

**PARSHA  
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**595**



## THE BONFIRES OF FAITH FOR RABBI SHIMON BAR YOCHAI

*Rabbi David Pinto Chlita*

**T**he Hilloula of the tzaddik Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a Tanna to whom all the generations feel a special connection, recently took place. Numerous books recount stories of his feats and acts of bravery by explaining that he dominated both the upper and lower worlds. In the upper worlds, he could annul what G-d decreed, and G-d would fulfill what he decreed. He is mentioned several times in the Zohar: "At that point a celestial voice declared, 'Happy is your lot, Rabbi Shimon, for G-d has decreed above and you have annulled below. It is certainly in regards to you that it is said: "He fulfills the desires of those who fear Him"'" (Zohar Chadash 33). It is also said that he had power over the angel of death and its emissaries. Furthermore, in this world he also wielded power over men and animals, and G-d glorified him in the upper worlds.

How did Shimon bar Yochai merit all this? He was a tzaddik, a pillar of the world concerning whom we sing: "It is only for you that 'Let us make man' was proclaimed." This means that the descent of Rabbi Shimon's soul into this world was by itself enough to justify the creation of the world and man.

In reality, Shimon bar Yochai's defining characteristic was the sanctity that infused all his actions, as well as the life of deprivation that he lived. In fact he lived and studied Torah in a cave for 13 straight years without speaking, isolated from other men and from society, something which by its very nature no human being can tolerate and even imagine. Even his teacher Rabbi Akiva, who lived far from his home for 24 years – proof of an extremely high spiritual level – was living with others and surrounded by a yeshiva where he studied and taught. As for Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, he had his son Elazar as his only companion. Furthermore, he consumed nothing but carob beans and water for 13 years! We can more easily understand that with such deprivation, he was able to reach such an exceptional spiritual level.

By his behavior, Rabbi Shimon brought us a new, valuable teaching: Any human being has the ability to sanctify himself and attain extremely lofty levels. It is explicitly written, "You shall be holy, for I, Hashem your G-d, am holy" (Vayikra 19:2). The Midrash asks, "You shall be holy might be understood to mean that your holiness is to be equal to Mine. Therefore Scripture plainly states: for I, Hashem your G-d, am holy – that is, My holiness is superior to yours" (Vayikra Rabba 24:9). In the time when the Temple stood, it may have been possible to attain a level of sanctity almost equal to G-d's, for the Shechinah was present. Furthermore, when the Children of Israel ascended to the Temple they infused themselves with the fear of G-d for a long time, until the next festival. It was therefore easier to sanctify oneself and approach the holiness of G-d. Yet now that the Temple no longer

stands and the Shechinah no longer resides in exile, we cannot transform ourselves entirely into a sanctuary for G-d and become a chariot for the Shechinah during our lifetime. Herein lies the great novelty that this Tanna brought us: By his holiness and connection to G-d, he prepared a place for the Shechinah, allowing it to descend and dwell on earth and in him, despite the absence of the Sanctuary.

We therefore have the custom of lighting bonfires on the evening of Lag BaOmer in honor of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, something for which the book Bnei Issachar gives various reasons. We should add that in the term medura ("fire") we find the word dira ("abode"), for he created an abode for G-d in this world and enabled Him to make His Shechinah dwell in us. Also, the letter mem (numerical value 40) alludes to the 40 days in which the Torah was given. This teaches us that enabling the Shechinah to dwell on earth is only possible through the intensive and diligent study of Torah.

We are commanded in Parsha Emor, "Speak to the kohanim, the sons of Aaron, and say to them" (Vayikra 21:1). Rashi explains the redundant expression "Speak... and say" to mean: "Admonish the adults in regards to the minors." I would like to explain this repetition by recounting an incident that occurred to me while I was traveling on an Air France flight from New York to France. Sitting next to me was a man who was clearly Jewish, yet unfortunately not observant. When he was served his meal, obviously non-kosher, he hesitated for a long time and changed his mind several times on whether to eat it or not. He seemed almost to yield to the temptation, but then at the last minute he looked at me and decided not to eat it. After a certain time I got up to wash my hands, and in passing I offered him a kosher sandwich that I had with me, which he gladly accepted. I waited for him to finish eating before asking him: "Why didn't you eat the meal that was brought to you? What were you thinking at that moment?" He told me that he was actually unable to resist the temptation of eating it. Yet when he looked at me, he saw a representative of Jews, a person who served G-d in this world – an ambassador, if you will, of Hashem. He didn't dare eat a non-kosher meal next to a Rav, and therefore he changed his mind. I praised him for his actions and encouraged him to persevere in Judaism. We must conclude that even without deeds or words, we can influence others and enlighten everyone around us. Even without speaking, a person who is infused with Divine fear and careful to Sanctify G-d's Name will spread goodness and serve as an example to those around him. It often happens that I meet people who tell me, "Rabbi David, since our last conversation I've started putting on tefillin" or "since you encouraged me to develop a fear of G-d, I've been observing Shabbat," something that fills me with immense joy.

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That makes it worth it to come into this world, just so that a person returns from the wrong path and puts on tefillin or observes Shabbat!

This is the meaning of “Speak...and say” – “Admonish the adults in regards to the minors.” In other words, if we enter into the realm of “speak” – meaning that we fear G-d, that we observe and are completely infused with mitzvot, and that we study Torah for the sake of Heaven, for its words are “the words of G-d, pure words” – then we won’t have to incite others to fulfill mitzvot because they will see us acting and they will fear G-d. Thus even if you do not “speak,” you will be considered to

“say” to the minors. This virtue only exists with the complete man, one who studies Torah without ulterior motives.

This is why a person who sanctifies himself can also sanctify those around him. How much more did this apply to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, whose teachings were pure and emanated from the heights of his holiness and asceticism, teachings that trace a path to follow for all the generations. Whoever looks into his books and into the Zohar will be filled with the fear of G-d and become meticulous in regards to mitzvot, despite never having seen him.

## Real Life Stories

### *The Foundations of a Good Education*

During a sermon on Shabbat Hagadol last year, we heard a marvelous story from Rabbi David Hanania Pinto Shlita, who sought to highlight and describe the great principle of educating children. Among other things, he recalled that “we must educate our children to serve G-d when they are small; we must teach them to obey their parents and teachers without arguing. When these virtues are instilled in them, they can then infuse themselves with Torah and the fear of Heaven, and they will be able to teach the Torah in Israel.”

In this regard he told us the following story:

In our time, we have heard about the gaon Rabbi Shimon Baruch Salomon Zatzal, the Rav of Petah Tikva, who was known for his passion for honoring Shabbat. He would bristle upon hearing that Shabbat was being publically profaned, fighting with all his strength to eliminate such things in his city. His special connection to Shabbat had begun from childhood. He was actually born on Shabbat, and his mother had absolutely refused to be brought to the hospital in a car on that day. With great devotion, she traveled there on foot. He also died on the eve of Shabbat.

Many of his opponents tried with all their might to stop the Rav from preventing them from profaning Shabbat. However the intensity of Shabbat’s sanctity, which he was infused with, was greater still. Every Shabbat he would stand before the bastions of Shabbat desecration in his city, and with tears in his eyes he would utter moving words on the observance of Shabbat, words that touched people’s hearts. The sincere truth, profound pain, and the light of his Torah and fear of G-d had such a profound effect on people that those who opposed him would actually switch sides and join the Rav in his fight.

With our very eyes, we saw that anyone who attacked the Rav did not come out unscathed. There were numerous instances in which the honor of the Torah and Shabbat protested against the insults inflicted upon them. Some of the Rav’s opponents could actually sense this, and they went to see the Rav and asked for his forgiveness.

In the camp of those opposed to observing Shabbat was a central and dominant figure, a man who led and incited crowds against the Rav and Shabbat. This man had the audacity to arrive with a group of youngsters near the Rav’s home, where they brazenly hurled insults upon him for several minutes, insults laden with language that made those who heard it shudder. Some students of the Rav, who were there at the time, were convinced that the man in question would not emerge from this unharmed. One student therefore warned him not to play with fire. As it turned out, the man in question was soon murdered by someone whom he himself had helped.

### *I’ve Read Psalms for You*

Some time after this incident, a student who studied with the Rav every Wednesday night arrived at his home for their regular weekly study

session, from midnight until the early hours of the morning (during that time, the Rav would prepare the class that he gave on Thursdays). On that particular evening, this student had difficulty making his way inside the Rav’s home because near his front door, in the outside yard, was a dog that was barking and growling, preventing him from getting to the door. Someone from inside the Rav’s house opened a window and told the student to use the back door. He explained that this dog had been there for hours, and that to prevent it from coming inside they used the back door.

The student therefore used the back door, and he immersed himself in Torah study with the Rav for several hours. When he got up to leave (as always, the Rav would accompany him out), the dog’s barking and growling were again heard. The student stopped and said to the Rav, “Perhaps it would be better if I used the back door.” However the Rav didn’t respond. He opened the front door, and before the eyes of this student – who was ready to prevent the dog from making its way into the house – the Rav stood in front of the dog and said to it: “I’ve read psalms for you.” At that point the dog went silent, stepped back, and ran hysterically into the street and disappeared.

When the student returned to the yeshiva and told people what he had seen, he was told: “Don’t you remember that the Rosh Yeshiva [completely in contrast to his refined conduct] said to the man [the central and dominant leader of the Rav’s opponents]: ‘You’re an insolent dog!’”

How great is the power of the tzaddikim, whose words are heard in Heaven! That man had died and was reincarnated as a dog, and the Rav restrained himself and forgave him. He even agreed to help him by reciting psalms for the elevation of his soul.

I remember that in my youth, I asked the shamash of the synagogue why he had placed the box for tzeddakah in a certain place, which I had moved and placed elsewhere. It’s true that I acted incorrectly by moving the box, which had been his responsibility, but I still made this remark to him. All of a sudden, I felt my cheeks burning, and before me I saw my father Zatzal reprimanding me: “Why are you criticizing people who are older than you?” This is the education I received: To respect adults and not to criticize them, to be humble and accept things. It’s only through this kind of education that we can annul our views and our will before Hashem’s will, and thus grow in Torah and the fear of Heaven.

## Guard Your Tongue

### *Committing Ourselves*

During the reading of the Shema, when we recite the verse, “And these words...shall be upon your heart” – which represent the acceptance of mitzvot – we must commit ourselves to not transgressing prohibitions or positive mitzvot that depend on speech.

– Chovat HaShemirah

### A Rabbinic Ordinance

It is written, “But the seventh year shall be a complete rest for the land” (Vayikra 25:4).

A rav once came to see the Chazon Ish in an attempt to convince him to be more lenient in regards to the Shmita (seventh year). “In our days, the mitzvah of Shmita is only a rabbinic ordinance. There’s no reason, therefore, to be so strict with it,” he claimed.

The Chazon Ish responded as follows:

“Almost all the ordinances that we observe are rabbinic. Almost none of them come directly from the Torah. The salting of meat – is it specifically mentioned in the Torah? Most poskim have ruled that eating cooked blood has only been prohibited by the rabbis, and the same applies to numerous other things. Nevertheless if a person eats meat that has not been salted, it’s considered as if he has eaten non-kosher food.”

The Chazon Ish added, “Furthermore, we don’t even understand the significance of a ‘rabbinic ordinance!’”

### Shameful Himself

It is written, “Each of you shall not wrong his fellow” (Vayikra 25:17).

The Gemara explains that this refers to offensive words, adding that “one who publicly shames his fellow is as though he has shed blood” (Bava Metzia 58b). The Yerushalmi teaches, “Why is a harp called a naval [shameful]? It is because it shames all other musical instruments” (Sukkah 5:6). However Rabbi Eizel Charif of Slonim asks, “In that case, it would have been better to call it menavel [which shames others], for it shames all other instruments. In reality, whoever shames others – in addition to debasing them – becomes shameful [naval] himself.”

Appearances May be Deceiving

It is written, “If your brother becomes impoverished” (Vayikra 25:25).

The letters forming the term yamuch (“becomes impoverished”) are the initials of the expression Yesh mitasher ve’ein kol (“Some pretend to be rich, but have nothing” [Mishlei 13:7]). As our teacher the Birkat Peretz points out, this alludes to the fact that we must pay attention even to a poor man who only appears to be wealthy, for as such we fulfill the mitzvah of supporting him.

### Labor

It is written, “If you follow My decrees” (Vayikra 26:3).

Here Rashi writes: “This means that you must labor in the study of Torah.”

Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov is surprised by this, for how can engaging in Torah study be called labor? After all, we say that the freest man is the one who studies Torah!

Rabbi Chanoch Tzvi of Bendin responds: Studying Torah for oneself is actually liberating and enjoyable. On the other hand, demonstrating kindness to others and pushing them to also study and observe mitzvot involves a great deal of labor, especially when accusers are multiplied, accusers whose only desire is to distance the Children of Israel from Torah.

### For Every Mitzvah

It is written, “If you behave casually with Me” (Vayikra 26:21).

In regards to the Shulchan Aruch’s affirmation that “it is forbidden to do something else while reciting Birkat Hamazon,” the author of Turei Zahav points out the following: “This prohibition concerns not only the

reciting of Birkat Hamazon, but every mitzvah. In fact participating in a discussion during the fulfillment of a mitzvah proves that it is a supplementary act, something coincidental.”

This is included in the verse, “If you behave casually with Me,” which signifies that even if you follow Me – meaning that you fulfill mitzvot – it remains supplementary and coincidental.

### Not Alone in Exile

It is written, “And despite all this, while they are in the land of their enemies, I will not despise them” (Vayikra 26:44).

Rabbi Eleazar said, “Blessed is Israel above all heathen peoples, for although they provoked their Master, the Holy One, blessed be He, was not willing to abandon them. For in every place to which they have been exiled, the Holy One, blessed be He, is with them in their banishment, as it is written: ‘And despite all this, while they are in the land of their enemies, I will not despise them.’”

Rabbi Abba said, “Come and see how great G-d’s love for Israel is. Even though they caused themselves to be in exile among the nations, the Shechinah never removed Herself from them. Do not say that they are alone in exile, for ‘And despite all zot [‘this’ – zot referring to the Shechinah]’ is with them.”

– Zohar III:297b

## In the Light of the Parsha

### The Shmita

It is written, “But the seventh year shall be a complete rest of the land, a Sabbath for Hashem. You shall not sow your field and you shall not prune your vineyard” (Vayikra 25:4).

Our Sages have taught, “Exile comes upon the world for idolatry, for incest, for murder, and for not letting the earth rest during the Shmita” (Pirkei Avot 5:9). This is surprising: How does not observing the Shmita (letting the land lie fallow one year every seven years) cause the Children of Israel to go into exile? How can this be compared to the three most serious transgressions of the Torah? Our Sages declare, “Better for a man to cast himself into a fiery furnace than to shame his fellow in public” (Sotah 10b). From here we learn that the prohibition against shaming others is among those for which a person must be willing to die rather than commit.

The Gemara explains: “For every law of the Torah, if a man is commanded, ‘Transgress and you will not be killed,’ he may transgress and not be killed, except for idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder” (Sanhedrin 74a). However humiliation isn’t mentioned here! Hence Tosaphot explain that the Torah is only speaking about specific sins here, which do not include cases of shaming others. The absence of unity among people represents a sin equal to the three gravest sins of the Torah, and that is why the verse compares the neglect of the Shmita to these three sins. In fact the mitzvah of Shmita calls for people to be united, for during the Shmita every person can go into a field and take whatever he wants without its owner objecting. Therefore just as it is better to die rather than commit the three sins mentioned above, likewise we must have “You shall love your fellow as yourself” as our top priority.

## *In the Footsteps of our Fathers*

### *A Love for Others*

No one understands the accounting made by Heaven. Who can delve into such mysteries? Nevertheless, the approach of our Sages allows us to catch a slight glimpse of how certain things happen, things that leave us stunned. How does this occur? In reality, wicked deeds that stem from vile character traits result in the Celestial Court's balance swinging to the wrong side. Let us examine the words of the Gemara in this regard: "All gates are locked except for the gates [through which pass the cries of] wrong" (Bava Metzia 59a). Rashi explains, "Whoever beseeches G-d because he was wronged, the gates of prayer will not be locked to him." What does this mean? On the verse found in this week's parsha, "Each of you shall not wrong his fellow" (Vayikra 25:17), Rabbeinu Bechaye comments as follows: "Since one who has been wronged by offensive words suffers greatly and is afflicted by them, his sadness pushes him to yield, and with deep sincerity he will utter a prayer from his aggrieved heart, and it will be answered." The book *Lev Eliyahu* contains a description by the mashgiach Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian of the extraordinary conduct of a wholehearted person, one who ensures that none of his actions harm his fellow: "How greatly can we sanctify ourselves by being careful not to harm others! For instance, take the example of a student who enters his room at the yeshiva and finds his friend asleep. He will be careful not to make any noise or switch on any light so as not to wake him. This behavior is proof of a love for his fellow, which comes from faith in the principle that 'G-d made man in His image.' How much holiness and Divine light spread from this individual! How happy he must be, and how much favor he must find in the eyes of G-d for this considerate act! We cannot imagine what his success and progress in Torah and the service of G-d will be!"

### *Together in Judgment*

For a long time, a widow worked as a cook at the Be'er Yaakov yeshiva. However with age, the quality of her work diminished and it was not what it used to be. The yeshiva therefore felt that it had to let her go. However the Rosh Yeshiva, the gaon Rabbi Moshe Shemuel Shapira, was afraid to take such a step, aware of how the Torah warns us against causing a widow to suffer.

In order to determine how to proceed according to the Torah, the Rosh Yeshiva consulted the Brisker Rav, the gaon Rabbi Yitzchak Zeev Soloveitchik. He said that if the yeshiva had no choice, then it could actually let her go. However he recommended that everyone in the yeshiva's administration sign the letter advising her that she would be fired. This would ensure that everyone would be aware that a harsh judgment might strike them, thus preventing the Rosh Yeshiva from bearing this responsibility alone. The Brisker Rav then added that the widow should normally be granted whatever monetary compensation she asks for, since money is the least expensive form of compensation.

The Ramban wrote the following in this regard:

"A person is obligated to show great care for orphans and widows because their spirits are very low and their feelings are depressed. This applies even if they are wealthy. We are commanded to do this even for a king's widow and his orphans as [stated]: 'Do not mistreat any widow or orphan.' How should one deal with them? One should only speak to them gently and treat them only with honor. One should not cause pain to their persons with [excessive] work or aggravate their feelings with harsh words, and [one should] show more consideration for their financial interests than for one's own. Anyone who vexes or angers them, hurts their feelings, oppresses them, or causes them financial loss transgresses this

prohibition. Surely this applies if one beats them or curses them. Even though [a person who violates] this prohibition is not [liable for] lashes, the retribution that one suffers for its [violation] is explicitly stated in the Torah: 'I will display My anger and slay you with the sword.' There is a covenant between them and the One Who spoke and created the world, that whenever they cry out because they have been wronged, they will be answered, as stated: 'When they cry out to Me, I will surely hear their cry'" (Hilchot De'ot 6:10).

### *Showing Compassion to Workers*

The Belzer Rebbe recounted that as a boy, he would usually say Shabbat Shalom to Rabbi Aharon of Belz (the previous Belzer Rebbe) each Shabbat morning after Shacharit. The Rebbe, who was then studying, would serve the boy a piece of cake.

One Shabbat, the Rebbe asked the boy what he was currently learning, to which the boy replied: "The chapter dealing with relations between an employer and his workers." The Rebbe then inquired, "What do we learn?" When the boy was silent, the Rebbe himself provided an answer: "We are advised to show compassion to our workers."

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

### *My Grandfather Lets me Know*

Rabbi Yossef Assaraf told Rabbi David Hanania Pinto that he once traveled from Akko to Mogador carrying eight camels loaded with leather. As he normally would, Rabbi Yossef immediately went to see Rabbi Haim Pinto for a blessing, as well as advice on how to sell his leather. In fact his merchandise wasn't attracting any clients, although he had invested all his money into it. The Rav recommended that he not sell it immediately, but to store it for two months.

The Rav explained to him that the price of leather would increase during this time, allowing him to earn more. That is precisely what Rabbi Yossef did, eventually selling his leather for an enormous sum.

Rabbi Haim also blessed him with the wish that both he and his descendants would be wealthy, something that also happened. Even today, his children and grandchildren are supporters of Torah intuitions.

Rav Avraham Moyal recounted another story:

"I once arrived in Essaouira at six o'clock in the morning, without anyone knowing about it. Suddenly, I heard someone knocking at the door of the inn where I was staying...and there I saw, standing at the entrance, Rabbi Haim Pinto's assistant. He said to me, 'My Rav sent me to get you, Mr. Avraham Moyal, who has just arrived from Tiznit.'

"I was stunned. How did Rabbi Haim know that I had arrived in town? Without delay, I went with the assistant to go see the Rav, who welcomed me with the words: 'Welcome to Essaouira!' He then heaped blessings upon me.

"Rabbi Haim then confided to me, 'Know that as soon a Jew from elsewhere arrives in my town, my holy grandfather Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol lets me know.'"