentions the custom of fasting during this period. In Morocco, this tradition was reserved for leap years, as he himself points out: "There are places where people have the habit, during leap years, of establishing a fast every Thursday during Parshiot Shovevim-Tat. During Shacharit we read the weekly parsha, during Mincha we read Vayakhel, and during the Haftarah we read Dirshu. This custom exists because the year is long, with more than six months between the Monday and Thursday fasts of Cheshvan and those of Iyar. Hence we fast during these eight days to compensate for the additional four-week month, two days of fasting (Monday and Thursday) for each week. And in order not to overly burden the community, these fasts are divided, for we fast only once a week. I've also heard another explanation for this, which is that the elders noted that pregnant women are liable to miscarry on leap years. Hence they enacted these eight fasts for every Monday and Thursday of the additional month, so that pregnant women would carry to term."

The gaon Rabbi Chaim Falagi Zatzal discusses this subject in his book Kaf HaChaim: "Already many years ago, in the city of Izmir, the practice of having ten talmidei chachamim fast was initiated. They would also study Tehillim in synagogue with seven mohelim and pray Mincha with Selichot. People were appointed to collect charity from pregnant women, which would be distributed to the poor in order for this merit to protect them from all harm. Amen."

Stringencies

Rabbi Chaim Vital Zatzal mentions the custom of fasting during both ordinary and leap years (Sha'ar Ruach HaKodesh 17): Throughout the Jewish nation, there is an ancient custom to fast during the 40 days starting from the first day of Parsha Shemot until Parsha Terumah, and including a little of Tetzaveh. These days were given the mnemonic Shuvu, Banim Shovevim, Erpah Meshuvoteichem ("Return, O wayward sons, and I will heal your waywardness" [Jeremiah 3:22]). The term shovevim [wayward] is formed by the initials of these parshiot, which describe exile, enslavement, and redemption, providing a fitting opportunity to do complete teshuvah.

Particularly pious individuals adopt ascetic customs and special stringencies during this period. The Chida alludes to these in his writings, stating: "During this time, it is very desirable to sanctify oneself in what is permitted" (Birkei Yosef 685). Likewise, books of Mussar and Chassidut testify that many exceedingly pious individuals fast from Parsha Shemot to Parsha Mishpatim, from one Shabbat to another, and are especially careful not to eat meat or fowl during the Shovevim. Numerous others adopt severe restrictions for themselves by not eating animal products on the night after the fast, and by going to the mikveh each day, each according to his own particular custom.

Greater than a Thousand Fasts

We need to stress something extraordinary that is attributed to Rabbi Aryeh of Opole and recorded in the book Ohel Elimelech: Eliyahu HaNavi once appeared to Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk, revealing that it had been decreed in Heaven that people should not fast or mortify themselves, for the generation was too weak. Instead they should be content with strengthening themselves in the study of Torah and the service of Hashem.

Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov also writes, "When someone controls his temper, it is greater than a thousand fasts, as the Gemara says: 'One who overlooks an opportunity to retaliate, all his transgressions are overlooked' [Yoma 23a]. The world only exists because of people who control themselves during conflicts."

The book Yesod HaAvodah cites our Sages as stating that the Torah atones, protects, and saves, and that the fire of Gehinnom has no power over a talmid chacham. It adds, "When someone establishes a period in which he does not speak, appropriate words or not, for five uninterrupted hours, to me this seems incredibly useful. It is something that purifies, redeems, and leads to a tremendous degree of teshuvah and atonement."

The Salvation of Hashem

The custom of taanith dibur (not speaking for an entire day) has been preserved in many Jewish communities during the Shovevim. Rabbi Yitzchak Alfiya Zatzal speaks about this subject at great length in his book Kuntras HaYechieli, explaining and extolling this custom as follows: "The taanith dibur [not saying anything from beginning to end, neither words of Torah nor polite remarks] is extremely useful for every person, small and great, educated and talmid chacham, gaon and Rav, rich and poor. It is more useful than all kinds of fasts and personal stringencies, and it does not weaken the body as fasting and other stringencies do. The difficulty lies only in putting a restriction on the tongue, not to discuss your own affairs, and especially not to engage in idle talk, which is completely pointless, and certainly not to utter useless words. However we may discuss words of Torah and utter G-d's praises, which we say throughout the day. Hence a taanith dibur is good for the body and good for the soul, establishing peace between body and soul so that both may merit the light of life in the World to Come, which is entirely good." In regards to the usefulness of a taanith dibur, Rabbi Yitzchak Alfiya cites the author of Noam Elimelech, for whom a taanith dibur – when practiced from Shabbat to Shabbat – is considered to be like 65,600 regular fasts. This shows us the tremendous power of a taanith dibur, which is more practical than a physical fast. Reciting Tehillim is another custom practiced by exceptional individuals during the Shovevim. The commentators even find allusions to the reading of Tehillim during these days in the verse that marks the start of the Shovevim: "These are the names of the Children of Israel, who came into Egypt" (Shemot 1:1). The first letters of these words in Hebrew form the term hashavim ("those who repent"), while the last letters of these words form the word tehillim. The commentators also explain that the expression Va'eira el Avraham ("And I appeared to Abraham" [Shemot 6:3]) has the same numerical value as the word tehillim. Furthermore, the letters that form the word tehillim are an acronym for Teshuat Hashem Lekol Yehudi Mevakesh ("The salvation of Hashem is for every Jew who asks").

In the Footsteps of our Fathers

Beloved is Man

The obligation that we have to always respect and honor others – on account of the teaching “Beloved is man, for he was created in the image [of G-d]” (Pirkei Avoth 3:14) – is marvelously demonstrated in the words that Hashem addresses to Moshe and Aaron in this week’s parsha. There we read, “[G-d] commanded them regarding the Children of Israel and regarding Pharaoh, king of Egypt” (Shemot 6:13). G-d said to them, “Treat Pharaoh with respect and accord him the honors of his kingdom, even if I must deal with him severely.”

In the book *Orchot Yosher*, the gaon Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky writes: “We are well aware that whoever respects others will be resected in return. Conversely, whoever scorns others will also be scorned, as it is taught: ‘Who is respected? He who respects others’ [Pirkei Avoth 4:1].”

In this regard, he cites teachings from Rav Tzvi Kufschitz on his explanation of the Mishnah’s statement: “Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? He who learns from every person.... Who is strong? He who subdues his inclination.... Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot.... Who is respected? He who respects others” (Pirkei Avoth 4:1). This Mishnah lists four character traits and interprets them in a novel and surprising way. In fact we tend to think that a wise man is someone from whom everyone seeks advice, but has no need of advice himself. Here the Mishnah teaches us that, on the contrary, a wise man is someone who learns from everyone! Likewise we tend to think that a strong man is someone who controls others and cannot be controlled himself. Yet the Mishnah declares that a strong man is precisely one who controls his inclination and yields to others. Still more, the concept of a rich man immediately conjures up the notion of someone who makes a lifelong effort to amass possessions and increase his wealth, but the Mishnah affirms that a rich man is none other than a person who is satisfied with what he has. Finally, in everyone’s mind a man of respect is someone who is respected by others, not having to show respect in return. Hence the Mishnah teaches us that, paradoxically, a respected man is one “who respects others.”

I Came to Ask for Your Permission

The following story illustrates the respect and honor that the gaon Rabbi Ezra Attiya showed to his fellow scholars.

Someone came to ask Rabbi Ezra a halachic question, and he reflected upon the subject before responding. Rabbi Ezra told his visitor that before giving him an answer, he had to ask a local rabbi for permission to make a halachic decision.

This rabbi lived quite a distance from Rabbi Ezra, about half-an-hour away, and it was very hot on that day. Nevertheless, Rabbi Ezra arose and resolutely took to the road. He then presented the halachic question, as well as his thoughts and conclusion on the matter, to the rabbi. Upon hearing his response, which was built upon sound reasoning and deep insights, the stunned rabbi explained: “Why have you come to see me?”

With complete modesty Rabbi Ezra replied, “I came to ask for your permission to issue a halachic decision.” The rabbi smiled and said, “But you know everything! I’m the one who should be consulting you – not the other way around!”

Along the same lines, it is said that the gaon Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky would be very careful to show respect to others. Thus he was in the habit, when guests would linger in his home at night and he wanted to go to

sleep, not to say that it was time to leave, nor did he make any direct allusions to it. He simply began to recite the Shema (which we say upon retiring for the night) with a pleasant voice. Those who were in his home then realized that it was time to leave, and so they bid him goodnight and started to depart. At that point the Rav, in the middle of prayer, gave them a friendly nod of his head.

In the Light of the Parsha

Everyone Must See Himself as Having Personally Left Egypt

It is written, “Moshe said to the people, ‘Remember this day on which you departed from Egypt, from the house of bondage, for with a strong hand G-d removed you from here, and therefore leaven may not be eaten’” (Shemot 13:3).

Our Sages affirm, “In every generation a man is obligated to regard himself as having personally left Egypt” (Pesachim 116b). If he fails to do this, he has not fulfilled his obligation.

The Vilna Gaon points out that each time it is written “a man is obligated,” we are dealing with an obligatory positive mitzvah, not a simple adage.

It is because of this commandment that we eat reclining during the Seder, in memory of the exodus from Egypt. In our days, unfortunately, many of us eat reclining without sensing its true significance. Indeed, the Seder meal seems like a strange and mechanical procedure to us, and if we look around at people eating reclined, we will see some nervous smiles. Yet in reality, the fact of eating reclined gives us a concrete sense of our departure from Egypt and our present freedom.

In the Haggadah we read, “Ma’aseh [It happened] that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Hoshua, Rabbi Elazar the son of Azariah, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Tarfon sat all night in Bnei Brak telling the story of the Exodus.” I’ve always had difficulty understanding why this story is described as an act (ma’aseh). How is it unusual that these holy Tannaim fulfilled the mitzvah of recounting the exodus from Egypt? The obligation to fulfill this mitzvah rests on every Jew, so it’s clear that these Tannaim fulfilled it! What novelty is there in what they did?

In reality, these holy Tannaim were not content with just reciting the story of the Exodus. They considered themselves as having lived the experience. Hence it is designated as an “act,” not being a simple halachah. In this regard our Sages declare: “[Torah] study is greater, for it leads to action” (Kiddushin 40b). Thus anyone who puts an effort into recounting the stories of the Torah, and who senses them as intensely as the Patriarchs themselves did, will be capable of reaching their level.

Guard Your Tongue

The Dust of Lashon Harah

Certain things are forbidden to say because they constitute the dust of Lashon Harah. For example, if someone tells another person what someone else said about him – even if it’s not negative, but simply something to which people attribute some importance – it would constitute the dust of Lashon Harah. Furthermore, we must carefully guard any secret that people have entrusted to us, even if revealing it would not constitute Lashon Harah. This is because it can harm the person concerned, not to mention that it demonstrates a lack of discretion and a disregard for the wishes of others.

– Chafetz Chaim

To Serve Hashem

It is written, “For from it [mimenu] shall we take to serve Hashem” (Shemot 10:26).

The term mimenu (“from it”) is formed by the same letters as mammon (“money”). As mentioned in the name of Rabbi Avraham Harari-Rafoul, this contains an allusion: A wealthy man should not waste his money solely on food, drink, clothing, etc. He should also use his wealth to fulfill mitzvot and good deeds, to do acts of charity and support scholars and yeshivot, since it is written: “For from it [money] shall we take to serve Hashem.”

Divine Punishment

It is written, “Please speak in the ears of the people: Let every man request of his fellow” (Shemot 11:2).

This is surprising: Why does G-d condemn the Egyptians to death as well as to financially compensate the Children of Israel? Furthermore, according to the Halachah we cannot inflict two punishments at the same time! The Tosaphot also write (Avodah Zarah 71b) that even concerning the nations of the world, if they incur two punishments, “we only inflict the most severe on them.”

Thus since the Egyptians were condemned to death, why did G-d also impose financial compensation on them?

In his book Parashat Derachim, Rabbi Yehudah Rozanis replies that this principle is only valid in the case of capital punishment decreed by a human court. With regards to Divine punishment, the sinner must pay with both his money and his life.

Great Wealth

It is written, “Let every man request of his fellow and each woman from her fellow silver vessels and gold vessels” (Shemot 11:2).

Why does G-d command the Children of Israel to ask their neighbors for gold vessels and other precious articles? After all, the Egyptians had enslaved them because of the decree made during the “covenant between the parts”!

In the book HaHayim Vehashalom, Rabbi Haim Faladji writes that the Egyptians oppressed the Children of Israel far more than they should have, and it was for this reason that they had to bequeath their possessions to them. This remains difficult to understand, however, for the Children of Israel were liberated after 210 years of slavery rather than 400 years, as initially planned, because of this particularly brutal subjugation. That being the case, they didn’t deserve great wealth!

As far as this is concerned, the Children of Israel were liberated prior to 400 years for another reason. Because of their great numbers, they fulfilled the work due to Pharaoh before schedule. As a result, the harshness of their enslavement earned them great wealth.

We find an allusion to this in the verse, “He raises the poor out of affliction” (Tehillim 107:41). Why did they merit such great wealth? It is because, “He makes families [as numerous] as the flock” (ibid.).

Hashem Included

It is written, “About six hundred thousand men on foot” (Shemot 12:37).

Rabbeinu Bechaye writes, “This language teaches us that they had not reached the number of six hundred thousand, since the Torah does not specify this exact number. From here we learn that they only lacked one person to reach this number, and that the text did not want to use an expression designating lack.”

In Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer we also find, “When the Children of Israel left Egypt, they numbered ‘six hundred thousand less one.’ What did Hashem

do? He joined Himself to them so they would number six hundred thousand, as it is written: ‘I shall also surely bring you up’ [Bereshith 46:4].”

Matza

It is written, “You shall eat nothing leavened [machmetzet]” (Shemot 12:20).

Rabbi Eliezer notes that the first and last letters of the term machmetzet form the word met (“death”). This teaches us that whoever eats leavened bread on Passover should expect to die. We also know that such a person will die in this world and in the World to Come, for it is written: “That soul shall be cut off” (v.19).

Why is unleavened bread called matza? The Divine Name Sh-ddai means, “The One Who said to His world: Dai [Enough],” and He will also say Dai to our sufferings (by distancing evil spirits from us). Thus matza subjugates and destroys all negative forces that affect us by setting them against one another. Just as the name Sh-ddai written on the mezuzah wards off demons and evil spirits, matza makes them flee from all holy places and brings them into contention with one another, as in the expression Matza O’meriva. Hence the reason for the name matza.

Men of Faith

Rabbi Haim’s Prayer and the Locusts

It is written, “Hashem turned back a very powerful west wind, and it carried the locust swarm and hurled it toward the Sea of Reeds. Not a single locust remained within the entire border of Egypt” (Shemot 10:19).

The Moroccan city of Mogador experienced years of famine and suffering, during which time numerous residents were reduced to poverty, with some even perishing on account of famine, thirst, and great hardship.

From time to time, the city was struck by a plague of locusts, millions of them invading fields and farms. When they “decided” to leave the city, they left devastated fields, devoid of crops, as a reminder of their visit. This destituteness raised the price of food in the city, contributing to the severe economic hardships of its inhabitants. One year, locusts appeared in massive numbers over Mogador.

The Jewish community was terrified, for the Mishnah teaches that whoever sees locusts should say Baruch Dayan haEmet (“Blessed be the True Judge”). Now the established decision regarding locusts and grasshoppers is the following: Even if they are not present locally, but exist elsewhere, a fast should be proclaimed because it is a moving plague. Likewise people are warned about the plague of locusts even if they don’t see the wing of a single one.

Thus when countless locusts covered Mogador, fear and terror were at their height. Under such difficult circumstances, all that the Jews of Mogador could do was resort to their ancient tradition: They proclaimed a day of fasting and prayer throughout the cities of Morocco. Yet to their great disappointment, their prayers were not answered, and the locusts did not disappear. In fact the distress of the Jews of Mogador only increased! It was then that deliverance finally arrived. A few days later, while Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol was learning with his disciples, darkness filled the house. This darkness was caused by a “cloud” of locusts flying overhead and darkening the entire neighborhood. A few of them even fell on the books of his disciples, who were forced to stop learning. Rabbi Haim also stopped learning. Without waiting, he took hold of a shofar and sounded it to annul the evil decree. He then began to pray, reciting the thirteen attributes of mercy and transforming that day into a genuine “Yom Kippur Katan.” Rabbi Haim continued to implore his Creator, not stopping until an east wind blew all the locusts out to sea.