

PRIOR TO RECEIVING THE TORAH

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "This is the work of the Gershonite families: To work and to carry" (Bamidbar 4:24).

As we know, every person constitutes a miniature Sanctuary. Now just as the mission of the Levites in the Sanctuary was "to work and to carry," likewise anyone who wants to acquire the Torah and wear its crown must assume the service of the Levites. "To work" designates the sacred service, whereas "to carry" (massa) refers to carrying the yoke with others (nassa be'ol). In reality, these are not two separate things, for the mitzvot governing our relationship with G-d are intimately connected to those governing our relationship with others.

We all realize that to acquire the Torah, prior preparation and work are necessary. Nevertheless, performing superficial and light work is not enough. We need "to work and to carry," meaning that we must make a real effort; we must carry the yoke and yield before the Creator during our sacred service. This is how we succeed in understanding that we are subservient to our Master, that Hashem is our King, our Father, and our Shepherd, and that we are His servants. This requires a great deal of work on our part, as well as commitment and deep reflection on this subject.

During a visit to New York, I met a man who was highly respected, the Rosh Yeshiva of a renowned yeshiva. He asked me a very surprising question: "How do we grow in serving G-d?" I was perplexed for an instant before asking him, "Is this a serious question?" He said that it was, and then added: "I immerse myself in Torah study, I can recite numerous pages of Gemara by heart, and during my lectures I explain many Mussar concepts to my students. Yet unfortunately, I don't sense any spiritual growth on my part." I then realized that this Rosh Yeshiva was raising a very serious issue. In fact if we find ourselves eating food that we can't taste, this failure should make us ask questions. Likewise if we are surrounded by people who are speaking words of Torah, and yet we are not moved by them, we also need to ask questions because it means that we are not internalizing these words. However the problem is even worse for someone who studies Torah, for someone who invests himself into learning it, but still fails to benefit from the beauty of his learning and senses no spiritual growth. And here was this Rav, aware of his difficulty, coming to seek my advice and help!

I responded that just like the Children of Israel, who had to prepare themselves before receiving the Torah, we must also prepare ourselves to undertake sacred tasks. This preparation must be similar to 'working and carrying' – tasks that demand effort and exertion. It is only after this kind of preparation that we can sense an elevation in Torah and the fear of G-d. I then asked him a question: "When you

recite, for example, the blessing after a meal, are you paying attention to the meaning of the words that you're saying? Are you concerned with Whom you are speaking to, before Whom you are standing, and Whom you are thanking for having satiated you? It's true that concentrating on each blessing is not easy. It demands great effort. However if you adopt this practice, a powerful change will come over you, and you will sense an improvement in your spiritual condition. However if you recite these blessings only as an automatic reflex that is devoid of all intention and concentration – if it represents a mitzvah that is done purely out of habit – then it serves no purpose and will not help you grow or progress."

Let us examine the way that we address G-d. We speak to Him in the second person by saying, "Blessed are You, Hashem." Do we use the same language when speaking to an important figure? No, clearly not. With an important figure, we use the third person. Yet Hashem, Who is our Father and our Shepherd, wants us to sense that He is very close to us, and He allows us to address Him in the second person. However if we pray without focus and do not sense that He is near, and if we fail to consider the immense merit that we have in being considered as the King's sons, then after 120 years on earth He will rebuke us for having treated Him casually, something not justified by our attitude. He will rebuke us for not having addressed Him with the respect befitting royalty. We will have spoken to Him like a friend, not like the King of kings. We will then be ashamed and have no answer to give. I think that in order to have this sentiment, we must "work and...carry" in serving Hashem. This is not superficial and light work, but a task that requires real effort, one in which we carry the yoke of the kingdom of G-d and sense His dominion, for He is our Father and our King.

How do we reach such a level? By yearning to acquire Torah and fulfill mitzvot. A person who ardently wishes to go learn at the Beit HaMidrash, impatiently awaiting the precious moment when he can study, will be a symbol of the fear of Heaven and a love of Torah. For example, a person who is eager for a certain type of food will savor the aroma that emanates from it even before tasting it. The same applies to a person who desires Torah: As soon as he approaches the Gemara, he will sense the pleasant spiritual aroma emanating from it, and his soul will rejoice. That is the level we should hope to reach.

This is the meaning of the expression "to work and to carry." It refers to a heavy load – to learning Torah in depth, praying with great concentration, and perfecting ourselves in the performance of mitzvot and yearning to fulfill them. May we wisely use these days of preparing to receive the Torah in order to acquire a fear of Heaven, to fulfill mitzvot, and to learn Torah. Amen.



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Pearls of Wisdom and Midrashim from our Sages on Megillat Ruth

Greed

It is written, “A man went from Bethlehem in Judah to sojourn in the fields of Moab” (Ruth 1:1).

The text does not name the people involved here, but simply describes them as “he, his wife, and his two sons” (v.1). It is only in the next verse that we read, “The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion” (v.2). Why are their names not mentioned in the first verse?

As we know, Elimelech fled Bethlehem because of greed, for numerous poor people came to seek his help during a time of famine. The Midrash recounts that “when the famine arrived, he said: ‘Now all Israel will come knocking at my door, each one with his basket.’ He therefore arose and fled from them” (Ruth Rabba 1:4). Moreover, if his identity were to be discovered as he was fleeing, both the poor and their needy relatives would come to him begging for help. Hence he preferred to flee in secret and not reveal who he was, even as he was fleeing.

It was only after his journey had ended and he reached his destination in a foreign land (“the fields of Moab”) that he openly proclaimed that his name “was Elimelech, the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion.”

– Kli Chemda

The Living and the Dead

It is written, “If anything but death separates me from you” (Ruth 1:17).

The text does not say, “separates us,” but rather “separates me from you.”

In reality, death does not separate two people, but only one from the other. The dead separates himself from the living forever. As for the living, he never separates himself from the dead.

– The Maggid of Dubno

The Yoke of Torah

It is written, “When she [Naomi] saw that she [Ruth] was determined to go with her, she stopped arguing with her” (Ruth 1:18).

We know that investing oneself in Torah weakens a person. Thus when someone takes the yoke of Judaism upon himself, he becomes physically weaker, as the Gemara states in regards to Resh Lakish: “One day as Rabbi Yochanan was bathing in the Jordan, Resh Lakish saw him and leapt into the Jordan after him. He [Rabbi Yochanan] said to him, ‘Your strength should be for Torah.’ He replied, ‘Your beauty should be for women.’ He said, ‘If you will repent, I will give you my sister [in marriage], who is more beautiful than I.’ He agreed [to repent]. He then desired to return and collect his weapons, but could not [Rashi: For he had just taken upon himself the yoke of Torah]” (Bava Metzia 84a). Hence just Resh Lakish’s decision to accept the Torah had already weakened him.

The verse states, “When she [Naomi] saw that she [Ruth] was determined to go with her” – when Naomi saw that Ruth had to make an effort to walk, for walking had already become more difficult – “she stopped arguing with her.” In other words, she stopped trying to dissuade her. In fact since Ruth suddenly felt weaker and walking became difficult for her, this proved that she had wholeheartedly accepted the yoke of Torah.

– Divrei Chaim

Ruth’s Wisdom

It is written, “To whom does that young woman belong?” (Ruth 2:5).

Rashi states, “He saw her modest and wise behavior. Two ears she would glean, but three she would not glean.” We may ask how such actions revealed Ruth’s wisdom.

In reality, there is a strict prohibition against gleaning more than two ears of wheat, for taking three ears is no longer considered leket. On the other hand, Jewish law allows converts to glean three ears of wheat. Ruth (who was a convert) did not allow herself to do this, for she went through the fields and gleaned only ears of wheat that came in pairs, lest someone would come before her and take them before she could.

As for the ears of wheat that were found in threes, she left them for later because she knew that nobody else would take them. In fact gathering three ears of wheat was forbidden to everyone except converts. To Boaz, Ruth’s actions revealed her wisdom. – Chiddushei HaRim

The Convert

It is written, “She said to him, ‘Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take special note of me, though I am a foreigner?’” (Ruth 2:10).

How was Boaz’s gift a problem for Ruth? Furthermore, what did Boaz mean when he said, “I have been informed of all that you have done... how you left your father and mother” (v.11)?

The Gemara explains that it is forbidden to offer a gift to non-Jews without good reason, due to the prohibition against showing them affection. Such was the meaning of Ruth’s question to Boaz: “Why have I found favor in your eyes” – such that you are giving me a gift – “though I am a foreigner?” By this she implied, “You aren’t allowed to give me a gift without good reason!”

Hence Boaz replied, “I have been informed of all that you have done” – I learned that you converted and have sought shelter under the wings of the Shechinah. He then added, “you left your father and mother” – and since that’s the case, it is fitting that I offer you a gift in order to fulfill the mitzvah, “You shall love the convert.” – She’erit Yaakov

A Worthy Woman

It is written, “And now my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you whatever you say, for all the men at the gate of my people know that you are a worthy woman” (Ruth 3:11).

Ruth lost two husbands in life, for after the death of Chilion, his brother Mahlon married her (to fulfill the mitzvah of Levirate marriage). However he died as well. Ruth therefore entered into the category of a “woman who kills her husbands.” That said, how could Boaz have married her without regard to the law concerning such women?

We may say that Boaz married Ruth in order to fulfill the mitzvah of Levirate marriage. As a result, he did not have to fear the consequences because whoever fulfills a mitzvah will not be struck by misfortune. Nevertheless, Mahlon had married Ruth under the same circumstances, and yet nothing protected him from death.

The Noda B’Yehuda writes (Even HaEzer 7) that the prohibition against marrying a “woman who kills her husbands” does not apply to a “worthy woman.”

This is why Boaz told Ruth at the very outset, “And now my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you whatever you say.” Why? Because “you are a worthy woman.” In other words: Do not fear the law concerning a “woman who kills her husbands,” for you are a worthy woman and therefore not affected by it.

– Chatam Sofer

Nasso

It is written, “Take a census of the sons of Gershon” (Bamidbar 4:22).

The book Iturei Torah relates an amazing concept, namely that Parsha Nasso, which is composed of 176 verses, is the longest parsha in the Torah. In parallel to this, Tehillim 119 (“Praiseworthy are those whose way is perfect”) is composed of 176 verses. Furthermore, Bava Batra is the longest tractate in the Talmud, containing 176 folios.

Among all the parshiot in the Torah, Parsha Nasso is the subject of the greatest number of commentaries in the midrashim and the Zohar. Since this parsha is read near the festival of Shavuot, the time of the giving of the Torah, our Sages have demonstrated, through their numerous commentaries, their special love for the Torah which they merited to receive.

The Nazir

It is written, “He shall bring his offering to Hashem” (Bamidbar 6:14).

The gaon Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk taught that the offerings of the Nazir (one who takes a vow of abstinence), which he brings on the day that he shaves himself, is similar to the offerings that were brought by the princes during the inauguration (chanuka) of the altar. Why the similarity? It is because a broken heart is greater than all offerings. Now the aim of the person who decides to be a Nazir is to learn to break his urges and desires, and to train himself (chinuch) in this way. Hence the Nazir would bring the offerings of the inauguration (chanuka).

A Blessing Fulfilled

It is written, “So shall you bless the Children of Israel” (Bamidbar 6:23).

Each morning we have the merit of finding ourselves before the kohanim with their arms extended, and obediently hearing their blessing. Why were the kohanim chosen to bless the Jewish people?

Rabbi Aharon Walkin, the author of Beit Aharon, explains: The Maharsha commented on the formula established by our Sages “to bless His people Israel with love” (Sotah 38b), stating that a blessing is fulfilled in accordance with the desire of the person who says it. It is therefore fitting that the blessing should be said by a person with a positive outlook and who wants to give it.

Thus the effectiveness of a blessing depends on the genuine desire of the person who says it.

Since we cannot claim to be at a level where we love every Jew from the bottom of our heart, G-d chose the kohanim, who are obviously interested in the complete welfare of the Jewish people. In fact the sustenance of the kohanim depends on the offerings of the Jewish people, which they receive as members of the priesthood. Thus the greater the blessing of the Jewish people, the greater their contribution to the kohanim will be. Hence we are assured that their blessing will emanate from the depths of their heart and be fulfilled.

By a Levite

It is written, “So shall you bless the Children of Israel” (Bamidbar 6:23).

It is taught that the priest who is about to spread forth his hands [for the blessing] needs an influx of holiness in addition to his own. He

must therefore have his hands washed by one who is himself holy, namely a Levite.

Thus the priest may not receive the sanctification of the washing of hands from any commoner who is not himself sanctified. It may be asked: Why only a Levite? Why should the priest not be sanctified by the hands of another priest?

The answer is: Because the other priest would not be complete, but the Levite is complete, being qualified for his own service, and he is also deemed to be “purified,” as it says: “and purify them.”

– Zohar III:146ab

In the Light of the Parsha

The Tribe of Levi’s Capacity for Self-Sacrifice

It is written, “Take a census of the sons of Gershon as well, according to their fathers’ household, according to their families” (Bamidbar 4:22).

What does the expression “as well” signify? Did they have some vague desire not to count them? Here the Torah is alluding to the work required to perfect middot [character traits]. In fact the name Gershon is related to the term gerushin (“separation”), an allusion to ridding ourselves of bad character traits and our own evil inclination. Furthermore, the expression gam hem (translated by “as well”) has a numerical value of 88, equal to that of pach (“snare”). By ridding ourselves of these negative character traits, “the pach [snare] broke and we escaped” (Tehillim 124:7) – all evil leaves a person, who is delivered and considered free.

Thus at the end of Parsha Bamidbar (chapter 4), we read about the responsibilities of the sons of Kohath, who worked in the Holy of Holies and could die when called upon to perform their duties. The Midrash explains: “Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedath said in the name of Rabbi Yossi ben Zimra: ‘Their numbers were depleted because fire came out and grazed those who carried the Ark. In consequence everybody would run elsewhere; one would take the Table, another would take the Menorah...’ Rabbi Shemuel bar Nahmani said: ‘Heaven forbid! The sons of Kohath did not abandon the Ark and run to the Table and the Menorah. On the contrary, even though their numbers dwindled, they gave their lives for the Ark’ ” (Bereshith Rabba 5:1). Such an attitude revealed an immense capacity for self-sacrifice on behalf of the sons of Kohath, who continued to transport the Ark with devotion, all while knowing that it was decimating them. However working on our middot remains vital. In fact Korach, who was also among those who carried the Ark, started a rebellion against Moshe.

We see the grave consequences of bad middot, which can also exit among great and decent men. In fact the sons of Kohath were so zealous for the Torah that they did not consider the dangers of carrying the Ark, nor were they worried about their own physical well-being, for they understood the importance of their duties in the Sanctuary. They merited such a high spiritual level by chasing the evil inclination from their hearts and concentrating on their service of G-d, rather than focusing on the dangers involved in it. In reality, the Levites served the Jewish people, for the service of the Temple was for the people. Despite the dangers involved in their work, they did not stop performing it with joy and love for the Children of Israel, all for the sake of the glory of G-d.

Being the First to Greet Others

A love for peace is deeply rooted in the Jewish people. The Holy One, blessed be He, blesses His people Israel with peace, as we say every day in Shemoneh Esrei. In this week's parsha, the priestly blessing echoes this: "May Hashem lift His face to you and establish peace for you" (Bamidbar 6:26). Here Rabbeinu Yaakov Baal HaTurim sees an allusion to the advice given in Pirkei Avot to greet others (by saying shalom – "hello," but which also means "peace"), even to a non-Jew. In fact the word shalom has the same numerical value as Esav, the allusion thus being clear: Be the first to say shalom to others, even to a non-Jew.

In his work Derech Avot (a commentary on Pirkei Avot), the Maharal makes the following remarks on a statement by Rabbi Matya ben Charash ("Be the first to greet any man" [Pirkei Avot 4:15]): It is preferable to be the first to greet anyone, be he wicked or not. One who is not wicked, it is obvious that we must greet him first. However the same applies to an evildoer, for he himself does not consider himself to be wicked; and if we fail to greet him, he will think that we are abhorrent, among those who do not respect others. Hence we must be the first to greet even him. In that case, however, we have greeted an evildoer! The Maharal explains that this is permitted, and for proof he refers to a statement in the Gemara: "Rabbi Yehudah of Israel (another version, Rabbi Shimon ben Pazzi) expounded: It is permitted to flatter the wicked in this world, as it is said: 'A vile person will no longer be called generous, and it will not be said that a miser is magnanimous' [Isaiah 32:5]. Consequently it is allowed in this world" (Sotah 41b). The Maharal adds that the verse, " 'There is no peace,' said my G-d, 'for the wicked' " (Isaiah 57:21) does not concern this world, as the Gemara explains in Shabbat 151b. Instead it concerns the souls of the wicked after they die; in this world, the wicked are in peace.

By the Merit of a Warm Hello

The gaon Rabbi Shemuel Feldman Zatzal was able, on account of the warmth that radiated from his face, to convince people who were not even Torah-observant not to open their businesses on Shabbat. On Friday afternoon, he would go from shop to shop and warmly greet each merchant by saying Shabbat Shalom.

These words, which emerged from his heart, as the book Shalom Rav recounts, had their effect, melting the hearts of even those who were furthest from observance. Many said that they especially came to hear him say Shabbat Shalom with such rare warmth.

One of them began to open his shop after the death of Rabbi Shemuel. Surprised by this change, his neighbors asked him: "For numerous years you didn't open your shop on Shabbat, so why are you profaning it now?"

He answered, "The truth is that I'm far from being observant, and I have no concept of mitzvot in general or the observance of Shabbat in particular. I always wanted to open my shop on Shabbat, but the Shabbat Shalom of the Rav prevented me from doing so."

Rectifying a Mistake

The biography of the gaon Rabbi Moshe Feinstein shows just how careful he was to be the first to greet everyone he met, respectfully and with a welcoming smile. One day he walked by someone without seeing him, and therefore he did not greet him, as he normally would.

A dozen or so steps later, he walked back to the person and greeted him. In order to rectify this mistake, he stayed there and chatted with him for a long time.

Rabbi Haim Pinto

An individual from the Ohana family of Morocco hid a large amount of money in his car, despite national laws prohibiting it. He hid the money in a secret place within the car, and he covered it with a layer of wax to prevent it from being seen.

His neighbors denounced him to the authorities, and one day the police stopped him and asked that he open his car so they could search it. He immediately took the money out of the car and fled on foot to escape. The police pursued him in French-built cars that traveled at close to 70 mph, while he was running on foot and carrying a heavy load of silver and gold, meaning that he couldn't run quickly. Nevertheless, he managed to flee and evade the police, who were stunned that they failed to catch him.

On the following day, when the police found him (obviously without any money), they asked: "How did you manage to escape? What rabbi did you call upon to save you?" He responded, quite simply, "I called upon the name of Rabbi Haim Pinto."

When the police heard this, they understood everything that had happened on the previous day, and they left just as quickly as they had arrived.

Rabbi Haim at the Door

The following story was recounted by our teacher Rabbi David Hanania Pinto Shlita: "When my grandfather, the tzaddik Rabbi Haim Pinto, may his merit protect us, was in Morocco, one resident of the city began having a severe toothache. In fact it was so painful that he tossed in bed at night, unable to sleep, gripped by pain. He prayed for G-d to send him a complete healing by the merit of the tzaddik Rabbi Haim Pinto.

"At that point he suddenly heard knocking at his door, and when someone went to open it, they found Rabbi Haim there. He said, 'I haven't been able to sleep for several hours now, for your father prayed that Hashem should send him a complete healing by the merit of my holy ancestors.' Rabbi Haim then approached the man and touched his tooth, and he was healed."

Guard Your Tongue

A Good Influence

Whoever refrains from speaking forbidden words rectifies and sanctifies all the tools of a Jew; all the words of Torah and prayer that he says will then ascend to their source. The ministering angels will defend him before G-d, and a spirit of holiness will surround him. He will become worthy of receiving blessings in this world, and he will merit an honorable place in Gan Eden (for each moment that he refrains from speaking forbidden words, he merits a hidden light that no earthly or heavenly creature can comprehend). He will be saved from Gehinnom, he will be free of all jealousy, he will be loved by others, everyone will confide their secrets to him, and no one will slander him.

– Sha'ar Hazechira