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ALL BLESSINGS BY THE MERIT OF UNITY

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "Let them make a Sanctuary for Me, and I will dwell among them" (Shemot 25:8).

G-d asked the Children of Israel to build Him a miniature Sanctuary so He could make His presence reside among them. Why does the verse say, "I will dwell among them," rather than: "I will dwell in it"? Our Sages see an allusion here, namely that G-d wants us to understand that He yearns to place His presence within each Jew, who constitutes a miniature Sanctuary. Jewish unity is the prerequisite for the Divine Presence dwelling within each of us. As long as the Children of Israel are connected to one another by a feeling of mutual responsibility, G-d can make His presence dwell among them. On the other hand, He withdraws it when contention and strife separate them, since He is entirely "peace." In fact Hashem concluded the Birkat Kohanim (Priestly Blessing) with the word peace, and we also conclude the Amidah and the reading of Shema with this theme. Arguments, disputes, and conflicts are therefore contrary to His essence.

Thus Hashem did not give the Torah to the Children of Israel as long as they were not united, as it is written: "Israel encamped opposite the mountain" (Shemot 19:2). In Hebrew, the term "encamped" is in the singular, teaching us that they encamped before the mountain like a single person with a single heart. Hashem gave the Torah to His children after making certain that they were united, this being for the simple reason that the majority of mitzvot concern relations between man and fellowman. As a result, in order for the Torah to endure among the Children of Israel, they had to first prove that peace and unity characterized these relations. It was only afterwards that they could be worthy of receiving the Torah.

Rabbi Yehoshua Levi once met Eliyahu Hanavi and asked if he could follow him in order to observe and learn from his actions and deeds. At first Eliyahu Hanavi refused, but afterwards, after having made Rabbi Yehoshua promise not to ask any questions or criticize his actions, he agreed. Hence they took to the road and arrived in a village where the inhabitants did not welcome them properly. As they were leaving that place, Eliyahu Hanavi wished that they should all become respected community leaders. Rabbi Yehoshua was surprised by this blessing. Yet since he had promised not to bother the prophet with questions, he kept quiet.

They went to another village, but this time they were welcomed with great kindness and warmth. Eliyahu Hanavi gave them a different blessing: He wished that only one of them should have the merit

of becoming a community leader. Upon hearing this blessing, the Rav could not keep silent. He asked the prophet why he had lavished such a blessing on those who had not welcomed them properly, whereas he was more reserved in his wish for those who had given them a better welcome. The prophet replied, "Know that I did not bless the inhabitants of the first village. I cursed them by wishing that they should all become respected men and community leaders. In fact when all the people of a city become prominent officials, each of them feels especially important and peace cannot reign among them. The residents of the second village, on the other hand, received my blessing: If one of them becomes a community leader, peace and harmony will unite them, for that is what happens to a community that is led by a single person" (Oseh Peleh 62).

A Gift from Heaven

We read in Sefer Tehillim, "Hashem will give oz [strength] to His nation; Hashem will bless His nation with peace" (Tehillim 29:11). Since the Torah is also called oz, this verse means that the Torah has the power to bring peace and blessings to the Jewish people. By investing ourselves in Torah, which is called oz, the Jewish people become meritorious and G-d blesses them, making peace and harmony reign among them. How can the Torah bring peace into the world? It's very simple: The mitzvot educate and train us not to think solely of ourselves, but also to care about those around us. Thus by studying Torah, by immersing ourselves in it and making an effort to fulfill mitzvot, we can better ourselves. We can free ourselves of bad character traits and acquire positive character traits that refine us and make us less selfish. In our days, however, when we have neither Temple nor Sanctuary, the home of husband and wife is considered as a "miniature Sanctuary." Thus in order to be worthy of the Divine Presence dwelling among us, we must reflect upon how to increase love and peace in the home. When G-d sees that a couple loves and respects one another, He hastens to place His Shechinah (the Divine Presence) among them, and thus love and peace increase even more. Conversely, He withdraws His Shechinah from a place that is filled with contention and where people do not respect one another. Now without the Divine Presence and G-d's help, there is but a small step to separation and divorce. This is also what our Sages have said: "When husband [ish] and wife [ishah] are worthy, the Shechinah [yud - hei] abides with them. When they are unworthy, fire [aish - from the words ish and ishah when the letters yud and hei are removed] consumes them" (Sotah 17a).

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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

Being Put to the Test

The following story, which took place in the Israeli city of Holon, stuns everyone who hears it. It makes people realize that there is a G-d in Israel, that there is a Judge, a judgment, and that a person can't do whatever he wants.

A man once hired a carpenter to do some work in his home. He was a skilled craftsman who did particularly good work, and the man gave him the keys to his house, allowing him to work even when nobody was at home.

One day, while the carpenter was still in the home, the man arrived and made a serious accusation: He said that an expensive jewel belonging to his wife had been on a table in the hallway, and that witnesses had even seen it that very same morning. "Since no one but you has been here since then," the man said, "we suspect that you stole it and we want you to give it back."

Despite the vehement denials of the carpenter, the man continued to accuse him of the crime. When the carpenter refused to pay the man, he brought him to court.

Although we have known for a long time that secular courts are very poor at rendering fair decisions, many people were still stunned to hear how foolish their verdict was in this case. Based on witness accounts of having seen the jewel in the hallway that morning, the carpenter was ordered to pay the man its full value, namely 70,000 NIS. The injustice done to the carpenter was actually two-fold. First, it wouldn't be easy to find such an amount of money to pay the man, especially for a craftsman who works hard for a living; and second, once people learned of the court's verdict, he would have no clients left, since nobody would want to hire him, a carpenter now known as a sleazy thief who had the audacity to steal a precious jewel.

The second part of this story is that the carpenter was so affected by this incident that he died. But the story doesn't end there. In fact it's barely begun.

A few days after the carpenter died, the man's wife opened her jewelry box and found her precious jewel inside!

It seems that she had forgotten that she placed it there herself, which is why she and her husband had been certain that the carpenter had stolen it. Now it turned out that all the accusations brought against the carpenter had been completely baseless.

The man's wife was shocked by what had happened, and she asked a Rav how she could rectify things according to the Torah. The Rav advised her to gather a minyan and to go to the grave of the carpenter and ask forgiveness for everything that had happened to him. The woman agreed, but her husband objected, for he was afraid that once people heard that they had gone to his grave asking for forgiveness, it would be interpreted in the wrong way. Hence he refused.

And now we come to the last part of the story. Barely a few days later, the family of the man who had hired the carpenter was also sitting shiva for the man himself, who suddenly died.

Other than the obvious conclusion that there is a Judge and a judgment, there is another lesson to draw from this story. The Shelah writes that when Heaven decrees that a person should die, sometimes the defenders that he created by his merits and good deeds intercede

for him, and he is given another chance. In our story, defenders had intervened on the man's behalf, and Heaven decided to give him another chance. If he used it properly, he would have been forgiven and the decree against him annulled.

If he had agreed to the Rav's suggestion and gone to the grave of the carpenter, it would have been possible for Heaven to forgive him. Yet since he refused, the most severe decree was enacted against him.

In general, says the Shelah, in such a case a test is sent to a person in the form of a poor man who comes to ask for tzeddakah in a very rude way, enough to infuriate anyone. Even though he has already received tzeddakah, he returns a second and a third time, not content with what he has received. This is how a man is put to the test, says the Shelah. Will he explode and get angry with the poor man, or instead – and despite the natural disdain that fills him – will he show compassion and overcome his evil inclination?

Hence when we encounter such a poor man – one who can truly exasperate the average individual – we must understand that it is very possible he may have been sent from Heaven in order to put us to the test, to see if we will control our natural tendencies and treat him with kindness, in which case the decree that may have been enacted against us will be annulled.

This is important to remember when we hear constant requests for donations being made in synagogue, when representatives of devoted charity organizations that do marvelous work go from one synagogue to the next in order to reach the public with their uplifting words, their goal being to collect funds for orphans and similar causes.

Sometimes we may think, "How many times can these people ask for money? How many? Can anyone possibly think that the wallets of bnei Torah are filled with unlimited supplies of money?"

There are cases in which, because of such thoughts, we decide that we are not going to give. In our minds, we object to the people who come to collect tzeddakah, and we come to the conclusion that enough is enough – that we can't give any more – and that we're not giving this time. We must realize that by making such a decision, we may be sealing our own fate.

– Barchi Nafshi

Guard Your Tongue

Habitual Speakers of Lashon Harah

If someone has unfortunately grown accustomed to the sin of Lashon Harah and regularly engages in it, like those who constantly come over to tell you what happened to So-and-so, what his forefathers used to do, what people are saying about him – and all of it is negative – he is among those whom the Sages call ba'alei Lashon Harah (habitual speakers of Lashon Harah), and his sin is much worse. In fact these people are deliberately transgressing Hashem's Torah, which seems insignificant in their eyes. Of them it is said, "May Hashem excise all lips of smooth talk, the tongue that speaks boastfully" (Tehillim 12:4).

– Chafetz Chaim

In the Footsteps of our Fathers

Collectors of Charity Institutions

It is written, "From every man whose heart motivates him, you shall take My portion" (Shemot 25:2).

The expression, "you shall take My portion" refers to the collectors of charity institutions, of whom it is written: "Those who teach righteousness to the multitudes [will shine] like the stars forever and ever" (Daniel 12:3). Indeed, they are very important in the eyes of the Creator. The gaon and tzaddik Rabbi Raphael Baruch Toledano was once invited to spend Shabbat in Casablanca during a family celebration. It was the middle of winter, and in his talk he described the suffering of the poor and their families during those harsh winter days. He then described their need for warm blankets and their inability to purchase them, after which he suggested that money be collected for that very purpose.

His listeners, all of whom thought that he wasn't speaking about a large amount of money, agreed to give. Hence imagine their surprise when the Rav declared that he would be the first donor, and that he was giving 50,000 Francs! All the listeners were obviously embarrassed to offer a smaller amount, and as a result the Rav was able to collect a considerable sum for the needy Jews of Morocco. On that same day, as soon as Shabbat ended, he asked the donors to give the amount they had promised.

The Seraph of Stelisk was once spending Shabbat in the home of his brother-in-law, the Rebbe of Kosov (the author of Ahavat Shalom). As soon as Shabbat ended, numerous people went to say farewell to the Rebbe and his brother-in-law.

Among the guests was a very wealthy man who had come to tell the Rebbe of Kosov about a reversal of fortunes he had experienced. In fact he had lost all his money, and his debts were accumulating to the point that he didn't know what to do. The Rebbe answered him, "I'll try to help you, but first go and ask my brother-in-law the Seraph about your situation. Then come back and tell me what he says."

The formerly wealthy man followed the Rav's advice and returned an hour later. The Seraph had promised that he would go to the mikveh and pray for him as he immersed himself, hoping that it would help. "Tell him that, as far as I'm concerned, you can't pay your debts through his immersion" was the Rebbe's response. The Seraph then assured him that the mitzvah of tefillin, which he would do on the following day, would help the poor man, who would be saved by this merit. This time as well, the Rebbe replied: "Tell him I say that your creditors won't agree to be paid in this way." Faced with such responses, the Seraph went to see his brother-in-law in order to find out what he really wanted. The Rebbe of Kosov explained, "I would like both of us to go and see some well-known donors in order to gather funds for this man so he can pay his debts and get back on his feet!" That is what they did, and the man was able to regain his original financial and social status.

Overcoming Shyness

Physical and emotional suffering were the daily lot of the Rav of Ponevezh (Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman) when he journeyed day and night collecting funds for his institutions. During the day

he would meet friends and donors, and at night he would travel from town to town.

When he was exhausted by his travels and tribulations, he would sometimes cry out: "Oh, where can we find a 'madman' who can replace me?"

He used to say, "The Ponevezh yeshiva does not send out emissaries. It has one single emissary [me]! Do you know why? Because we would have to pay another emissary a large percentage of what he collects, and there would be almost nothing left. In my opinion, all that we could give him wouldn't be enough, for it could never compensate for all the insults he faces, nor could it make up for the humiliation that he endures during his mission."

During a discussion with the students of the yeshiva, the Rav confided in them: "My dear students, do you know what gives me the strength to travel around the world and overcome my natural shyness in order to knock at the door of a supposed donor and beg for money?"

"The answer is your shining faces in the yeshiva when you are excited about a sugia, when you have exhausted yourself to acquire Torah. That's what gives me the energy I need to do the impossible."

In the Light of the Parsha

Respect Due to Torah Knowledge

It is written, "Insert the staves into the rings on the sides of the Ark, with which to carry the Ark" (Shemot 25:14).

Our Sages teach, "The learned mamzer takes precedence over the ignorant Kohen Gadol" (Horayot 13a). It is nevertheless strange to grant greater importance to a mamzer than a Kohen Gadol, who atoned for all the sins of Israel on Yom Kippur!

This teaches us just how greatly we must honor a Torah scholar. It is said, for example, that Shemaya and Avtalyon also waited for the Kohen Gadol to leave the Holy of Holies in order to show their respect for him. When the Kohen Gadol emerged alive, everyone rejoiced, but then immediately followed Shemaya and Avtalyon to their homes, for that particular Kohen Gadol was ignorant (Yoma 71b). In fact our Sages explain that the goal of a tzaddik is to become learned in Torah and as holy as the Holy of Holies every second of his life, not just once during the year, on Yom Kippur.

Now the ignorant Kohen Gadol elevated himself on Yom Kippur as needed, but he did not infuse himself with Torah throughout the year.

This is why we respect an educated mamzer more than a Kohen Gadol who is devoid of Torah. In fact that latter only grabs hold of the staves of the Ark; he does not truly grab hold of the Torah itself, which is compared to the Ark because the Ark contained the Tablets of the Law.

As for the learned mamzer, he was not content with just grabbing hold of the staves, meaning the superficial aspect of the Torah. Rather, he dug more deeply into its essence, and he is compared to the holy Ark itself. He fought for it and put an effort into seizing the depths of its wisdom. Hence despite the mamzer's origins, we must respect him because of the Torah knowledge that he has acquired.

Learning From the Sanctuary

It is written, “You shall make curtains of goat hair for a tent over the Sanctuary” (Shemot 26:7).

The immense wealth that filled the Sanctuary (planks covered with gold, bars coated with gold, gold rings, and curtains of turquoise, purple, and scarlet) was covered by simple curtains of goat hair that were joined together by simple copper hooks.

What was the point of all this?

The book Kinyanei Kedem cites the teaching that our Sages deduced from this: This serves as an example from which we learn to manage the wealth that G-d has given us. On the outside, we must act with simplicity and discretion so as not to arouse the jealousy of our neighbors and acquaintances. We must be careful not to boast of our wealth.

We must constantly remember G-d’s Sanctuary, which on the inside was composed of precious and valuable materials, but on the outside was covered with curtains of goat hair that were joined together by simple copper hooks.

A Matter of Perspective

It is written, “Let them make a Sanctuary for Me, and I will dwell among them” (Shemot 25:8).

G-d first commands us to build a Sanctuary, and afterwards He commands us to respect Shabbat: “However you must observe My Sabbaths” (Shemot 31:13). Nevertheless in Parsha Vayakhel, when Moshe repeats these words to the Children of Israel, he starts by giving them the mitzvah to observe Shabbat, followed by the mitzvah to build the Sanctuary! The Kli Yakar explains the reason for this inversion: Shabbat enable us to “honor G-d,” for it was given as a day of tranquility and holiness to celebrate Hashem’s rest, its goal being to testify to the Creation of the world. The Sanctuary, on the other hand, stresses the “honor of Israel” – it comes to prove that they are a “unique people on earth,” for Hashem left the supernal worlds to make His Shechinah rest upon them.

G-d therefore made the construction of the Sanctuary precede Shabbat in order to show that the glory of Israel goes before His own. However Moshe mentioned Shabbat before the construction of the Sanctuary, because from our perspective the glory of G-d should be more important than the reputation of the Jewish people.

Zer or Zar

It is written, “You shall cover it with pure gold” (Shemot 25:11).

Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer beautifully explained the following words from our Sages: “If he deserves it [the Torah], it becomes a crown [zer] unto him. If not, it remains foreign [zar] to him” (Yoma 72a). He said: “If a Jew who studies Torah is also infused with a fear of Hashem, filled with good character traits, and loved by others, the Torah will be a crown and an ornament for him. It will glorify him and everyone will say that it refines his character traits and personality. However if the same man, learned in Torah, does not fear G-d, is not distinguished by his character traits, and is not particularly appreciated by those around him, the Torah will become foreign to him, despite his intentions, and he will end up forgetting it. In fact because of his Torah knowledge, the honor of the Torah will be desecrated, for people will say: ‘Look at the behavior of So-and-so, who nevertheless studies much Torah.’ Indeed, they will attribute his sin to the Torah. Thus to preserve the glory and

importance of Torah, it will necessarily become foreign to him and he will forget it.”

Zahav

It is written, “You shall cover it with pure gold” (Shemot 25:11).

The Siftei Kohen affirms that the behavior we must adopt while eating is hidden in the term zahav (“gold”), the letters of which are an acronym for zimra (“song”), hallel (“praise”), and baruch (“blessing”).

This teaches us that while eating, we must punctuate our meal with words of Torah, we must sing songs and praises, and we must not forget to recite a blessing corresponding to each food that we eat.

Never Empty

It is written, “You shall make a table of acacia wood” (Shemot 25:23).

[Rabbi Yosei] said, “This table stood in the Sanctuary, and a blessing from above rested upon it, and from it went nourishment to the whole world. Not for a moment was that table to remain empty, since blessing does not rest upon an empty place. Therefore the show-bread always had to be renewed upon it each Shabbat, in order that the blessing from above might always rest upon it, and that food and blessing...may emanate from that table to all the tables of the world. Likewise every man’s table should be like this when he says grace after meals. In order that a blessing from above should rest upon it, it should not be empty, as it is said in connection with the words of Elisha to the widow: ‘Tell me, what do you have in the house?’ [2 Kings 4:2].”

– Zohar II:153b

Men of Faith

Stories of the Tzaddikim from the Pinto Family

You’re Still Young

What was a day in the life of Rabbi Haim Pinto really like?

Rabbi David Hanania Pinto recounted the words of Rabbi Yeshoua, Rabbi Haim’s assistant: “I would go to his home early in the morning, and I already found him praying in the synagogue just above his house.

“He would come down and ask his wife what she needed. He gave her the necessary funds for these purchases, and then he would immediately go and collect money for the poor of the city. He would later go and visit the sick, families in chaos, the poor and needy, and he would get them – him alone – what they needed. In each place that he visited, he was offered a snack. He would taste a little each time, but then he would ask me to eat the rest. I asked him, ‘Rabbi, how much food can I eat?’ To this he replied, ‘You’re still young. You can eat. Furthermore, if they offer, it’s forbidden to make them feel bad, so we must eat it.’

“Thus both in his youth as well as in his advanced years, he traveled across the city from one end to the other, from morning till night, collecting tzeddakah. You can now understand how much strength each of his assistants, as well as charity fund collectors, needed in order to accompany him each day on this holy mission. Then at night, he would recite the tikkunim and study Torah. ‘Who may ascend the mountain of Hashem, and who may stand in the place of His sanctity? One with clean hands and a pure heart’ [Tehillim 24:3].”