

PARSHA

## MISHPATIM

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# 583

### THE TORAH REFINES CHARACTER TRAITS

*Rabbi David Pinto Chlita*

**I**t is written, "Moshe arrived in the midst of the cloud and ascended the mountain, and Moshe was on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights" (Shemot 24:18).

Moshe ascended to Heaven in order to receive the Torah, and there he remained for 40 days and 40 nights. The Sages say that when the angels saw him, they asked the Holy One, blessed be He: "What is this son of a woman doing among us?" When they learned that he had ascended to Heaven to bring the Torah to the Children of Israel, they protested and asked Hashem to stop him because the Children of Israel would transgress and profane the Torah. The Sages add (Pirkei Avoth 6:2) that a Heavenly Voice goes forth and weeps, saying: "Woe to the people because of their affront to the Torah!" When the Holy One, blessed be He, heard the objections of the angels, He told Moshe to answer them. Moshe replied that these beings, who live in Heaven, did not possess an evil inclination. Hence they were not in a constant fight with their desires, nor did they need the Torah to protect them or refine their character traits and guide them along the right path. Conversely the Children of Israel possess, in addition to a good inclination, an evil inclination that does everything it can to make them stumble and veer off the right path, and only the Torah has the power to teach creatures of flesh and blood how to act and which behavior to adopt in order to subjugate their evil inclination. If there was any reason to worry that the Children of Israel would actually profane the Torah, there was no greater proof than the power of their evil inclination, which pushes them to turn away from good, as the Zohar teaches (Zohar II:82b).

The Torah is a book of practical advice for use against the evil inclination, and the mitzvot found within it actually constitute a book of laws and directives that encourage a person how to act in order to avoid becoming corrupt and falling into sin.

We may also say that just as the Torah is formed by the Names of the Holy One, blessed be He, likewise a person who studies it receives strength and assistance to fight against the evil inclination through these divine Names. As the Sages have said, "If the Holy One, blessed be He, were not to help him, he would be unable to withstand it" (Sukkah 52b). Someone once came to see me in tears because whenever he stood in prayer, all sorts of thoughts came to mind, preventing him from praying with the proper concentration.

I advised him to study the laws related to the Amidah, for they have the power to reveal the greatness of prayer. In this way, he would be careful not to have forbidden thoughts when he stood before the King of kings. The Alter of Novardok adds that the Torah is a living book of Mussar, awakening a desire to fulfill

Hashem's mitzvot in a person who makes an effort to study it. Indeed, the Torah prevents him from obeying his desires and sinning, for studying the lives of the Patriarchs is all it takes to arouse a heartfelt desire to demonstrate goodness and kindness.

### Giving Life to the Soul

The Zohar tells us that the Holy One, blessed be He, looked into the Torah to create the universe (Zohar II:161a). This means that everything is based on the Torah, and that nothing can survive without it. It is like a building that is astoundingly well-designed, and which rises to its full height and cannot be moved even by a hurricane. Yet if someone were to set off a car filled with explosives next to the building's foundations, it would immediately crumble. All the intelligent planning and immense work invested into its construction would have been in vain, for explosives have the power to bring down even the largest of structures.

The same applies to the world, which was created according to the holy Torah. In every corner of the universe, the Holy One, blessed be He, imprinted Creation with the seal of the Torah, which allows the world to endure. Yet regrettably, transgressions and negative character traits have the power to destroy, just like the planes that struck the twin towers and reduced them to dust, as if they had never risen to such great heights.

This is why Moshe asked the angels to agree to give the Torah to man, for it alone has the power to improve character traits and lead a person along the right path, as it is written: "I created the evil inclination, but I [also] created the Torah as its antidote" (Kiddushin 30b).

In fact all the parshiot during the Shovevim deal with improving character traits and the greatness of teshuvah as a preparation for receiving the Torah. I've read one commentator who states that as a great Torah scholar was reading Parsha Bo, he began preparing his suitcase. When asked what he was doing, he replied that he was going into exile to atone for his sins. See how the Torah has the power to give life to the soul and encourage people to do teshuvah, as if he himself was living during the time of the events that the Torah describes?

The stories in the Torah are like a living book of Mussar. They are a tool that enables us to improve our character traits, and they have the power to elevate man and lead him to great heights, just as the Children of Israel did when they received the Torah. We too should hope to learn the lessons found in these parshiot and sanctify ourselves before G-d. May it be considered as if we ourselves had been elevated along with the Children of Israel, proceeding from the 49 gates of impurity to the 49 gates of sanctity.



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### Who's Buying a Ticket for Warsaw?

One day the gaon Rabbi Israel Meir HaCohen of Radin, the Chafetz Chaim, found himself in Warsaw to sell his books. It was the eve of Rosh Chodesh, and for Mincha he absolutely wanted to recite the Yom Kippur Katan prayer, as he normally would at that time of the month. However he was surprised to see the local chassidim praying like it was an ordinary day. He therefore said to them, "Why aren't you reciting the Yom Kippur Katan prayer? Today is the eve of Rosh Chodesh!"

"Rabbeinu, the Gerer Rebbe doesn't usually do that, and as his disciples we follow his lead," was the reply of the chassidim.

The Chafetz Chaim responded, "In that case, let me tell you a story: Two Jews from a certain town found themselves traveling together in a train, where they had a friendly conversation. One of them asked the other, 'Tell me, where are you going?' The other responded, 'I'm on my way to Warsaw.'

"'Me too!' exclaimed the first. 'I'm also on my way to the capital.'

"However as soon as they reached the first station, the first traveler bid farewell to his neighbor and disembarked to continue his journey.

"Stunned, the second traveler said: 'Why are you getting off here? You just told me that you're also traveling to Warsaw, and there's still a long way before we arrive!'

"The first traveler responded, 'True, I'm also on my way to Warsaw, but there's a difference between you and me: You're able to purchase a ticket for the long journey all the way to Warsaw, but I'm a poor man and I don't have enough money to purchase a ticket to get me all the way there. That's why I purchased a ticket for an intermediate destination. I must stop and with difficulty gather what little money I can. Then, when I have enough funds, I'll purchase a ticket for the next leg of my journey, and so on until I arrive. I therefore travel from town to town and from station to station until I arrive at my final destination, which is Warsaw.'

The Chafetz Chaim then turned to the chassidim and said, "This is the difference between your Rebbe and me. Each of us journeys through the calendar year, from one Rosh Hashanah to the next, from one Yom Kippur to another. However there is a great difference between one person and another!

"Your Rebbe is a tzaddik who possesses numerous merits. He is able to make it through the entire year in a single journey, without making a single stop. His great piety allows him to go from one Yom Kippur to the next in a single stretch.

"As for myself, regrettably I am poor in mitzvot and lacking in merit. I'm not suited for traveling through the calendar year in a one journey to reach our main destination in a single stretch, which is the following Yom Kippur.

"I therefore have to stop at each Rosh Chodesh for the prayer of Yom Kippur Katan to gather spiritual sustenance that will enable me to continue until the following stop, the next Rosh Chodesh, in the hope of successfully reaching my final destination."

### The Right Time

Likewise we may explain, based on the Midrash, the verses that describe the destruction of Sodom: "See, now, Your servant has found

grace in Your eyes and Your kindness was great which You did with me to save my life. But I cannot escape to the mountain, lest the evil attach itself to me and I die. Behold, please, this city is near enough to escape there, and it is small. I shall flee there – is it not small? – and I will live" (Bereshith 19:19-20).

The explanation of this passage is the following: "See, now, Your servant has found grace in Your eyes and Your kindness was great which You did with me to save my life" – these are the 51 days of grace that separate Rosh Chodesh Elul from Hashanah Rabba, a time during which everyone grows spiritually, purifies himself, draws closer to his Creator, and revives his soul. We find an allusion to this in the expression *hosha na* ("please save"), for *na* has a numerical value of 51.

However "I cannot escape to the mountain" – in other words, there is a strong chance that, right after these days, we will be defeated by the evil inclination, which is described as a "mountain" (as mentioned in Sukkah 52a). It will seize us and do everything to bring us to mundane days in great danger.

What danger is this? "Lest the evil attach itself to me and I die" – the danger of seeing all the spiritual growth and greatness of the Days of Awe becoming dulled, and falling back into sin and transgression, just like every other year, G-d forbid.

"Behold, please, this [hazot] city is near enough to escape there" – it is the nearest stage, where we need to stop and equip ourselves with things (hazot) that are none other than repentance, prayer, and charity. In fact the terms *tzom* ("fast"), *kol* ("voice") and *mammon* ("money") each have a numerical value of 136. The value of all three equals the numerical value (408) of *zot*. These three actions have the power to annul evil decrees.

Yet what does "Behold, please, this [hazot] city is near enough to escape there" mean? Where is it located, and what is the right time to go there? "It is small [mitzar]" – the first three letters of this term are the initials of *mammon* ("money"), *tzom* ("fast"), and *avodah* ("prayer"). As for the last letter, *resh*, this tells us that Rosh Chodesh is the right time.

If I act in this way, I am guaranteed that "I will live."

## Guard Your Tongue

### Even if it is the Absolute Truth

It is forbidden to say something negative about our fellowman, even if it is the absolute truth. Our Sages call this *Lashon Harah*. If our words are tainted by falsehood and they do even more harm to our fellowman, then we enter into the category of "those who spread falsehood," and our transgression is that much worse. The author of such slander transgresses a negative commandment, as it is written: "You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people" (Vayikra 19:16), and it also constitutes talebearing.

– Chafetz Chaim

### **Distance Yourself from Falsehood**

It is written, “Distance yourself from a false matter” (Shemot 23:7).

The Sforno explains this verse to mean that we must distance ourselves from everything that can lead to a lie. In fact it is written, “Beware, lest your words be the source of falsehood.” The precaution to take in order not to lead your fellowman into sin is included in the commandment: “Distance yourself from a false matter.”

In Sefer Hachassidim (paragraph 1162), Rabbeinu Yehudah Hachassid warns us: “If you see people whispering and you want to know what they are saying, do not ask because you may cause them to lie. In fact if they wanted you to know what they were saying, they would have told you. Since they don’t want you to know, they will respond with a lie.”

### **An Ounce of Falsehood**

Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz was a man of truth. He devoted seven years trying to discover the truth. For the seven years that followed, he tried to understand what falsehood was, and then he devoted seven more years to discovering how to acquire truth and distance himself from falsehood.

In this regard, a story is told of Rabbi Shem Kalshitz, who would usually immerse himself in a mikveh during the middle of the night, before starting his Torah studies. One night his assistant was still sleeping, and he did not wake him before going to the mikveh. Immersed in his thoughts, he stumbled over something and fell, breaking his hip. He was discovered and brought back home, where he had to remain in bed for a long time – a period during which he never uttered a single complaint! When he was asked how he could not complain about his situation, he said the following:

“I’m afraid of the words of Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, who affirmed that complaining excessively about suffering represents an ounce of falsehood.”

### **We Don’t Need a Building**

The leaders of the Be’er Yaakov yeshiva were able to set up a meeting between the gaon Rabbi Moshe Shemuel Shapira and a very wealthy man. The latter would typically donate buildings, not money, to religious institutions. During that time, the Be’er Yaakov yeshiva did not need any more buildings, although such plans were in the works and new buildings would be needed in the near future. The people behind the planned meeting therefore asked the Rosh Yeshiva to accept the wealthy man’s donation if he were to offer buildings to the yeshiva, claiming that accepting them did not constitute a lie. In fact, what difference did it make if the yeshiva needed buildings today or tomorrow? The wealthy man eventually came to see Rav Shapira, who warmly welcomed him.

During their conversation, the wealthy man said to the Rav: “I’ve heard that you need donations. That’s why I’m offering the Be’er Yaakov yeshiva a new building.” The Rav immediately responded, “Thank you very much! However what will we do with it? We don’t need a new building now, since everyone in the yeshiva already has a place.” The wealthy man tactfully pointed out that he had no intention of offering the yeshiva anything but a building, at which point Rav Shapira calmly replied: “In that case, give the building to a yeshiva that needs it.”

## **Silence is a Fence for Wisdom**

The following story was told by the Rebbe of Erlauer, Rabbi Yochanan Sofer:

During the Second World War, after fleeing from Poland, Rabbi Aharon of Belz found refuge in Hungary, where the situation was relatively calm until 1944. In order to remain in Hungary, the Rebbe had to obtain a temporary residence permit, but such a document was only given to people who knew someone in office.

Accompanied by Reb Moshe Weingarten, the Rebbe went to see the deputy police commander, with whom Reb Moshe had connections. Reb Moshe asked for a visa for his “uncle” the Rebbe.

The deputy police commander turned to the Rebbe and asked him if he was Reb Moshe’s uncle, but the Rebbe didn’t reply. Not even a grain of falsehood would emerge from his mouth, whatever the result. He remained mute to all the commander’s repetitive and insistent questioning. That’s when a miracle took place: The commander, exasperated at the Rebbe’s silence, addressed Reb Moshe with anger: “So, tell me yourself – is he really your uncle?” This is how the Rebbe was saved, without profaning the sanctity of his lips by speaking falsehood.

## *In the Light of the Parsha*

### **The Pilgrimage Festivals and the Prohibition Against Mixing Meat and Milk**

It is written, “Three pilgrimage festivals shall you celebrate for Me... The choicest first fruit of your land shall you bring to the house of Hashem your G-d. You shall not cook a kid in the milk of its mother” (Shemot 23:14,19).

These verses, which juxtapose the subject of the three pilgrimage festivals with the prohibition against mixing meat and milk, are also read during the prayer services of the very same festivals. What is the connection between the festivals of Israel and the prohibition against eating a mixture of meat and milk? They seem to be two completely different issues! Rav Peninim delves into the explanation brought by the commentators on the connection between them. One of the three festivals, Sukkot, is an allusion to the Final Redemption, a time when G-d will extend His sukkah of peace over us and Mashiach will come to deliver us. During the Messianic era, the reality of the world will change: Meat-eating animals will live in peace with animals of the herd and the flock, as it is written: “The wolf will live with the sheep” (Isaiah 11:6). Only the thanksgiving offering (korban todah) will be made during the Messianic era (Vayikra Rabba 27:12), for the evil inclination will no longer fill the world and therefore offerings for atonement will no longer be necessary. All the festivals will be annulled except those of Purim and Yom Kippur (Midrash, Mishlei 9), just as numerous Torah prohibitions will be (see the Ritva on Kiddushin 49b). For example, as our Sages have said, G-d will make the pig a kosher animal, meaning that it will become permissible to eat.

The holy Torah juxtaposed the pilgrimage festivals with the prohibition against mixing meat and milk in order to tell the Jewish people that as long as they are in exile and have not yet merited the Final Redemption (that is, as long as they are obligated to celebrate the festivals of the Torah), they must also meticulously observe the commandment: “You shall not cook a kid in the milk of its mother.” Yet after the coming of Mashiach, when the festivals will be annulled, this prohibition will also be annulled and we will no longer need to observe it (see Niddah 61b and the commentary of the Maharitz Chayot).

### From My Altar

It is written, “If a man [ish] shall act intentionally against his fellow, to kill him treacherously...” (Shemot 21:14).

This verse is explained allegorically in the book Bechor Yaakov, which is based on the words of the Midrash:

The term ish (“man”) is an acronym for Yoav Sheharag (“Joab, who killed [Abner]”).

The expression “against his fellow” refers to a man of similar status (Abner was a leader of the army, just like Joab). As for the expression “to kill him treacherously,” this is indeed how Joab acted: He asked Abner, “How does a woman without arms perform halitza [i.e., how does she remove the shoe of her brother-in-law]?” While Abner was showing him, Joab killed him.

The end of the verse states, “from My Altar shall you take him,” just as Scripture states: “Joab...took hold of the horns of the Altar” (I Kings 2:28).

### A Loss of Torah Study

It is written, “If he gets up and goes about outside under his own power, the assailant is absolved” (Shemot 21:19).

The person who caused the injury must pay for everything: Physical damage, medical costs, lost wages, and compensation for pain and suffering. Nevertheless, he also caused the victim to lose Torah study and prayer while recovering. Who will compensate him for such losses? The book Kerem Hatzevi states that this remains an eternal burden upon the assailant, something from which he can never cleanse himself.

However this is only true if the victim, upon recovering from his injuries, again immerses himself in the study of Torah and the service of G-d. On the other hand, “If he gets up and goes about outside under his own power” – meaning that he does not regret the loss of Torah study and prayer during this time, nor does he desire to fill that void, but continues to lose time outside – he thereby proves that the assailant did not cause him to lose any Torah, in which case “the assailant is absolved.”

### Even With Good Intentions

It is written, “If you oppress him – for if he cries out to Me, I will surely hear his cry...” (Shemot 22:22).

Our Sages affirm that when Penina caused Chana pain, she was acting with good and sincere intentions. By doing so, Penina wanted Chana to pray to Hashem for children. Nevertheless, Penina was left destitute and all her sons died.

Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna states that this is what the Torah is alluding to here: “If you oppress [humiliate] him” – so that “he cries out to Me” – meaning that even if your intentions are good, it will still be a sin on your part, given that “I will surely hear his cry” and you will be punished as a result.

### A Promise, Not a Prohibition

It is written, “You shall be holy people to Me. You shall not eat flesh torn in the field” (Shemot 22:30).

The Sefat Emet asks why the commandment, “You shall be a holy people to Me” is juxtaposed to the prohibition, “You shall not eat flesh torn in the field.” He answers according to a statement in the Gemara (Chullin 5b) that G-d does not place pitfalls in the path of righteous men.

The Tosaphot answer that we have nevertheless seen righteous men committing sins, and they explain that it is primarily in regards to food that G-d does not cause them to transgress. In fact consuming forbidden food is dishonorable for a righteous man.

Thus if we sanctify ourselves and reach the level of righteous men as described by the verse, “You shall be holy people to Me,” then the Torah promises us that “you shall not eat flesh torn in the field.” Hashem will make certain that we do not eat unkosher food.

### A Vision of Accusing Angels

It is written, “You shall not cook a kid in the milk of its mother” (Shemot 23:19).

It is set forth in the mysteries of King Solomon’s book that he who eats a mixture of meat and milk, or drinks milk shortly after eating meat, will for 40 days see a vision of the accusing angels with the appearance of a slaughtered goat.

Multitudes of impure powers surround him, and he causes unholy judgments to be awakened in the world.

– Zohar II:125ab

## Men of Faith

*Stories of the Tzaddikim from the Pinto Family*

### Thanking the Creator of the Universe

In his final years, the tzaddik and kabbalist Rabbi Haim Pinto Hakatan moved to Casablanca, the center of his activities, the city where he became widely known because of his great piety.

Casablanca’s prosperous Jewish community welcomed him with glory and honor. The prominent officials and scholars of the city had great admiration for the Rav, and the community even purchased spacious living quarters for him and his family. Rabbi Haim very quickly earned a reputation as a tzaddik, the author of deliverance, following which hundreds and even thousands of people came to see him for a blessing, or to receive help by the merit of his great piety.

He also cleaved to the poor, becoming like one of them. He gave them a feeling that they weren’t responsible for the miseries they faced. At the same time, he never stopped asking the nobles and wealthy men of the land to provide greater assistance to their poor brothers, who were mired in financial difficulties. Rabbi Haim Pinto lived a very simple and modest life. He dressed like the poor and frequented them often. On the other hand, during Shabbat and festivals, he dressed with great dignity in honor of these sacred days.

During a year of famine, which often struck the land and resulted in great poverty, Rabbi Haim asked his wife to fashion their curtains into clothing, which they gave to poor women whose clothes were worn and tattered.

In practice, numerous people asked the Rav for a blessing or prayer on their behalf, and those who experienced a happy outcome as a result of the Rav’s blessing would return to thank him.

However he would immediately put things into perspective by asking them to simply thank the Creator of the universe.