



פחד דוד

**PAHAD DAVID**

*(Commentaries on the Torah)*

*David Hanania Pinto*



*Excerpt from the book*  
**PAHAD DAVID**  
*(Commentaries on the Torah)*

***Rabbi David Hanania Pinto שליט"א***

*(from France)*

*(Grandson of venerable and holy Rabbi Chaim Pinto Zatsal)*

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*And the Wedding of*

***Eric Gabriel Hanania Abitbol  
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ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.



# PAHAD DAVID

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## פחד דוד

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***An Apology From the Author  
Said in the Name of His Fathers***

I would like to express my gratitude to Hashem for having given me the knowledge and understanding, according to my abilities, to pass His message on to others. Hashem has enabled me to spread the teachings of His Torah to the various crowds that I address, enabling both them and myself to come closer to Him.

I would like to thank Hashem for having given me the opportunity to establish Torah institutions for Jews returning to their spiritual roots, as well as for *bnei Torah*. I would also like to thank Him for having helped me to continue this sacred endeavor.

This book, based on the weekly sections of the Torah, is one of ethics and morals. It was written so as to guide both myself and others in the fear of Heaven, and it is designed for people who, like myself, wish to elevate themselves in Torah and the fear of G-d.

I thank G-d for having rescued me as I left yeshiva, when the evil inclination was inciting me to enjoy the pleasures of this world. Seeing that I was a young, single student, as well as the descendant of a pure and holy family, the evil inclination wanted to divert me from the right path. In fact it almost succeeded in entrapping me, and I felt that I was almost giving into it. If not for G-d's help and the merit of my fathers, who knows where I would be today?

G-d's kindness got the upper hand, and the merit of my fathers came to my rescue. I therefore left the place where I was living at the time and put myself into exile. I wandered from city to city, traveling to Morocco several times in order to pray by the graves of my ancestors. At that time I began collecting stories that people would tell me about the *tzaddikim*, recording them in a journal. This reconnected me to the blood of my ancestors – the very blood that flowed in my veins – and from then on people began visiting me for advice and blessings. They did this even though I knew nothing. I was an empty well, devoid of all knowledge, since I had forgotten almost everything I had learned.

However I suddenly received help from Heaven, and I began succeeding in all my endeavors. In fact everything I had learned was coming back to me, and I began to develop a love for Torah. Still, the evil inclination was not finished with its plans, lest it lose me for good!

This miserable wretch caused me great suffering, bringing hardships upon me day after day. How many times did I decide to stop following the footsteps of my ancestors and plan, as so many others did, to begin working or start a business! However I always lost money, and everything I did to earn a living ended up in failure.

I began to pray more and more for the Creator to open my eyes, until finally His kindness prevailed. This happened about 15 years ago, after a certain event.

A Jewish man from Paris, who was married to a non-Jew, came to ask me for a blessing. My response, which surprised even myself, was to yell at him as if I was an army officer. In fact I ordered him to divorce his wife! When he left, I felt like another man. I understood that Heaven had appointed me for this task, meaning that I had to help people do *teshuvah*, just as I myself had done *teshuvah*. In fact everyone, virtuous or not, must constantly do *teshuvah* for as long as they live.

At the time I felt obligated to take the same path that my ancestors had taken, for immediately after this incident people began coming to me from every corner of the globe for advice and blessings. In fact the money I was receiving amounted to a small fortune, yet what was I to do with it all?

As most people know, the Pinto family had never, up to that point, established a yeshiva or Beit Midrash. I therefore decided to set up institutions to further the study of Torah, and with G-d's help I will establish as many Torah institutions as there are *tzaddikim* in the Pinto family, namely 26.

Whenever a person becomes famous, he finds himself confronted by those who seek to oppose him. People become his enemies and say, "Only yesterday he was one of us, so how did he suddenly become a leader? Why is he lauded and admired by thousands for his wonders and miracles? Perhaps he's using the power of the occult!"

Others say, "He's obviously making all this stuff up and fooling people!" When I heard such slanderous things being said about me, I became dejected and didn't know if I should stop or continue. However one thing I did know was that my success was due to the merit of my fathers! I had placed my trust in the kindness of Hashem, and I began to give public lectures to thousands of people. The goal of these talks was to bring people back to their source, back to the Torah. I covered my ears at the same time, ignoring the gossip swirling about me and accepting my suffering with love.

I remember that 13 years ago, in the French city of Lyon, I asked my father (may his merit protect us) what I should do. Should I continue what I was doing or should I stop? My father became angry and said, "Did you take leave of your senses? Are you better than Moses and Aaron? Are you better than the Baal Shem Tov or all the other *tzaddikim*, those far more righteous than yourself, who did not react to the insults hurled at them?" When I told my father that I wasn't at their level of holiness, he replied, "Every Jew has the ability to reach the level of our teacher Moses. One step in this direction is enough to overcome your weakness. Connect yourself to the *tzaddikim*, read the books that discuss their lives and deeds, and in this way you can learn a great deal from their conduct." That was precisely what I did.

I have received many letters from great Torah figures of our generation, letters in which I am addressed as a *tzaddik*, saint, or venerable individual. This makes me feel extremely uncomfortable, since I am not a *tzaddik*, a saint, or venerable. I have a feeling that I am deceiving those who see me in this way. I asked one rabbi for help by showing me how to overcome my weakness when receiving such letters. He simply told me, "The letters that you receive from these great men, letters in which they

ascribe great qualities to you – ones that you don't feel you have – they must compel you to obtain those very same qualities! You must strengthen your service of Hashem, for it is possible that you can reach this level one day, and perhaps even surpass it!"

I answered, "That's an impossible goal. I'm an adult and I have responsibilities. I don't have the time to become pure and holy like my ancestors." He very simply repeated, "Do what you have to do and what is expected of you. Then have faith in Hashem and His will. The main thing is that you surrender to Hashem's will."

I am revealing my intentions here to everyone reading this, asking that they not judge me for my deficiencies, failings, and limited Torah understanding, for I am not making any claims of being among the great.

I have not asked for anyone to think of me in the way that some people do, and I have not sought the position that I find myself in, one that only attracts jealously, suffering, deprivation, exile, and dangerous travels. I find this all the more difficult because I always have to fight my evil inclination and overcome the pride that is aroused by the honors I receive.

I have no desire for official positions, honor, wealth, or donations. All I ever wanted was to be a simple Jew who earned an honest living in business. I fully realize that I do not deserve the honors I receive, and I often remind myself of who I really am. I have no doubt that all these honors really belong to the merit of my ancestors, who were holy to the greatest degree.

Those who come to see me, deep inside they know that I am but a descendant of a line of *tzaddikim*. They know that I work by the means and strength that Heaven has given me on account of the merit of my holy fathers.

I would like to conclude with a prayerful supplication: If *bnei Torah* are not pleased by what I have written, or by what I have said to crowds of followers, may they judge me fairly because I did not impose my teachings on anyone. In fact it is even possible that some people have found my words useful.

May G-d fill my heart with true love. May He give me the strength to serve Him with reverence, love, and self-effacement. Above all, may He bring about the Final Redemption, speedily and in our days. Amen.





# BERESHIT

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## *Parsha Bereshith*

### *The Love of G-d for Man Created in His Image*

It is written, “And G-d created man in His image, in the image of G-d He created him” (*Gen 1:27*). On this the Mishnah comments, “Beloved is man, for he was created in the image [of G-d]” (*Perkei Avoth 3:14*). The image of G-d in man is what allows him to serve his Creator and have an understanding of Him, each man according to his intelligence and abilities, as the Rambam says in his Book of Knowledge (Yesodei Hatorah 2: 2). It is through proper conduct that a man manifests this image of G-d that’s within him. This requires a person to work hard and strenuously on himself, for we have to correct our actions and acquire lofty values and traits in order to perceive this image of G-d, and to sense the reality of the Holy One, blessed be He. We should accustom ourselves to act properly in everything we do, especially in synagogues and houses of study, places that are particularly sanctified by G-d’s Presence (*Berachot 6a; Bamidbar Rabba 11: 3; Shir Hashirim Rabba 2:21; Zohar III:4*). As it is said, “G-d stands in the Divine assembly” (*Ps 82: 1*), which means that in such an assembly, more than in any other place, we can sense the closeness of G-d and vividly feel His reverence. Not only that, but we will be able to sense His glory and His power, as it is said, “Know before Whom you stand” (Testament of Rabbi Eliezer Hagadol 18; *Derech Eretz*, end of chapter 3). It is only when ones knows and senses the image of G-d in man that one can understand before Whom one stands – in front of the King of kings, blessed be He. Alternatively, if one doesn’t make this distinction, and if one doesn’t clearly perceive the image of G-d that is in man, this image and likeness will vanish (*see Gen 1:26*), and thus one will no longer understand or comprehend that G-d’s existence manifests itself everywhere.

If a man is to preserve the image of G-d that is within him, it follows that he must preserve this image in his neighbor, for he too was created in the image of G-d. This is why everyone must respect his fellow man, as we are taught, “Let the honor of your fellow man be as dear to you as your own” (*Perkei Avoth 2:13*). It is specifically stated “your own” honor, meaning that in the same way in which you watch over the image of G-d that is within you, so must you watch over and protect the image of G-d that’s in your fellow.

In wronging our fellow man, we commit a sin towards G-d. Our fellow is also created in the image of G-d, and so an insult directed at him is an insult directed at G-d. And yet, the one who sins in one of his obligations towards G-d is not like one who sins in one of his obligations towards man, for with regards to his fellow, when one sins against him, he *also* sins against G-d. This is why we are taught that repentance or suffering effects forgiveness for sins against G-d (*Yoma 85-86a*), but sins committed against one’s fellow are not pardoned unless we have made peace with the person in question. It’s only after having restored the image of G-d that is within one’s fellow that the

repentant one is accepted and obtains pardon for the sin that he committed against him. That's also why we should want the best for our fellow man, to the point of being able to once again perceive and sense the image of G-d that's within him, the image that we had attacked when sinning against him. And so things begin to come together and make sense. Concerning the verse that states, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (*Lev 19:18*), Rabbi Akiva said, "it is a fundamental principle of the Torah" (*Yerushalmi Nedarim 9:4*). For if someone were to attack the honor of his fellow, may G-d help us, it's as if he were to have denied the existence of He who gave the Torah. Which is to say that, by attacking the honor of his fellow, one denies G-d Himself. Loving one's fellow as oneself is a fundamental principle of the Torah, the everlasting delight of G-d.

With respect to Abraham Avinu, it is said that on that day that he obeyed the divine command and circumcised himself, he became perfect and bore the Divine Presence. It's written that on the third day after his circumcision, "the L-RD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre" (*Gen 18:1*). On this verse, Rashi cites the comment of the Sages: "It was the third day after the circumcision, and G-d saw how Abraham regretted that he had no passer-by, and no one to welcome into his home. This was because G-d didn't want Abraham to be disturbed by visitors, so He created an intense heat" (*Bava Metzia 86b*). But this saddened Abraham, so he sent his servant Eliezer to search for guests (*ibid.*). G-d then had compassion on Abraham and sent him three angels, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, under the guise of Arabs (*Bereshith Rabba 48:9*). Abraham was overjoyed to have the opportunity to welcome guests, and therefore he asked G-d, "If I have found favor in Your eyes, please pass not away from Your servant" (*Gen 18:3*), then "ran to meet them" (*Gen 18:2*). This shows us that Abraham left the Divine Presence to rush after his guests, to the point that the Sages learn from this that "receiving guests is greater than greeting the Divine Presence" (*Shabbat 127a*).

This is a very surprising, and requires explanation:

1. The absence of guests caused greater pain for Abraham than that which he felt from being circumcised. And that was on the third day, when fatigue is most felt! (See *Shabbat 134b* and the commentary of *Rabbeinu Nissim 31b*).
2. Abraham found himself in G-d's Presence, Who had come to visit and heal him. Yet despite this, he regretted not having visitors. Does being in G-d's Presence thus have less meaning?
3. As soon as visitors arrived, Abraham left the Divine Presence and ran to meet them. Was it proper for him to act in such a way with respect to G-d? This is very surprising! And what allows the Sages to affirm that receiving guests is more important than standing in the Divine Presence? What permits us to say that Abraham acted correctly when he withdrew himself from the Divine Presence?
4. Why did Abraham experience such discomfort from not having visitors, and why did he want so much to welcome them into his home?

5. What is remarkable about the fact that, after his circumcision (when he became perfected), he wanted so much that passers-by come visit him? Why just at that moment?

We will attempt to explain, with G-d's help, each of these points.

Abraham Avinu had a great love for all of G-d's creations. He never considered their exterior appearance but, on the contrary, he saw and felt only their internal demeanor – their essence – that which is hidden inside. As we saw earlier, everyone is created in the image of G-d, and that's what must be revealed. The role of Abraham in this world was to prove to men that their way of life was a failure. He was to convince them of the error of their ways so as to bring them to the knowledge of G-d and have them come under His Providence. This is what the Sages said concerning the verse that states, "And the souls that they made in Haran" (*Gen 12:5*), namely that "Abraham converted the men..." (*Bereshith Rabba 39:21*). This is also what Abraham told Eliezer his servant: "the L-RD, G-d of the heavens and G-d of the earth" (*Gen 24:3*), and Rashi explains (citing the words of the Sages) that, "up to now He was but G-d of heaven, but since I've taught and accustomed the people to proclaim His Name, He is also G-d of the earth." Abraham made men realize that the image of G-d, which they once carried, had left them, and from that moment on (and thanks to his teaching) they found it once again.

Beginning from the moment that Abraham was circumcised, he became perfect and bore the Divine Presence. It was precisely at that time, in fact, that Abraham desired most of all to resemble G-d in everything. He desired to conduct himself in a way that reflected His image and His likeness, just as it's written, "Attach yourself to His ways and to His attributes: Just as He is merciful, you should be merciful; just as He is kind, you should be kind..." (*Sotah 14a*, amongst others). This is why Abraham, when he became G-d's partner, felt great anguish at not having visitors that he could be kind to, just as G-d acts kindly towards others. This is why G-d sent him three people – so that he could receive them. In seeing these visitors, Abraham left the Divine Presence and ran to meet them for two reasons:

1. Because he wished to emulate his Creator and perform an act of kindness.
2. Because he recognized in them the image of G-d, just as he saw it in all people.

From here on in, we can see how every one of the questions that we asked earlier can be answered. The anguish felt by Abraham because he didn't have visitors was greater than the pain of his circumcision because he wanted nothing to do but to bring men closer to, and resemble their Creator. This desire was so ardent that he forgot about the pain of his circumcision. All this occurred precisely when he was circumcised and had become perfect, in the sense that he would henceforth bear the Divine Presence. For it was at that moment that he became a partner with his Creator, in His image and in His likeness. That's the reason why Abraham, even though he found himself in the presence of G-d, regretted not having visitors, for being in the presence of G-d is the goal of perfection only if we act in love to bring people back to G-d's protective care.

We now understand why Abraham withdrew himself from before G-d and ran after the visitors. It was because in them, also, Abraham recognized the Divine Presence and the image of G-d. Therefore he hastened towards the Divine Presence he found with them, and it's in that sense that welcoming guests is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence (since receiving guests means also receiving the Divine Presence). And so Abraham did not slight G-d's honor by withdrawing to run after his guests. Rather, he only expressed great kindness towards them and, just as the Creator is kind, so too was Abraham. He thus followed in His ways, and it's by actions such as these that the Divine Presence never leaves us.

The sacred obligation of all Jews, descendants of Abraham, is to conduct themselves as he did in order to reveal the Divine Presence in the world. It is to bring people back to G-d, and to restore in them the image of G-d that they lost because of their sins. It is not only for those who committed one mistake, but for those who committed great sins as well. It is to return them to G-d.

The Sages said, "Whoever causes the many to have merit, no sin shall come through him" (*Perkei Avoth 5:18*). For what reason is this? It is because the one who causes the many to have merit, as Abraham did, acts in accordance with the image and likeness of G-d. How could someone who acts like this therefore have something in his heart that brings dishonor to the Divine Presence and thus lead him to sin? The fear of G-d is what prevents him from sinning, and hence such a person can make the many acquire merit because he reveals the image of G-d in himself. He also can see it in others, and so he respects them, he brings them back to G-d, and he increases their faith. How does one recognize the image of G-d? One must put in great effort in order to sense it, and strive to have great success both with oneself and with others.

"Everyone must recognize the image of G-d in himself and his fellow, and this will prevent him from sinning. Peddling in gossip is a sin that cries out to Heaven" (*Erchin 15b*). As it is written, "They set their mouths against Heaven, and their tongues strut on earth" (*Ps 73:9*). "Gossip is a sin that is as serious as the three most heinous crimes: Idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder. And it is much more harmful" (*Erchin 15b*). But if we were sensitive to the image of G-d that is in our fellow, we would no longer utter words of gossip. There would be no more jealousy, hate, or competition among men. For finally, what can we possibly achieve from the Torah, from our own intelligence, or even from our own good deeds, if we lose the essential realization that, at all times and at every moment, "it is G-d that I fear" (*Gen 42:18*)? To show respect for the presence of G-d that is upon our fellow man, we must respect him and guard his honor close to heart.

### ***The Renewal of the Work of Creation: An Act of Kindness***

As we know, the work of Creation renews itself every day, and we mention this fact in the Morning Prayer: "In mercy He gives light to the earth and to those who dwell thereon, and in His goodness He renews each day, continuously, the work of Creation." It is a permanent miracle that is renewed every day.

It seems necessary to explain the language of this blessing. Four questions immediately arise.

1. What is the sense of the expression, “He gives light to the earth and to those who dwell thereon”? For in the final analysis, if G-d gives light to the earth, if necessarily follows that the inhabitants of the earth also benefit from this light. Why, then, add the term “and to those who dwell thereon”?

2. If light is destined to the inhabitants of the earth, it would have been enough to say, “He gives light to those who dwell on the earth.” What need is there to state, “He gives light to the earth”?

3. In addition, the word “mercy” must be explained. How is giving light to the inhabitants of the earth an act of mercy on G-d’s part?

4. Furthermore, why specify that in His goodness G-d renews each day the work of Creation? Is it not obvious that this demonstrates G-d’s goodness?

With G-d’s help, we will answer these questions.

The Sages tell us that at the time of Creation, not only the angels, but also some of the *midot* (virtues) pleaded before G-d against the creation of man because he would inevitably sin. They asked, “What is man that You are mindful of him?” (*Psalms 8:5*). Yet G-d in His goodness and infinite kindness silenced these dissenting and accusatory voices and He gave light to the earth despite them, in particular the light of which it is said, “G-d saw that evil men did not merit the light, since by their wicked acts they only spread darkness upon the earth. As it is written, ‘their deeds are done in darkness’ [*Isaiah 29:15*]. This is why G-d hid the primordial light. He separated it and reserves it for the righteous in the future” (*Bereshith Rabba 12:6*). If such is the case, the entire world should at present be plunged into darkness because of the sins of men, as was actually the case in Egypt during the plague of darkness. Concerning that plague it is written, “No man could see his brother, nor could anyone rise from his place for a three-day period” (*Exodus 10:23*). Nevertheless, “for all the Children of Israel, there was light in their dwellings” (*ibid.*), for G-d in His goodness continued to give light to the Jews. He performs this miracle for us every morning and gives light to the world and to those who dwell thereon.

Concerning the verse that states, “In every place where I cause My Name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you” (*Exodus 20:21*), the Sages have said that if someone commits a sin in a particular place, that place will be destroyed forever; it can never be rebuilt (*Zohar II:28a*). Blessing is only found in a place where G-d’s Name is invoked and His will performed. However a place where one commits a sin, where one transgresses the Divine will, is cursed and merits destruction. We learn in the Mishnah: “If two sit together and no words of Torah are exchanged between them, this is a company of scorners” (*Perkei Avoth 3:2*). Why is the expression “this is” used? The book *Beit Aaron* explains as follows: “This is” is like a sign that forever designates that this place is one where scorners congregate. If others want to use this place, they cannot

study there, for this area is not blessed; on the contrary, there hangs over that place a harmful influence and a curse.

We have numerous proofs to support the fact that our senses are capable of perceiving places where sins have been committed or that are stained with impurity. This being the case, we must distance ourselves from these places. The warning to distance ourselves from places where idolatry is practiced is often repeated (see *Avodah Zarah 17a*). Even the one who only passes by such a place suffers from its influence and the practices performed there, and (may G-d protect us) an impure spirit attaches itself to him.

The book *Lev Eliyahu* relates a terrible fact from which we can all draw an important lesson. In a certain hospital, many sick individuals were suddenly struck by a grave illness, unknown until then. The hospital's administration began an inquiry and finally discovered that certain microbes had been causing all these ills, yet they were not able to isolate and eliminate them. After having discussed the problem for a long time, the administration concluded that the only solution was to destroy the building from top to bottom and to burn the rubble. That a place could have a harmful influence on everything it contains gives us pause to think and invites us to undertake a deep introspection.

The earth does not merit receiving the Divine light, since men, through their unnatural acts and the damage that they cause, have a harmful influence on the earth, the place where men commit their sins. Consequently, the earth should have darkened mornings and be deprived of light. Yet despite this, G-d in His infinite goodness illuminates the earth and the entire world, including the sullied areas that do not merit light. This is why the blessing specifies that, aside from illuminating the earth's inhabitants, G-d "gives light to the earth." This is an admirable and fantastic thing, which moreover happens every day without stop.

In fact, we are witnesses every day to another miracle of Creation. It is written, "In the same way that G-d makes peace in the Heavens, thus will He make peace for us." What is meant by "peace in the Heavens"?

Each commandment is limitless with regards to the possibilities that we have to carry it out to perfection. Yet this is not the case with light and darkness, which are limited by G-d's will itself, as it written, "And G-d called the light 'Day', and the darkness He called 'Night'" (*Genesis 1:5*). Commenting on this subject, Rashi states: "He saw that the light was good and that it was not proper for light and darkness to operate together and become mixed with one another. And so He fixed limits to them, to one the day, and to the other the night." As our Sages say, "G-d brought the light forth and put it in charge of the commandments of the day, and He brought the darkness forth and put it in charge of the commandments of the night" (*Pesachim 2a*). He limited them in time, forbidding each from encroaching on the domain of the other. Yet light and darkness would have continued to oppose one another if G-d had not made peace between them, which is an additional miracle.

Light as much as darkness depends on the actions of men. If men are good and act correctly, they produce light; if not, darkness. The blessing, “In mercy He gives light to the earth and to those who dwell thereon” means that the light on earth stems from the merit of the good acts of those who dwell thereon, and G-d, “in His goodness renews each day, continuously, the work of Creation.” Each day He reconciles the light with the darkness in order to illuminate Israel in this world.

We need to say a few words of censure here concerning the subject of mixed dancing during celebrations. How many sins are caused by promiscuity? How much is the power of evil increased when, during mixed dancing, men and women make impure physical contact with one another? This is extremely detrimental. It is the same with a husband who can, during normal times and in private, abstain from all contact with his wife when observing the laws of family purity, yet when a celebration involving mixed dancing occurs, he will by necessity touch his wife if they dance together. It is an extremely serious matter to transgress the laws of family purity.

Today, we are witnesses to the fact that the sins of the generation and the spreading of impurity have rendered us unworthy of the Divine light. Without this light, we would not be able to exist if it were not for G-d ignoring people’s evil ways and renewing, in His infinite goodness, each day the work of Creation and illuminating the earth and its inhabitants. Yet we rejoice in His light, whether we merit it or not. That being said, we should on our own correct our ways in order to merit, in all fairness, the beneficial influence of the Divine light, and not to profit from it as a result of His great leniency, each day, always.

On this basis, we can understand the continuation of the verse that states, “and it was evening, and it was morning, one day” (*Genesis 1:5*). The word *vayehi* (“and it was”) connotes affliction (*Megillah 10b*). What affliction could there be in Creation, to the point that this expression is repeated on each day of Creation?

The Sages say that each day that passes, the attribute of Justice presents its grievances before the Creator, asking Him not to continue the work of Creation because of the sins committed by Israel. At the end of each day of Creation it is stated “*vayehi* [and it was] evening and it was morning” in order to express that G-d had displeasure, as much during the day as during the night, because of the grievances brought forth by the attribute of Justice. However, G-d did not pay attention to the words of this attribute, and He nevertheless created the world, day after day, which is why the word “day” is repeated. The word *yom* (“day”) designates the light of day, and this light is the Torah, as it is written, “For the commandment is a lamp and the Torah is light” (*Proverbs 6:23*). Likewise, in the Midrash it is said that light represents the good deeds of upright men (*Bereshith Rabba 1:16*). This means that G-d created the world for the light of the Torah and for the righteous, and to create it He connected the attribute of Mercy to the attribute of Justice. The day also alludes to the Torah, as it is written, “even today, if we but heed His call” (*Psalms 95:7*). In the same way, it is written, “you are all alive today” (*Deuteronomy 4:4*) and “The Torah of the L-RD is perfect, restoring the soul”

(*Psalms 19:8*). The Torah guides the heart of man towards G-d and it gives life to those who make it the foundation of their actions.

Despite the pain that Creation causes Him, G-d connected Justice to Mercy. He connected Justice to light – to Torah – and He created the world with these two attributes, for Justice is necessary in order to properly punish those who scorn Torah.

The blessing, “Who in His goodness gives light to the earth and on those who dwell thereon” is accurate to the greatest degree, for light is nothing but Torah. Moreover, for the righteous, G-d in His goodness “renews each day, continuously, the work of Creation” despite the objections of the attribute of Justice. The goal of the world’s creation is that Israel follows the paths of the righteous, as it is written, “in order that you may walk in the way of the good and keep the paths of the righteous” (*Proverbs 2:20*). This is done through obedience to Torah, and thus the work of Creation is allowed to renew itself day by day, continuously, according to His will.

### *The Greatness of Man and His Purpose*

The author of *Chesed l’Avraham* writes: “Life spreads to all the worlds by emanations from on high, and the spreading of this abundance is possible only by means of the connections that exist between them. The connections between the worlds are accomplished solely by man, for it is to achieve the union of all these worlds that he was created, and it is through him that an abundance of blessing and success spread to all the worlds.” He continues and states, “The vitality of man comes from the world of *Asiyah*, his mind from the world of *Yetzirah*, and his soul from the world of *Beriah*. He carries the name Adam, which pertains to all the worlds, and it is through him that an abundance of good fills all the worlds.” Such are his holy words.

Due to the fact that a man has a portion of all these worlds within him, only he can establish connections between them, connections through which abundance spreads to all the worlds. We see that, essentially, it is man’s responsibility and mission to connect these worlds to one another, for he stems from each of them. If he were to sever one of the links that connects these different worlds, be it only for a moment, all of Creation would suffer as a result!

Let us try to understand this. It is written, “And G-d blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which G-d created to make” (*Genesis 2:3*). G-d finished the work of Creation on the sixth day, just before the arrival of Shabbat, and man (G-d’s preferred creation) was made last so that he could be responsible for all of Creation. This is like a king who builds a magnificent palace, splendid in all its details, and who calls for a servant and commands that he guard the property, telling him, “This house is mine, and it must always be kept in a state of perfection, always as splendid as now.”

And yet, at the end of the verse, it is written, “to make,” which indicates that there is still something to complete, that the world still lacks something. According to what

we have seen above, it is clear that in this world man has the task of watching over Creation as he received it, and to add to the beauty of the world. The Sages have said, “Man was created on the eve of Shabbat ... so that he could immediately enter the banquet. It is like a king that builds a palace that is splendid in its least detail, prepares a great banquet, and when everything is ready he brings his guest into it, as it is said, ‘Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out her seven pillars. She has prepared her meat; she has mingled her wine; she has also furnished her table. She has sent forth her maidens; she calls upon the highest places of the city’ [Proverbs 9:1-3]” (*Sanhedrin 38a*). For man to accomplish his task, he should be concerned that, above all, he never severs the connections between the worlds, this in order that an abundance of light emanating from G-d can spread to all places.

We know that the first man was created in such a way that he contained within himself a part of all the worlds, hence it is man who commands and connects them. It is in this way that G-d’s light and abundance can flow to all corners of Creation, for these worlds are connected one to the next.

How can man connect the worlds, as well as the Ten Sephiroth, to their source, to G-d? Only by means of the Torah, as it is said, “The uppermost knot of the Tefillin is a commandment of the Torah” (*Menachot 39a*). The Torah is a light (*Proverbs 6:23*) that illuminates all the worlds. G-d’s intention is for man to fulfill his holy task – that he live from the sweat of his brow without becoming indebted to others. When he lives a holy and pure life, he receives a reward from G-d that is in proportion to his good deeds, according to G-d’s promise.

That being said, let us now return to the subject of the first man. On the day G-d created man, he placed him in the Garden of Eden “to till it and to guard it” (*Genesis 2:15*). Yet this work and safeguarding were only for a few hours a day (see *Sanhedrin 38b*). If, during those hours, man had maintained his state of purity and holiness, all the connections between the worlds could have been interlinked, and the infinite light would then have continued to flow for all the generations. Such is what the Sages have said: “G-d showed the first man all the generations and its leaders” (*ibid.*). That is to say, all the generations were dependant on the first man. If he had carried out his task to perfection, he would not have been chased from the Garden, and death would not have entered into the world.

That is why it is written, “to make” (*Genesis 2:3*). G-d left man a certain task to perform in order to provide him – him and all the generations to come – with the merit of living and rejoicing in the infinite light. Yet to our great misfortune, the first man failed in his task on the very first day he was created, and he was chased from the Garden. G-d laments over him (*Bereshith Rabba 19:18*) because of this sin, a sin that up to our day we have not succeeded in rectifying so as to make G-d reign in this world through the connections that link the worlds.

And yet, even in our day, man has the ability to carry out this reparation. He possesses the means and the power to do it by his Torah study, as the Sages say, “Great

is Torah, for if not by its merit, heaven and earth would not exist” (*Nedarim 32a*). It is by the study of Torah that man spreads abundance in all the worlds by means of holy connections, and all of Creation perpetuates itself by the merit of the uppermost knot of the Tefillin, which attaches man to the Torah.

At present, we understand the need to immerse ourselves in a mikveh on the eve of Shabbat, which as we know is helpful for effecting the repair of the *brit*, the sign of the covenant that sanctifies the Jewish people.

The word *mila* alludes to the 40 days of the formation of the embryo (see *Sotah 2a*). During these 40 days, it is determined if the fetus will be a male, a man being the one who has the mission of connecting all the worlds in order to make the waters of life – the abundance that spreads in a holy way to all the worlds – spring forth. A man should understand and never forget that G-d desires and wants that the embryo should be a male at the end of its 40 days of formation, this in order for him to connect all the worlds by the abundance that spreads through the sanctified connections that link them. This also allows us to understand the statement of the Sages: “Up to 40 days, it is permitted to pray and ask that the infant not be deformed and that it be a boy or a girl. However after 40 days, it is forbidden to pray that it be a boy or a girl, for it is useless to pray and ineffective to ask for something that has already occurred” (*Berachot 60a*). This is because, as we have said, after 40 days G-d Alm-ghty has already decided what the fetus will be.

The letter *mem* in the word *mila* has a numerical value of 40 (referring to the 40 days of the formation of the child), and the word *yeled* (“child”) has a numerical value of 45, which is also the numerical value of one of G-d’s Names. We see, therefore, that the task which man is responsible for, as well as his purpose in life, is to make sure that he does not damage the holiness of this connection (which the sign of the covenant represents). It is through it that all the worlds are linked, and it is the mark of the covenant between him and G-d. Whoever harms this sign harms the Name of G-d as much as he harms man himself, who was created to be the permanent connection between all the worlds. If he harms this sign, it is as if he denied the Name of G-d that he carries within him (G-d forbid).

Let us now explain the sin of the first man, who was created on the sixth day. G-d left him the task of continuing the work of Creation and perfecting it, this during the few hours that preceded the beginning of Shabbat. If he had obeyed G-d’s will, death would never have entered the world, yet because of our great sins he damaged the sign of the covenant (see *Sanhedrin 38b*). The Arizal explains that the first man did not wait until Shabbat to join with his wife Chava, which provoked the jealousy of the serpent. The deterioration of man began as a consequence of his premature union with Chava. If he had waited until the night of Shabbat instead of uniting with her during the day, the Divine light would have protected him. Yet for not having waited, he ended up eating from the Tree of Knowledge. All this happened on the day before Shabbat (see *Arizal, Ta’amei HaTorah*).

The mikveh on the eve of Shabbat comes to correct the sin of the first man. Whoever purifies himself in the mikveh on the eve of Shabbat receives the holiness of Shabbat and its enveloping light, which prolongs the creation and the formation of man, and which connects the worlds to each other in order to fill them with abundance. We therefore see how awesome the secret of the purifying waters is. When a man descends into a mikveh, he prolongs the beam of the primordial, infinite light upon himself, the light from which all the worlds were created. Which beam of light is this?

We know that when G-d wanted to make His creations know His goodness and mercy, and to lavish them with the abundance of His goodness, He, so to speak, “withdrew” Himself to create a void in reality. He then made a beam of the infinite light descend from Him, and it reached that nothingness, that void. From that void and beam of light the Ten Sephiroth were created, and from them came the worlds. This “withdrawal” of G-d was only meant for man, only for beings capable of rejoicing in G-d, and from the moment that He created them, He put all the worlds into their power, with the obligation to connect and unite them. This is a sign of G-d’s great generosity.

Such is the secret of the mikveh. In descending into the mikveh, which holds 40 *seahs* of water, a man accepts the sovereignty of G-d, his Creator. At the same time, he accepts the fact that at the end of his 40 days of formation in the womb of his mother, he became a man, attached to the Name of G-d. From that moment on, all the worlds are connected to one another and receive an abundance of Divine goodness.

When a man finds himself in the water of a mikveh, he prolongs this beam of infinite light upon himself, a beam with which G-d created the Ten Sephiroth, and this beam continues and gives birth to all that exists and fills all the worlds with an outpouring of abundance.

Everything that we have asserted thus far is indicated by the word *mikveh* itself.

The letter *mem* (whose numerical value is 40) represents the 40 *seahs* of water in the mikveh, as well as the 40 days of the embryo’s formation in the womb, so that it can carry the name “man”. The letter *kuf* represents the beam (or line, *kav* in Hebrew) of infinite light that descended into the void, a void created as soon as G-d “withdrew” Himself, and into which the light spread. From there the Ten Sephiroth, as well as the worlds of *Atzilut*, *Beriah*, *Yetzirah*, and *Asiyah* were created. Without this light, the void would not exist. The letter *he* (whose numerical value is 5) represents the five forms of purity that a man takes upon himself on the eve of Shabbat when he is immersed in the mikveh.

All of the above illustrates just how the meaning and goal of the mikveh are profound and awesome. A man immerses himself in the mikveh on the eve of Shabbat to repair the foundation that was damaged by the first man, and he receives the infinite light in order to connect and unite the worlds to one another, for it is to continue the work of Creation that man was created, as it is written: “which G-d created to make.” A man must be extremely careful not to damage the sign of the holy covenant, for that

would be damaging the foundation of the creation of man and denying the Name of G-d that he carries within himself. If he guards and purifies himself, he becomes like the first man before his sin, and thanks to the purification that occurs in the mikveh, he unites all the worlds together in holiness and purity. He also prolongs upon himself an abundance of goodness, which surges forth by means of the worlds, starting from that very same beam of light that connects them. It is for this purpose that man was created.

By virtue of being purified and sanctified, we will merit what the Sages have mentioned: “The one who sanctifies himself a little is sanctified a great deal; the one who sanctifies himself below is sanctified from above; the one who sanctifies himself in this world is sanctified in the World to Come” (*Yoma 39a*). Amen.

### ***The Light is Hidden For the Righteous so That the Wicked Cannot use it***

It is written, “G-d saw that the light was good, and G-d separated between the light and the darkness” (*Genesis 1:4*). Concerning this verse Rashi wrote: “Here too the Aggadic explanation is necessary. He saw that it was not fitting that the wicked should use it [the light]. He set it apart for the righteous in the World to Come.”

Let us also examine the following text: “Rabbi Elazar said, ‘With the light that the Holy One, blessed be He, created on the first day, a man could see from one end of the world to the other. When the Holy One, blessed be He, saw the generation of the flood and that of the dispersal, He saw that their deeds were wicked and He hid it from them, as it is written: “As light is withheld from the wicked” [*Job 38:15*]. For whom did He hide it? For the righteous in the future, as it is written: “And G-d saw that it was good,” and there is no “good” but the “righteous”, as it is written: “Tell [each] righteous man that it is good” [*Isaiah 3:10*]. He rejoiced when He saw the light that He had hidden for the righteous, as it is written: “The light of the righteous will rejoice” [*Proverbs 13:9*]’ ” (*Hagigah 12*).

Rav Eliyahu Dessler asks why the Holy One, blessed be He, hid this light. Would it not have been better to leave it? In that way, the wicked would have acknowledged the reality of G-d, and this light would have prevented them from committing wicked deeds. Even if they had acted wickedly, they would have immediately repented.

I thought that I would answer by responding that in the World of Action (*Zohar II:258a*), there exists no simple way of ensuring that a person will not sin, for he has to work hard to reach a state of perfection and accomplish all his duties in this world.

Moreover, even if the light had not been hidden, that would not have prevented the wicked from pursuing their evil ways. The proof is that even without the hidden light, if someone goes to the trouble of looking around a little, he can easily conceive of the existence of a Creator by realizing that “this great city” must have a “governor”. As King David wrote, “When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars...” (*Psalms 8:4*).

In addition, even the generation of the desert – who were filled with knowledge (*Vayikra Rabba* 9:1) and witnessed with their own eyes miracles and wonders, and saw that the Holy One, blessed be He, spoke with Moses face to face (*Numbers* 12:8), without mentioning the fact that they were surrounded by clouds of glory – even *they* ignored all this and sinned, going so far as to protest against Moses and Aaron. What was the reason for this? It was because of their material concerns, yet they paid no attention to the fact that their behavior was considered as a protest against the Shechinah itself. In fact, Rabbi Chanina bar Papa said, “Whoever rebels against his Rav, it is as if he rebelled against the Shechinah, as it is written: ‘Not against us are your complaints, but against the L-RD’ [*Exodus* 16:8]”. Rabbi Abahu said, “Whoever has doubts about his Rav, it is as if he had doubts about the Shechinah, as it is written: ‘The people spoke against G-d and Moses’ [*Numbers* 21:5]” (*Sanhedrin* 110a). It is only through G-d’s kindness that the generation of the desert was not wiped out.

We may ask why everything that the Children of Israel saw and lived through did not have enough of an affect to strengthen their faith to the point that they would be incapable of sinning. We may even ask why not everyone has tried to contemplate the beauty of Creation and its Creator.

We must reply that the reason is because of the power of habit. It is this that blinded and prevented them from reflecting upon the greatness of the Creator. Even though they observed Torah mitzvot, they did so by rote – through habit – and did not put much thought into it.

This is why the Holy One, blessed be He, did not reveal the hidden light to the entire world, but reserved it for the righteous in the future. Even if the light had remained, the wicked would have become accustomed to it. In that case, not only would the light have *not* brought the wicked closer to a knowledge of G-d, they could possibly have used it to commit even more evil.

As for those who had no intention of acting wickedly, they could have also sinned and used this light for evil purposes because of their ignorance and inability to distinguish between good and evil. In fact, without the Torah, there is no way of making such a distinction. What can this be compared to? To a child who was given a handful of diamonds and precious stones, and who because of limited intelligence and understanding threw them all into the garbage. And why? Because the child put them in his mouth and discovered that they did not taste good. The child does not know what purpose they serve. Even if the child is given something refined and delicious to eat, he can also throw it away because he lacks understanding.

The same applies to a person without Torah. He is exactly like a child lacking understanding – like one who doesn’t know how to make proper distinctions – to the point that even if he could use the light to see from one end of Creation to the other, he risks using it harmfully because he doesn’t understand its value. This is why a person must toil in Torah and mitzvot in this world, the World of Action, to learn how to appreciate the Torah. He will then merit this same very light that the Holy One, blessed

be He, hid for the righteous. However the main thing is not the study of Torah alone; by Torah study a person must arrive at a level such that he recognizes the Creator and understands the depths of His secrets. A person will then have his reward beginning from this present world, as the verse states, “Taste and see that the L-RD is good” (*Psalms 34:9*), and his principle reward will be kept for the World to Come.

### *The Torah and Israel: The Purpose of Creation*

It is written, “In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was desolation and waste, and darkness was upon the face of the abyss, and the spirit of G-d moved upon the face of the waters. And G-d said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (*Genesis 1:1-3*).

We know that the Torah is called *reshith* (beginning), as it is written: “The L-RD made me as the beginning of His way, before His deeds of yore” (*Proverbs 8:22*). Rashi explains this to mean: “At the beginning of His creation – before He created the world.” The Torah preceded the creation of the world by 2,000 years, as our Sages have said (*Avodah Zarah 9a*). G-d rejoiced in the Torah during all that time, as it is written: “I was then His delight every day” (*Proverbs 8:30*), which according to Rashi refers to the 2,000 years before Creation. The Sages said, “All of Creation has but one purpose: The Torah. It was for the Torah, which is called *reshith* [beginning]” (*Bereshith Rabba 1:1*), and the world was created by the Torah (*ibid. 1:4*). Furthermore, “G-d looked into the Torah and created the world. It was the instrument of His work. His only goal was to give His chosen ones, the Jewish people, the Torah by which and for which the world and everything it contains was created” (*Zohar 1:24*).

We read in the Talmud, “Rabbi Eleazar said, ‘Great is the Torah, since but for it heaven and earth could not endure, as it is written: “If not for My covenant [the Torah], I would not have appointed days and nights, the decrees of heaven and earth” [*Jeremiah 33:25*]’ ” (*Nedarim 32a*). This is an additional proof that everything was created by and for the Torah.

The verse states, “The spirit of G-d moved upon the face of the waters” (*Genesis 1:2*). Now water symbolizes Torah (*Bava Kama 17a*), as it written: “Ho, everyone who is thirsty, go to the water” (*Isaiah 55:1*). Water existed from the start of Creation, since the heavens themselves are composed of fire and water, as the word *shamayim* (“heavens”) indicates: *Eish-mayim* (see Rashi on *Genesis 1:1*). We therefore see that water was brought into existence at the very start of Creation.

The rest of the text also indicates that the world was created for the Torah, in order that man may serve G-d, observe Torah, and proclaim G-d’s Name in the world. Concerning man’s creation, it is written: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the heavens” (*Genesis 1:26*). Now that Creation was complete, in all its splendor and glory, man was created in the image and likeness of G-d. This was in order that he may resemble G-d in all His deeds and attributes, and that he may be holy like Him, as it is written:

“You shall be holy, for holy am I, the L-RD your G-d” (*Leviticus 19:2*). Man also received a task: “Have dominion over the fish.” This means that he is to plumb the depths of Halachah and Torah, which is represented by water, since it was for it that the world was created. What is the goal of Creation, if not to observe the Torah and to obey the commandments that G-d gives us? It was for this purpose that man was created in the first place, coming into a world where everything is ready and set, and enabling him to receive the Torah and its laws.

Know that all of Creation is a secret of the Torah and wisdom. The Immanent One wanted to raise noble minds, and so He created four worlds (*Atzilut, Briyah, Yetzirah, and Asiyah*) into which He placed the 10 Sephirot: *Keter* (Crown), *Chochmah* (Wisdom), *Binah* (Intelligence), *Chesed* (Kindness), *Gevurah* (Power), *Tipheret* (Beauty), *Netzach* (Eternity), *Hod* (Glory), *Yesod* (Foundation), and *Malchut* (Royalty). These are the foundations of the heavens and the earth. Without the Torah, it is impossible to know or understand them. This means that all of Creation and every treasure it contains – visible and non-visible – exist only for the holy Torah.

If all of Creation exists only for the Torah, then why does the Torah begin with “In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth” (*Genesis 1:1*), rather than the verse, “The L-RD made me as the beginning of His way, before His deeds of yore” (*Proverbs 8:22*) and then describe the order of Creation? This would have clearly taught us that the Torah preceded Creation and that the world was created for it.

When the Jewish people were at Mount Sinai, it is written: “They stood at the bottom of the mountain” (*Exodus 19:17*). This teaches us that G-d held the mountain over their heads and said, “If you accept the Torah, good. If not, there shall be your burial” (*Shabbat 88a*). We know, however, that the Jewish people had already promised, “Everything that the L-RD has said, we will do and we will obey” (*Exodus 24:7*).

It is difficult to understand why G-d forced the Jewish people to receive the Torah with this threat hanging over their heads, given that they had already accepted the Divine yoke of their own free will (*see Shabbat 88a*).

We know that each person has free will and the choice of doing good or evil in this world. If G-d forces us to accept the Torah, what becomes of our free will?

We must first understand why the Children of Israel said, literally, “We will do and we will hear” (*Exodus 24:7*). Logically, one must first hear a command in order to carry it out. Should they not have said, “We will hear and we will do”? This was the argument used by a godless Sadducee when he mockingly said to Rabba, “You rash people... who gave precedence to your mouth over your ears? You still persist in your rashness. First you should have listened: If it was within your powers, accept; if not, you should not have accepted” (*Shabbat 88a*).

We may be permitted to suppose that the Jewish people did not declare “We will do and we will hear” under duress, for well before gathering at the foot of Mount Sinai, Jews knew that G-d was watching over and protecting them, and they always had faith

in His providence. They knew that they had been saved from the furnace of Egypt and the 49 degrees of impurity (*Zohar Chadash Yitro 39a*) because they had not changed their names, their way of dress, or their language, since they continued to speak Hebrew (*Vayikra Rabba 32:5*). It was always to G-d that they addressed their prayers, and it was through Him that they hoped to be delivered from Egypt, as it is written: “The Children of Israel groaned because of the work and they cried out. Their outcry because of the work went up to G-d” (*Exodus 2:23*). Already before receiving the Torah, the Jewish people had accepted a certain number of commandments at Marah (*Rashi on Exodus 15:25*), including the bringing of a Passover sacrifice (v.21), the prohibition against eating or possessing leaven during Passover (vv.15,19), the commandment to eat unleavened bread (v.8), the redemption of firstborn cattle (*Exodus 13:2*), the commandment of Tefillin (vv.9-16), just as they had accepted to observe the holiness of Shabbat (which is equal in importance to all the other commandments – *Yerushalmi Berachot 1:5*), circumcision (*Genesis 17:12*), and many others.

This is to say that the Jewish people already possessed some knowledge of Torah well before it was given on Mount Sinai, and they cherished it – particularly since “its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its pathways are peace” (*Proverbs 3:17*). This is why, when they stated, “We will do and we will hear,” their intention was to say: What we have already practiced up to now and what G-d commands us, we will do, for all the ways of the Torah are good and we will obey Him in everything without fail. But that is not all. We want to know more. May G-d Himself give us more commandments.

Hearing G-d’s voice corresponds to a profound yearning on the part of the Jewish people, and they wanted to hear more. This is the sense of *Im shamoah tishmah* (“If you hearken diligently” – *Exodus 15:26*), meaning that if you adhere, without reservation, to your promise to listen to G-d’s words, you will continue to hear them. This is the sense of “we will do and we will hear.”

We now understand why the Sages said, “One who walks on the road and studies [Torah], and interrupts his study and remarks, ‘How beautiful is this tree!’ ...Scripture considers it as if he were guilty of a mortal sin” (*Perkei Avoth 3:7*). A tree symbolizes Torah, as it is written: “It is a tree of life to those who grasp it, and its supporters are praiseworthy” (*Proverbs 3:18*). In other words, one who interrupts his study and says, “How beautiful is this tree!” – how greatly have I learned Torah up to now, knowing the Talmud and its laws; how happy I am with myself, for I understand the Torah and do not need to review what I’ve learned – such a person puts his life in danger. This is because “the Torah is an elixir of life” (*Eruvin 54a*) only if we continue to study it in depth. The Torah presents 70 different faces; there are 70 facets to the Torah (*Bamidbar Rabba 13:15*), and a student must review his studies. Otherwise, just like one who sows without reaping, he will forget what he has learned (*Sanhedrin 99a*). Our ancestors at Mount Sinai are proof of this: Even though they possessed a knowledge of Torah, to the point that they are called “the generation of knowledge,” they also wanted to hear G-d’s voice so as to understand the Torah and its laws. Each of us must follow their example, for the wise listen and increase their understanding (see *Proverbs 1:5*).

The Jewish people therefore had reason to mention action before understanding, for action referred to the past while understanding referred to the future.

The Torah was nevertheless given with the threat of the mountain hanging over their heads. They had no way to escape, and thus they had no choice. Given that “we will hear” concerns the future, we may understand why G-d held the mountain over their heads even though they had already begun to obey the Torah. Just as both body and soul exist, so too do the written Torah and oral Torah exist. The written Torah is like the body and the oral Torah is like the soul; they both need one another. Just as the body cannot live without the soul, there can be no soul without a corporal housing. By saying, “We will do and we will hear,” the Children of Israel only accepted the written Torah. For them, it was enough to obey the commandments without plumbing the depths of the ideas on which they are based. Such obedience, devoid of every urge to uncover G-d’s secrets, is certainly a good thing, for “Seek not what is too difficult for you.” Nevertheless, G-d wanted it otherwise. He threatened them by holding the mountain over their heads and saying, “If you accept the Torah, good. If not, there shall be your burial.” The Children of Israel had no way to escape, and so G-d said to them: Just as you are now under the mountain and are lost with no way to escape, neither to the right nor to the left, so too if you accept only the written Torah. You will not be able to understand it and you will remain lost, not knowing left from right, and you will be deprived of the advantages of the Torah and its goodness, to the point that it will bury you. If you accept only the written Torah, it will be like a body without a soul, which must be buried, and you will be lost in the written Torah. You must therefore also accept the oral Torah, and then you may come and go from this mountain, for you will also have a soul.

Those who understand the depths of Torah know that the oral Torah is a revelation of the written Torah’s hidden meaning. Rabbi Menachem M. Halperin, in the introduction to his book *Eypha Shlema*, writes that the Torah hides sublimes secrets that constitute its soul.

The oral Torah is the soul and life of the written Torah, and it is impossible to understand one without the other. This allows us to assert that G-d did not force the Children of Israel to accept the Torah under duress, since they declared, “We will do and we will hear.” Rather, G-d only wanted to explain to the Jewish people that the foundations of the heavens and the earth were created with the purpose of carrying out both the written and oral Torah. The oral Torah is the soul of the written Torah, and it is essential for understanding what is written – the body of the Torah.

The answer to the question asked earlier (namely why the Torah begins with the words “In the beginning G-d created” rather than “The L-RD made me as the beginning of His way, before His deeds of yore”) becomes clear. The world was created for the Jewish people to receive and observe both the written Torah and the oral Torah. The word *bereshith* (“in [the] beginning”) demonstrates this, for *be* represents the written Torah and *reshith* represents the oral Torah. These are the foundations of Creation,

and only after them were the heavens and the earth created. In other words: In the beginning, for the written Torah and the oral Torah, G-d created the heavens and the earth, the entire universe, and everything it contains.

At the beginning of Creation, the heavens were created. They represented the oral Torah, which is celestial, the soul of the Torah. Its secrets are only revealed to one who is diligent and persistent in Torah study, one “who fears the L-RD, who greatly desires His commandments” (*Psalms 112:1*). The creation of the earth connotes the written Torah, the body of the Torah that was given on Mount Sinai, which is as humble and submissive as the earth.

Afterwards it is written, “And the earth was desolation and waste, and darkness was upon the face of the abyss.” This means that if a man only studies the written Torah (the earth), he will only be desolation and waste. Being only a body, he will not be able to come and go at will, and he will seem like a dark abyss. This is because an ignorant man walks about in darkness, without knowing where he is going. But then “the spirit of G-d moved upon the face of the waters.” The spirit of G-d, which is the oral Torah – the life and soul of the written Torah – moved over the waters, and “water is the Torah” (*Bava Kama 17a*). Man can therefore become fulfilled in this world. How is that possible? “And G-d said, ‘Let there be light.’ ” Light is necessary to understand the hidden secrets of the Torah, and this light is the oral Torah, which illuminates the written Torah. The written Torah and oral Torah are like two inseparable lovers, and it is by their merit that the world and all Creation exist.

Israel and the Torah (written and oral) form the essential elements of the creation of the world and the foundation of the heavens and the earth. They teach us the meaning of life and show us the path to follow. The world rests on the merit of the Jewish people, who observe the written and oral Torah, and who obey its laws as they were given by G-d, the Creator of the world.

### ***The Entire World was Created Solely for Me***

The holy Torah ends with the words, “That Moses performed before the eyes of all Israel” (*Deuteronomy 34:12*), and it begins with the words, “In the beginning [*bereshith*] G-d created.”

From this we learn what the Sages have said in various places (*Bereshith Rabba 1:4 et al.*), which is that the world was created for the Torah (which is called *reshith*) and for Israel (which is called *reshith*). This is the meaning of the expression, “before the eyes of all Israel – In the beginning [*bereshith*] G-d created.” All Creation is for Israel.

Just where do these words of our Sages lead us? In *Sefer Yetzirah*, it is stated that man is a microcosm of the world, meaning that everything found in the world is found in the body of man. The Sages have also mentioned this in the Talmud (*Nedarim 32b*). Consequently, a person should realize this fact and constantly be engaged in personal

introspection with a humble and contrite heart. He should think, “I am like a world, and if I want the world to be in a good state, I myself must properly maintain my own world. But is that possible? Can I accomplish my task in this world? Was G-d correct in having created me? Perhaps it would have been better had my soul remained under the Throne of Glory?” Now we know that the soul does not want to descend into this world, yet G-d forces it to do so, for it is written: “He established it [the earth]. He did not create it for emptiness; He fashioned it to be inhabited” (*Isaiah 45:18*). Hashem created all living beings in order for the world to be inhabited.

Created beings were therefore not made without reason, but to fulfill the will of the Creator. How can we achieve this? When a soul descends into the world, it is nourished by spirituality, leaving materiality for the body. However the role of man is not to make this materiality the main thing in life, but instead to give priority to the spiritual. What is the primary thing? It is the Torah! The mitzvot! This is the goal of man’s creation. When a person accomplishes them, he thereby connects to G-d and the Torah, and everything becomes one. As the Zohar states, “The Torah, Israel, and Hashem are one.” This is why the Torah ends with the letter *lamed* and begins with the letter *beit*, which together form the word *lev* (heart). This teaches us that a person must put his entire heart into serving Hashem.

We learn something else from the letter *beit* at the beginning of the Torah. The letter *beit* resembles a container, which means that if a person wants the Torah to enter his heart, and if he always wants to do his Creator’s will, he must resemble a container that holds blessings. He must do everything necessary for blessings to remain in him. He must prepare himself and be open to the Torah, for in this way the Torah and mitzvot can find a home in him. In the opposite case, how can blessings rest upon him?

True, everyone can claim that it is sometimes difficult to resemble a container that can hold blessings. This is because the evil inclination lies within him and constantly tries to make him sin. What can we do in that case? How can we conquer it? The Holy One, blessed be He, grants His blessings to everyone for this purpose as well, a fact alluded to in the word *keli* (container). How does this occur?

Before each mitzvah we say, “For the sake of the union of the Holy One, blessed be He, with His Shechinah... in the name of all Israel.” Why do we add the words “in the name of all Israel”? It is because each person alone cannot perform all the mitzvot, for some can only be performed in Eretz Israel, others can only be performed by Kohanim, others only apply to Levites, and so on. Nevertheless, everyone is obligated to perform all 613 mitzvot. How is that possible?

This is why we say before each mitzvah, “in the name of all Israel.” It is in this way that we connect ourselves to the entire Jewish people, including the Kohanim and Levites, thus enabling us to perform all 613 of the Creator’s mitzvot.

This is the *keli* that Hashem has given each person. The word *keli* is formed by the first letters of the words Kohen, Levi, and Israel. This means that Hashem gives us all this *keli* in order that, by means of the entire Jewish people, we can all carry

out the 613 mitzvot and the entire Torah. If it is sometimes difficult for someone in particular to become a container that holds blessings, then by means of the mitzvah “You shall love your fellow as yourself” – by helping one another – we can become such a container and reap all the benefits of the precious abundance that comes from the Creator. We therefore come to the conclusion that studying Torah alone is not enough. We must also give to others and love them, for in this way the world will continue to exist.

However if Adam and Eve sinned through the Tree of Knowledge, what can we accomplish? Adam was created on the sixth day in order for him to enter Shabbat and find everything ready for him, yet he still sinned! Imagine that a sumptuous meal had been prepared for someone, yet instead of appreciating it, he despised it. Such ingratitude is hard to imagine. Now where ingratitude exists, no container able of holding blessings can exist.

Let us draw a lesson from Adam and his wife, who sinned by the Tree of Knowledge, by the tree of the Torah. Let us strengthen our Torah study, for in this way we will ensure the existence of the entire world. We will then have achieved the goal of Creation, namely that the entire world was created solely for Israel.

### *Man is the Pinnacle of Creation*

What connection is there between the human body and the earth, given that they do not resemble one another in any way? The answer is that we can learn a great deal from both: From the earth, which was created at the beginning by the word of Hashem, and from the human body, which Hashem formed from the earth. When a person looks at the dust of the earth, he remembers that he was taken from it. He realizes that he is really nothing but dust, and that he will return to dust. The Name *mem hei* (same numerical value as *adam*) that is inscribed in a person, and the Torah of Hashem that is also inscribed in him, are what make him a man. When he merits it, a person differs both from animals and the earth. After creating all the land animals on the sixth day, Hashem said: “Let us make man in our image” (*Genesis 1:26*). Hashem made man and then his wife Eve from him. He called them *adam*, this name being in keeping with the earth (*adama*), since their creation originated from the earth. In fact it would seem that there’s no real difference between man and beast, since animals were also created on the sixth day, and even before man. However there is a divine spark in man that sets the two apart. Hashem breathed a divine spark into man’s nostrils so he could sanctify himself in everything he says and does. What Hashem breathed into man came from within Him. This is why man is called *adam*, a name with the same numerical value (45) as the Tetragrammaton (when “filled” with three *alephs*, two *vavs*, and one *daleth*), which represents greatness and loftiness. Furthermore, man has the power to prolong Creation, creating or destroying what he wishes. In fact a *tzaddik* rules through the fear of G-d (*II Samuel 23:3; Moed Katan 16b*) and possesses real power, for Hashem does “the will of those who fear Him” (*Psalms 145:19*).

Hashem imposed a condition on Creation, namely that it must obey the words of a *tzaddik*. We know that certain *tzaddikim* of Morocco were able to stop the sun in order to prevent a desecration of Shabbat. That is, in order to reach their destination before Shabbat, they could stop the sun in the sky just as the prophet Joshua did when he said: “Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and moon in the valley of Aijalon” (*Joshua 10:12*). We also know the amazing story involving my grandfather, the *tzaddik* Rabbi Haim Pinto (may his merit protect us), who on the eve of Passover helped a Jew by taking out a small suitcase from his kiddush cup, one that had miraculously grown in size and become filled with seawater. Rabbi Haim Pinto wanted to help this Jew after he had miraculously survived a shipwreck, one in which his small suitcase (containing all his wealth) had been lost at sea.

It is therefore clear that each person is comprised of two components: Physical and spiritual. A person should not make the mistake, however, of thinking that the physical is greater than the spiritual component, for in that case he is liable to lose whatever spiritual strength he has. A very bad idea indeed! If that were the case – if a person were incapable of overcoming a physical trial – Hashem would have had no reason in creating him. This is because He only tests a person with what he is capable of overcoming. Hence the spiritual is greater than the physical.

What is the source of our spiritual strength? It is the living soul that Hashem breathed into man. Before doing this, man was like a corpse, and what Hashem breathed into man came from within Himself, meaning that it was divine. It is therefore the soul that sustains man, and without this soul his body is but a corpse. Thus man’s life derives from his soul. What levels of holiness can a person reach? We all know that everything which the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world was for the purpose of holiness. Everything is therefore holy, whether it be nourishment, fragrance, or even what the eyes see. At the same time, every created being has an angel that looks over it and says, “Grow” (*Bereshith Rabba 10:6*). Now it is clear that anything having an overseer to protect it is important. Otherwise there would be no need to appoint a guardian for it. Thus the fact that Hashem created guardians for every created being proves that all of Creation is holy.

As for man, he is at a higher level than all other things. He has no angel responsible for protecting him or making him grow, for he is truly G-d’s handiwork (*Bereshith Rabba 24:5; Aggadah Bereshith 11*). The Holy One, blessed be He, personally saw to his creation and formation. The dust from which he was drawn was holy and spiritual, and he was infused with life from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He. His hands touched man as he was being formed, making him even more sanctified than the rest of Creation.

Thus everywhere that Hashem touched man, He commanded him to use his 248 members and 365 sinews to observe the Torah and its *mitzvot*. This is like the sound of the human voice being good for fragrant herbs (the analogy being that fragrant herbs are the Torah and man has the importance of a Sefer Torah). Hence when Hashem

touched man's body and breathed into him a living soul, he became so highly sanctified that the angels mistook him for a divine being. They even wanted to exclaim, "Holy" before him (*Bereshith Rabba 8:10*). In fact until the angels saw him eating, they did not realize that he was only a man created in G-d's image.

It is true that man eats the same things that an animal does. However man differs from and is loftier than an animal because the latter is entirely physical, whereas man is made in G-d's image. This is only true of an individual person, however, when he conducts himself like a being created as G-d's handiwork. If a person fails to safeguard the divine characteristics that Hashem has placed in him (namely holiness, the Torah, and the Names of Hashem), he no longer differs from an animal.

Now that we have explained, to some extent, man's greatness and importance in Creation, it does not take much to realize that we cannot derive satisfaction from the world for a single instant without praising the Creator. In fact our main purpose and goal in this world is to serve Hashem, to separate ourselves and be distinct from all other created beings. It is only in this way that we may bring satisfaction to the Creator.

## *Parsha Noah*

### *The Influence of the Righteous in this World and the Next*

“These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man and perfect in his generations. Noah walked with G-d” (*Gen 6:9*).

In the name of the Sages, Rashi says the following on this verse, “For some of our Sages, ‘in his generations’ is to his credit, for if he was righteous in his own generation, how much more would he have been in a generation of righteous men. For others, this is to his discredit, for he was righteous only in comparison to his contemporaries, but had he lived in the time of Abraham, he would not have been so notable.”

Let us begin by relating what Rabbi Hiya bar Achy said: “The righteous rest neither in this world nor the next, as it is said, ‘They advance from strength to strength; each one will appear before G-d in Zion’ [*Ps 84:8*]” (*Berachot 64a*).

Concerning this subject, the Vilna Gaon wrote that in this world, it is said that man “walks”, for he advances without stop and grows in the knowledge of Torah and the performance of commandments and good deeds. But in the next world, he no longer has any obligations, for it is written, “I will grant you passage among these [angels] who stand here” (*Zec 3:7*). In the next world, everyone is static (like the angels), and it is only in this world that we have the possibility to grow spiritually. This is why it is said concerning angels that they “stand up”, but of men that they “walk”, for men should always be progressing.

We can go on further and note that, once we leave a dead body we say “*Lech Beshalom*”, but when we leave a living person we say “*Lech Leshalom*” (*Berachot 64a*). This is because the letter *Beth* represents a state that is static and permanent, which is the case with the dead, whereas the letter *Lamed* represents movement and activity. And yet, it is said concerning certain of the righteous that they “walk” even in the next world, because there too they continue to progress. The Sages say concerning them, “Even in the next world they have no rest,” and they continue to grow and advance in the service of G-d.

We see therefore that there are two types of people: Those who, when they arrive in the next world, remain static, and those who continue to progress. What is the difference between a man who observes the Torah, obeys the commandments, and performs acts of goodness in this world – yet in the next world remains static – and a righteous man who did the same yet continues to progress in the next world?

There are pious men who study and observe the Torah, but who unfortunately work only for themselves, giving no thought to others. They share none of their teachings with others, don’t pray for them, don’t care about the welfare or well being of their

fellow, don't correct them in their conduct, etc. Of such people it is true, they don't have rest in this world, but they grow without concerning themselves over the needs of others, needs that they don't come to aid. They remain cloistered in their "four cubits". All the time that they spend in this world, they grow. But when they leave this world for the next, they remain calcified in the level that they reached when they passed away. In the next world, they will no longer be able to take action, as it is written, "Among the dead who are free" (*Ps 88:6*) which means that "Death frees one from all obligations" (*Shabbat 30a, 151b; Niddah 61b*). Concerning these righteous, it is said that they find peace in the next world, having no longer to exert themselves, but they remain at the level that they attained in the lower world.

On the other hand, there is another category of men, righteous as well, who of course occupy themselves with the study of Torah, obey the commandments, and fear G-d, but possess the additional characteristic of coming to the aid of others. They help to encourage and bring people back to G-d. Aside from their individual piety, they put themselves at the disposal of others, and their reward is great. Although they have no rest in this world (occupied as they are with gladly providing for the needs of other), they are happy to help and direct people in the right path and teach them Torah, and are rewarded by seeing the fruit of their labor.

Since "G-d deprives no creature of its reward" (*Bava Kama 38b; Nazir 23b; Pesachim 118a*), and He pays back to each measure for measure, their joy and reward in the next world will be to continue to progress by concerning themselves over the fate of Jews still living. As our Sages say, "Jews, even when dead, are called alive" (*Berachot 18a*).

Noah is an example. As we said earlier, even though the Torah testifies that he was "a righteous man and perfect in his generations" (*Gen 6:9*), some Sages judge him unfavorably. Why did they interpret this verse negatively?

It is because at the end of the section, it is simply said of Noah that he was "a man of the earth" (*Gen 9:20*). And why? Because he was concerned only about saving himself, not others. His very name, *Noah*, indicates rest (*mihnuha* in Hebrew); Noah was troubled only over himself. This wasn't the case with Abraham, who thought not only of himself, but also came to the aid of others, whom he instructed in the fear of G-d. It is written, "And the souls that they made in Haran" (*Gen 12:5*), which are Sages explain as follows: "Abraham converted the men and Sarah the women, and the Torah considers this as if they themselves had created them." It is possible that this is the reason why it is written, "Noah walked with G-d" (*Gen 6:9*), for he went only with G-d in his observance of the commandments, without concerning himself with others.

The Sages ask, "With what do the righteous occupy themselves in the next world?" (*Zohar I:183a, III:159b-160a*). They answer as follows: "In the next world, they occupy themselves with the same things that they did in this world." This means that if they were occupied only with Torah, they will continue to study Torah, and if they also helped others – praying for and having a positive influence on the lives of their contemporaries – then in the next world they will continue to do so.

This is why “the righteous rest neither in this world nor the next” (see *Maharsha, Berachot 64a*). In the next world, “they sit and rejoice in the Divine Splendor” (*Berachot 17a; Avoth D’Rabbi Nathan 1:8*). Because of this, if we make mention of their merit in our prayers, we will disturb them in their rest, and what’s more, will connect them to the material world, which for them constitutes a great disruption. It is extremely difficult for them to leave their rest, up there, to take note of the concerns in this lower world and to pray for us. Yet despite this, when we expose them to the problems of the material world, they remember that they too were once part of it. They recall how difficult it is to live in this world, and so they pray for us in order that we may be granted an abundance of blessings and success.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai protected his entire generation in his lifetime, to the point that he could say, “I could have saved the entire world from catastrophe” (*Sukkah 45b*). After his death he also continued to protect the world, and even in our days his name is revered by all. It is the same with Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, may his merit protect us. I’ve heard it said that the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, in his lifetime, felt the personal problems of everyone. If such was the case when he was alive, how much more so after his death. It is therefore not without reason that, in order to benefit from the merit of his father-in-law, the Lubavitcher Rebbe z”l would read at his gravesite the requests and letters that he received. Similarly, it is said concerning my ancestor and revered teacher, the holy Rabbi Haim Pinto, that he had promised before dying that whoever would pray at his gravesite on the day of his Hilloula (Elul 26), would be favorably mentioned on the day of Rosh Hashanah.

And yet all the men who have, during their lifetime, observed Torah in the hopes of being able to eternally bask in the Divine Splendor don’t become renown after their death. This doesn’t mean that the righteous who have remained unknown have not helped others, but rather that their contemporaries were incapable of recognizing the great sanctity of their souls, and that is why they remain relatively unknown.

It is therefore natural that certain people mistake themselves into thinking that men known for their piety don’t deserve the honors that they receive, or that they attained their position without effort or pain. This is simply not true. These righteous men greatly suffered before becoming known, struggling day and night to become one of the “Righteous for whom G-d executes the decree” (*Shabbat 59a*). Nothing is gotten without effort and without pain, even less so the fear of G-d, of which it is said, “Everything is in the hands of G-d except the fear of G-d” (*Berachot 33b; Zohar I:59a*). It is certain that they worked very hard before attaining their position.

Without a doubt, the righteous after their death continue to work for their people, and they progress and their powers grow due to those who follow them and who give them merit. When we recall the Patriarchs in our prayers, G-d is favorable to us because of their merit, as it is said, “And I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember “ (*Lev 26:42*).

### ***The Duty to Perform the Commandments Unselfishly***

“One must study Torah even in a selfish way, for in so doing one will arrive at studying it in an unselfish way” (*Pesachim 50b*). The principle goal is to study Torah for its own sake and to obey the commandments as much as possible, to the point that in the morning blessings that precede the daily study of Torah, we ask that we “know Your Name and study Your Torah for its own sake” (*Alfassi, Berachot 11b*).

The Sages say, “Eliezer, Abraham’s servant, asked Shem the son of Noah, ‘How were you saved from the flood?’ And Shem answered him, ‘It was by the merit of taking care of and feeding the animals that were in the Ark. We were always running around day and night taking care of their needs, for there are some animals that eat during the day and sleep during the night, and there are others that eat at night and sleep in the day. It even happened that a lion struck and bit my father Noah because he was late in bringing him his meal’” (*see Bereshith Rabba 30:6*).

Some questions may be asked concerning this.

1. The *Meyil Tzedeka* asks how it is possible to say that they were saved for having taken care of the animals. The Torah explicitly testifies that G-d told Noah, “It is you that I have seen to be righteous before Me in this generation” (*Genesis 7:1*), meaning that they were saved because they were upright men. Why, therefore, did Eliezer ask by what merit they were saved? Did he not know that they were upright men?

2. Shem’s reply must be analyzed. Was it really for having taken care of the animals that they were saved? How could this be, since in order to have meat to eat after the flood, they fed the animals for their own benefit? What kind of service did they render to the animals in that case? If the verse says that they were saved by reason of their piety, why didn’t Shem reply in this way to Eliezer? Why did he tell him that it was for taking care of the animals?

Noah and his sons feared that they would become arrogant and consider themselves righteous, an unforgivable sin (*Berachot 4a*) for which they would be punished. This also explains why Noah did not enter the Ark until the waters rose on the earth and G-d pushed him in (*Bereshith Rabba 32:5*). He did not think that he merited to live while others perished. Noah and his sons avoided believing that it was due to their own merit that they were saved.

This explains the care with which they maintained the animals. Noah and his sons did not think of taking care of the animals so that they could have something to eat after the flood. They guarded themselves against such a thought, attributing their survival on the care they gave to the animals, doing so in order that no one could say that their efforts were performed out of selfishness. They obeyed G-d’s command only, which effectively directed them to make provisions for the animals, as it is written, “And as for you, take yourself of every food that is eaten and gather it in to yourself, that it shall be as food for you and for them” (*Genesis 6:21*). This consisted of all types of food in order to provide for the needs of every animal (*Tanhuma 58:2*). They fulfilled their duty by

occupying themselves with providing the animals with as much care as possible, and in the final analysis it was this that saved them from the flood. The lion is proof that they acted in conformity to G-d's command, for the meat of a lion is not edible, yet Noah continued to nourish the lions even after having been bitten by one. This proves that they acted in an unselfish manner.

We may yet add another reason. At the time, the attribute of Divine Justice hovered over the world, and the Accuser said, "the work of His hands is being drowned" (*Megillah 10b*). This is why, in order that the Accuser not plead that there was no reason for G-d to save them while the entire world was being destroyed, they were busy performing good deeds, deeds "which save from death" (*Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Zutah 1*). As it is written, "charity [*tzeddakah*] rescues from death" (Proverbs 10:2), and they annulled their will before the Divine will. This was because the Accuser was pointing his finger at them and demanding justice: "Why did they not reprimand their fellows? Why should they live while others die?"

The answer to this is that they held the interest of the animals – thanks to whom they were saved – as their top priority, and they forsook their own comfort in order to fulfill the task that G-d had entrusted them with. They occupied themselves with taking care of the animals, both clean and unclean, with equal devotion, and it was because of this that they were saved from the flood.

This is the question that Abraham's servant Eliezer had asked Shem, namely: "What merit managed to save you from the flood? G-d's creations perished, and you didn't reprimand your neighbors as required to lead them to repentance and be saved. And if you think that you were saved because of being upright, this is because your pride leads you in error! Perhaps you took care of the animals in order to gladly partake of their meat after the flood? Perhaps you only acted out of self-interest!" (*See Sanhedrin 108b*).

To this, Shem the son of Noah replied that they had no thoughts whatsoever of this type and no intention of personally profiting from the meat of the animals. The attribute of strict Justice did not have any grievance against them either, for everything that they did for the animals was done in a strictly unselfish way. The proof for this is that they continued to feed the animals even after "a lion struck and bit my father Noah."

From this we learn a lesson that is valid for everyone. When one obeys G-d's will, it is proper to do so without ulterior motives, as it is said, "Fulfill His will as you would your own will" (*Perkei Avoth 2:4*). Do it solely because G-d commands it. If G-d testifies that a man is upright, he should not feel proud of himself, for "Every haughty heart is an abomination to the L-RD" (*Proverbs 16:5*) and "G-d cannot live in the same world as the conceited" (*Sotah 5a*). One must submit oneself to G-d with humility and feel that one is not worthy of being called upright. If not, then to make us lose any merit that we have acquired, the evil inclination will chime in our ear: "How righteous you are!"

It is written, "Noah did according to everything G-d commanded him" (*Genesis 6:22*), which "consisted of the construction of the Ark" (*Bereshith Rabba 31:14*). Furthermore it is

stated, “And Noah did according to everything that the L-RD had commanded him” (*Genesis 7:5*), which consisted of his entry into the Ark (*Rashi ad loc*). Even if he did not merit being saved by his virtues, he merited it for his good care of the animals in the Ark. He built the Ark, and in the final analysis he entered into it as G-d had commanded him, doing so without pride, and only to obey G-d to the letter.

### ***Peace: The Receptacle For All Blessings***

In the commentaries we find that two generations grievously sinned and were punished as a result: The generation of the flood and the generation of the Tower of Babel. However there exists a great difference between them with regards to the sins they committed and the punishments they received.

Concerning the generation of the flood, it is written, “Now the earth had become corrupt before G-d; and the earth had become filled with robbery” (*Genesis 6:11*). Rashi states that “the earth had become corrupt” refers to immorality and idolatry (*see Sanhedrin 57a*). It is also written, “The end of all flesh has come before Me” (*Genesis 6:13*), meaning that “anarchy accompanies immorality and idolatry wherever it is found” (*Yerushalmi Sotah 1:5*). Similarly the Sages have said, “With hot passion they sinned, and by hot water they were punished” (*Sanhedrin 108b*). The Sages also said, “The waters of the flood fell for 40 days and 40 nights, which corresponds to the number of days of the embryo’s development in the womb, for they forced the Creator to make illegitimate offspring” (*Yalkut Shimoni 56*). Concerning the verse, “They took themselves wives from whomever they chose” (*Genesis 6:2*), Rashi says that they even took “a married woman, even a man or an animal” (*see Yalkut Shimoni 43*). They were so perverted that even domestic animals, wild animals, and birds mated with species other than their own (*see Rashi on Genesis 6:12*).

Despite these grievous sins, the fate of the generation of the flood was not sealed until they committed robbery (*Sanhedrin 108a*), for “the earth had become filled with robbery” (*Genesis 6:11*). This clearly demonstrates the gravity of stealing, for although the generation of the flood committed all kinds of transgressions, its fate was sealed only because of theft.

The question becomes self-evident: Why were immorality and idolatry, two of the Torah’s three principle sins, not sufficient to provoke the punishment of the generation of the flood? Why was it precisely robbery that tipped the scales and provoked the decision to erase them from the earth?

Another question is raised by Rabbi Aryeh Leib. The Sages say, “The L-RD of Mercy does not inflict suffering on human beings first” (*Vayikra Rabba 17:4*). G-d warns them first, and if they pay no attention to these warnings He afflicts their possessions, followed by their homes and their clothing. It is only when these punishments are ineffective (meaning that they do not lead people to repent and correct their sins) that G-d afflicts a person himself, in his body. Yet for the generation of the flood, we see no warnings whatsoever being given, and it is stated: “I will blot out Man whom I created” (*Genesis 6:7*).

Contrary to this, we see that the men of the generation of the Tower of Babel said, “Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed across the whole earth” (*Genesis 11:4*). What was their goal? They wanted to build a tower and climb to the heavens with axes to fight against G-d (*Sanhedrin 109a*), as if that were even conceivable! What was their punishment? They were scattered about the world, as it is written: “The L-RD dispersed them from there over the face of the whole earth” (*Genesis 11:8*).

Here too a certain number of questions arise, which we shall explain:

1. Is it not surprising that the punishment of these men, who knew their Master and rebelled against Him to the point of wanting to climb to the heavens to fight Him, was only to be dispersed? Why only the punishment of exile – to be sent to all the corners of the earth – and not more? We do not see the generation of the flood rebelling against G-d, but only allowing themselves to be carried away by their desires. Yet they were totally destroyed, erased from this world, and according to one opinion they were excluded from the World to Come (*Sanhedrin 108a*). Why was the punishment of the generation of the flood much more severe than that of the generation of the Tower of Babel, which blasphemed?

2. We must also understand how, after the flood, there could exist ungrateful men and sinners who renounced G-d and thought they could fight against Him. Is it possible that they could be so foolish? Did they not know that it is truly impossible to reach Heaven and fight against G-d?

3. The verse “The L-RD descended to look at the city and the tower which the sons of man built” (*Genesis 11:5*) also needs to be explained, for it implies that G-d Himself descended. This is a difficult thing to understand, for does G-d – Whose Glory fills the world and Who knows all its mysteries – need to “descend” in order to know what men are doing on earth? Even though the Sages explain that “this teaches men to not judge the accused before having personally examined and verified the facts” (*Tanhuma 58:18*), G-d knows what men are doing. Therefore why did He Himself have to descend?

4. Why did G-d punish them by confounding their language and dispersing them throughout the world? Why not some other punishment, such as the loss of their wealth, a plague, the death of some of them (which would have frightened the others and caused them to flee), or some other penalty?

5. We also need to ask ourselves why, after having finished the account of the flood and the Tower of Babel, the Torah recounts how Abraham was tested: “Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house...” (*Genesis 12:1*), yet we are not told about the miracle of Ur Kasdim. Abraham was thrown into a fiery furnace by Nimrod (*Bereshith Rabba 38:13*) and miraculously saved, however the Torah only tells us of Abraham’s departure from Ur, not the astounding miracle that occurred there. This is surprising and also needs to be explained.

The Sages teach, “For transgressions between man and the Omnipresent, the Day of Atonement procures atonement. However for transgressions between man and his

fellow, the Day of Atonement does not procure atonement until he has pacified his fellow” (*Yoma 85b*).

The sins committed by men against one another (such as theft, blackmail, and slander) are also transgressions against G-d. This is because He prohibits us from doing these things, especially since the person victimized by his fellow, be it physically or financially, is “G-d’s creation” (*Ecclesiastes Rabba 3:14*). A man who has committed a sin against his fellow will only obtain forgiveness from G-d once he has obtained the forgiveness of his fellow. It is only then that the Celestial Court will forgive his sin.

The Sages have said, “Spreading gossip about your fellow is equivalent to renouncing G-d” (*Erachin 15a*). By speaking ill of your fellow, who was created in G-d’s image, you irritate G-d Himself. It is for this reason that sins committed against others are only forgiven once peace is made and forgiveness obtained, so as to restore G-d’s image; only then does G-d forgive. Shaming and scoring another person is tantamount to despising the image of G-d that is in him, and spreading gossip about another is to speak ill of G-d’s image. One who acts in this way will himself lose his resemblance to G-d. It is only once the victim forgives the offender, and they are reconciled to one another, that the sin is forgiven and the image of G-d restored. G-d forgives at that point, and the sinner can continue to live in this world and the other. This is not the case for sins committed against G-d, such as not wearing Tefillin or transgressing Shabbat. By wholeheartedly repenting of these sins, the wrong committed is instantly rectified, and in His goodness G-d immediately accepts a person’s repentance and his sin is straightaway forgotten.

What we have said deals only with individual sins perpetrated by a man against his fellow. However for the collective transgressions of a community (for example, when everyone speaks ill of others, or when everyone steals, extorts, or destroys), the sin is a hundredfold worse. The image of G-d disappears completely from such a community, for by their deeds everyone has renounced G-d. It is then that G-d inflicts a collective punishment upon it, given that everyone is equally at fault, and at that point G-d shows no mercy.

We are now in a position to answer our questions. G-d gave the generation of the flood a reprieve of 120 years to repent (*Tanhuma Noah 5*), since it is a fact that G-d is patient and waits for a sinner to return to Him on his own, as it is written: “I do not desire the death of the wicked one, but rather the wicked one’s return from his way, that he may live” (*Ezekiel 33:11*). This is why G-d did not punish these men for their immorality and idolatry, which are sins against Him. However when they began to steal and deceive their fellowmen, the image of G-d left them. G-d patiently waited 120 years before punishing them, the length of time for the Ark’s construction. During that entire period, Noah warned them concerning the approaching flood so that they might sincerely correct their sins against their fellowmen. However they did not repent, and G-d executed the judgment against them.

The Sages say, “Although the generation of the flood transgressed all laws, their decree of punishment was sealed only because they stretched out their hands to rob” (*Sanhedrin 108a*). This refers to sins against their fellowmen, which G-d does not forgive unless the victim has forgiven. Given that everyone was stealing from everyone else (it was total anarchy), and that nobody asked for forgiveness – nor did they even apologize for the harm they caused – they were all liable to the penalty of death decreed by G-d. We therefore understand why it is precisely theft, a sin perpetrated by man against his fellow, which sealed their fate. It was not immorality or idolatry that did so, for these are sins perpetrated against G-d.

Since G-d “does not inflict suffering on human beings first,” why did He not first warn them, then take away their goods, their wealth, homes, and finally afflict their bodies? Here G-d immediately blotted out man whom He had created. The reason is because if G-d had punished one of them by taking away his sustenance, instead of suffering, that person would have stolen what he lacked from his neighbor, and so evil would have spread without end and have only become worse. “The earth had become filled with robbery” (*Genesis 6:11*) means that everyone had become so accustomed to stealing that they no longer feared any punishment, and nothing could stop them. This is why G-d gave them no further reprieve and sealed their fate.

The generation of the Tower of Babel was different than that of the flood. Although they did not act with faith, they still knew that G-d grants a reprieve and forgives sins committed against Him, which is not the case with sins committed by men against their fellowmen. Hence they were careful not to sin with respect to each other, this in order to avoid the fate of the generation of the flood. Their interpersonal relations remained acceptable.

Unfortunately, the language they shared through lip service, as well as their mutual expressions of love and goodwill, were not sincere. To free themselves of fear and to live as they pleased, they plotted a war against G-d – as if such a thing were possible – for they wanted to liberate themselves of every obligation. However they kept far from theft, and “the whole earth was of one language and of the same words” (*Genesis 11:1*) in order to avoid divine wrath.

Their mutual love and goodwill rested only on their fear of G-d’s anger, and they began to build a tower whose summit was to have reached heaven. Obviously they had no real intention of actually reaching it, since that is impossible, however they wanted this tower to symbolize to the whole world their desire to fight G-d. If they had possessed the ability to build a tower that would have actually reached heaven, they would have done so without hesitation.

Such was that generation’s level of perversion. They feared that G-d would punish them, as He had punished the generation of the flood, yet they were not afraid to fight G-d Himself. To demonstrate their rebellion, they began to build a tower that would have, had they been capable of the feat, reached heaven.

It is written, “The L-RD descended to look” (*Genesis 11:5*), which means that G-d penetrated to the depths of their thoughts and saw the true reason behind their “love” for their fellowman. It consisted of nothing other than a fear of punishment, whereas in their hearts they hated each other. Nevertheless, “Intention that does not bear fruit, the Holy One, blessed be He, does not combine with deed” (*Kiddushin 40a*). This is why He did not wipe them out, but instead punished them in proportion to their sin. They outwardly expressed that they were unified with “one language and...the same words,” which is why their language was confounded, as it is written: “It was there that the L-RD confused the language of the whole earth” (*Genesis 11:9*). The Sages have said that when their language was confounded and they could no longer understand one another, they killed each other: “Thus one said to his fellow-worker, ‘Bring me water,’ whereupon he would give him earth, at which point he struck him and split his skull; ‘Bring me an axe,’ but he brought him a spade, at which point he struck him and split his skull” (*Bereshith Rabba 38:10*). They were going to build a city with the intention of being united, and G-d paid them back, measure for measure, in that they were divided and dispersed throughout the world. In wickedness this generation surpassed the generation of the flood, for in the depths of their hearts they had no love for one another. Without faith in G-d, by renouncing Him and rebelling against Him, one cannot love one’s fellow. Yet because they did not commit any actual sins with regards to their fellowman, their punishment was only exile, not annihilation, as was the case with the generation of the flood.

Concerning them it is said, “Behold, they are one people with one language for all” (*Genesis 11:6*), and previous to that: “The whole earth was of one language” (*v.1*). This means that their love for one another was only in words and expressions; it did come from the depths of their hearts. G-d confounded their language before it was too late, for if the situation had deteriorated, each of them would have come to openly hate his fellowman and have fought him to the death. G-d would then have had no choice but to once again wipe everyone out, as He did at the time of the flood. Now G-d had already promised that there would never again be another flood on the earth (*Genesis 9:11*), which is why He dispersed them to the four corners of the world.

The text continues: “Now nothing which they purpose to do will be withheld from them” (*Genesis 11:6*). Everyone thought ill of his fellowman up to that point, but they did not act lest they suffer the fate of the generation of the flood. Henceforth they would abandon their fear, and so “nothing which they purpose to do will be withheld from them.” They would have murdered one another, forcing G-d to destroy the world. Therefore they had to be dispersed and separated from one another as soon as possible.

G-d thus demonstrated His mercy and kindness. He did not wipe them out, but rather punished them measure for measure by scattering them throughout the world. They gave up on building the city at that point. Nevertheless, these liable to death by fire were burned in the tower itself, and each person received the punishment he deserved.

This allows us to understand the name that was given to this generation: *Dor Haflaga* (“The Generation of the Dispersion”). This is because they wanted to separate, cut-off, and completely detach themselves from G-d, Who punished them as a result. In reality, “Knowing [one’s] Master, and yet purposely rebelling against Him” (*Rashi on Genesis 10:9*) cannot go hand in hand with loving your fellowman. It is impossible to love your fellow if you do not love G-d, and it is impossible to love G-d without loving your fellow, for these feelings are mutually dependent.

The Torah commands, “You shall love your fellow as yourself. I am the L-RD” (*Leviticus 19:18*). You must love your fellow and infuse yourself with G-d’s love. Concerning this verse, Rabbi Akiva said, “This is a great principle of the Torah” (*Yerushalmi Nedarim 9: 4*). Why is this so? Because by loving our fellowman, we in fact love the image of G-d that is in him, and so we naturally come to loving G-d. This is the meaning of “You shall love your fellow as yourself,” for your fellow also carries the image of G-d in him, which is why you must love him.

When the Jewish people stood at Mount Sinai, it is written: “Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain” (*Exodus 19:2*). Our Sages explain this to mean, “As one person, with one heart.” In other words, to receive the Torah – to stand in front of Mount Sinai and hear G-d’s words – they had to be united by a mutual love and act as a single person. Unity and love for one’s fellowman gives a person the merit to receive the Torah. This is what constitutes “a great principle of the Torah.”

There is a profound difference between the generation of the flood and that of the dispersion. Before the flood, as long as the generation sinned exclusively with regards to immorality and idolatry, G-d gave them the time to repent, for these sins were committed solely against Him. However when they began to steal and sin against their fellowman, they lost the image of G-d. Thus there was no further hope that they would rectify their ways, which is why they were immediately destroyed.

Such was not the case with the generation of the dispersion, which was more corrupt. These men revolted against the Master of the world, yet they were cordial and demonstrated love and goodwill to one another. Even though their love was not sincere, G-d in His infinite mercy did not completely wipe them out, but only dispersed them in order to prevent them from actually sinning against each other. The Sages have said, however, that for being guilty with respect to G-d, “The generation of the dispersion has no portion in the World to Come” (*Sanhedrin 109a*). For having rebelled against G-d, they no longer deserved to stand in His presence.

All this allows us to understand why the Torah does not describe the miracle that happened to Abraham in Ur Kasdim, and also why it fails to mention how Nimrod threw him into a fiery furnace or how he was saved. Abraham did not bow before idols, he did not give in to Nimrod’s demands, and he did not renounce G-d. The Torah does not go into this, for man’s destiny and his purpose in life is to obey G-d without seeking personal glory.

We also understand why the account of the Tower of Babel and that of Abraham's trial are juxtaposed, for G-d created opposites. Some acted against G-d on the one hand, while on the other hand Abraham (who lived among them) did not act like them. A love for his fellowman and all creatures was his goal in life. He brought people closer to G-d and taught them how to serve Him. He accomplished this precisely by deeds that govern proper relations among men.

This behavior played such a role in Abraham's life that when G-d told him to leave his land (Genesis 12:1), this constituted a great trial for him. He had no thoughts of leaving the inhabitants of that place, people whom he knew and to whom he taught the knowledge of G-d. He wanted to continue to instill them with righteous thoughts and good deeds.

The Sages ask why the generations were counted up to Abraham's time. Their answer is that it is "to indicate how great is His patience, for all those generations repeatedly angered Him, until Abraham our father came and received the reward of them all" (*Perkei Avoth 5:2*). Why is this so? It is because he was perfect as much with respect to his relationship with G-d as with his relationship to others. However if we compare one generation to the other, the generation of the Tower of Babel appears preferable to that of the flood, for they were cordial and honest in their relationships with one another. Thus it is certain that "Peace is the best receptacle for blessings" (*Sifri Nasso 6:26*).

### ***The Extraordinary Power of Unity***

There are two generations that disobeyed G-d: The generation of the flood and the generation of the dispersion. Let us examine the marvels of our Torah and look into their deeds to see what became of them.

Concerning the generation of the flood, the Torah tells us: "Now the earth had become corrupt before G-d, and the earth had become filled with robbery" (*Genesis 6:11*). In the name of the Sages (*Sanhedrin 57a*), Rashi explains that "had become corrupt" refers to immorality and idolatry. As a result, the generation of the flood sinned by giving themselves over to the most forbidden kinds of relationships.

What was their punishment? Why did G-d erase their name from under the heavens, and why did they all die in the flood? On the verse, "the earth had become filled with robbery," the Sages say: "Come and see how great is the power of robbery, for although the generation of the flood transgressed all laws, their decree of punishment was sealed only because they stretched out their hands to rob" (*Sanhedrin 108a*).

This is difficult to understand. The generation of the flood committed the gravest sins, yet their fate was only sealed because of robbery? Is such a thing possible? Were their gravest sins not enough to incur punishment, such that they needed to be found guilty of stealing from one another?

If that were not enough, after the generation of the flood came the generation of the dispersion, who wanted to, as it were, "help" the Holy One, blessed be He in protecting

the world from ruin. However they also wanted, G-d help us, to wage war against Him (*Sanhedrin 109a*), and so they built a tower whose top reached to the heavens. Had they lost all reason? After the generation of the flood received such a severe punishment, the generation of the dispersion still denied the Omnipotence of G-d and attempted to wage war with Him?

To top it off, what was the punishment of the generation of the dispersion, which had renounced everything? Hashem came down to see the city and tower that they had built, yet what did He do to them? He scattered them over the entire earth. Is that truly a fitting punishment for one who renounces G-d? The Torah is teaching us a very important principle here. We know that the sins of a person against his fellowman are more serious than those against G-d, since as the Sages have said: “For transgressions between man and the Omnipresent, the Day of Atonement procures atonement. However for transgressions between man and his fellow, the Day of Atonement does not procure atonement until he has pacified his fellow” (*Yoma 85b*).

It follows that if a person commits these two kinds of sins, it will be easier for him to procure atonement for those which he committed against G-d, for He is filled with mercy and ready to forgive. However if a person does not repent of what he has done against his fellowman, he has not done enough, even if he asks G-d for forgiveness. This is because the essential thing in such a case is for his fellowman to forgive him for what he has done.

From the time that the generation of the flood began to commit sins against their fellowmen, the situation began to change. They started to swindle from each other, and they had neither love for one another nor unity of any kind, and so the entire earth became filled with robbery. Everyone stole and committed abuses, to the point that no one sought the forgiveness of others, for everyone committed the same sins. Since they did not obtain forgiveness, they were erased from the world.

On the other hand, the generation of the dispersion completely renounced G-d, and they wanted to, as it were, fight against Him. Nevertheless, the generation of the dispersion acted in unity and with love for one another, and of them it is said: “The whole earth was of one language and of the same words” (*Genesis 11:1*), for they did not sin against one another. We know that when one acts in unity, even idolatry is forgiven, for unity is the essential thing. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do as a result? He did not kill them, but simply confused their language and scattered them over the entire earth. Hashem made it such that no one could understand the other, as the Sages have said: “Thus one said to his fellow-worker, ‘Bring me water,’ whereupon he would give him earth, at which point he struck him and split his skull” (*Bereshith Rabba 38: 10*). Hashem did all this so that they would no longer be unified, and thus they would no longer be successful. How much greater, therefore, is the power of unity in serving G-d! When we act in unity with one another, we can achieve their greatest levels of perfection, for unity leads man to listen to what the other is saying. It leads him to lend an ear to the other person’s troubles, to think of him, and to help him in every possible

way. It is said that Rabbi Moshe Leib *Zatzal*, the Rebbe of Sassow, once stated: “Today I learned the meaning of loving a fellow Jew from a passing Gentile. I was walking in the street when I heard a Gentile asking his friend, ‘Tell me, do you love me?’ His friend replied, ‘Of course I love you.’ The Gentile then said, ‘If you love me, then tell me what I lack.’”

From here we see the power of unity. Above all else, we can merit the Torah through unity, for “the Torah is acquired through collective study.” Let us do everything possible to arrive at the level of unity and a love for our fellow Jew, for in this way we will merit the greatest virtues.

### *Hashem’s Honor, Not Your Own*

Our holy Torah states that Nimrod “began to be a mighty man upon the earth...a mighty hunter before the L-RD (*Genesis 10:8-9*). The Sages explain this to mean that Nimrod “ensnared people” by his words (*Bereshith Rabba 37:2*), for he wanted to rebel against G-d. In fact Nimrod eventually managed to ensnare everyone at the time when “all the earth was of one language and the same words” (*Genesis 11:1*). Not only were they united against the Holy One, blessed be He, but they were also under Nimrod’s control, with Scripture telling us that his domination began at Babel (*ibid. 10:10*). This is very surprising, for how could it be that everyone was united and did not speak Lashon Harah about one another, yet they spoke Lashon Harah about the Holy One, blessed be He, because of the flood? When unity exists between two people, they end up acknowledging Hashem. Yet in the case of the generation of the dispersion, they ended up rebelling against the King of the entire earth, even taking Nimrod as their king to revolt against Him!

I thought I would explain this by looking to the words of the Sages for inspiration. They tell us: “Terah was a manufacturer of idols. He once went away somewhere and left Abraham to sell them in his place. A man came and wished to buy one. ‘How old are you?’ Abraham asked him. ‘Fifty years,’ was the reply. ‘Woe to such a man!’ he exclaimed. ‘You are 50 years old and would worship a day-old object!’ At this he became ashamed and departed” (*Bereshith Rabba 38:13*). There are other stories like this as well. Terah knew in his heart that idols had eyes but could not see, that they had ears but could not hear. He knew that they were simply made by man. Yet despite realizing that there was no truth to them, and despite the fact that he did not believe in them, he allowed himself to get swayed by the prospect of personal gain, since he sold these idols for great profit. This shows us that a person is liable to reach a point at which he actually believes in Hashem, yet he will ignore the truth due to personal interests or for reasons of honor and gain. He then reaches a state in which “love upsets the natural order, and hate upsets the natural order” (*Bereshith Rabba 55:8*).

We learn a great principle from this, which is that a person cannot love Hashem and honor Him with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might if he also loves

himself, honors himself, and worries about his own honor! Furthermore, a person cannot love and respect the Torah if he loves money and personal glory. Why is that? It is because the Torah “is not found among merchants or peddlers” (*Eruvin 55a*). That is, it cannot be acquired with money. Instead, it can only be acquired by one who abases himself and yields to it (see *Berachot 63b*; *Taanith 7a*). If a person loves money and personal glory, how can he annul and lower himself before the Torah? Abraham’s service of Hashem consisted of just that, following His ways to the point that his innards taught him wisdom and Torah (*Bereshith Rabba 61:1; 95:3*). Abraham never sought person glory, but instead all he yearned for was increasing the glory of Heaven! This is why he overcame every trial he went through, demonstrating the tremendous power of his love for Hashem. He reached a point at which he was truly able to give his life to sanctify His Name, so much did he love Him.

It follows that there exists a fundamental difference between the righteous and the wicked. The wicked are only concerned with their own personal gain and glory, which is why they try to show that they are in control, as Nimrod did. This is not the case with the righteous, who are only concerned with G-d’s honor and are prepared to suffer and endure humiliation for it. Even when the world respects them, the righteous remain humble, for their only desire is to increase the glory of Heaven. Such was the case with Abraham, who gave no thought to personal honor, but instead was constantly concerned with increasing the honor of Heaven and bringing people closer to G-d, since he did everything for His sake with love.

There is a tremendous difference between a person who is only concerned with his own honor, and one who is sincerely concerned with the honor of Heaven. The former cares only about himself and his money, with all his deeds being geared to that end. Even if he teaches Torah and encourages others to perform mitzvot, it is only with his own interest in mind that he does so. He turns the Torah into an instrument for person gain, taking the honor of the Torah for himself. Such a person is like Nimrod, who assembled his entire generation together as one, yet in his heart sought only his own glory. In fact if the unity of his generation had been real, they would have continued to serve Hashem in truth.

Such is not the case with righteous individuals, who actually do love Hashem. When someone truly loves Him and works for His glory with all his heart, this enables him to arrive at “with all your soul,” for his entire life is devoted exclusively to Heaven. Furthermore, such a person is constantly prepared to give his life for the glory of Hashem. Hence it follows that he is constantly giving his life for the sanctification of His Name, as it is written: “Because for Your sake we are killed all the time” (*Psalms 44:23*). Of such a person we can say that he is a true servant – with all his heart and all his soul – of Hashem, and from him we must learn a lesson for our personal and social lives. That is, when we love ourselves and our money, when we seek out personal honor, then not only will we be left with nothing as honor flees from us, we will also be unable to love Hashem. In that

case, how can we serve Him? Therefore we must first and foremost love Hashem, after which honor will come, for Hashem loves those who love Him and grants them an abundance of blessing and success.

## *Parsha Lech Lecha*

### *The Test of Riches*

It is written, “And the L-RD said to Abraham, ‘Leave your country ... to the land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great. And you will be a blessing’” (*Gen 12:1-2*). Rashi explains that travel causes a decrease in three things: In children, in wealth, and in honor, which is why Abraham needed the three blessings that G-d promised him (descendants, riches, and renown).

If G-d blessed him with renown, riches, and above all with offspring (which he had so hoped for up to that day), what did Abraham’s test consist of then? Who wouldn’t accept to leave his country, his native land, and his father’s house and go to a foreign land if G-d assured him of such things?

The answer lies in the fact that a person who is rich and famous has very little free time, as the Sages say, “increasing possessions increases worry” (*Perkei Avoth 2:7*). His spirit is not free to occupy itself with spiritual matters and personal growth. And if such is the case for people in general, how much more so for someone like Abraham, who had begun to serve G-d with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his strength since his youth: “At the age of three, Abraham knew his Creator” (*Bereshith Rabba 30:8*). He also observed the entire Torah (*Yoma 28b*), he studied the Law of G-d without stop, and observed it in its entirety. Therefore for him, to leave his country was a great test, for if he were to become very rich and famous, and if people were to come to ask him for help, advice, and bother him at all hours, it follows that he wouldn’t have time to occupy himself with the Torah and serving G-d. This in itself is a great test, which is why G-d told him, in effect, “Over there, everyone will come to ask for your advice and seek your blessing.” What’s more, Abraham cared about satisfying people’s spiritual needs as well their material ones. He brought people to the knowledge of G-d (*Bereshith Rabba 39:21*), and instituted a shelter at Beer Sheva open to all: “The tent of Abraham had doors on all four sides so that whatever direction people came from, they didn’t have to look for the entrance” (*Bereshith Rabba 48:9*). His servant of many years, Eliezer, was in charge of managing his possessions (*Gen 24:2*). Abraham entrusted him with the task of dealing with financial affairs, as well as to distribute portions to the poor, as Onkelos translated: “he managed the household” (*Gen 15:2*). The Sages interpret the word *damessek* (“of Damascus”) as if it were written *doleh ou mashkeh* (“Eliezer drew and spread the Torah of his master to others”). What was the Torah of his master? To bring close to the knowledge of G-d those who are far, to distribute money to the poor, and to see to the requirements of the needy. Eliezer was put in charge of all these tasks, and Abraham, instead of being dominated by his riches, dominated them.

That being said, Abraham didn't have any children, and the "son" of his house – the one who managed his possessions – was his servant Eliezer of Damascus. G-d told Abraham, "This one shall not inherit from you, but one that will come out of your bowels – he shall inherit from you" (*Gen 15:4*). The Sforno writes, "Your son will successfully manage your possessions in your lifetime" (*ibid.*). It is not your servant Eliezer that will inherit from you, for he doesn't know how to manage your goods, but the one that will be born of you, he will know how to manage your goods and your wealth. This is difficult to understand. G-d blessed Abraham with a son who would know how to manage his possessions, instead of a son who will be pious, holy, and will inherit all his virtues! Could Abraham be satisfied with a son that would limit himself to administering his possessions without following him in the path of a spiritual and sanctified life? If this is the case, what did the promise to Abraham consist of?

In light of what we said earlier, we can now begin to understand. Abraham knew very well how to manage his own possessions; he dominated his riches and didn't subjugate himself to them. He distributed his possessions to the poor and spent his riches on doing good around him, and it's in that way that he resisted the test of riches, a test initiated so that riches would neither turn him away, nor prevent him from serving G-d. This is why he merited the divine promise that the son born to him would use his riches in the same way as he did, and would overcome the test of money. He would have a son who would know how to manage his possessions and dominate and use wealth to do good, which was not the case with his servant Eliezer. Even though he was a faithful servant, if he were to have inherited that fortune, he wouldn't have known how to manage it because he didn't possess the sublime character traits of Abraham Avinu.

In the same way that Abraham overcame the test of riches and didn't let himself get sidetracked, in our own time the saintly Rabbi Israel of Rozhin, and other virtuous and pious men, overcame the test of riches and didn't let themselves get diverted from G-d, from His ways, and from His service. For us, this serves as a valuable moral teaching, for wealth is a far more difficult test to endure than poverty. One must not fall into these traps, but to the contrary, with money we must at all times, and at every hour, carry out the commandments and perform good deeds. We should not resemble those of whom it is said, "But My people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols" (*Jer 2:11*). The Sages compare this to "the son that erred when he received much gold and money from his father" (*Berachot 32a*). One must devote one's wealth to doing good, helping one's fellow, and obeying the commandments; we must completely follow the example set by Abraham Avinu.

I once heard a fine explanation from the Chief Rabbi of Austria, Rabbi Riezberg. He said that of all the tests that Abraham underwent, the test of leaving his country was the most convincing and difficult of all, for the others were temporary, but this one was permanent. It meant always progressing "from strength to strength" in the Torah, which means to be always occupied in serving G-d.

We would humbly like to add a few more words concerning this subject. Rashi comments on the verse that states, “If you walk in [i.e., if you perform] My statutes” (*Lev 26:3*) by saying the following: “It is not enough to perform the commandments. One must also study the Torah.” In that verse we see that the Torah is termed “statutes”, not “commandments”. In effect, the study of Torah is accompanied by difficult trials. The evil inclination wishes to prevent such study, and it uses all types of arguments to disturb the one who studies it, in the hope to make him abandon it. This is why G-d orders us to “walk in My statutes.” It is to teach us that the study of Torah is a law that one must not transgress, even if we don’t understand the reason for this decree; all the arguments put forward by the evil inclination to prevent such study are nothing but a trick. The study of Torah is a law that has its own reason, to be sure. It is a divine decree that must bring us to the observance of all the commandments, and in so doing defeat the evil inclination.

This allows us to explain why the study of Torah is categorized under the term “statutes” and why the Torah uses the expression “walk”. According to the Ohr HaChayim in his various commentaries on the verse, “If you walk in My statutes”, he concisely brings out the following: “Do all that you have to do – eat, drink, speak – in order to occupy yourself with Torah.” He also says, “My laws [חוקים] are the rations of sustenance that I dispense [the Hebrew word חוק can mean both “law” and “ration”], and if you want to receive your share of food, you should likewise observe My commandments.”

It is written, “If you walk in My ways” and in the same verse, “if you obey My commandments” meaning, as much as in that which concerns man’s relationship to G-d, as in that which concerns man’s relationship to his fellow. A man will easily manage to overcome the test of riches if he practices what is written in the verse, “Each man would help his fellow, and to his brother he would say ‘Be strong!’” (*Isa 41: 6*). Such a victory over that test allows one to reach the greatest heights of perfection, even to the point of being counted amongst those “close to G-d”. It is the sacred duty of every man to strengthen himself in the study of Torah, with toil and sweat, all while observing the commandments and performing good deeds. This is without doubt the sense of the following Mishnah: “It is good to combine the study of Torah [religious laws that regulate the relationship between man and G-d] with an occupation [the social laws that manage relationships among men], for the effort required by both of them keeps sin out of mind” (*Perkei Avoth 2:2*). Man possesses only the commandments that he practices, and thus he can be happy in this world and the next.

### ***The Mind, Heart, and Soul: Man’s Essential acquisitions***

It is written, “And He said to Abram, ‘Know with certainty that your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own – and they will serve them, and they will oppress them – four hundred years ... and afterwards they will leave with great wealth’ ” (*Genesis 15:13,14*).

We know that at the *Brit Bein Habetarim* (Covenant Between the Parts), G-d announced to Abraham the decree that his children would go into exile. At the same time, however, G-d promised him that they would leave from there with great wealth. We see, in fact, that this is what happened when they departed from Egypt. At that time, G-d commanded Moses, “Please [Hebrew: *na*] speak in the ears of the people: Let each man request of his fellow and each woman from her fellow silver vessels and gold vessels” (*Exodus 11:2*). The school of Rabbi Yanai teaches that the word *na* indicates a supplication. G-d said to Moses: “Please, ask the Egyptians for silver and gold utensils lest the righteous one [Abraham] say that the foretold servitude occurred but not the foretold departure with wealth.” The Children of Israel replied to Moses: Only if we ourselves leave (*Berachot 9a; Rashi ad loc.*).

That which is not said is far more than that which is. As such, we will try to clarify the situation by answering the following three questions.

1. Why was it so important to tell Abraham that the Children of Israel would leave with great wealth, so much so that G-d accomplished what He had promised to Abraham and beseeched the people to ask the Egyptians to give them their silver and gold? In any case, the spoils of the Red Sea were much more important than the spoils of Egypt. Therefore why did G-d not tell Abraham that the Children of Israel would receive all their wealth from the spoils of the Red Sea?

2. Rabbi Shimon Akavitz cites one question from *Machazeh Avraham*: Since we know that one who borrows an object is required to return it to its owner (*see Exodus 22:13; Rambam Halachot She’elah 1:5*), why did G-d command Moses to tell the people that everyone should ask their neighbor to “borrow” their things? We do not see that the Children of Israel returned that which they borrowed from the Egyptians, and there is no reason to say that the possessions of the Egyptians were a compensation for the slavery that they inflicted on the Children of Israel (*see Kli Yakar, Shemot 11:2*). If such were the case, it would have been sufficient for G-d to command them to appropriate the riches and possessions of the Egyptians, and it would not have been necessary to beg them to take these things under the pretext of borrowing.

3. The Maharsha, in the name of Ein Yaakov, asks another question: “One should ask oneself what is the sense of the expression ‘Please speak,’ given that Israel benefited in obeying the request which followed. Why was it necessary to present the request in the form of an entreaty?” (*Berachot 9a*).

In response to these questions, at the time of the Covenant Between the Parts, it was not material riches that worried Abraham when he first heard the decree of his children’s exile, but rather their spiritual future – that which would become of them after so many years of exile in a foreign land.

We know that the Children of Israel were exiled to Egypt in order to correct the 288 sparks of holiness that were held inside, as Ohr HaHaim explains concerning the verse that states, “And darkness was upon the face of the deep” (*Genesis 1:2*). How would this correction take place? Solely by the suffering of the Children of Israel in Egypt. In his

writings, the Arizal explains that what we say in the Passover Haggadah (“this bread of affliction [matzah]”) points to the sparks of holiness that were captive in Egypt, and the expression “that our ancestors ate in Egypt” indicates that our ancestors corrected them.

Only the children of Abraham were capable of correcting these 288 sparks of holiness, this being in order to bring Creation back to its initial state of perfection. Thus the Divine Presence would once again find its place in the world of *Asiyah* (action) and G-d would give the Torah to the Children of Israel. As long as the 288 sparks of holiness had not been corrected, G-d would not have given His Torah to any people, not even to our ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, although they already observed all the commandments, including even rabbinic ordinances. The Torah was not given to the Patriarchs, but to the entire people, publicly on Mount Sinai, after the 288 sparks of holiness had been corrected.

And yet Abraham, in hearing the decree and the promise, was not only unhappy, but his world was darkened, as it is written at the time of the Covenant Between the Parts: “And behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him” (*Genesis 15:12*). He feared that the terror and suffering that would be the Children of Israel’s lot in Egypt would not only prevent them from correcting that which they were supposed to correct, but also cause, in and of itself, even more harm. In such a case, they would never escape from the grip of the people that they served. In addition, Abraham feared that even if they would correct the 288 sparks of holiness by their suffering and servitude, they would be in danger of being harmed in their heart and soul, and they risked falling to the fiftieth degree of impurity. If such were to have been the case, they would no longer have merited being saved and would no longer have been protected.

G-d knew Abraham’s thoughts and fears. This is why He told and promised him that after their sufferings and enslavement, his children would leave their exile with great wealth. It is as if G-d had told him, “You have no reason to worry that your children will debase themselves and not leave Egypt. On the contrary, not only will they leave because of their sufferings, but also ‘they will leave with great wealth,’ meaning that they will take in their bags these same sparks of holiness that constitute great wealth.” In addition, G-d promised Abraham that his children would not reach the fiftieth degree of impurity because their heart and soul would not be harmed, which in itself is a precious thing. In effect, when the Children of Israel reached the forty-ninth degree of impurity, they were immediately saved (*Zohar Yitro 39a*), and G-d did not let them reach the fiftieth degree.

The verse itself alludes to this. The first and last letters of the words “and afterwards they will leave with great wealth” have the same numerical value as the entirety of the expression, “the heart and soul”. This means that G-d promised Abraham that his children would not sink to the fiftieth degree of impurity and their heart and soul would not be affected, and also that they would leave Egypt before ever reaching that stage. This is what in fact happened. They left with their hearts and souls intact, a fact that

without doubt constitutes a great treasure for man, since these elements are essential for serving G-d throughout one's life.

In the same way, besides great spiritual riches, G-d promised Abraham that after his children's enslavement in a foreign land, they would leave with great material riches. The gold and silver that they left with were not a compensation for their servitude, but rather a loan, in order not to give the Accuser the possibility of asking why they received great wealth since "they [the Egyptians] were idolaters and these [the Children of Israel] were idolaters" (*Zohar II:170b*). What right would they have to be compensated? If they repaired these forty-nine degrees of impurity (before receiving the Torah) and elevated themselves to the fiftieth degree of holiness, then this wealth would effectively become theirs, without any question.

There are some who would say that this wealth was given in compensation for their servitude, not that it was a loan. It is proper to make them recall what Gevia ben Psesia told the nations: "If it had been a payment, the Children of Israel had been enslaved for 210 years, and a simple calculation shows that they should have received an incalculably greater amount of silver and gold" (*Sanhedrin 91a*).

It is written, "and afterwards they will leave with great wealth." It is precisely that "they will leave with great wealth," and not that "they will *take* great wealth." The latter would have indicated that they took it as compensation for their servitude, whereas the former indicates that it consisted of a loan that would be returned. Nevertheless, when they corrected the forty-nine degrees of impurity that they had fallen into while in Egypt, the silver and gold that had at first been borrowed had now become a seizure proper, without chance of return. Also, since the expression "and afterwards they will leave with great wealth" has exactly the same numerical value as the expression, "the loan will completely belong to the Jews," the verse alludes to the fact that the possessions taken by them would remain theirs.

G-d's promise to Abraham consisted of two stages. The first stage dealt with the time when they left Egypt, when they took silver and gold from their neighbors under the pretext of borrowing in order to avoid any dispute. The second stage dealt with the time when they would make it to the fiftieth degree of holiness. At that point, those riches would belong to them without question. It is certain that the Children of Israel would no longer be the object of any accusations, since G-d would retort to Egypt's ministering angel that the Children of Israel had every right to take this wealth. Even if they were idolaters in Egypt, they had all purified themselves, abandoned all idolatry, and elevated themselves in holiness. However there still remains one question: At what moment did the second stage begin? The answer is that it began with the spoils of the Red Sea, as the Sages say: The spoils of the Red Sea far surpassed the spoils of Egypt, as it is written, 'we will make for you circlets of gold and points of silver' [*Song of Songs 1: 11*]" (*Bamidbar Rabba 13:19*). If the Children of Israel had not asked for or borrowed from the Egyptians, the latter would have brought all their silver and gold to the Red Sea and the Children of Israel would have received everything there. Consequently, at the Red

Sea, even that which they had borrowed became theirs. An allusion to this is found in the letters of the word *zahav* (gold), which make up the first letters of the Hebrew expression for “it was their possession.” Thus they did not have to return it.

At the time of the departure from Egypt, G-d said to Moses, “Please speak in the ears of the people...” (Exodus 11:2). He did not wait until they arrived at the Red Sea to give them all the wealth due to them. “It is proper that I fulfill My promise to the letter in order that they leave with great wealth, as much spiritual as material, as I promised them.” And as we know, all Divine promises are fulfilled.

### *Leave Your Country for Your Own Good*

It is written, “And the L-RD said to Abram, ‘Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’” (*Genesis 12:1*). Commenting on this in the name of the Sages, Rashi says that it means: “For your own benefit, for your own good. It is there that I will make you into a great nation, whereas here you will not merit having children. Also, I will make your character known to the world” (*Bereshith Rabba 39:2*).

We see here that G-d promised great favors to Abraham, contrary to the ordeal of Isaac’s sacrifice when G-d told him, “Take your son, your only one, whom you love...” (*Genesis 22:2*) without promising him anything in return. We should therefore understand the meaning of this trial to “Go ... from your land.”

The following questions come to the fore:

1. Why did G-d command Abraham to leave Haran, since there “he succeeded in converting people, in bringing them to a knowledge of G-d” (*Bereshith Rabba 39:21*)? Moreover it is written, “and he proclaimed there the Name of the L-RD, G-d of the Universe” (*Genesis 21:33*), concerning which our Sages have said: “Do not read *vayikra* [and he proclaimed] but *vayakri* [and he made others proclaim]” (*Sotah 10b*). Hence if such was the case, why did Abraham have to abandon his religious activities? If it was in order to receive his reward in Eretz Israel, we cannot say that it was trial, since that would have been for his own benefit.

2. Why, furthermore, is the narrative not in chronological order? It should have first stated “from your father’s house,” followed by “from your relatives,” and then “from your land.” The commentators have already noted this inversion.

To explain this reversal in the logical order of the passage, the Sages have said: “If a person feels an uncontrollable urge to sin, let him go to a place where he is not known, wear black clothing, and do what he desires there” (*Kiddushin 40a*). Concerning this, commentators have stated: “One must not be mistaken and think that he will sin elsewhere, but rather that his black clothes will bring him to restrain his desires and repent” (*Tosaphot in the name of Rabbeinu Chananel*). The fact is that he will not be bothered in a place where nobody knows him, and he will then be capable of repenting and correcting himself,

for no one will come to remind him of his past sins. It was the same for Abraham when G-d told him: “Go for yourself from your land,” for elsewhere – where no one knows you – you can progress better in your service of G-d, which is not the case here, near the perverted King Nimrod and his entourage. You will not be able to serve G-d in the house of your father either, for there you are prevented from doing so. And even if you manage to overcome the pressure of these heretics, they will never come to appreciate your deeds.

Abraham did not hesitate for a moment. He immediately assembled all his family and “the souls they made in Haran” (*Genesis 12:5*) – meaning all his followers – and they quickly left in accordance with G-d’s command. Thus it is written, “So Abram went as the L-RD had spoken to him” (*v.4*), for G-d’s word constitutes a command.

From here we learn of Abraham’s great piety and humility. In fact, he could have remained pious, even among those heretics. He could have overcome their influence and pressure for his entire life, especially since all his deeds were motivated solely by his love for G-d and he did not seek out publicity or renown. He could have therefore told himself that in spite of the opposition of his surroundings, he was going to stay in his land without deviating from his chosen path. Yet Abraham didn’t ask any questions after G-d spoke to him. He immediately left Haran and headed in the direction of Eretz Israel, for he knew that if G-d commanded him leave his land and his father’s house, He had His reasons for it.

The First Reason: Abraham knew that he had no reason to fear that he himself would be influenced by his wicked environment, however all the people that he and his wife Sarah had converted were not yet at that level – they were not yet at the point of being able to overcome the trials of their surroundings and that era – and they risked returning to their wicked ways if they stayed. He feared this for good reason.

The Second Reason: Abraham understood that his role was not to serve G-d secretly and in private, but on the contrary, in broad daylight – in plain view and full knowledge of all – so that everyone would witness his deeds. In fact this is exactly what he did, as the Rambam states: “His sole aim was to correct people from the error of their ways and to make them understand that there is but one Creator. It was to bring them to a knowledge of G-d” (*Hilchot Akum 2:2-3*).

And yet, Abraham asked himself some questions: In a new land, would he also be able to convince people to believe in G-d, as he had done in Haran, especially since he didn’t know which land G-d would bring him to? This was a great trial for someone who, during his entire life, had fought for G-d in spite of the opposition he faced along the way. One must not forget that this was the era of the Tower of Babel, the time when peoples were dispersed as a punishment for having separated themselves from G-d and practiced idolatry. Yet Abraham withstood this trial because he knew that it was his duty at the time.

Certainly G-d knew what Abraham felt in his heart, how difficult it was for him to leave his land, and that Abraham was ready to renounce fame to continue his sacred mission. In addition, he feared that the voyage would make him lose his followers, in the way evoked by the passage that states: “the status of one who travels diminishes” (*Bamidbar Rabba 11:4*), thus diminishing G-d’s renown in the world. Yet to put him to the test, to greatly reward him, G-d commanded that he leave his house and overcome all these difficulties.

It was therefore a test for Abraham to leave his land, and for him it constituted neither a kindness nor a benefit. He had succeeded in Haran, but would he succeed in another land? What kindness or benefit would he gain in a strange land? However Abraham withstood this test, and if G-d says, “For your own benefit, for your own good,” one must do what G-d commands.

And in fact, after having withstood this test and departed from Haran, Abraham realized just how beneficial it was, for as soon as he arrived in the land of Canaan he felt the holiness of that land which G-d had promised to him and to his descendants, as it is written: “The L-RD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land’ ” (*Genesis 12:7*). Abraham then realized how faithful were G-d’s words when He previously said that he should leave his land “for your own benefit, for your own good,” since there is no greater pleasure for the heart and soul than experiencing the holiness of a place. Hence all the more reason why a person is rewarded for every step he takes in Eretz Israel, a land that surpasses all others in holiness.

More than anything, Abraham rejoiced when G-d told him, “Raise now your eyes and look out from where you are: Northward, southward, eastward and westward. For all the land that you see, to you will I give it, and to your descendants forever” (*Genesis 13:14-15*). For having withstood his trial, G-d promised Abraham: Your “springs will spread outwards” (*Proverbs 5:16*), and here also you will succeed in bringing people closer to Me. Because of you everyone will know that the world has a Creator, and “all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you” (*Genesis 12:3*). You are mistaken in thinking that you will not succeed here as you did in Haran. Here too everything that you do will succeed, and you will even be able to increase your work.

We now understand the order of the words in the verse (“from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house”). This order arises because Abraham was busier outside the house than inside it, in the sense evoked by the statement: “Not study, but practice is the essential thing” (*Perkei Avoth 1:17*). Abraham was outside for the majority of his time. He was interacting with people, speaking to them; his house had but secondary importance. This is why G-d told him at first “your land,” since being outside in the land was essential to him. The phrase “your father’s house” was mentioned last because it was secondary for him. Without a doubt, that was the reason why this trial was so difficult, for he was attached to that place, to that land, and he wondered if he could ever

succeed in a new land. Yet he withstood this trial, and G-d promised him that he could continue his work in his new land.

Abraham was the first to bring people closer to G-d. He proclaimed the greatness of the Creator everywhere he went: “The L-RD, He is G-d! There is none beside Him!” (*Deuteronomy 4:35*). For future generations as well (since the deeds of the forefathers serve as examples for their offspring), the earth would be purified, as it is written: “I will remove ... the spirit of impurity from the land” (*Zechariah 13:2*). At that time the gentiles will learn from Jews and they will also know G-d, as it is written: “It shall be that at every New Moon and on every Sabbath, all mankind will come to prostrate themselves before Me, says the L-RD” (*Isaiah 66:23*). It is then that the following prophecies will be fulfilled: “Many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek out the L-RD, the Master of Legions, in Jerusalem” (*Zechariah 8:22*), “They will come and relate His righteousness” (*Psalms 22:32*), and “Many nations will join themselves to the L-RD on that day, and they will become a people unto Me” (*Zechariah 2:15*). Amen, may it be so.

### ***Our Father Abraham Goes to Eretz Israel to Bring Back Those Who are Far***

It is written, “Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing” (*Genesis 12:1-2*). Rashi explains: “[Meaning] for your own benefit, for your own good. It is there that I will make you into a great nation, [whereas] here you will not merit having children. Also, I will make your character known to the world.”

We must understand how this departure was a test for Abraham, since G-d promised him that as a result He would bless him and make a great nation out of him. It seems obvious that he would be happy to leave Haran and obey G-d, since the Holy One, blessed be He, desired Abraham’s benefit and good.

We shall attempt to explain. In observing the situation, we see that several tests are combined here. First of all, we note that the Holy One, blessed be He, did not command Abraham to circumcise himself before his departure for Canaan. Now it seems that it would have been better to enter into a holy land with a holy body, and in that way even the journey would have been considered a great test. This is because it implied that Abraham was neglecting the mitzvah of honoring one’s father, which is the reason why the Torah mentions that Terah died before relating Abraham’s departure for Canaan. As Rash puts it: Why does Scripture recall the death of Terah before the departure of Abraham? So that people would not say that Abraham failed to show respect for his father because he left him in his old age. Scripture therefore declared Terah to be dead. In addition, in Haran Abraham would routinely serve G-d with all his strength. How then could he leave a familiar environment to go to one that he wasn’t at all familiar with? Perhaps this departure would lead him to neglect the Torah? Perhaps he also would not have been followed by all those whom he had converted, as the Sages

have said concerning the verse, “And the souls they made in Haran” (*Genesis 12:5*), which teaches us that Abraham converted them and brought them under the wings of the Shechinah (*Sifri Va’elchanan 32*).

In addition to all these tests, Abraham also needed to go to Canaan without being circumcised – and thus without the ability to attain the level of holiness of that land – since he lacked the mitzvah of circumcision whose performance carries with it the perfection of the body’s holiness. It follows that his journey towards this land would constitute a spiritual plunge for him. Consequently, how are we to understand what G-d told him, namely to go “for your own benefit, for your own good,” since as far as Abraham was concerned this voyage was nothing but a spiritual descent? In fact in Haran he understood very little, and in Canaan the Holy One, blessed be He, told him that he would understand very much, hence there was reason to fear that he risked “not understanding anything because he wanted to understand everything” (Rosh Hashanah 4b).

From everything that we have said up to now, we see just how difficult a test it was for Abraham to have not received the commandment of circumcision before the age of 100, which is the numerical value of *lech lecha* (“go for yourself”), to the point that the Sages have questioned which test was greater, that one or the sacrifice of Isaac. Rabbi Levi bar Chayata said, “It is twice written *lech lecha*, and we do not know which test was more precious to G-d, the first or the second. From what is written, ‘*Ve’lech lecha* [And go for yourself] into the land of Moriah’ [*Genesis 22:2*], we understand that the second was more valuable than the first” (*Bereshith Rabba 55:8*).

To explain this point, let us say that at the beginning the Sages hesitated to determine which test was the greater one, for in the same way that the first *lech lecha* engendered a spiritual plunge for him, the second *lech lecha* also engendered the same, for how could he elevate himself once again after having slaughtered his son? He was lacking the concept of “the son is the foot of the father” (*Eruvin 70b*), meaning that even after the death of the father, the son contributes to his spiritual elevation. He was missing that as well, to the point that the Sages affirmed that the last test was greater than the first, since after the last one he would no longer be able to accomplish what was said of him: “For I have loved him, because *he commands his children* and his household after him” (*Genesis 18:19*). In fact, after the sacrifice of Isaac he would already have nobody whom he could direct to perpetuate his service of G-d.

In that which concerns the test of *lech lecha*, we may add that even when Abraham was in Haran, before being circumcised, he served G-d with all his bodily members. He spread his doctrine and taught others, and he held firm in all trials without the *orla* disturbing him, for he was stronger than it. It was accounted to him as a merit to have discovered the light and to have felt it even while being surrounded by the *orla* and being blind at the mitzvah of circumcision.

Despite all this, Abraham felt great darkness within himself when G-d spoke to him, for he understood that everything that he had accomplished with his own strength up

to that point was trivial compared to the fact that G-d spoke to him. This enabled him to understand everything that he had been missing prior to this Divine communication. This was particularly true when he was told that there is a constant light in the Holy Land, even when no Divine communication would be given to him, because the eyes of Hashem are on the land from the beginning of the year to its end (*Deuteronomy 11:12*). This means that the land itself is under the providential care of the Creator of the world, and therefore a person can elevate himself just by simply walking on its soil, much like one performs the mitzvah of the Sukkah just by being inside it. The mitzvah of living in Eretz Israel is like that of the Sukkah, not because the Sukkah is the “shadow of faith,” but because of the real presence of the Shechinah.

This becomes especially clear when we understand what the Sages said on the verse, “Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations” (*Genesis 6:9*), namely that Noah was a righteous man in his generation, which is why the Holy One, blessed be He, had to save him (*Sanhedrin 108a*). Consequently, Abraham thought that as long as he lived in Haran (a place filled with the wicked, where despite everything Abraham controlled himself and served G-d with devotion since the age of three – *Nedarim 32a*), since he was considered a righteous man before G-d, He would help and protect him from the evil inclination.

Yet in Eretz Israel, which is a land that devours its inhabitants, if Abraham was not perfect then everything that he had accomplished on his own in Haran would have been considered as nothing, due to the greater holiness of Eretz Israel, as it is written: “The air of Eretz Israel grants wisdom” (*Bava Batra 158b*). Under such conditions, if he had not been commanded to circumcise himself, and thus if he had not merited to be considered as being completely G-d fearing, what purpose would his wisdom have served, since it is written: “The beginning of wisdom is fear of the L-RD” (*Psalms 111:10*)? Without considering the fact that when the Holy One, blessed be He, told him that it was precisely in “the land that I will show you” that he would merit comprehending a great light at the age of 100 by circumcision, it would have been difficult for him to understand what would become of everything that he did before.

This is precisely what is written: “Go for yourself from your land...” (*Genesis 12:1*), as well as “They left to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan” (v.5), meaning that in the same way that “Go...from your land” constituted a great trial for him, his arrival in Canaan would also constitute a trial because he began to perceive and feel the holiness of the land. There he sensed the presence of G-d more than in any other place, and he also perceived that it was the starting point of Creation (*Bamidbar Rabba 12:4*). On the other hand he felt as nothing, far from his Creator. Yet despite this he overcame that trial without losing hope, and on the contrary he sought and found a way to overcome without protesting against G-d’s word. He did so by reasoning with a *Kal Vachomer* concerning Noah, who was considered to be a righteous man in his generation. At the time when all the men of Noah’s generation died, he felt at that point that he no longer had any merit with respect to them, since they were all dead, and the

attribute of strict justice began to rage against him because he was not worthy of being saved. He only merited being saved because of the generosity that he had show to the animals in the Ark, as the Sages have said: Abraham's servant asked Shem, the son of Noah, how Noah and his sons had merited being saved in the Ark, and Shem replied that it was because they had given Tzeddakah and demonstrated kindness toward the animals in the Ark day and night (*Sanhedrin 108b*).

Consequently, Abraham too – who was now in the place where the Shechinah resided, a place whose holiness abounded – was also by this very reason in considerable danger. Those who had accompanied him were considered insignificant, which is why at that point everything depended on Abraham to carry out the mitzvah of hospitality and to bring every passerby under the wings of the Shechinah with more fervor, even more than in Haran. Thus he became worthy of living according to Tzeddakah, which his righteousness pushed him to perform in that place. As a result, it was there that he chose to plant a tree, as it is written: “He planted an *eshel* in Beersheba, and there he proclaimed the Name of the L-RD” (*Genesis 21:33*). The Sages add that it was because of this *eshel* that the Holy One, blessed be He, was called the G-d of the entire world. When Abraham's guests had finished eating and drinking, he would say to them, “Bless the One to Whom everything you consumed belongs. You thought that it was mine? It belonged to the One Whose word created the world” (*Sotah 10a*).

We see from here a great principle in serving G-d, namely that the Holy One, blessed be He, only send a person trials if he is able to overcome them. Even if he sees no apparent way of being saved from a trial and a spiritual fall (which is very grave indeed), if a person bitterly regrets – because of the terrible hardship that he suffers – not having served G-d as he should have, in the end the Holy One, blessed be He, will open up a path for him as He did for Abraham. G-d will show him a way to be victorious in all trials, and that person will then merit pathways of holiness to be opened in his body, a light of spiritual awakening from on High that will descend upon him.

### ***The Reward is in Proportion to the Hardship***

The Sages say, “Any man who has no wife lives without joy, without blessing, and without goodness.... In [Israel] it was stated: Without Torah and without a [protecting] wall” (*Yebamot 62b*). The Talmud supports this teaching by basing each of these characteristics on a verse in the Torah. Even if a man is completely pure and holy, he will only have joy and blessing if he is married. This is also the reason why man was created alone. It is only when he sensed the absence of joy, blessing, and Torah that Hashem put him to sleep and presented the woman to him, after which it is stated: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (*Genesis 2:24*). As long as a man lives in his parents' home, single, he is incomplete. However once he marries, he achieves fulfillment, as it is stated: “He called their name ‘Man’ on the day they were created” (*ibid. 5:2*), for woman is included in the term “Man,” for she is his partner.

Even if a man feels great joy in leaving the home of his father and mother to get married, he should realize that it is only then that hardships will begin, such as the obligation to provide for his family's needs, as well as other problems that he must overcome.

It is written, "Go for yourself from your land...from your father's house, to the land that I will show you" (*Genesis 12:1*). In other words: "From your father's house," go from the home of your father and mother, leave your parents and go "to the land" – to your wife – who is symbolically represented by the earth, as the Sages have said: "Esther was as the ground of the earth" (*Sanhedrin 74b*). She is also called "a field" (*Shabbat 118b*), "that I will show you." Such is your destiny, and it is for your good, for she is your other half – destined to you by Heaven – and you shall live with her.

It may be that a man prefers not to marry at all, as was the case with Ben Azzai, who devoted himself entirely to Torah study and said: "But what shall I do, seeing that my soul is in love with the Torah? The world can be carried on by others" (*Yebamot 63b*). As Rabban Yochanan asked, "With a millstone around his neck, will he learn Torah?" (*Kiddushin 29b*). The Talmud recounts that King Hezekiah, who did not marry, "Planted a sword by the door of the schoolhouse and proclaimed, 'He who will not study the Torah will be pierced with the sword.' A search was made from Dan to Beer Sheba, and no ignoramus was found...no boy or girl, man or woman was found who was not thoroughly versed in the laws of cleanliness and uncleanness" (*Sanhedrin 94b*). G-d would have even made King Hezekiah the Messiah if he had not renounced marriage due to his fear of having wicked children (*Berachot 10a*) and being subjected to the hardships of marriage.

However a man cannot avoid this. He must understand that it must be beneficial to him. Only marriage enables a man to attain perfection, even if the difficulties involved are many.

How can a man actually achieve eternal life through marriage? It is because of the light that envelops them – husband and wife – under the wedding canopy. G-d's Name rests upon them at that moment, as the Sages have said: "When husband and wife are worthy, the *Shechinah* abides with them" (*Sotah 17a*). This is due to the letter *yud* in the word *ish* (man) and the letter *hei* in the word *isha* (woman), which together form the Name of G-d (*Yud – Hei*). The letters *vav* and *hei* are contained in the word *chuppah* (wedding canopy), and these four letters combined form G-d's Name, which protects them from all harm. This happens when they marry with the intention of observing the mitzvot and building a home founded on Torah and the fear of G-d. It is then that G-d's light envelops them, and thus in the word *chuppah* there remains only the letters *chet* and *peh*, which form the word *chay* (void), meaning void of all sin. When they are under the chuppah with the intention of building a home in holiness and purity, they are saved from a *pach* (trap), the inverse of the word *chay*, which represents what is rejected, and thus the celestial light envelops them and gives them joy for the rest of their lives. This is the meaning of "they shall become one flesh" (*Genesis 2:24*).

The hardships of marriage are great, but G-d showers all His blessings on those who overcome them.

Look at how great a man our father Abraham was, “the greatest man” according to the Sages (*Bereshith Rabba* 14:6). When he heard G-d’s command to “Go for yourself from your land” (*Genesis* 12:1), he was prepared to give up all his undertakings and activities without protest or hesitation, as it is written: “So Abraham went as the L-RD had spoken to him” (*v.4*). He “journeyed on, journeying steadily toward the south” (*v.9*), without knowing where his steps would lead. Thus he arrived in the Holy Land, which he walked through from north to south and from east to west, receiving a reward for each of his steps.

It is written, “There was a famine in the land, and Abram descended to Egypt to sojourn there” (*Genesis* 12:10). Despite G-d’s promise, Abraham found Israel to be an arid land that produced nothing. However its neighbor Egypt – “steeped in immorality” (*Shemot Rabba* 1:18) and filled with witchcraft and impurity (*see Menachot* 85a) – was awash with food. Yet Abraham did not complain, and contrary to his will he descended into Egypt, into that impure land, for he accepted G-d’s commandments with love and overcame all the hardships he encountered.

This is the way to serve G-d. The evil inclination instills doubts into a man’s hearts, precisely when he must, without apparent reason, confront numerous hardships. In fact if we wholeheartedly obey G-d’s commandments, yet are afflicted by suffering and tragedy, this will naturally lead us to question G-d’s ways. We must know how to resist the suggestions of the evil inclination as it tries to sweep us up in doubt. On the contrary, we must confront these hardships and overcome them, for it is in this way that we will be counted among the King’s soldiers, for G-d does not send a man trials that he cannot overcome. One who accepts such trials can definitely overcome and conquer them, enabling him to rise to spiritual levels beyond comprehension.

It is a good idea to cite the advice of the Gaon Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, of blessed memory, in his book *Lev Eliyahu* concerning Abraham’s war against the kings: “This war is surprising, for it is clear that it progressed in a supernatural way, and it was only due to miracles that Abraham was victorious. According to one opinion, he went out to war accompanied only by his servant Eliezer; according to another, with only 318 servants (*Nedarim* 32a). However it may be, this small number of men conquered the armies of four kings, whose powers are indicated by their spectacular victory against the five kings that had destroyed all the peoples in their way. Among these people were the Rephaim, so-called because whoever saw them became weak (*raphah* – *Zohar* III:160b) and the Emim, who terrorized (*ayem*) everyone (*Bereshith Rabba* 26:7). How did Abraham manage to conquer them? ‘The dust that he threw at them turned into arrows and projectiles’ (*ibid.* 43:3). It is obvious that all the surrounding peoples witnessed the miracles performed by Abraham. We should therefore be surprised that these very same peoples became so guilty of sin. It is possible that they really forgot that a Judge and justice exist? How did they manage to arrive at such extreme wickedness after having witnessed such miracles?”

The answer is that it is precisely a person who is given the opportunity of knowing the truth and standing on the path of repentance that risks being subjected to difficult trials. Instead of receiving good and blessing from G-d, that person is liable to experience only tragedy and suffering. Therefore despite the blessing and promise connected with “Lech Lecha,” a person may experience hardships and suffering meant to improve his character traits and perfect him. These are meant to put his strength to the test, as it is written: “So as to test you, to know what is in your heart, whether you would observe His commandments or not” (*Deuteronomy 8:2*), and “In order to afflict you and in order to test you, to do good for you in your end” (v.16).

Having witnessed such miracles and wonders with his own eyes, as well as Abraham’s complete victory, the king of Sodom said: “Give me the people and take the possessions for yourself” (*Genesis 14:21*). He abandoned every treasure and all the spoils of war, yet in the end he fell back into his terrible heresy. He oppressed his own people to the point that history records the name of his land as being a symbol of cruelty and tyranny, one of humanity having lost the image of G-d.

It is astonishing that the people of Sodom and Gomorra, despite having witnessed such great miracles, fell so low (*Hagigah 5b*). Why did that happen? It is because they did not overcome the hardships inflicted on them by G-d, and consequently they did not elevate themselves. The affection that the king of Sodom expressed for Abraham was selfish in nature. It was based on miracles, and it is in man’s nature to fall back into heresy when miracles cease or are forgotten. Thus the love of the king of Sodom disappeared “when that consideration vanish[ed]” (*Perkei Avoth 5:16*).

One who has returned to G-d must be careful not to fall back into doubt or to let it seep into him. He must realize that if he is to love G-d, it should not be by considering past miracles or by hoping for future ones, for such love risks disappearing along with its cause. On the contrary, he must strengthen his connection to G-d with renewed vigor, with no preconditions, and without seeking personal gratification.

Abraham was the antithesis of the perverted inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorra. He loved G-d with an unselfish love, and each time that he received a command from G-d, he obeyed it without ulterior motives or thinking about the benefits that he would derive from it. He knew that G-d alone is the “owner of the building” (*Bereshith Rabba 39: 1*). It is to Him that a person must address his prayers, and He is that One that a person must serve. He alone is the Creator of light and darkness. He makes peace reign, nothing is hidden from Him, and nothing escapes His view. He alone rules the world. When Abraham achieved this degree of deeply rooted faith, nothing in the world could detract him from it, as it is written: “You selected...Abraham. You found his heart faithful before You” (*Nehemiah 9:7-8*). In all circumstances and at every occasion, Abraham remained pure in his faith, in the sense of “be perfect” (*Genesis 17:1*).

Abraham’s last trial, the sacrifice of Isaac, was the most difficult of all. “G-d said to Abraham, ‘I implore you, do not disappoint me in this trial’ ” (*Tanhuma Vayera 22*). Why such a plea? Did Abraham need for G-d to, as it were, beg him?

How could Abraham – who assembled and increased the number of Torah followers, brought them under the wings of Divine protection, accustomed them to proclaiming G-d's Name (Sotah 10b), converted numerous people to Judaism, and explained to everyone that they must abandon their idols and serve G-d alone – how could he sacrifice his son? Would Abraham have to destroy, with his own hands, the future of the Jewish people by sacrificing his only son, his beloved?

In his book *Lev Eliyahu*, the Gaon Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian writes, “This is like a king who tells his prime minister, the one who loves him and who educated and raised his sons: ‘Here, I am giving you a sharp sword as a gift, but only on condition that you decapitate all the king’s sons, the ones you take of. If you do not obey me, this sword will pierce your heart.’ It is certain that this minister will reply to the king: ‘I am willing to die prematurely in order not to harm the king’s sons. In addition, my refusal proves to the king that I love him, and perhaps the king is only giving me such a directive to test my faithfulness. Thus if I fail by actually carrying out the king’s command, he will cut off my head and say, “It’s like this that you love the king!” ’ It is the same for Abraham. How could he sacrifice his son with his own hands, thus depriving himself of descendants and causing tremendous anguish to those around him?”

However it was the evil inclination which insinuated that the trial of the sacrifice was destined to reward Abraham if he disobeyed G-d. However Abraham, G-d's servant, did not go through all the calculations involved in acting against G-d's directive, and he rejected such apparently justified and obvious arguments. On the contrary, he hastened to obey it and placed his trust in G-d, knowing that He did not want to make him fail by commanding him to do something that was contrary to His will. G-d, Who knows the depths of the heart and mind, knew that Abraham only wanted to sanctify His Name in the world. G-d was aware of his faithfulness, and He did not actually command him to “sacrifice” his son, but only to “bring him up there as an offering” (*Genesis 22:2*), as it is written: “You have taken him up. Now take him down” (*Bereshith Rabba 56:8*).

To conclude, we may say that the Mishnah (which details Abraham's tests) conceals a profound idea: “With ten tests was our father Abraham tested, and he withstood them all – to indicate how great was the love of our father Abraham for G-d” (*Perkei Avoth 5:3*). Since “the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children” (Sotah 34a), we must model ourselves on Abraham and overcome hardships as he did. In addition, G-d knew that the Satan would accuse the Children of Israel later on at the Sea of Reeds by saying that they too, like the Egyptians, were idolaters (*Shocheh Tov 15:5*). It was in this way that G-d introduced the cure before the illness (*Megillah 13b*) by testing Abraham ten times, with the goal of having his children benefit from his merit through the miracles that occurred in Egypt and at the Sea of Reeds. Abraham had to be tested, not for himself but for us, in order to preserve *our* future. This is the meaning of “to indicate how great was the love of our father Abraham for G-d,” for G-d tested him to prove to the accusers how much He loved him. By stating, “he withstood them all,” the Mishnah wants us to realize that

it is in man's nature to want to avoid hardship and flee from it, and it wants to highlight the fact that Abraham did not feel that his trials weakened him, but rather that they strengthened him. This is the sense of the word *nissayion* (test), which has the same root as the word *neis* (banner), as in the verse "Raise a banner over the peoples" (*Isaiah 62:10*), and "Stand up, be glorified" (*Zohar I:140a,b*). Similarly, all the trials that each man undergoes are meant to raise him higher, to ever-greater levels of spirituality.

### ***Leave Your Country For Your Own Good***

It is written, "And the L-RD said to Abram, 'Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (*Genesis 12:1*). Commenting on this in the name of the Sages, Rashi states that the meaning is: "For your own benefit, for your own good. It is there that I will make you into a great nation, whereas here you will not merit having children. Also, I will make your character known to the world [*Bereshith Rabba 39:2*]."

Here we see that G-d promised great things to Abraham, contrary to the trial of Isaac's sacrifice when He told him, "Take your son, your only one, whom you love..." (*Genesis 22:2*), without promising anything in return. We therefore need to understand the meaning of this trial to "Go for yourself from your land."

The following questions arise:

1. Why did G-d command Abraham to leave Haran, since it was there that he succeeded in converting people and bringing them to a knowledge of G-d? Furthermore, he made everyone proclaim the Name of G-d. If such is the case, why did Abraham have to abandon his religious activities? If it was in order to receive his reward in Eretz Israel, we cannot say that this was a trial, since it was for his own benefit.

2. In addition, why is the narrative not in chronological order? It should have first stated, "From your father's house," followed by "from your relatives," and then "from your land." The commentators have already noted this inversion.

To explain this reversal in the logical order of the passage, the Sages have said: "If a man sees that his [evil] desire is conquering him, let him go to a place where he is unknown, don black and cover himself with black, and do as his heart desires" (*Kiddushin 40a*). Concerning this passage the commentators have stated: "One must not be mistaken and think that he will sin elsewhere, but rather that his black clothes will bring him to restrain his desires and repent" (*Tosaphot in the name of Rabbeinu Chananel*). The fact is that he will not be disturbed in a place where nobody knows him, and he will then be able to repent and correct himself, for no one will come to remind him of his past sins. It was the same for Abraham when G-d told him: "Go for yourself from your land," for elsewhere – where no one knows you – you can progress better in your service of G-d, which is not the case here, close to evil King Nimrod and his entourage. You will not be able to serve G-d in the house of your father either, for there you are prevented from so doing.

Even if you manage to overcome the pressure of these godless men, they will never appreciate your deeds.

Abraham did not hesitate for a moment. He immediately assembled his entire family and “the souls they made in Haran” (*Genesis 12:5*) – meaning all his followers – and quickly left in accordance with G-d’s command. Thus it is written, “So Abram went as the L-RD had spoken to him” (*v.4*), for G-d’s word is a commandment.

Here we see Abraham’s great piety and humility. In fact he could have remained pious, even among ungodly men, and overcome their influence and pressure for the rest of his life. This is especially true since all his deeds were motivated solely by his love for G-d, and he did not seek out fame or renown. Therefore he could have told himself that, in spite of the opposition of his surroundings, he was going to stay in his land without deviating from his chosen path. However Abraham did not ask any questions after G-d spoke to him. He immediately left Haran and headed in the direction of Eretz Israel, for he knew that if G-d commanded him to leave his land and his father’s house, He had His reasons.

The first reason was that, although Abraham knew that he did not have to fear the influence of his wicked environment, all those whom he and his wife Sarah had converted were not yet at that level. They were not yet at the point of being able to overcome the trials of their surroundings and the time, and they risked returning to their wicked ways if they stayed. Abraham had good reason to be concerned about this.

The second reason was that Abraham understood that his role was not to serve G-d secretly and in private, but on the contrary, in broad daylight – in plain view and full knowledge of all – so that everyone could witness his deeds. In fact this is exactly what he did, as the Rambam states: “His sole aim was to correct people from the error of their ways and to make them understand that there is but one Creator. It was to bring them to a knowledge of G-d” (*Hilchot Akum 2:2-3*).

Nevertheless Abraham had some questions: In a new land, would he also be able to convince people to believe in G-d, as he had done in Haran, especially since he did not know to which land G-d would lead him? This was a great trial for someone who, during his entire life, had fought for G-d in spite of the opposition he faced along the way. One must not forget that this was the time of the Tower of Babel, a time when peoples were dispersed as a punishment for having separated themselves from G-d and practiced idolatry. However Abraham withstood this trial because he knew that such was his duty at the time.

It was therefore a trial for Abraham to leave his land, and to him it constituted neither a kindness nor a benefit. He had succeeded in Haran, but would he also succeed in another land? What kindness or benefit would he gain in a strange land? Yet Abraham withstood this test, and if G-d says, “For your own benefit, for your own good,” one must do what He commands.

We now understand the order of the words in the verse (“from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house”). This order occurs because Abraham was busier outside the house than inside it, in the sense evoked by the statement: “Not study, but practice is the essential thing” (*Perkei Avoth 1:17*). Abraham was outside for the majority of his time. He was interacting with people and speaking to them, and his house had but secondary importance. This is why G-d first said, “your land,” since being outside in the land was essential to him. The phrase “your father’s house” was mentioned last because it was secondary to him. Without a doubt, that was the reason why this trial was so difficult, for he was attached to that place – to that land – and he wondered if he could ever succeed in a new land. Yet he withstood this trial, and G-d promised that he could continue his work in a new land.

### *Connecting To The Tzaddik On The Inside*

In this week’s parsha we read of the dispute between the shepherds of Abraham and those of Lot: “Abram said to Lot, ‘Let there be no strife, please, between me and you.... Separate yourself, please, from me. If you turn to the left, then I will go to the right; and if you turn to the right, then I will go to the left’ ” (*Genesis 13:8-9*). The Sages said, “Abraham’s cattle used to go out muzzled, but Lot’s did not go out muzzled” (*Bereshith Rabba 41:5*), for Lot’s shepherds were wicked and grazed their cattle in other people’s fields, thereby benefiting from theft.

This apparently did not bother Lot in any way, and no doubt he even agreed with what they were doing. In fact a love for money existed in Lot, a desire that can make a person lose his mind and forget G-d. Even if we see a tendency towards hospitality in Lot (since he would later invite angels into his home), after this incident Abraham said to him, “Separate yourself...from me.” Despite Abraham’s tremendous kindness, he pushed Lot away instead of drawing him closer. Why was this situation so serious? It is because good and evil were intertwined in Lot, and his proximity to Abraham would have tarnished the latter’s name. In fact people would have distanced themselves from Abraham, and he would have been unable to bring them under the wings of the Shechinah. Thus the Name of Heaven would have been desecrated. The fact that Lot reached a point at which both good and evil became part of him, however, remains difficult for us to accept. On one hand it seems that Lot had a good heart, for he practiced generosity like Abraham, but on the other hand he acted like a thief, allowing his cattle to graze in other people’s fields. In the Mishnah we learn, “Not study, but practice is the essential thing” (*Perkei Avoth 1:17*). The Torah also tells us, “Know this day and take it unto your heart” (*Deuteronomy 4:39*), which means that it is not enough just to know the Torah in order to come closer to Hashem; we must actually carry it out! We must infuse the knowledge of the Torah deep within our hearts and live accordingly. Only in this way can we come closer to Hashem and become completely spiritual.

To explain this, we note that there are two kinds of students: One studies only to learn, as well as to relate some fine-sounding things to his friends, but not to infuse them into his heart. He would never think of doing that, for with him everything is superficial. There is another second kind of student, one we should all emulate. His sole purpose is to infuse his Torah learning into his heart, to gather everything there, and thus to make everything work together. How could Lot have acted in such a lowly way that he descended to the forty-ninth gate of impurity? The answer is that initially he was actually close to Abraham, resembling him in all his deeds and following Hashem's ways just as he did. After a certain time, however, Lot became accustomed to living with him. Thus since Lot's kindness was superficial in nature – not stemming from his heart, nor having the goal of rectifying the ills of the many or the few – he fell from the spiritual level that he had initially attained. Hence we are told, “And Lot with him, to the Negev” (*Genesis 13:1*), for at that point he had already spiritually deteriorated. Even though he still resembled Abraham somewhat (including showing hospitality), it was certainly superficial, for it did not stem from his heart. It was not truly sincere.

Lot differed from Abraham's other disciples insofar as they strived to progress spiritually. They put an effort into growing, renewing themselves each day, and not by force of habit. Hence they received what they deserved. For example, the Sages said that Eliezer merited passing “from the category of the accursed into that of the blessed” (*Bereshith Rabba 60:7*). Even today Eliezer serves the holy Patriarchs (*Bava Batra 58a*), for he drank from the Torah of his master Abraham for the sake of others, doing so sincerely and from the depths of his heart.

Things were not the same with Lot, for he did everything by force of habit. Although Lot may have partaken of Abraham's Torah for the sake of others (insofar as he recounted all the wondrous things that his teacher did), they nevertheless did not enter his heart, and they certainly did not stem from it. Because Lot's conduct was not sincere, he descended to the lowest levels, to the abyss, acting like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Abraham still attempted to have a good influence on Lot and to encourage his repentance. We find an allusion to this in Abraham's words to Lot: “Let there be no strife, na [please], between me and you” (*Genesis 13:8*), for the word na always signifies a request. Abraham said “please” to Lot, not quite speaking in a decisive way, so as to leave him an opening for repentance. Lot could have pleaded with Abraham to help him return to the right path, but he chose not to. He made the desires and vanities of the world – not a connection to the tzaddik – his primary concern. Hence he departed from his uncle Abraham.

We see something like this in our own time, when great Torah scholars are careless with Lashon Harah despite its tremendous gravity. Why does this happen? It is because they study Halachah only to teach others. As for themselves, they do not learn it to perfection, with the utmost clarity. Furthermore, all their learning is superficial and has

become second nature to them. They do not learn Halachah to put it into practice, to know and internalize it. Therefore when they connect to the tzaddik, this too is by force of habit, not with true sincerity, the consequences of which cannot be foreseen.

From here we learn just how important it is to connect ourselves to the tzaddik with wholehearted sincerity. We must serve Hashem with real feeling, not by going through the motions, otherwise who knows where this may lead? It is in this way that we can elevate ourselves in serving Hashem, until we reach the fiftieth gate of purity.

## *Parsha Vayeira*

### *Prayer is Never in Vain*

It is written, “And the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners against the L-RD exceedingly” (*Gen 13:13*) and “the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is indeed exceedingly heavy” (*Gen 18:20*). Despite this, Abraham prayed to try and save them in the name of divine justice: “Will You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are ...” (*Gen 18:23-24*).

Several points need to be clarified:

1. Without doubt, G-d knew that in Sodom there existed neither fifty, nor forty, nor even a single innocent man. What then is the reason for the drawn-out discussion between G-d and Abraham? G-d told Abraham, “If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will forgive ... I will not destroy if I find there forty-five ... I will not do it for the sake of the forty ...” (*Gen 18:26-29*). G-d could have told Abraham, “Know that there are not even ten righteous men in all the city.” What is the reason for this exchange between G-d and Abraham? We know that in the Torah, not one letter is superfluous. What’s more, if there had been ten righteous men in Sodom, G-d would not have destroyed the city because of their merit, but in fact there were no innocent men at all to be found there.

2. The commentators ask another question: Why is it written, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?”

We know that the people of Sodom were extremely wicked: “They knew the Master of the world and yet wanted to revolt against Him” (*Sanhedrin 109a*). “They were eager to satisfy their desires and their lusts” (*Bereshith Rabba 41:10; Tanhuma Vayera 7*). They were so perverse that it was difficult for them to have faith in the Creator of the Universe. Their depraved behavior put the existence of the world in danger, a world “built on kindness” (*Ps 89:3*), as they plunged it towards destruction by their licentiousness and denial of all the fundamental concepts that justify its existence.

They knew that after the flood, G-d took an oath to never again destroy the world (*Shavuot 36a; Bereshith Rabba 34:10*), and they took advantage of this promise to commit their abominations, thinking that they would not be punished. In order to satisfy their desires, their perversions became ever more provocative. Nevertheless, they were no worse than the generation of the flood, of which it is written, “the earth is filled with violence because of them” (*Gen 6:13*), a generation that sinned in double measure – as much against others as against G-d.

First of all, G-d desired to hide from Abraham His intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because He knew that Abraham would pray in order that even the wicked repent. As it is written, “That sins disappear from the earth” (*Ps 104:35*). It is not written

“sinners”, but “sins” (*Berachot 10a*). But G-d didn’t want them to be saved, and He didn’t send them a prophet to reprimand or correct them, as He did for the generation of the flood, who were warned by Noah (*Sanhedrin 108a*), and as He did for the city of Nineveh, who were sent the prophet Jonah.

In fact, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were worse than those of the generation of the flood, of whom our Sages said, “Noah built the ark for 100 years, and during this entire time he called on them to repent” (*Sanhedrin 108b*). But they didn’t listen to him, for they had “corrupted their way upon the earth” (*Gen 6:12*). Even if G-d had sent a prophet to publicly rebuke the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, they would not have listened to him, for a man is not naturally inclined to agree that another man is right, even if sent by G-d. It is in a wicked man’s nature to steal and commit robbery, even though he knows without doubt how serious it is. There arrives a time when nothing can correct such a man, to the point that even Abraham (to whom his servant Eliezer recounted the intrigues of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah) did not go and reprimand or exhort them to repent. Actually, why not? It is because he knew that he was incapable of correcting them. First of all, G-d hid from Abraham His intention to destroy them, for He knew that Abraham would have tried to oppose such a decree and that he would have, without doubt, shaken heaven and earth in order to save them from annihilation.

Yet in saying, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” G-d wanted that Abraham’s pleading on their behalf benefit the Children of Israel. If G-d had hidden from Abraham the punishment awaiting the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (something that would be known afterwards), Abraham would have been distraught. He would have also worried that if the Children of Israel were to sin, G-d would hide their punishment as well, and if they are deprived of the chance to correct themselves, the decree would be signed and the punishment would follow.

In other words, G-d thought, “It is not possible for Me to hide from Abraham what I am about to do to Sodom, since he will pray in their favor and his prayer will not be in vain – it will benefit his offspring.” This is confirmed by what is written immediately afterwards: “For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him.” Abraham would make sure that the Children of Israel would not be like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, for they would receive a proper education and follow in the footsteps of their father. Even if they would sin, it would not be through malice (as did the people of Sodom and Gomorrah), but rather because the evil inclination had pushed and overwhelmed them, in the same sense as: “It’s the yeast in the dough that’s the cause” (*Berachot 17a*). Without a doubt, the Jewish people don’t lack righteous individuals, and so G-d couldn’t hide from Abraham the punishment awaiting Sodom and Gomorrah, for his prayer would benefit his children.

Now we can also understand the pleading of Abraham, who asked for mercy on behalf of fifty, forty, thirty ... ten righteous individuals. G-d did not reveal to him that there wasn’t even one righteous person in Sodom because He wanted Abraham to

continue praying for their survival. This was done in order that his prayer may help his descendants after him, for if in the future G-d were to raise an accusation against Israel, the merit of this act (Abraham's prayer for the wicked) could be presented in Israel's defense.

Abraham greatly feared arousing divine wrath because of his insistence, yet despite this he continued to pray in favor of the culprits. That prayer is an assurance for the Children of Israel that they will always be warned before being punished. In addition, Abraham prayed without respite concerning the number of righteous individuals, until G-d told him that there were none at all in Sodom, and that they are all guilty to the highest degree. At that point Abraham kept quiet. But this prayer will protect his children, and in addition it has the merit of hiding from Satan – from the forces of evil – the sins of Israel, so that he cannot accuse them. If he wanted to accuse them, the prayer of Abraham on behalf of the wicked will protect them. The accuser will then have to give up because the sins of Israel are surely not worse than those of people of the Sodom for whom Abraham interceded.

This is an important teaching valid for all times. This shows us that when one prays to save the wicked, such a prayer protects the one who pronounces it (as well as his descendants) from the accusations of Satan. In addition, before punishing, G-d sends warnings to the offenders – suffering that should bring them to repent – as it is written, “The L-RD desired to oppress him and He afflicted him” (*Isa 53:10*). The Sages explain: “Suffering is for the good of man” (*Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Rabba 13*), and “Israel corrects its ways because of suffering” (*Menachot 53b*). In effect, G-d desires that offenders repent and correct themselves of their faults, which is why He doesn't hide punishment, something that would definitely annul the possibility of prayer and repentance.

Now we can understand why G-d revealed to Abraham what He was about to do. This revelation is truly a kindness to Israel, given that Abraham proved his devotion to them.

We may be permitted to think that Abraham prayed on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah well before G-d revealed to him what He was about to do. Yet after this revelation, Abraham put himself in danger by taking the risk of awakening divine wrath against him. But no, G-d didn't show His anger; on the contrary, He allowed him to plead for a long time because He desired that this prayer benefit the Children of Israel for all generations.

This is why it is written, “For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may observe the way of the L-RD, to do righteousness and justice...” (*Gen 18:19*). Despite all the tests and obstacles that Abraham went through, his actions constitute a lesson for us, and he provides merit for his descendants so that they may overcome tests, repent of their sins, and serve G-d with complete devotion.

### *Welcoming Guests Under the Wings of Divine Protection*

It is written in this week's Torah portion, "And the L-RD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting in the door of the tent in the heat of the day" (*Genesis 18:1*).

"That day was the third day after Abraham's circumcision, and G-d came to visit the sick. When G-d saw that he was suffering from his circumcision, He created a great heat in order that no visitors should pass by" (*Bava Metzia 86b*). Abraham was known for his hospitality, since "his tent had an entrance in each of its four sides so that visitors could easily enter regardless of the direction from which they came" (*Bereshith Rabba 48:9; Yalkut Meam Loez Bereshith 420*). Having no visitors on that day, Abraham sent out Eliezer to find some guests, but he returned empty handed. Therefore Abraham himself went out in search of passers-by, telling Eliezer that he did not believe him because he was a slave, and "one cannot put one's trust in slaves."

Rabbi Yossef Seruya once said to me: "Eliezer was the faithful servant and student of Abraham. He was close to him like a son, as Abraham himself said, 'And behold, the son of my house is my heir' [*Genesis 15:3*] and 'Eliezer drew from the Torah of his master and spread it to others' [*Yoma 25b; Pesikta Zutah; Rashi Lech Lecha 15:2*]. Since Abraham had faith in his servant Eliezer for the choice of his son's wife, a woman from whom the entire Jewish people would spring, why then, when it came to visitors, did Abraham not trust him?"

I would add to this yet another question: If it was not possible to trust Eliezer concerning guests, how is it conceivable that Eliezer drew from the Torah of his master, faithfully transmitted it to others, and taught the truth of the Torah to everyone who gathered at Abraham's home? How could he instruct G-d's Torah to others?

In response to these questions, one must say that Eliezer, Abraham's servant, was his heir before Isaac's birth. As it is written, "And the son of my house is Eliezer of Damascus ... and behold, the son of my house is my heir" (*Genesis 15:2,3*). This means, therefore, that Eliezer was directly concerned with the inheritance. This is why Abraham had reason to suspect that Eliezer, his inheritor, did not properly look for guests, but instead let a visitor go by without inviting him. It is therefore possible to attribute to Eliezer the thought that Abraham, happy now that he was circumcised, would now – precisely because of his joy – give all that he possessed to the poor, leaving nothing for Eliezer to inherit. In order that he not be deprived of his inheritance, Eliezer therefore did not want to bring back any guests. Abraham did not trust him because he knew that he acted selfishly, which is why Abraham himself went to look for passersby.

Nevertheless, when a wife had to be found for Isaac, Abraham had faith in his servant Eliezer, knowing without any doubt that he would return with an upright woman from a good family, just as his son needed. Abraham felt this way for two reasons:

First, at that point it was no longer Eliezer who would inherit from Abraham, but Isaac, and this according to G-d's promise: "That one will not inherit you. Only him that shall come forth from within you shall inherit you" (*Genesis 15:4*). Therefore, from that moment on, Isaac would be master of all he possessed and Eliezer would become Isaac's servant, not receiving any inheritance from Abraham because "that which a slave owns belongs to his master" (*Pesachim 88b*). Consequently, there was no reason to suspect that Eliezer would come back with a woman for Isaac that was not suited for him, for he wanted to be able to tell Isaac that it was he that chose a wife for him, and Isaac would be grateful to him for all his life.

In addition, Eliezer said to Abraham, "Perhaps [*ulai*] the woman shall not wish to follow me" (*Genesis 24:5*), and later on, when Eliezer recounted what Abraham said to him (*Genesis 24:39*), he used the same word *ulai*, but written without the letter *vav*. As such, it can be read as *eilai* ("to me"), concerning which the Sages have said, "Eliezer had a daughter, and he wanted to give her in marriage to Isaac, yet Abraham refused. He told him, 'My son is blessed, and you are cursed [because of the curse on Noah's son], and the one who is cursed cannot associate with the one who is blessed' " (*Bereshith Rabba 59:9,12*). No doubt, the daughter of Eliezer was an upright woman, otherwise Eliezer would not have risked proposing her as a wife. However Abraham rejected this union, for in his eyes the daughter of Eliezer did not merit marrying Isaac and giving birth to the Jewish people. Therefore, precisely for this reason, Abraham did not think that Eliezer would come back with a woman who was ill-suited for Isaac. Eliezer himself understood that if his daughter, even though she possessed great qualities, was rejected as a choice for Isaac, he could not choose a woman for Isaac with inferior qualities. There was good reason, therefore, to believe that he would come back with a woman having exceptional qualities for the son of his master, and Abraham trusted him concerning this.

This also explains the oath that Abraham had Eliezer make to him (*Genesis 24:3*). Abraham asked Eliezer to take an oath, lest his eyes fail and mislead him by not allowing him to see in a woman greater qualities than his daughter possessed. He also made him take an oath in order that he search for and scrupulously verify the exceptional qualities of the woman who will merit to marry his son Isaac.

Now we have an answer to our second question. Eliezer was a pious man, and his daughter was a virtuous woman. Hence he was not thought of as being incapable of instructing his master's Torah to others. Yet, in that which concerns hospitality, especially on that day (the third day after the circumcision), it was another story. As we know, Abraham never entrusted the task of welcoming guests to others. It was always he who personally went to welcome them, who served them, who gave them to eat and poured them to drink. He personally cared for all their needs, spiritual needs included, until the Name of G-d was known and invoked by all (*Yalkut Shimoni Chayei Sarah 107; Sotah 10a*).

Yet on that day only, Abraham asked his servant Eliezer to go and bring back some guests (and even if one wants to say that Abraham often sent Eliezer to find guests,

he always found someone to invite). Yet G-d caused it to be tremendously hot on that day so that visitors would not disturb Abraham. When Eliezer returned alone, Abraham was so disappointed that he suspected Eliezer of fearing that his inheritance would have been distributed to the poor if he had brought any back with him. This is why Abraham did not believe Eliezer when he said that he could not find anyone to bring back. However in everything else that Eliezer did, he was an upright and faithful servant.

It is possible to say, by comparison, that this is also the meaning of hospitality. In the same way that one should not study Torah for oneself, one should also “welcome guests” and instruct them in G-d’s Torah, similar to that which is stated by the Sages: “If you have learned much Torah, do not claim special credit for yourself” (Perkei Avoth 2:8). One should do this in order to spread the knowledge of G-d to every place and to all the Children of Israel.

### ***Protecting the Holiness of the Sign of the Covenant***

It is written, “The L-RD appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and saw: And behold! Three men were standing over him. He perceived, so he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent and bowed toward the ground” (*Genesis 18:1-2*).

Let us present a few questions at the outset in order to better understand these verses:

1. The Sages say, “It was the third day after Abraham’s circumcision, and G-d visited him as one visits the sick” (*Sotah 14a*). If Abraham was sick, from where did he find the strength to get up and run to those passing by, especially since he was in great pain?

2. It is written, “Since it is stated, ‘while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent,’ this tells us that Abraham wanted to get up, but G-d told him: Remain seated; I am standing. This will be a sign for your offspring, as it is written, ‘G-d stands in the Divine assembly’ [*Psalms 82:1*]” (*Bereshith Rabba 48:7*). The question arises: If Abraham wanted to rise out of respect for the Divine Presence (yet G-d asked him to remain sitting), what indication is there in this for Abraham’s children that G-d would be standing among them when they would be seated? Moreover, what is this sign?

3. Above all, how could Abraham leave the Divine Presence to go and run after guests passing by?

When the sacred imprint of circumcision perfected Abraham, he also became the vehicle for the Divine Presence, as the Sages themselves have said: “The Patriarchs constitute the Divine Chariot” (*Bereshith Rabba 82:6*). At that point he resembled G-d in all his attributes. Concerning the statement, “The L-RD appeared to him,” the Ohr HaChayim writes: “The Torah wants to show that the Divine Presence enveloped him and that he became its vehicle.” After circumcision, the *yud* of the sacred imprint was engraved in

his flesh, concerning which the Zohar states, “The Divine Presence is with the one who is marked by the sacred imprint” (*Zohar I:95a*). At that moment, Abraham felt tremendous new strength, and even though he served G-d before with uncommon zeal, an impulse was now born in him that erased all physical pain. When he saw travelers standing in front of him, he dashed toward them and invited them to his home.

This teaches us that whoever undermines this sacred sign, or is not even circumcised, cannot properly serve G-d, for he has not entered into His Covenant. Yet as soon as he corrects this lack and receives the blessings during the circumcision ceremony – blessings that, as we know, refer to Abraham, G-d’s beloved, who was chosen and sanctified by Him from conception (*see Tosaphot Menachot 53b*) – it is self-evident that what is awakened and revealed in him, in everyone, is new strength and impetus to serve G-d (which was main thrust of Abraham’s zeal). When someone feels a lack of enthusiasm in serving G-d, it is certainly because he has undermined the sign of the covenant and must rectify it. His zeal will then be restored to him, and he will be able to serve G-d with renewed strength.

After his circumcision, Abraham was imbued with energy that he had not known up to then; he was no longer the same man. His body now functioned with extra diligence, for he dominated the 248 members and 365 tendons of his body, as the Sages have said: “At first he was called Abram, for he dominated only the 243 members of his body, and in the end he was called Abraham, as it is written: ‘And your name shall no more be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham’ [*Genesis 17:5*], for he dominated all 248 members of his body” (*Nedarim 32b*). Note that the letter *hei* that was added to his name has a numerical value of 5. He thus took full possession of all his strength. When his eyes saw people passing by, his legs began to run towards them with all the kindness that G-d desired.

We can now understand the sign that G-d gave to Abraham for his children when He told him: “Remain seated; I am standing. This will be a sign for your offspring.” In effect, if G-d invited him to remain seated, there had to be a reason for this. It is possible that G-d took Abraham’s acute pain caused by the circumcision into account. Yet when he saw three people standing opposite him, he had no doubt that G-d wanted him to run and welcome them, even though just before He had told him to remain seated. Through his own initiative, Abraham merited overcoming his pain and expressing his great love for G-d precisely by the fact that he *didn’t* remain seated, but rather hastened toward these passing guests. Since G-d was in agreement with his actions, from here we learn that “hospitality is greater than receiving the Divine Presence” (*Shabbat 127a*). Only a man who has attained perfection can discern that G-d’s real intention is not for him to remain seated, but rather that he should hasten to welcome those passing by.

Such was the reply that G-d gave him: “Remain seated; I am standing. This will be a sign for your offspring.” G-d indicated to him that his children would guard the sign of the covenant and reach a state of perfection, for “the deeds of the fathers are a sign

for their children” (see *Sotah 34a*). They will seat themselves in the Presence of G-d, and they too will know when it is appropriate to get up and run and welcome guests, for they will dominate the 248 members and 365 tendons of their bodies. They inherited this from their forefather, and if they conduct themselves as he did, G-d will be present among them and they will know when it is possible and necessary to get up and help their fellow man, as did Abraham.

We now understand why the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself to Abraham on the third day following his circumcision.

Concerning the statement, “The L-RD appeared to him,” we must note that in Hebrew the phrase is literally: “And appeared to him the L-RD.” With regards to this, the Ohr HaChayim writes: We must understand why the Torah changes the order of the phrase and mentions the subject (the one who sees – Abraham) before the object (the one who is seen – G-d), as well as what G-d told Abraham during this prophetic vision. The Sages teach that G-d came to visit him three days after his circumcision, as when one visits the sick (*Tanhuma Vayera 2*), even though the text does not indicate this. It seems that the Torah’s intent is to make us realize that G-d’s Presence was with him and that he had become its vehicle, which is why the expression “to him” precedes the mention of G-d. This is meant to indicate that the Divine Presence revealed itself to him, something that we would not have known if the grammatical order of the phrase had not been inverted. (The Aramean translations of this verse – those of Onkelos and Yonatan – render it as: “He showed Himself – He revealed Himself,” to indicate that this consisted of a prophecy).

Abraham prayed that his offspring would follow G-d’s ways and remain connected to the soul of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He also prayed that they would have the merit of themselves being a vehicle for the Divine Presence. As it is written in holy books, “Reading the accounts of the lives of pious men [with the desire of being like them and emulating their ways] is like contemplating Divine knowledge.” In other words, whoever models his behavior on the deeds of the Patriarchs connects himself to the knowledge of G-d, and “by the awakening that he produces below, he causes an awakening in the worlds above,” as the Talmud discusses at length (*Hagigah 13a, 14b*). Each person can, according to his abilities, reach this level thanks to the faith that he has in pious men and their influence on him.

This also allows us to understand what is written in the section dealing with the sacrifice of Isaac: “An angel of the L-RD called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham’ ” (*Genesis 22:11*). Why is Abraham’s name called out twice? It is because “Repeating a person’s name is a sign of love” (*Bereshith Rabba 56:7*).

The Midrash adds: “When the angel told him, ‘Do not stretch out your hand against the lad’ [*Genesis 22:12*], Abraham did not listen, and he even wanted to spill a little blood (in sacrifice). Hence the angel added, ‘nor do anything to him’ ” (*Bereshith Rabba ad loc.*).

This is difficult to understand. How could Abraham have wanted to transgress G-d's commandment, for in the final analysis, if Abraham had done so he would have been committing murder. Can we even imagine such a thing?

Abraham knew that by sacrificing his son as G-d had commanded him, his obedience would have obtained great merit for him and his descendants, and from that day on G-d would favorably remember and forgive Jews for their sins until the end of time. That is what the Sages have explained concerning the verse that states, "And Abraham called the name of that site 'the L-RD will see'" (*Genesis 22:14*), for "G-d will remember (what could have happened to) the ashes of Isaac, united and destined to secure forgiveness for all generations" (*Yerushalmi Taanith 2:4*). Abraham desired to express his love for G-d just as G-d had expressed His love to him by calling out "Abraham, Abraham," and His love for his children when He would teach them the 13 attributes of Divine mercy, as it is written: "The L-RD, the L-RD, G-d, compassionate and gracious ..." (*Exodus 34:6*).

Concerning what is written near the end of our parsha: "I shall surely bless you and greatly increase your offspring" (*Genesis 22:17*), the Sages have explained, "A blessing for the father and a blessing for his son" (*Bereshith Rabba 56:11*). Abraham was blessed for his infinite love for G-d, and G-d rewards measure for measure (Shabbat 105b). Abraham knew that he was G-d's beloved, for G-d only puts those whom He loves to the test, as it is written: "The L-RD admonishes the one He loves" (*Proverbs 3:12*). Abraham wanted to win G-d's love for his children after him – "A blessing for the father and a blessing for his son" – and in the same way that G-d loved him and called to him "Abraham, Abraham," so too would G-d love his children and have mercy on them, for He is "compassionate and gracious."

### *The Deeds of the Fathers are a Sign for the Children*

It is written, "The L-RD appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day" (*Genesis 18:1*). The Sages say, "What does 'in the heat of the day' mean? Rabbi Chama the son of Rabbi Chanina replied, 'It was the third day after Abraham's circumcision, and the Holy One, blessed be He, came and asked about his welfare'" (*Bava Metzia 86b*).

I read a question in the book *Midrash Moshe* that was asked in the name of "Mizrachi". It seems to follow from this passage in the Gemara that the most painful period following circumcision is the third day, whereas tractate Shabbat (134b) asserts that the first day of a baby's circumcision is the most dangerous one. If such is the case, why did the Holy One, blessed be He, not visit Abraham on the first day of his circumcision?

It is also stated that the Holy One, blessed be He, appeared to Abraham in the plains of Mamre because Mamre had given Abraham advice on circumcision (*Bereshith Rabba 42*). This enabled him to merit that the Shechinah would reveal itself on his territory.

This apparently needs some explanation, for in what way did Abraham need advice on circumcision? What was Abraham hesitant about? He had not hesitated to throw himself into the fiery furnace of Ur Kasdim (*Genesis 15:7*), and he had done so without question! How much more would he have no reason to fear circumcising himself? In addition, we must understand why Abraham was not content with asking for the advice of only one friend, but three: Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre. Did he therefore have the least doubt about performing this great and important mitzvah, since it was going to make him “perfect” (*Nedarim 31b*) and faultless? He even became, at that point in time, the chariot of the Shechinah (*Zohar I:213b*), which his soul had always yearned for.

We must explain that Abraham had no need whatsoever for the advice of Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre. Even if these three had tried to discourage him, he would not have listened to them and would have carried out the mitzvah in joy. However he wanted, despite everything, to ask them for advice so that they would know what he was about to do. Since they were the greatest men of their generation, people would quickly find out that Abraham had asked them for advice on circumcision, and thus the whole world would have known of Abraham’s devotion, an old man who did not hesitate to accomplish the commandment of his Creator, even if it involved his own blood.

An additional reason why Abraham wanted the advice of his friends is that he wanted to make the trial even more difficult on himself, for he knew perfectly well that they would dread the thought of doing such a thing, especially at such an advanced age. In particular they feared that he would want them circumcised as well, an idea that clearly terrified them, and so they tried to prevent it. However Abraham circumcised himself all the same, be it at the price of the friendship and affection that united them. Thus his reward would be greatly enhanced because of the fact that he was ready to forgo his friends if they did not follow him in serving G-d. Yet despite all this, Mamre still advised him to circumcise himself, which is why he merited that G-d should reveal Himself on his territory, for not only did he *not* allow himself to be frightened by the idea of circumcision, he also spread the news of it, as Abraham had wanted. Nevertheless it is obvious that Abraham was resolute in carrying out the command to circumcise himself from the time he had received it, without any need for Mamre’s advice.

From everything that we have said, we see the great devotion of our father Abraham. Not only did he put himself in danger by circumcising himself, but he wanted to proclaim this mitzvah – as well as the existence of the Holy One, blessed be He – to the entire world. This is a lesson for all the generations to come, namely that a person should not be content with loving G-d; he should be ready to give his life for Him and not think that he can achieve perfection in serving G-d without doing so. In every place and using all possible means, a person should proclaim that the Holy One, blessed be He, is G-d. This is what Abraham did, for he wanted to share every mitzvah he performed with the whole world.

This lessens our question concerning the fact that the Holy One, blessed be He, did not come and immediately visit Abraham on the first day of his circumcision, since

from that point on Abraham became perfect and G-d's light revealed itself to him. This is alluded to in the verse, "The L-RD appeared to him," which indicates that he received a mark of great holiness, as the Ohr HaHaim writes: "Whoever carries the mark of holiness, the Shechinah rests on him." Consequently, why did G-d not reveal himself to Abraham immediately?

The Holy One, blessed be He, wanted Abraham to truly feel that he could possibly die, and for the whole world to realize that he had put himself in grave danger. This certainly brought about a magnificent sanctification of G-d's Name, something that would not have happened if G-d had visited him on the first day, for then he would have been immediately healed. In that case, Abraham would not have been in such grave danger, and therefore G-d's Name would not have been so greatly sanctified. The fact that G-d waited three days enabled people to see just how Abraham had put himself in great danger. Even though the Holy One, blessed be He, did not visit him, not only did that *not* demoralize him, but on the contrary it made him happy! Hence because of Abraham a sanctification of G-d's Name occurred, and in fact such had always been his desire and wish. It was only after the danger passed, when the pain and weakness left him, that the Holy One, blessed be He, came to visit him.

All this leads us to a lesson of prime importance: A person is guided in the way that he desires to take (Makot 10b). Since Abraham wanted to serve G-d by actually being at risk of dying, to the point that his soul would leave his body, Heaven granted this desire and the Shechinah visited him only on the third day following his circumcision.

I listened to a question about this that my oldest son, Raphael Meir Amram, asked at the Shabbat table: Why is it only concerning the sacrifice of Isaac that the Torah explicitly writes that it was a test, as it states, "G-d tested Abraham" (*Genesis 22:1*), an expression that we do not find with the other nine trials that he underwent. Moreover, Rabbi Moshe Ibgui *Shlita* asked me why only Abraham was put to the test, whereas the other Patriarchs did not undergo such explicit hardships.

This is what I told them: Abraham was the one who traced out the path to follow, and he shows us how to behave in the worst trials. Because of his great strength, he bequeathed this path as a heritage to his descendents to the end of time. Thus before Abraham, a person had no chance of conducting himself this way even in simple trials, and even less so in difficult ones, such as sacrificing one's love for another. An example of this would be a father sacrificing the love he feels for his son uniquely for the Holy One, blessed be He, without any second thoughts, pride, or any other benefits. It is true that even non-Jews gave their children over to *Molech* (*Leviticus 18:21*), but it goes without saying that they only sought glory and pride by doing so.

We should realize that the love of a non-Jew for his son is an external sentiment, one that in no way resembles that of a Jew. The Jew, other than his natural parental love for his son, wants to see him pursue his course, and he wants to transmit a knowledge and love of G-d to him.

In this, Abraham demonstrated heroic courage in all the trials that he underwent, and he gave us – we his descendants – the strength to pursue his path in every test or hardship. This is why, up to the time of Isaac’s sacrifice, the word “test” is not used, for all that preceded it concerned only Abraham himself. It dealt with his own purification and elevation in serving G-d, and it was for his own spiritual benefit. As the Holy One, blessed be He, said when He commanded Abraham to leave for the land of Canaan: “*Lech lecha* [Go for yourself]” (*Genesis 12:1*) – go for your own good, for your own benefit.

However this presents a difficulty, since for the sacrifice of Isaac the expression used is the same: “*Ve’lech lecha* [And go for yourself] into the land of Moriah” (*Genesis 22:2*). Now there, what good, what personal benefit would come to him for having slaughtered his only son Isaac?

It is clear that in this trial as well, Abraham experienced great personal satisfaction and good. This allows us, his descendents, to learn to walk in his ways. It was an extremely difficult trial, one that not only affected him personally, but touched upon the future of the entire Jewish nation. To overcome it, he had to sacrifice the love he had for his son, meaning the most valuable thing to a man. We find an illustration of this in the story of King Zedekiah. When Nebuchadnezzar wanted to torture him, he slaughtered his sons before his very eyes, and only afterwards did he blind him, as it is written: “The king of Babylonia slaughtered Zedekiah’s sons before his eyes. He also slaughtered the officers of Judah in Riblah, and he blinded Zedekiah’s eyes” (*Jeremiah 52:10-11*). From this we see just how powerful the feelings of a father are for his son. It was this feeling, something that a man has no power over, that Abraham was asked to renounce for the Holy One, blessed be He, by sacrificing Isaac. However once he emerged victorious from that trial, we his descendents merited to more easily overcome our own trials.

### ***Hospitality: Commandment and Virtue***

It is written, “The L-RD appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and saw: And behold, three men were standing over him. He perceived, so he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent and bowed toward the ground. And he said, ‘My Lord, if I find favor in Your eyes, please pass not away from Your servant’ ” (*Genesis 18:1-3*).

How our limited intelligence is far from grasping the meaning of such words!

1. Abraham stood before G-d, Who came to visit him on the third day after his circumcision (*Bava Metzia 86b*). He spoke to him, an experience that everyone hopes for and one that would make anyone extremely happy. It was precisely at that point, however, that Abraham suddenly left the Divine Presence and ran to welcome some unknown guests, wayfarers. Perhaps they were upright, or maybe wicked? Is it really proper to act in this way when one is “face to face” with the Divine Presence? Is it appropriate to leave G-d’s Presence like this?

2. The Sages draw a lesson from this: “Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence, for it is written, ‘And [Abraham] said, My Lord, if I find favor in Your eyes, please pass not away from Your servant’ [Genesis 18:3]” (*Shabbat 127a*). How did Abraham know that hospitality is a greater commandment than welcoming the Divine Presence, and how did he realize that it was right to act as he did?

Abraham was the embodiment of kindness; that was his main character trait (*Zohar III:302a*), as it is written: “You grant truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham” (*Micah 7:20*). He had a natural tendency to run to help each and everyone, for he saw the image of G-d in all people and therefore felt that it was his duty to help and support them, without checking if they were righteous or immoral. On the contrary, if he knew that someone was sinful, he tried even harder to correct and bring him to the right path, until the image and likeness of G-d (which had left that person because of his sins) was restored to him. Abraham pushed himself to restore to each man the spirit and soul that he had abandoned, for what is the meaning of a man’s life if he does not carry G-d’s image within him or emulate godly attributes? In such a case, it is as if he were dead. Such was the magnitude of Abraham’s activities, who brought those who were far from G-d back under His protection.

We may now understand the situation. G-d visited Abraham at his home because he was ill, and it was there that G-d spoke to him. Abraham was connected to G-d and His attributes, as the Sages said concerning the verse, “After the L-RD your G-d shall you walk” (*Deuteronomy 13:5*): “Walk after the *attributes* of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked...so you too should clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick...so you too should visit the sick” (*Sotah 14a, among others*). Abraham himself did good, like G-d, and he reached such a level that on that day he became the carrier of the Divine Presence. [Note: The Ohr HaChayim, commenting on the beginning of Parsha Vayeira, states, “It seems that the Torah’s intention is to tell us that G-d made his Presence hover over Abraham and chose him to be the carrier of the Divine Presence, as the Sages have said, ‘The Patriarchs are [G-d’s] chariot’ [*Bereshith Rabba 82:6*], and it was then that the sacred imprint was revealed in his flesh”].

When Abraham saw those three men standing before him, he perceived the image and likeness of G-d in them, and he understood that they too needed to be connected and attached to G-d, for they also carried His image and likeness. It would have definitely been a spiritual waste for the Creator of the world to lose them if Abraham had not run to meet them and invite them under his roof, and therefore it was better to leave G-d and run to greet them, for G-d would also take pleasure in this. We may compare the situation to that of a king who was accustomed to eating fish. He was once staying far from the royal palace with his entourage, in a place where it was almost impossible to find fish. When the king was overtaken with a desire to eat some, his fisherman (who accompanied the king and his entourage) cast his line into the water while the king was sitting next to him, speaking with the fisherman while waiting for him to catch his meal. All of a sudden, the fisherman felt something biting his line. What did he do?

He naturally, and even abruptly, interrupted his conversation with the king (despite the respect due to him) and promptly brought up the fish before it could escape and return to the watery depths. Of course he did this so as to fulfill the will and desire of the king, who would in no way consider the fisherman's abrupt end to the conversation as a show of disrespect. On the contrary, in the eyes of the king the fisherman's success was entirely for his honor, and he even deserved the king's tremendous gratitude for having caught some fish for him, especially in that isolated region.

Such was the spiritual condition prevalent in Abraham's time. The entire world denied the unity and existence of G-d, and no one feared Him. Only Abraham alone – “great among the great” (*Zohar II:53a*), who proclaimed the unity of G-d with all his heart and soul – made His Name known in the world and proclaimed Him as “G-d of heaven and earth.” Thus while G-d was speaking to Abraham, he saw three people standing before him and understood that bringing them under G-d's protection and connecting them to Him was exactly what would please G-d. It would in no way be considered as a lack of respect toward the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. On the contrary, the fact that Abraham succeeded in bringing three other souls under G-d's protection would be considered as a mark of respect and homage, especially since by his good deeds he would bring them to repent and the image of G-d would be reflected on their faces. By acting in this way, Abraham behaved in accordance with G-d's attributes, with kindness and compassion. This is why he suddenly interrupted his conversation with the King – G-d Himself – and hurried to welcome the wayfarers. In fact Abraham never left G-d, not even for a single moment, since he was running toward the Divine Presence, toward G-d's image and likeness, in His honor and in homage to Him. Abraham knew that the very fact he went to warmly and joyfully welcome them would please G-d, since He desired that these men should return to Him and bless Him.

It seems that the commandment to demonstrate hospitality confers upon a host a double elevation: First of all, by welcoming guests, he also welcomes the Divine Presence to his home. If the Divine Presence is not very noticeable before having welcomed guests, afterwards it will become evident because the guests will also share in the knowledge of G-d and praise Him. Secondly, by the hospitality that a host demonstrates, he brings pleasure to his Creator by having clung to His attributes, by having concerned himself with the welfare of all created beings, and by having brought them material and spiritual benefits. The host therefore attains the supreme level of clinging to G-d. How happy he will be in this world and the next!

We must add another consideration concerning the greatness of the commandment to demonstrate hospitality: “For transgressions between man and the Omnipresent, the Day of Atonement procures atonement. However for transgressions between man and his fellow, the Day of Atonement does not procure atonement until he has pacified his fellow” (*Yoma 85b*). What must a person do if it is impossible to ask forgiveness from the one he has wronged? The sin in such a case is great, and a person must even go to the grave of the one he has wronged in order to pacify him (*Yoma 87a*).

Concerning this, the Talmud recounts a terrible incident concerning Nahum of Gamzu: “Once I was journeying on the road...and I had with me three donkeys, one laden with food, one with drink, and one with all kinds of dainties. A poor man met me and stopped me on the road and said to me, ‘Master, give me something to eat.’ I replied to him, ‘Wait until I have unloaded something from the donkey.’ I had hardly managed to unload something from the donkey when the man died [from hunger]. I then went and laid myself on him and exclaimed, ‘May my eyes which had no pity upon your eyes become blind; may my hands which had no pity upon your hands be cut off; may my legs which had no pity upon your legs be amputated.’ My mind was not at rest until I added, ‘May my whole body be covered with boils’ ” (Taanith 21a). That is the story in a nutshell.

The Sages have said, “It was the third day from Abraham’s circumcision, and the Holy One, blessed be He, came to enquire after Abraham’s health. He drew the sun out of its sheath, so that the righteous man should not be troubled with wayfarers” (*Bava Metzia 86b*). Hence when Abraham saw three people before him, in his mind he weighed what he should do: Should he remain before G-d, or should he leave Him and run toward the wayfarers, for it was extremely hot outside and who knows how long they had gone without eating or drinking? Perhaps their lives were even in danger.

This is why he decided to leave the Divine Presence, risking that this would be reckoned against him as an error and a sin. However because sins against G-d can be forgiven on Yom Kippur, surely this sin would be forgiven. On the other hand, if he had not run to meet those wayfarers, that would have constituted a sin against others, for which there is no forgiveness on Yom Kippur unless forgiven by them, and who knows if he would still have had the opportunity to be forgiven by these three visitors in their lifetime? Perhaps they would die before he had the time to feed them or give them something to drink, as was the case for Nahum of Gamzu. In that case, Abraham would only be able to ask them for forgiveness after their deaths. Would he then find people that would agree to accompany him to their graves? Would that not have been a crime too burdensome to bear?

This is why Abraham, who by nature was kind, merciful, and attached to G-d’s attributes (*Sotah 14a*), who saw a friend and a relative in each person, took it upon himself to leave G-d’s Presence, preferring to run to the wayfarers and serve them food and drink. If “the saving of life supersedes Shabbat” (*Shabbat 132a*), what can be said in this case? The Sages have already said, “Profane for his sake one Shabbat, so that he may keep many Shabbats” (*Yoma 85b*). If a person that we could have saved ends up dying, he can no longer carry out any commandments. However by saving that person’s life, we thereby give him the opportunity to serve G-d for the rest of his life. This is the reason why “Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence.”

We have seen here the sublime greatness of Abraham, who consistently tried by all possible means to bring joy to his Creator, to the extent that he understood that G-d wanted him at that point to go and welcome the wayfarers. Abraham loved G-d,

from which it follows that he loved His created beings (*see Perkei Avoth 6:1*), and desired their good, as did Aaron the High Priest (*ibid. 1:12*). In fact Abraham earned the merit of being called “Abraham, whom I love” (*Zohar 1:85a, 89a*). Each Jew must conduct himself according to this attribute, and in this way he will be happy in this world and the World to Come.

### ***The Importance of The Mitzvah of Hospitality***

There was once a king who loved to eat fish. In fact the king’s desire for fish was so great, he hired a professional fisherman who lived in the royal palace. This fisherman’s sole task was to catch fish for the king. One day the king traveled to a region where fish were extremely hard to find. With him were his servants, including the royal fisherman. Despite the difficulty of finding fish there, the king still had a desire to eat some. Thus he and the royal fisherman went out onto the waters. While the king was chatting with the fisherman, the latter was busy casting his nets left and right in order to catch something. At one point the fisherman felt that he had caught something big in his net, and naturally he stopped conversing with the king as he tried to bring it in. He did this, of course, for the honor of the king.

Let us think about this for a moment. Was the fact that the fisherman abruptly ended his conversation considered as a slight to the king’s honor? Obviously not. Even if the fisherman had stopped speaking with the king, this could in no way be considered as an error on his part, since his full intention was to fulfill the king’s desire for fish. It is even possible that the king was grateful to him for having caught fish in such a remote place. The same occurred with Abraham when Hashem came to visit him on the third day after his circumcision. Could there be a greater honor than this? However despite such an honor, Abraham left Hashem in the middle of His visit when wayfarers arrived, and he joyously ran to welcome them. Not only that, but he asked Hashem, “My L-RD, if I find favor in Your eyes, please pass not away from Your servant” (*Genesis 18:3*). In other words, wait until I have received these wayfarers. From this passage, the Sages have learned that practicing hospitality is more important than receiving the Shechinah (*Shabbat 127a*).

Abraham left Hashem in the middle of their conversation, yet that was in no way considered a slight to Hashem’s honor? How could that be?

Abraham lived in a godless generation. They had no faith in G-d, and Abraham was the only one in his generation to have acknowledged that Hashem ruled the entire world. Abraham realized, however, that his role was to bring those who were far from Hashem under the wings of the Shechinah. His task was to produce an ever-increasing number of believers, for that was Hashem’s will.

Consequently, when Abraham saw that wayfarers were standing before him at the entrance of his tent, he understood that his task began at that point. At that instant he had to leave everything behind and run to greet them in order to bring them closer to

Hashem. Abraham was to say a kind word to them, he was to serve them, and he was to ask them to bless Hashem. It was in this way that they would understand that Hashem is the Creator and the One Who governs the world.

Yet in doing so, did Abraham not slight G-d's honor? On the contrary, Hashem Himself rejoiced because he ran to them in order to encourage them to think!

However that was not enough, for the Torah describes in detail how Abraham received his guests. He prepared a sumptuous meal for them, even standing nearby during the entire meal to serve them. He did all this despite the fact that it was the third day after his circumcision, when the pain is the greatest (*Nedarim 31b*). He demonstrated the greatest devotion to this mitzvah, even though he was in a fragile state of health.

In addition, some people ask why the three angels appeared to Abraham in the form of Arabs, not otherwise. Most of the wayfarers who came to Abraham were Arabs; he was therefore always prepared with meals that Arabs typically ate. Hashem did not want to exhaust Abraham while he was still recovering, which is why He sent him wayfarers in the guise of Arabs this time as well. However Abraham did not take this into account, which is why he ran to his livestock and brought them special meals, for he wanted to fulfill the mitzvah of hospitality with all his heart and soul, with every one of his 248 limbs and 365 sinews.

From Abraham's example we must learn the importance of the mitzvah of hospitality. Sometimes a guest arrives at our home when we are not properly prepared. Sometimes we are under financial constraints, sometimes under spiritual ones, periods when we do not function properly. Sometimes we just do not feel well or we are not in very good health, and deep down we think, "Why now? Why didn't he come at another time?" Sometimes we just have no time to receive guests.

Nevertheless, we must understand that the mitzvah of hospitality is one between man and his fellowman, whereas welcoming the Shechinah in a mitzvah between G-d and man. Which one is more important? We know that the former are more important, as our Sages have said (*Yoma 85b*). Hospitality is the greater and more important of the two mitzvot.

As a result, now must learn from Abraham how to conduct ourselves and fulfill this mitzvah. We must learn how to serve guests with all our heart and soul, preparing the best for them and exerting ourselves on their behalf, even if this proves difficult. If we act in this way, we in turn will merit Hashem's hospitality when the time comes for us to arrive in the World of Truth.

### ***The Main Thing is Action***

It is stated at the beginning of our parsha, after Abraham's circumcision, "He was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day" (*Genesis 18:1*). Rashi states that Abraham did this in order to see if there were any wayfarers he could invite into his home. The Torah also tells us, "He lifted his eyes and saw...and he ran toward them

from the entrance of the tent” (v.2).

Why does this verse seem to repeat itself by stating that Abraham ran “from the entrance of the tent”? We’ve already been told that he was sitting there, so it’s obvious that he ran from there to meet them! We may also ask why he *ran*, since he could have walked to meet them. Above all, we need to understand Abraham’s great courage in putting such tremendous effort into inviting guests to his home.

Our Sages say, “Happy is he who comes here with his learning in his hand” (*Pesachim 50a*). We should pay careful attention to the precise words the Sages use here. For example, why do they say, “with his learning in his hand” instead of simply “with his learning”? What exactly is the meaning of “in his hand”?

To explain this, we may say that the will to perform, and the actual performance of a *mitzvah* that results from learning is called “in his hand.” This means that learning and the resulting action are found in the hand – the instrument of action – to perform *mitzvot*. This is what the Sages mean by the words, “Happy is he who comes here with his learning in his hand.” In other words, it is not enough to simply come with our learning; it must also be in our hand – it must also be accompanied by action – as the Mishnah says: “Not study but practice is the essential thing” (*Perkei Avoth 1:17*). It is also said that we must “interpret well and act well” (*Chagigah 14b; Yebamot 63b*). With regards to this subject, our Sages have said: “Study is greater, for it leads to action” (*Kiddushin 40b*). This means that when a person studies Torah without ulterior motives, it leads to action, for the essential aspect of Torah study and its goal is that a person should carry out what he learns, thereby performing *mitzvot*. In fact what is the use of studying if a person does not end up performing what he learns? When study is coupled with action, however, a person then carries in his hand the reward for studying *and* for doing.

Since we have reached this point, we can now explain Abraham’s conduct. The Torah wants to highlight his greatness, for although he was ill at the time, and despite the sweltering heat on that day – since the Holy One withdrew the sun from its sheath (*Bava Metzia 86b*) – Abraham sat at the entrance of his tent and did not move from there. He did this solely to find wayfarers whom he could welcome into his home as guests.

Furthermore, the Torah mentions “the entrance of the tent” again in v.2, informing us that Abraham remained at the entrance of his tent, not inside, during all that time. Thus despite the great heat he continued to sit there until he saw some wayfarers, at which point he ran to meet them. He made a tremendous effort for his guests, for he desired to emulate his Creator and perform His commandments with great devotion.

Thus Abraham did not remain sitting when the angels arrived, but instead he “stood over them” (*Genesis 18:8*) in order to better serve and provide them with all they needed. Abraham truly wanted to emulate Hashem, desiring to fulfill the teaching, “Happy is

he who comes here with his learning in his hand” – the hand being the instrument of action – for “Not study but practice is the essential thing.”

Abraham’s good deeds stemmed from his learning. He was not content with just studying the Torah; he lived to fulfill it through action, performing *mitzvot* by practicing kindness and helping others.

We find this idea expressed by the Sages: “Service of Torah scholars is greater than its study” (*Berachot 7b*). This is because the essential aspect of Torah study is action, doing things for others, as we explained earlier.

Hence it is more important to serve those who study Torah than to study it ourselves. When an action stems from Torah study, we possess both study and action. Study is also very great because it leads to action (*Kiddushin 40b*), yet action is more important. By serving Torah scholars, one merits both study and action. This occurs among the *tzaddikim* of this world, for the more they devote their time to others, the more they elevate themselves in the fear of Heaven, and the more they desire to truly emulate their Creator. This is because action, not study, is the essential thing. Which action is this? It consists of showing kindness to others and helping those in need. These things are greater and more important than study itself, since it is through these things that the world endures. As Scripture states, “*Olam chesed yibaneh* [Kindness builds the world]” (*Psalms 89:3*). Thus there is great rejoicing before the Creator of the universe when He sees Jews fulfilling the concept that the world is “the work of My hands, that I may be glorified.” (*Isaiah 60:21*). The more a person demonstrates kindness and performs good deeds, the more he senses the reality of Hashem and elevates himself in Torah and the fear of Heaven.

In every generation, this results from the power of our father Abraham, “the greatest man among the Anakim” (*Bereshith Rabba 14:6 and Shemot Rabba 28:1 on Joshua 14:15*). Abraham fulfilled the principle by which the main thing is not the thought, but the deed, for he always worked to serve the Torah, to serve guests. He also fulfilled the teaching, “Happy is he who comes here with his learning in his hand.” Every Jew should be attentive to serving those who study Torah, for that is even greater than studying it ourselves. A Jew must also remember that the main thing is not the thought, but the deed. In fact it is not enough to be content with learning; we must also do things for others. If a person acts in this way, he will continually elevate himself in the service of Hashem.

## Parsha Chayei Sarah

### Sarah's Love For All

Regarding Sarah, our Sages say, “During all her life, a cloud of Glory hovered over her tent, a flame continually burned there, and the dough that she kneaded was blessed” (*Bereshith Rabba* 60:9).

Some questions may be asked here:

1. Why is it that these three things expressed Sarah's righteousness?  
 2. The verse says, “And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her” (*Gen* 23:2). In the word ולבכתה (“and to weep for her”), the letter כ is smaller than the others. What does this teach us?

3. It is written, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (*Lev* 19:18), and Rabbi Akiva explains that “this is a fundamental principle of the Torah” (*Bereshith Rabba* 24:7). This requires thought: Why is it written *reiahcha* (“your neighbor”) and not, for example, *haveirecha* (“your friend”)? Even better: Why is it precisely the love of one's neighbor that constitutes this fundamental principle of the Torah? Are there not other commandments in the Torah that could also constitute, by themselves, fundamental principles?

The Divine Presence dwelled in Sarah's home because she helped Abraham. This is the meaning of the cloud; it revealed the Divine Presence. The flame revealed her respect for the commandments, as it is written, “For a commandment is a lamp and the Torah is light” (*Pr* 6:23). Sarah performed all the commandments of the Torah to perfection, without any ulterior motives. The dough that she kneaded demonstrated that she loved to receive guests, and Sarah excelled in so doing. Her dough was blessed, for sometimes she prepared bread for a certain amount of guests, then suddenly her home would fill up with a greater number than expected, yet she would always have enough for everyone. It was in this way that she was kindhearted in everything she did.

When Sarah passed away, the home became devoid of the life that once filled it. It was then that Abraham understood to what point she was a help and support to him, and how exceptional a woman she was. In addition, he saw that the cloud, the flame, and the blessing of the dough disappeared with her. When Abraham came to give his eulogy and to weep for her, the word ולבכתה is used. It is written with a small כ, which can also be read as לבתה (from the Hebrew word for “house”), and signifies that Abraham wept for his empty home. He wept because of the great void that Sarah's death had left. It was only in those moments that Abraham felt how much her modesty hid her love, to the point that no one had noticed her greatness. This is what he expressed in his eulogy and his by tears.

What is the meaning of the words “your neighbor” in the verse, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”, and why is it not written “your friend”? It is to indicate that even if someone acts wrongly towards you – and even hates you – you are required to love and respect him. The word רֵעִךָ (“your neighbor”) can be rearranged as רַע לְךָ (“wicked to you”). Despite his wickedness to you, love him as yourself. In so doing you will turn his heart, for he will think, “This man, despite the wrong that I’ve done to him, loves me.” And this will bring him to repentance.

In a time when so many men were idolaters and hated Abraham and Sarah, these two bestowed an immense love upon all, as they brought back to G-d those who were far from Him. This is the reason why Rabbi Akiva said that it is a fundamental principle of the Torah.

In the past, people were prepared to die in order to sanctify G-d’s Name. They loved their neighbor, even if they were wicked. But men have weakened from generation to generation. If such is the case, how can we observe the commandment of loving our neighbor if he acts wickedly towards us? What’s more, how is it possible to command everyone to feel the exact same way about his neighbor as himself?

The Sages tell of a man who came to see Hillel the Elder and said, “Convert and teach me the entire Torah in the time that I can stand on one foot.” Hillel responded, “That which you hate, do not do to your neighbor. Now go study” (*Shabbat 31a*). Why did he answer this way? Why didn’t he tell him to “love your neighbor as yourself”?

We know that before the giving of the Torah, the Children of Israel needed a 49-day preparation period. Concerning this subject, the Gaon Rabbi Israel Salanter wrote that the 49 days were to prepare for the 48 virtues necessary to acquire the Torah (see *Perkei Avoth 6:6*). The 49<sup>th</sup> day was the one in which they reviewed everything that they had learned, so as to be ready to receive the Torah. It is only in ridding oneself of one’s faults that man can acquire the Torah, which belongs to G-d (*Perkei Avoth 6:10*). It is certain that it is only when one has erased all the bad thoughts in one’s heart – then and only then – can one love one’s neighbor. This is because conflict and hate of one for another stems from jealousy, from animosity, from slander, etc. Whoever has acquired the Torah, and has firmly instilled in himself the virtues that it teaches, manages without any difficulty to feel a perfect love for his neighbor. It is thanks to acquiring Torah that one arrives at a love for all Jews.

Our Sages say, “The study of Torah and its light directs us in the right path” (*Yerushalmi Hagigah 1:7*). It is the Torah that allows us to eliminate our faults one after the other, and to feel a great love for our neighbor, even if he has acted wickedly towards us. But this happens only if we study Torah with this goal in mind, and acquire the character traits that it demands of us.

One who has no knowledge of Torah – who never in his whole life studied it – lacks savvy in basic life-skills, and thus cannot love his neighbor. How much more is he incapable of loving a wicked neighbor! In order to understand that this love constitutes

a fundamental principle, and is not just one commandment among many, one must study a good deal. This explains why Hillel didn't say to this would-be convert, "Love your neighbor as yourself", but rather the inverse: "That which you hate, do not do to your neighbor." Which is to say that, in the same way that you wouldn't want someone to do you harm, you shouldn't do harm to others; in the same way that you don't want others to speak badly of you, you shouldn't speak badly of them. This also means that you don't give someone something to eat that (because it either tastes bad or isn't permitted) you wouldn't want to eat yourself. Language such as this is understood by non-Jews, and a would-be convert who never studied Torah can grasp it. However, to understand "love your neighbor as yourself", which contains all the Torah, one must study it, and that's not something that can be accessed solely through intellect.

From here, we now come to understand how we can achieve a love for all Jews. "All Jews are responsible for one another" (*Shavuot 39a*); each soul is tied to that of others. If someone feels the divine part inside himself, he will automatically feel that the soul of his neighbor is tied to his own. His soul brings him towards the other, since both of them are similar and originate from the same source. Both of them come from that place, which is found under the Throne of Glory, the source of all souls (*Zohar III:29b*).

Concerning the Cherubim that topped the Holy Ark, the Torah writes, "And make one Cherub from the one end, and one cherub from the other end" (*Ex 25:19*). These Cherubim, which symbolized the unity and love of G-d for His people, were not separated from one another, for they were "spreading out [their] wings above, covering with their wings over the cover, with their faces towards one another" (*Ex 25:20*). The Mercy Seat covered the Ark of the Covenant, which itself contained the Tablets of the Law (*Ex 25:16*). This symbolized that the Torah should be in man's heart, in his innards, as it is written, "Your Torah is in my innards" (*Ps 40:9*). With respect to the verse that states, "The Holy One in your midst" (*Hos 11:9*), the Sages say, "It is as if the Holy One resided at the center of your innards" (*Taanith 11a*). The "Holy One" means the Torah.

If the Cherubim symbolized the unity of Israel, why were they placed in the Holy of Holies? It would seem that it would have been preferable to place them on the outside, to show that G-d's Presence reigns over Israel when we are united. By this, people could draw the lesson that they must conduct themselves with brotherly devotion one towards the other.

In fact, the essential part of loving one's neighbor is hidden in the heart, having no external manifestation. This means that one must love others as oneself, and not with respect to others. One can only feel this love when the Torah is in our beings, just as the Tablets of the Law were in the Ark of the Covenant. This covenant is one between all Jews, and since the Torah is a covenant (*Shabbat 33a*) and the words of the Torah are an oath (*Pesachim 38b*), it is really an oath for a covenant and for love between all Jews. How can we do this? The answer lies in the depths of the heart, just like with the Cherubim who were placed in the Holy of Holies. An allusion to all this is found in the first and the last letters of לוחות ברית ("Tablets of the Law"). The first letters form the

word לב (“heart”), and the last form ת”ת, which is an abbreviation for *Talmud Torah* (“study of Torah”). For it is through the study of Torah and the love found in the heart that one manages to love his neighbor.

It is written, “And they shall make for Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell in their midst” (*Ex 25:8*). If G-d can make His Divine Presence dwell on wood and stone, how much more can He make His Presence dwell in man, who He created with His own hands (*Kohelet Rabba 3:14*). But this can only happen if men have the right basic character traits, in the same sense as it is written, “Upright conduct precedes the knowledge of Torah” (*Leviticus Rabba 9:3*). How does one arrive at this? By taking the example of the Patriarchs, who did it by the study of Torah, and likewise Sarah, who did so by her heartfelt love. If we model our behavior on theirs, great will be our reward in this world and the next. Amen.

### ***Happy is Youth that has not Brought Shame To Old Age***

It is written, “And the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years. These were the years of Sarah’s life” (*Genesis 23:1*). Rashi notes that the repetition, “These were the years of Sarah’s life” indicates that they were all equally good.

It is difficult to understand, however, why Rashi interprets the repetition as such, since this is already indicated by the fact that the word *shana* (“year”) is used in the singular. Literally, the verse states: “And the life of Sarah was one hundred year and twenty year...” which shows us that each year was equal to the others. Thus the question stands: Why is it written, “These were the years of Sarah’s life”?

We will now clearly explain this. Rashi cites the commentary of the Sages: “At one hundred years, she was without sin like a young girl of twenty years. In the same way that a young girl of twenty years is without sin, at one hundred years she was without sin, and at twenty years she was beautiful as a child of seven years” (*Beresith Rabba 58:1*). The Torah here testifies to the virtues of Sarah even at the age of seven. At that age, when a child loves to play, when one has no responsibilities whatsoever, neither with regards to oneself nor to others, she was like a young woman of twenty – adult and responsible. She was virtuous and knew her Creator as much at twenty as at seven. At twenty, she was as wise as a woman of one hundred years, and conversely, just as at the age of twenty she was in possession of all her strength, so too at the age of one hundred was she in possession of all her mind and all her strength. Not that she had stayed at the same level all that time, but she had progressed from year to year, and although her evil inclination was strong when she was young, she put great effort into making it to the age of one hundred with the same virtues. Thus were the years of the life of Sarah.

Concerning King Saul, it is written, “A year-old Saul in his reign” (*I Samuel 13:1*). Concerning this, the Sages ask, “Was Saul really one year old? He was an adult! However, he was like a child of one year that did not know the taste of sin” (*Yoma 22b*). Such was Saul.

Man's goal in this world is to arrive at perfection, which is to say that his entire life should be, from beginning to end, without stain or sin. This can only occur if one progresses "from strength to strength." This is similar to a person that is born, grows up and becomes old: He is nevertheless the same person from the time that he is born until the time he dies. It is only his body and limbs that grow; the person remains the same. At the beginning of life his limbs are small, and later they are large. In the same way, man is born with a pure soul, and he must live his life from beginning to end without altering it. Even as his limbs and body do not change into something else, but rather slowly transform over time from that of a child to that of an aged person, so too must a man better his spiritual situation. He must become greater, progress in his knowledge of Torah, and increase his good deeds, similar to what is written: "And the man became great, and grew greater and greater until he became very great" (*Genesis 26:13*).

Sarah was at one hundred years as at twenty, and at twenty as at seven. She was at seven years old as at twenty, and at twenty as at one hundred, meaning to say that she never tasted of sin, but progressed without fail in her service of G-d.

This clearly explains why the verse repeats, "These were the years of Sarah's life." The life of Sarah was made up of years that had two aspects to them (in Hebrew, the expression *shnei chayei* can mean "two lives"). The word *chayei* has the same numerical value in Hebrew as the word *koach* ("strength"), which shows that she had acquired extraordinary strength during her life in this world. "At seven years old as at twenty" shows that when she was seven, she was as serious as a young woman of twenty who has a sense of responsibility, and that she demanded of herself behavior befitting that of a young woman. "And at twenty as at one hundred" indicates that at twenty years old she had the settled mind of an old sage, of which it is said, "the older they grow, the more stable their minds become" (*end of Tractate Kinim*) and "they become more and more wise" (*Shabbat 152a*). Wisdom increases with age, but the Torah witnesses of Sarah that at the age of twenty she already had extraordinary spiritual strength. Sarah lived an exemplary life.

Furthermore, Sarah possessed another character trait that is just as difficult to acquire. "At seven years old as at twenty" means to say that at twenty years old, she served G-d as a child of seven years, with great innocent faith, since a child does not have an evil inclination, and moreover the Heavenly Court only punishes beginning from the age of twenty (*Bamidbar Rabba 18:3*), meaning that it is as if a child does not commit any sins. In the same way, at the age of one hundred, at the age when an old woman is weak and without any strength, she served G-d with vigor as at twenty years of age, in full possession of all her strength.

The one who serves G-d in his old age with the same vigor as in his youth merits that which is stated: "Happy is youth that has not brought shame to old age" (*Sukkah 53a*). In his old age, he will not be ashamed of his youth. In extending this concept, we clearly understand that there are hidden sources of energy in every man, and that he

should realize his potential by the observance of the commandments and the service of G-d throughout his entire life.

Each man has natural strength, known and available to him, which he puts into practice so as not to profane Shabbat, not to steal, not to murder, to honor his parents as he should – things obvious to everyone. Yet in concert with this, there is the hidden strength of his soul, strength that he must awaken and put into use. He must also create and acquire strength that he does not naturally have. It is said concerning Rabbi Tarphon that when his mother's shoes had torn, he put the palms of his hands on the ground so that his mother could place her feet on them. Insofar as she accepted that he do this, this gesture demonstrated his mother's great spiritual strength, as well as demonstrating a great acquiescence on the part of Rabbi Tarphon, who begged his mother to walk on his hands. Despite this, when he fell ill the Sages told Rabbi Tarphon's mother, "He still hasn't arrived at half of what the law demands in order to honor one's parents." The Torah does not reveal the reward for keeping the commandments because each commandment, even the simplest ones, can be performed with immeasurable love and devotion. Therefore there is no reason to reveal the reward that follows for keeping a commandment. The same action can demand a great self-sacrifice or very little effort, and the Torah rewards the effort and the true intention, not the act in and of itself. It is not possible to know the reward, because the performance of a commandment can be without limit in its perfection. Man possesses hidden strengths that allow him to attain the summit of perfection, and everything that he joyfully adds by himself is appreciated and valued by G-d.

Concerning G-d, it is said that "in His goodness He renews each day, continuously, the work of Creation." In other words, the world ages according to natural laws, yet it is renewed and rejuvenated from day to day. In the same way, man has hidden strengths that are renewed each day. In his old age he can feel young. It is like a man on a boat who can no longer row because he has no strength left, the oars dropping from his hands. Then suddenly, drawing new energy, he seizes the oars and overcomes the waves to row the boat successfully to shore. It is the same with spiritual strength. Every man should draw from within himself new strength, for each man possesses the capability to renew his strength, in multiplying in himself that which he already naturally has. This is possible because he has received, along with his free will, the ability to do so. All depends on his will and the effort that he puts into maintaining and developing his natural strength.

It is not enough to study Torah and to perform its commandments. We are also obligated to devote all our efforts to it, in the sense of what Rabbi Israel Salanter, of blessed memory, said when he stated, "Putting effort into Torah, this is the sweat that actually beads off one's brow during Torah study." It is thus when we are really "occupied with Torah" and that we truly progress "from strength to strength."

When G-d wanted to give the Torah to Israel, He said, "Present Me with guarantors who will ensure that you will obey it" (*Tanhuma Vayigash 2*). G-d refused to accept those

who received the Torah as guarantors for themselves. He also refused the proposal of the Patriarchs, as well as the Prophets, as guarantors. However when Israel said, "Our children will be our guarantors," G-d accepted this guarantee and gave them the Torah.

It must be explained why G-d did not just say right away to Israel, "I will give you My Torah on condition that your children be guarantors," and why He waited until Israel themselves presented their children as such.

It seems that G-d simply wanted to give the Children of Israel the liberty of choosing their guarantors. If they really wanted to perform the Torah, they had the obligation to choose guarantors that would assure the continuity of its practice. If they truly desired the Torah, G-d wanted to demonstrate to them – by allowing *them* to choose their guarantors – that their desire should be sincere.

How do their children constitute a guarantee? Great certainty is required to make one's children a guarantee. A man is naturally prepared to sacrifice his life for his children, especially for an only child. However in this case, he is risking the life of his children by making them guarantors for himself, in the sense of that which it is stated, "[I visit] the iniquity of fathers upon children" (*Exodus 20:5*). Accepting that their children be their guarantors was a great risk that they took, yet it demonstrated their firm conviction to uphold the Torah. Being ready to put one's children's lives at risk reveals exceptional confidence that the Torah will always be observed.

### *Temporary Residence*

Let us examine Abraham's conduct at the time when he buried Sarah. Abraham said to the sons of Heth, "I am an alien and a resident among you. Grant me an estate for a burial site" (*Genesis 23:4*). Concerning this passage, the Maggid of Dubno notes that the verse contains a contradiction: If he was an alien, then he could not have been a resident, and if he was a resident, then he could not have been an alien. What did Abraham mean by saying, "an alien and a resident"? Rashi explains: "I am an alien from another land and I have settled among you."

It seems that Abraham wanted to convey to the sons of Heth (note that the word *heth* in Hebrew means "sinner") that all those who commit sins without any regret will die without repenting. They sin without remorse solely because they believe that they will inhabit this world forever. They do not give thought to the fact that one day they will die, nor do not see themselves as temporary residents who live in this world for only a set period of time. If they felt that they were temporary residents, that each day of their life could be their last, it is certain that they would want to vigorously correct their behavior and repent of their sins. That is the meaning of *toshav* (resident), which also entails the notion of *teshuvah* (repentance). Abraham said to the sons of Heth: "I am but an alien, a resident among you, and do you know why Sarah was always virtuous, even among the wicked in Haran? It was because she never considered this world as an

eternal dwelling place, but rather as a temporary residence. Sarah only saw herself as an alien in this world, which afforded her protection from the sins of the land.” The verse alludes to this by its brief expression, for the words *ger vetoshav imachem* (an alien and a resident among you) have the same numerical value, including the number of words and letters in the expression itself, as the words *Sarah tzaddeket* (Sarah is righteous).

Each person must not view himself as a resident. This will allow him to more easily conquer the evil inclination, for it always bothers those who settle down somewhere. Such was the case with Jacob, who planned on settling “in the land of his father’s sojournings” (*Genesis 37:1*) and on living in complete tranquility. In other words, he wanted to feel like a resident in a land where Isaac was but an alien. In order to save him from this mistaken belief and to make him realize that his father was in fact but an alien, Jacob was struck by the tragedy of Joseph.

On the other hand, people who are still in exile and travel from one place to another already live a difficult life. G-d does not overwhelm them with troubles that they are incapable of tolerating.

This is what Abraham conveyed to the sons of Heth: “Even though I am a resident of this land, since G-d gave it to me, I live my life as an alien and I have learned nothing from you, sons of Heth.” Without a doubt, it requires exceptional determination to live as an alien in a place that belongs to you! Moreover, Abraham asked the sons of Heth for a burial place for Sarah, as he said to them: “Grant me an estate for a burial site” (*Genesis 23:4*). Abraham reprimanded them and persuaded them to repent, as was his custom, by showing them just how they behaved. The sons of Heth lived in a land that was not theirs (since it belonged to Abraham). They were foreign aliens, yet they considered themselves as full-fledged residents, something that was audacious on their part. Abraham could have rightly chased them from his land, yet he only conveyed this to them in words. He behaved according to the characteristics of the righteous, for they say: “What is mine is yours, and what is yours is yours” (*Perkei Avoth 5:10*). As we know, kindness was Abraham’s essential characteristic (*Zohar III:302a*), and he renounced his rights to a portion of the land, to the point of telling Ephron: “If everything belongs to you, I want to pay you for the burial chamber.”

We can now understand why “each of the Patriarchs contributed something new to the world” (*Bava Metzia 87a*). Abraham asked that man be given signs of aging, which up to that time did not exist, as it is written: “Now Abraham was old, well on in years” (*Genesis 24:1*). That was something new. Isaac brought to the world atonement for sins through suffering (*Bereshith Rabba 65:4*). Jacob brought sickness: “Up to the time of Jacob, no one was ill, as it is written, ‘Someone said to Joseph, “Behold, your father is ill” ’ [*Genesis 18:1*]” (*Bava Metzia 87a*). Because of old age, suffering, and sickness, it is possible to rectify the world. How?

Abraham introduced signs of aging into the world. As everyone knows, a man can die at any time when he reaches an advanced age. Hence he inevitably feels like an alien in

this world, and it is in this way (when he sees that he is old and that death approaches) that he comes to repent. This is the meaning of *ger toshav*, an alien who repents.

Isaac introduced the phenomenon of suffering into the world. Even though a man may not yet be old, if he is overcome by suffering, he may remember that he is but an alien living in this world and thus repent. As the Sages said, “The one overtaken by suffering should examine his behavior” (*Berachot 5a*). He should not wait until he is old before mending his ways, for regrettably he may die before his time. Thus suffering also makes a man recall that he is but an alien in this world, and suffering makes him take to the right path, as the Sages have said: “Only by suffering does Israel take to the right path” (*Menachot 53b*).

Jacob introduced sickness into the world, for a man may become accustomed to suffering much like a poor person accepts his poverty and the fact that such is his lot in this world. Yet whereas poverty may lead a man to steal or lose his dignity, becoming sick will lead a man to remember that he is but an alien in this world and thus encourage him to return to G-d. The Sages expressly laid out the path to repentance so that people do not remain stuck in their sins, but instead understand what they have to do at all times. King Hezekiah hid his books that dealt with healing, a deed the Sages praised (*Pesachim 56*). Up to that point, those who were sick would consult these books and be healed of their illness. Hence they did not have to do the essential thing, which is repenting. Our Sages have further said: “All a man’s suffering is for his own good” (*Tanna D’vei Eliyahu Rabba 13*), which is to say that suffering and illness are beneficial for man when they make him remember that he is but an alien making his way through this world. Such a man with then pray and return to G-d with all his heart, and it is in such a way that he corrects his erroneous impression that he is a permanent resident in the world, that he will not die, or that life has no meaning.

The Patriarchs introduced old age, suffering, and illness into the world in order to teach us that we are but temporary residents here below.

### ***Sin is Crouching at The Door***

It is written, “[Abraham] spoke to them, saying: ‘If it is truly your will to bury my dead from before me...let [Ephron] grant me the Cave of Machpelah which is his...let him grant it to me for its full price....’ Ephron the Hittite responded...‘I have given you the field, and as for the cave that is in it, I have given it to you. In the view of the children of my people have I given it to you.... Land worth four hundred silver shekels, between me and you, what is it? Bury your dead.’ Abraham heeded Ephron, and Abraham weighed out to Ephron the price which he had mentioned” (*Genesis 23:8-16*).

The negotiations between Abraham and Ephron centered on the question of payment. Abraham offered a good price for the Cave of Machpelah, and for his part Ephron the Hittite offered him the cave with the field that surrounded it as a gift. Yet

in the end, “Ephron spoke much, but he did not fulfill one word of what he said” (*Bava Metzia 87a*), and he demanded 400 silver shekels for the cave, even adding: “between me and you, what is it?”

The commentators say that Abraham was only asking to purchase the cave that was at the end of the field, whereas Ephron specified “the field and the cave” several times. Why did he want to give him the field in addition to the cave, since Abraham had not asked for it? In the end, Abraham also purchased the field, as it is written: “And Ephron’s field, which was in Machpelah, facing Mamre, the field and the cave within it and all the trees in the field, within all its surrounding boundaries, was confirmed as Abraham’s as a purchase in the view of the children of Heth” (*Genesis 23:17-18*). Why, in fact, did Abraham also purchase the field?

To explain this, we must understand that impurity is always found in parallel with holiness, a growth that attaches itself and feeds off of holiness. If impurity does not find nourishment, it dies off and disappears. How can we effectively prevent impurity from nourishing itself? Through self-improvement, diligent Torah study, and sincere prayer – as well as through blessings said with proper concentration – impurity is prevented from nourishing itself to such an extent that it finally disappears. This in turn strengthens holiness and enables it to increase and spread. The Name of G-d is then glorified in the world, as it is said concerning Abraham, namely that he “invoked G-d’s Name and taught others to invoke it” (*Sotah 10b*).

We may explain that Ephron offered to give Abraham the field in addition to the cave for two reasons:

1. Ephron spoke much yet failed to do what he said, and nobody was more evil than him. To win over the hearts of the city’s residents (so as to be honored by them), he tried to show everyone just how generous he was by coming to the rescue of the needy. Thus not only did he say that he was going to give the cave to Abraham, he also consented to give him the field that surrounded it for free. This would greatly benefit Ephron, for everyone would extol him from that point on for having given the field and the cave to our Patriarchs.

2. Ephron wanted for his own name, Ephron the impure, to be forever inscribed on the cave next to Abraham’s, thus immortalizing his memory.

Abraham, however, understood Ephron’s wicked intentions and wanted to undermine them, which is why he refused his gift. Abraham wanted to uproot Ephron’s name from that place and, by paying the 400 silver shekels in hard currency, prove in the eyes of the whole world that Ephron was an ill-intentioned hypocrite. It was precisely in this way that Ephron’s name was cursed, as it is written: “The name of the wicked will rot” (*Proverbs 10:7*), and thus impurity would no longer be able to nourish itself with the holiness of that place.

Even though Abraham had no need for the field, he finally purchased it. However in seeing Ephron’s great brazenness – and disturbed by Ephron’s incredible impurity

– he did not want to be his neighbor and thus give everyone the chance to say that Abraham’s cave was located at the end of Ephron’s field. Such an association would have benefited Ephron, which is why Abraham immediately accepted to purchase the field along with the cave.

That being said, there exists yet another aspect to Ephron’s wickedness.

In the account of Sarah’s burial, there are six places in which the word “bury” appears immediately before the expression “your dead”. It is only at the end of the account that Ephron says, “and your dead, bury” (*Genesis 23:15*). After having concluded the sale, why is the order of the words reversed?

The people of the land spoke of Sarah with respect, and because of their respect they mentioned her burial before her death so as not to begin their statements with the expression “your dead”. Even Ephron, who was a wicked swindler, at first expressed himself with respect concerning Sarah. Nevertheless, in the end he revealed to his shame just how great his scorn actually was:

1. First of all, he declared before all the residents of the city that he was freely giving his cave to Abraham, but then he asked an exorbitant price for it, and in hard currency.

2. When he told Abraham what price he wanted for the sale, he disdainfully added, “and your dead, bury”. This disdain is typical of the wicked, who speak of the righteous with respect, yet in the end scorn them. As it is written, “Everything that is considered good by the evil is considered evil by the good” (*Yebamot 103a*). One must avoid such people like the plague.

This teaches everyone to “keep away from a bad neighbor” (*Perkei Avoth 1:7*), and to avoid receiving gifts from the wicked so as not to satisfy their wickedness and give them a reason to boast and exert control over others. In addition, such a gift will also have an influence on the recipient. However an upright man, because of the holiness of his prayers, can eliminate the impurity attached to a gift by making it his through a complete acquisition, thus effecting its repair.

The aforementioned concerns people who are simply mean. On the other hand, an upright man must refuse all commercial transactions with those who are evil – whose wickedness is more pronounced. The upright man must absolutely avoid receiving gifts from such people.

The power of impurity comes from the evil inclination, and we know just how powerful the evil inclination can be. It always finds a way to accompany a man and attach itself to him, as the Sages have said: “Today it [the evil inclination] says, ‘Do this,’ and tomorrow it says, ‘Do that’ ” (*Shabbat 198b*). This is an art to the evil inclination, and it is capable of convincing a person that in fact it only wants his good, that it only wants to help him, as if without it a person cannot live. A person must overcome the evil inclination in every circumstance and uproot it from his heart, even if this will cost him dearly, for in the end “the evil inclination is an old and foolish king” (*Ecclesiastes Rabba*

4:15), and one should not listen an old man who drivels on. We must avoid the fleeting pleasures that the evil inclination shines before our eyes and vigorously reject it and its advice. When we reject its arguments, we publicly demonstrate to everyone just how bad the advice of the evil inclination truly is. This is what Abraham did when he refused to accept Ephron's gift, purchasing the field and the cave at an exorbitant price in order to distance himself from Ephron as much as possible.

It is the duty of upright individuals to unmask the strategies of the evil inclination, which only scorns people by making them think that it is their friend, that it wants their good, and that it defends their interests. Its sole intention, however, is to gain a good reputation and to accepted. That was the very essence of Ephron, whose name is tied to that of Pharaoh, the "prototype of evil and impurity" (see *Zohar II:17a, 52b*), and who wanted to earn fame among the sons of Heth in order to more completely dominate them.

The Torah states, "Sin is crouching at the door" (*Genesis 4:7*), for when a person has the misfortune of allowing sin the smallest of openings, and when such a person listens to and heeds its advice, it follows that the Satan – the evil inclination (which first knocked at the door) – will come inside and take up residence there, eventually becoming the master of the house. However for the person who allows an opening to the word of G-d, He will open the doors wide and save him from the Satan, delivering him from impurity and consecrating him in the exclusive service of G-d. As the Sages say, "Open for Me an opening the size of a pin, and I will open it for you the size of a hallway" (*Shir Hashirim Rabba 5:3*).

### ***G-d's Blessing to Abraham is Valid For All Time***

It is written, "Now Abraham was old, well on in years, and the L-RD had blessed Abraham in everything" (*Genesis 24:1*). The Sages explain, "Wherever it is said, 'And the L-RD,' it means Him and His Celestial Court" (*Bereshith Rabba 51:2*). Therefore here too, G-d with His entire Court blessed Abraham. Why did the Celestial Court add its blessings to G-d's? It is because "With ten tests was our father Abraham tested, and he withstood them all" (*Perkei Avoth 5:3*), and also because "Abraham caused the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He, to be uttered by the mouth of every passer-by" (*Sotah 10b*). This is why he received a double blessing, one from G-d and another from all the angels.

We need to understand why it was necessary for the assembly of angels to bless Abraham. Was G-d's benediction not adequate to bless Abraham with all the blessings mentioned (see *Numbers 11:23*)? The Source of all blessings gives His own, yet that is insufficient?

To explain this, we note that in the natural order of things, no one born of a woman would have the power to overcome the ten tests of Abraham. Yet during his last test, the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham demonstrated that his love for G-d was so strong that it exceeded his love for his own son.

Abraham had proved himself. He eliminated his evil inclination in his words, thoughts, and deeds. The Satan wanted to prevent him from hearing G-d's voice and make him fail, yet Abraham defeated and drove him away. The angels observed all this and wanted to add their blessings to G-d's in order to make us realize that Abraham merited all the blessings that G-d gave him. The angels praised and also blessed Abraham.

The blessing of the angels for Abraham, in accordance with G-d's blessing, has an important and profound meaning. If Abraham's descendants would sin and be condemned by accusers, the angels would not join along with these accusations because they would remember Abraham's merits and become advocates for all Israel, in the sense of "Whatever happened to the Patriarchs is a sign to the children" (*Tanhuma Lech Lecha* 9). Abraham is a sign that his children are also blessed and cannot be accused, for Abraham's kindness and mercy protect them. Thus G-d will forgive their errors and erase their sins, and He will defend them in order to annul all their transgressions.

This also explains why G-d accepted that the angels should join Him in blessing Abraham. G-d is called the Father of Israel (as we say in the prayer "Our Merciful Father") and we are His children. This is why He is close to us, acting as our advocate, as is it written: "G-d is close to Israel" (*Esther Rabba* 7:17). Yet if He is close to Israel, how can He testify in our favor and act in our defense, since it is written: "Relatives cannot serve as witnesses for members of their own families" (*Makot* 6a)? This is why He uses the favorable opinion of the angels when Israel makes appeal to the merit of the Patriarchs, as the Sages have said: "Since when has the merit of the Patriarchs been exhausted?" (*Shabbat* 55a). Jews therefore benefit from the merit of Abraham for all time. G-d silences the accusers, for the angels also blessed Abraham and his descendants after him. They themselves become advocates for Israel and silence the Accuser and his cohorts. This is why G-d accepted the blessing of the Celestial Court along with the one He gave to Abraham and his descendants after him. The angels praised G-d for the blessings that He gave to Abraham and his children, who are called the children of G-d, as it is written: "Children of the Living G-d" (*Hosea* 2:1) for all time.

We may also find an allusion to this in the verse, "The L-RD had blessed Abraham *bakol* [in everything]" (*Genesis* 24:1). The word *bakol* has the same numerical value as twice G-d's Name, a reference to both G-d's blessing and that of the angels, who blessed Abraham and his descendants in G-d's Name for all time.

### ***Devotion to The Torah and Mitzvot Under All Circumstances***

On the verse, "The life of Sarah was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years" (*Genesis* 23:1), the Sages state: "At the age of twenty she was as at the age of seven in beauty, and at the age of a hundred she was as at the age of twenty in sin" (*Bereshith Rabba* 58:1). In other words, she never sinned in her entire life.

The Sages also state (*Bereshith Rabba 65:9*) that the Patriarchs introduced three things into the world: Abraham introduced the appearance of old age, as it is written: “Abraham was old, well advance in age” (*Genesis 24:1*); Isaac introduced suffering; and Jacob introduced illness, as it is written: “Someone said to Joseph, ‘Behold, your father is ill’ ” (*ibid. 48:1*).

If we carefully examine these two teachings, we will discover that they overlap. Each complements the other, and together they show us the extent of the power of self-sacrifice.

A young child is not so content to perform mitzvot and study Torah. It is true that he must carry out hundreds of mitzvot for his education, yet he prefers to amuse himself and play, to act immaturely. It is only when he grows up that he begins to understand the reasons for the Torah and mitzvot.

We see this with Sarah. At twenty years of age she was as beautiful as at seven. The Sages were obviously not referring to her outer beauty, but rather her inner beauty. From the age of seven she had acquired inner beauty – spiritual beauty in the practice of the Torah and mitzvot – that was as pronounced at seven as it was at twenty. It was in this way that she arrived at the age of a hundred, without any sins in the intervening years, for at one hundred she was as at the age of twenty.

We should draw an important lesson from our mother Sarah. She was utterly devoted to the Torah and mitzvot at all times, both in her youth and her old age. All her years were equally good, as the Sages explained. Yet what can we say of ourselves? We must learn from her example and study the Torah at all times, even in youth and even in old age, never tiring of studying it. We will then be able to say of ourselves, “Happy is our youth that has not disgraced our old age” (*Sukkah 53a*).

There is more. Some people feel that they can only study the Torah or perform mitzvot if everything is going right for them, when everything is running smoothly and without difficulty. It is only when they have money to live on, their children are in good health, and their business is prospering that their minds are free to study Torah.

What happens, however, when something goes wrong? What happens when someone is sick, when one is out of work, when a person faces numerous hardships, or when old age arrives and vision diminishes, weakness increases, and there is no strength to study Torah? Then the mind is not as clear, the intellect no longer works so well, the body no longer functions perfectly, and no desire remains to study Torah.

Nevertheless, this is not what we see with the Patriarchs. Abraham introduced old age into the world, Isaac introduced suffering, and Jacob introduced illness. What does this mean?

The holy Patriarchs have taught us that we must serve Hashem at all times and in every situation. When we find ourselves in a difficult position, we must nevertheless study Torah and accomplish mitzvot. Even if a person is already old and no longer has the physical energy to study, even if he is suffering from an illness and confined to bed,

and even if he is facing numerous hardships, he must still study Torah and accomplish mitzvot. Regardless of the difficulties that he encounters, a person must not give up! He must not lose hope! We cannot allow the evil inclination to infiltrate our beings and weaken us by saying, “You’re sick, you have enormous problems, you’re old – what are you doing with the Torah? Why are you torturing yourself?”

Absolutely not! Even in difficult circumstances we must overcome our desires and lead the war against them. We must learn from the holy Patriarchs and our mother Sarah, for in all her years she possessed inner beauty – spiritual beauty – serving Hashem even when old. We too must follow the same path and serve Hashem in every circumstance and regardless of age.

On the other hand, a problem automatically arises for every Jew: True, we must serve G-d in every situation, but how can we do so? How can we truly study and pray, all while performing mitzvot and good deeds, if we are in a weakened physical state? How can we serve Hashem when we are surrounded by suffering, illness, and worries?

The answer is simple. Concerning Hashem we say, “Who renews in His goodness each day the work of Creation.” In other words, the Holy One, blessed be He, renews Creation each day, and even that which is old becomes new. The same applies to man. The Holy One, blessed be He, gives each person the strength to renew himself each day, and if He sends him hardships, this is to encourage him to engage in some soul-searching. Yet at the same time, Hashem helps everyone to serve Him under every circumstance.

This, however, is something that we must want to do. If we truly want to renew ourselves, we will suddenly discover new strength, strength given to us as a gift by Hashem to serve Him with complete devotion. This will be our reward in the present world and the World to Come.

### ***The Elevation of the Emissary Who Completes His Mission***

Our parsha recounts the mission of Abraham’s servant Eliezer, which was to journey to Abraham’s home and find a wife for his son Isaac.

When Eliezer arrived at his destination, he encountered Rebecca near a well and presented her with gifts. Rebecca then returned home and told her entire family what had happened. When her brother Laban learned of this, he was immediately seized with a desire to steal from Eliezer. Scripture says of Laban: “When he saw the nose ring and the bracelets...he went to the man, and behold, he was standing by the camels at the fountain, and he said, ‘Come, O blessed of the L-RD’ ” (*Genesis 24:30-31*). On this the Midrash states: “When he saw the nose ring, he immediately went out to kill him. Realizing that something bad was about to happen, Eliezer invoked the Name of Hashem and levitated the camels over the wells, and then he levitated himself besides the camels. When Laban saw this, he realized that Eliezer was a *tzaddik*. Therefore he

said to him, ‘Come, O blessed of the L-RD,’ for Laban mistook Eliezer for Abraham, and in fact they looked the same. Although Eliezer was a descendant of Canaan, he was able to move from the category of the accursed to that of the blessed because he served the *tzaddik* so faithfully” (*Yalkut Shimoni 108*).

We need to understand why Eliezer levitated the camels in addition to himself. By levitating himself alone, Laban would have still realized that Eliezer was a *tzaddik*, therefore why include the camels as well? Also, how was it possible that Laban, who was a thoroughly wicked idol-worshipper, mentioned Hashem’s Name in saying, “Come, O blessed of the L-RD”? How could he be trusted? Even later on when he said, “The matter stemmed from the L-RD” (*Genesis 24:50*), are we to assume that he suddenly believed in the reality of Hashem, Whom he had completely denied up to that point? Even when Jacob would later dwell with Laban, he continued to practice idolatry and learned nothing from Jacob’s Torah, nor from the Torah of his sons and daughters. Yet here he suddenly believes in Hashem and invokes His Name several times?

Above all, we need to understand why Abraham made Eliezer swear that he would find a wife for his son from among his own family. Eliezer taught the Torah of his master to others (*Yoma 28b*), hence it is obvious that he would carry out Abraham’s instructions. How could it be, then, that Abraham had so little faith in Eliezer that he made him take an oath?

Let us try to explain this as best we can. When Eliezer encountered Rebecca by the well and gave her jewels, she returned home and told her mother what had happened. Upon hearing this, Laban quickly realized that Eliezer was carrying a great deal of wealth, as our Sages have mentioned. At that point, however, Laban suddenly perceived that Eliezer’s face resembled Abraham’s. This means that Eliezer had elevated himself so greatly that he eventually looked like him.

Since Abraham brought people to G-d (*Bereshith Rabba 39:14*), Eliezer obviously did the same, for he drank from the Torah of his master for the sake of others. Thus Eliezer succeeded in bringing Laban a bit closer to Hashem, and therefore Laban evoked His Name by saying, “Come, O blessed of the L-RD.” Consequently, when Eliezer perceived his own spiritual stature, his personal interests began to assail him. He had a daughter that he wanted Isaac to marry, since he had served Abraham faithfully and did not see why he should remain cursed forever.

Despite all this, Eliezer overcame his great trial. He paid no attention to his personal interests, and instead was happy to leave on his mission and carry it out. In fact he saw his error and realized that the reason he changed from being accursed to blessed was because of his loyalty to his mission, without which he would have remained cursed. Why did his face begin to resemble Abraham’s? It was because he was Abraham’s emissary, and as the Sages tell us: “A man’s emissary is as himself” (*Berachot 34b; Kiddushin 41b*). Thus despite the lofty spiritual heights that Eliezer reached, he continued to call Abraham his master (*Genesis 24:12*), meaning that he did not become proud on account of

his greatness. It is precisely for this reason that he merited having his words accepted in Laban's house.

We now understand why Abraham made Eliezer take an oath. It was not because Abraham did not trust him, but because he wanted to subtly tell Eliezer that he was still among the accursed, meaning that every blessing he bestowed would only be fulfilled if he faithfully carried out his mission. Therefore when Eliezer actually carried it out, his face began to resemble Abraham's due to his uprightness. That in itself enabled Eliezer to infuse a few thoughts of repentance into Laban's heart. We see a great principle at work here, which is that when a person ignores his own interests for the good of others, Hashem grants him success, just as the Sages have said: "Anyone who prays on behalf of his fellow when he himself needs that very same thing, he is answered first" (*Bava Kama 92a*). This is why Eliezer succeeded in his mission, even if (by bringing people closer to G-d and having become blessed) he himself was worthy of concluding a marriage between his daughter and Abraham's son. Despite this, Eliezer continued to faithfully carry out his mission and did not take advantage of his spiritual loftiness for personal gain.

Abraham's intention was to arrange a marriage precisely within his own clan – in which a mixture of good and evil existed – not among the descendants of Canaan, who were wicked sinners. In fact Eliezer followed Abraham's path in this respect by disregarding himself and thinking only of how to accomplish his mission in the right frame of mind. Hence in the end he merited leaving the category of the accursed and entering into that of the blessed. This applies not only to *shidduchim*, but to all things; it pertains to every task we assume. When we are only concerned with the other person's interests and what is good for him, we will be successful. From this we learn a very important principle in all areas of life: A person must not use his position for personal gain. Instead, as soon as he represents someone else, he must fulfill his mission with all the intention it rightfully deserves. We too will eventually be honored if we act as such, though we must not rush things in any way.

## *Parsha Toldot*

### *Esau's Hatred – Distancing Oneself From a Wicked Neighbor*

Regarding the Torah's account of Esau's request for a blessing from his father, we should really be a little surprised. The passage in question reads as follows: "And he also made delicacies, and brought them to his father. And he said to his father, 'Let my father arise and eat of the venison of his son....' And Isaac his father said to him, 'Who are you?' And he said, 'I am your son, your firstborn, Esau'" (*Gen 27:32-32*).

How is it that Isaac didn't recognize the voice of Esau, his eldest son, that he had to ask him, "Who are you?" We must ask ourselves how Esau dared to present himself as the firstborn, since he had sold his birthright to Jacob (*Gen 25:33*) and despised this right (*v.34*), something that surely didn't escape his father's attention.

We must also ask why Isaac told Esau, "Your brother came with deceit and took your blessing" (*Gen 27:35*). Isaac should have kept silent and not strengthen the hate among brothers. In effect, Esau's hate for Jacob became fixed after this incident: "It is a law: Esau hates Jacob" (*Sifrei Numbers 9:10*). It is a hate that we still suffer from today. For what reason then did Isaac, by his words, create such a situation?

If someone feels remorse over his sins and wants to repent, yet doesn't give his all to follow through on this realization and correct his sins, he definitely loses the image of G-d that is in him, and his behavior becomes ever more distorted.

It is possible to suppose that Isaac saw Esau return from the hunt and prepare him something to eat. However, here the Torah doesn't specify that he prepared a meal "as his father loved", which indicates that he sought to deceive his father, making him think that he had repented, which was clearly not the case. By deceiving himself and his father, he damaged his soul to the extent that it was no longer recognizable, to the extent that even his father asked him, "Who are you?" And when he replied, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau," he wanted to say: "I wish to take back my birthright, for I have repented of my scheming with all heart." In hearing this, "Isaac trembled with an exceedingly great trembling" (*Gen 27:33*), for "he saw hell open beneath his feet" (*Bereshith Rabba 65:22; 67:1*). The Sages tell us that "wicked men, even at the threshold of hell, don't regret their actions" (*Eruvin 19a*).

Isaac understood that there would never be peace between the two brothers, and so he preferred to separate them immediately. He asked, "Who, then, is he that hunted venison and brought it to me...?" (*Gen 27:33*). The word **וְיָ** ("who") has a numerical value of 50, and alludes to the 40 days of the giving of the Torah and the 10 Commandments that were given only to Israel. "This word designates the one who will later receive the Torah, which was given in 40 days" (*Menachot 99b*), and who accepted the 10 Commandments with love and fear. "This one preceded you and

brought me game – the practice of the commandments and good deeds – and I tasted the taste of the Garden of Eden and blessed him. And so ‘also blessed is he’ [Gen 27: 33]. I will not take back my blessings; they are transmitted to him as an unalienable gift.”

From the beginning of this incident until that moment, Isaac didn’t once mention Jacob’s name. The Emek Davar states that Isaac had not yet revealed to Esau that it was Jacob, for that would have constituted gossip. He had always hoped, and perhaps hoped even then, that Esau would truly wish to repent and accept that the blessings belonged to “he that hunted game”. Yet Isaac could discern that his words had no effect at all on Esau (the characteristic of wicked men is to remain attached to their wickedness; even at the threshold of hell they don’t withdraw). When “Esau lifted up his voice and wept” (*Gen 27:38*), it was not because he had lost his chance at eternal life, but rather because he had lost the pleasures of this world. And so Isaac revealed the reason behind his thinking: It was not right that these two brothers should live together. On the contrary, it was right that hate and profound animosity should separate them for always, a hate so great that it wouldn’t disappear or weaken even after many years. All this was in order that Jacob and his descendants not be influenced by Esau and his descendants. And so Isaac openly told him, “Your brother came with deceit and took your blessing” (*v.35*). He told him that it was Jacob who did it, thus putting an end to their fraternal love for thousands of future generations, and so forever separated the wicked from the righteous.

Prior to this, Esau had thought that, from then on, Jacob would be dependent on him for material possessions, and that he would serve him always. But then he heard from the mouth of his own father that Jacob didn’t only receive the world to come, but also “your blessing” – success in this world! In addition, since Isaac told Esau, “Behold, a lord have I made him to you” (*v.37*), and since “everything that a slave owns belongs to his master” (*Bereshith Rabba 67:5*), Jacob would therefore rule!

This greatly irritated Esau. If Jacob were to inherit both worlds (“he has supplanted me these two times”), what could Esau then do? He insisted that his father bless him as well: “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?” (*v.36*). In response, Isaac promised him that “when you strive, you shall break off his yoke from upon your neck” (*v.40*), but that “as long as Israel is tied to the Torah, he will not end up in hell” (*Shemot Rabba 51:8*), and “as long as Israel obeys G-d’s will, no foreign nation can dominate him” (*Ketubot 66b; Avoth d’Rabbi Nathan 34:4*). Yet, he continued, “if you see your brother freeing himself from the yolk of the Torah, you can declare war on him and win” (*Bereshith Rabba 67:7*), and so “you can free yourself from his yolk.”

This shows us that only the yolk of the Torah – its practice and study – protects Jacob and his descendants and prevents them from the influence of Esau. As our Sages say, “When the voice of Jacob makes itself heard in the houses of prayer and study, the hands of Esau do not dominate him” (*Bereshith Rabba 65:20*). If they unfortunately abandon the Torah, Esau will free himself from the yolk of his brother and will continue to

cause, as he normally does, Israel to suffer. As the Sages say, “in every age, Amalek serves as a whip for Israel” (*Bereshith Rabba* 19:11) – they strike him until he sincerely repents of his sins.

Such is perpetually the relationship between Jacob and Esau, be they his slaves or be they his rulers. This is what the Sages have said, namely, “If someone tells you that Jerusalem and Rome are both destroyed, don’t believe him; that both are prosperous, don’t believe him; that one is destroyed and the other is prosperous, you may believe him, for it is written, ‘I will be filled, for she was destroyed’ [*Eze* 26:2]. When one of them is filled, the other is destroyed, as it is written, ‘and one people shall be stronger than the other people’ [*Gen* 25:23]” (*Megillah* 6a).

We see, therefore, that Isaac bestowed a great blessing on his children by inciting this deep hate for Jacob in Esau’s heart. This was in order that they separate from one another, and that the children of Jacob learn not the wicked ways of Esau. This is how Isaac kept watch over Jacob and his descendants for all time.

### *You Shall Meditate on The Law Day and Night*

It is written, “And her days were full to bear, and behold, there were twins in her womb” (*Genesis* 25:24). The word תּוֹמִים (twins) is written without the letter *aleph*, and Rashi explains in the name of the Sages that “this omission indicates that one of the twins was upright and the other was ungodly” (*Bereshith Rabba* 25:24). This does not preclude the possibility of humbly adding another interpretation.

Concerning Moses, it is written, “Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights” (*Exodus* 24:18). Why does the Torah state “forty nights,” given that a day includes nighttime, as it is written, “and there was evening, and there was morning, one day” (*Genesis* 1:5)? This latter passage indicates that daytime is the continuation of nighttime. In that which concerns the Temple, nighttime is the continuation of daytime, together forming one complete day (*Chullin* 83a). On the mountain, Moses was in the presence of G-d, as during the Divine service. Yet one way or another, if it is already stated “forty days,” what is the need to add “forty nights”?

To explain this, it must be noted that it is natural to be tired at the end of the day; it is normal to be exhausted at night because of the activities of the day. It is natural to regain one’s strength and to become energized by a refreshing sleep. As the Sages say, “night was created for the sake of sleep” (*Eruvin* 65a). However this does not apply to Moses our teacher. On the contrary, for him the night was in everything just like the day, in the sense of the passage, “Night shines like the day; darkness and light are the same” (*Psalms* 139:12). For Moses, this was to the point that he felt no fatigue or nighttime weariness. This was because of his great desire to learn the Law from G-d’s very mouth.

The Sages add that when he was on the mountain for forty days, during the daytime he studied Torah in the presence of G-d, and during the nighttime he reviewed what he

had learned (*Shemot Rabba* 47:8). He did this in order to instruct the Children of Israel that they should reserve a time to contemplate Torah as much during the day as at night. If the Torah had not written “forty nights,” we could have thought that Moses, given his greatness and abilities, had in fact studied Torah most of the night, as it is written, “You shall contemplate it day and night” (*Joshua* 1:8), and that, despite himself, he perhaps rested a little and maybe even slept! This is why the Torah explicitly states, “forty days and forty nights.” It is in order to underline the fact that the nights were similar to the days, and that in the same way in which he diligently studied Torah with G-d during the day, he also studied it during the night, without feeling weary or tired.

Let us add to this that the will and desire to study at night, with mind sharp and eyes wide open, ensues from study during the day. The ability to fight against the natural hold of sleep and to study during the night is proportional to one’s efforts and steadfastness in Torah study during the day, and it is in this way that man achieves that which the Sages promised him: “The one who studies Torah at night is crowned with a halo of Divine kindness the next day” (*Hagigah* 12b). Moreover, the one who contemplates Torah at night (which is to say, in this world – which resembles the night) is encircled with a halo of Divine kindness in the world to come, in the world that is perfect and eternal (*ibid.*).

It seems to me that this can be applied to the verse that states, “Happy are those who dwell in Your House; they will yet praise You forever” (*Psalms* 84:5). What is the sense of “they will yet praise You forever”? The answer is that one who contemplates Torah with diligence during the day has an enhanced desire to pursue his study at night, and this allows him to overcome his natural fatigue. In such a case, G-d gives him the strength to continue doing so. Studying Torah regularly every day, at fixed times, allows a person to overcome fatigue and to continue with renewed strength, as did Moses who studied Torah during forty days and forty nights in the presence of G-d.

To say that “Torah weakens a man’s strength” (*Sanhedrin* 26a) is to say that study weakens the tendencies of his evil inclination and diminishes his natural desires. Yet Torah strengthens a man’s spiritual impulses, which allows him to once again tap the energy of his youth and to devote himself to study with renewed strength.

We know that such diligence, over and above that which stems from natural strength, is possible in the study of Torah, and we encounter it not far from us, with the Sages of our time. The Gaon Rabbi Haim of Brisk was visited one morning by a woman who wanted his advice. Having found him deep in his studies, she sat down and waited ... until the next morning – one entire day! She waited until the Gaon freed himself from his study to listen to her request. We have also heard stories of the extraordinary devotion of the Vilna Gaon, who slept but two hours a night! Only two hours!

This clearly demonstrates that diligence in Torah study on the one hand, and the individual help that G-d provides for those who make the effort to do so, on the other hand, engender one another. G-d’s help multiplies man’s strength, allowing him to continue to the next day, day after day.

The Zohar speaks of amazing things concerning those who push themselves to study Torah at night, describing how G-d connects Himself to them. We shall cite some of these statements: “The one who puts the effort into understanding Torah attaches himself to the Tree of Life” (*Zohar Korach 176a*); “Know the Name of G-d and free yourself from the prison” (*ibid. III:176a*); “The one who occupies himself with Torah in this world will find many gates open for him in the world to come” (*ibid. III:213a*); “The one who studies Torah during the day and night acquires two worlds: The higher world and the lower world” (*ibid. I:189b*); “He perceives the unity of G-d” (*ibid. III:9b*); “It is as if he is on Mount Sinai and receives the Torah himself” (*ibid. III:179b*); “He will die from G-d’s kiss” (*ibid. I:168a*). All this is to say that the one who overcomes his fatigue in order to study Torah brings joy to G-d, to the point that it is stated that G-d kisses him and says, “See what a being I have made in My world!” For such a man, “commensurate with the effort is the reward” (*Perkei Avoth 5:21*).

In opposition to Moses, who studied Torah forty days and forty nights on the mountain, we find in the Torah a character that is completely different. Even though it is not the subject here, the comparison between the two will allow us to explain and understand the subject that we have been dealing with up to now. The person we are referring to is Ephron the Hittite, the man who sold the cave of Machpelah to Abraham.

At first Ephron told Abraham, “You are a prince of G-d in our midst” (Genesis 23:6) and furthermore, “Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham ... before all entering the gate of his city, saying, ‘No my lord, hear me. I give the field to you, and the cave which is in it I give to you’” (*vv.10-11*). Apparently he acted with the formal respect due a representative of G-d, to whom he gave everything as a gift, free of charge. Yet when the time came to fulfill his promise, he revealed what his true intentions were: “A land worth 400 shekels of silver, what is it between you and me?” (*v.15*).

This shows us that Ephron, a cheat of Esau’s caliber, was lying openly. Just as Esau deceived people, Ephron passed himself off in public as upright and generous, yet this was in appearance only, as the end of the story proves. Ephron was one of those hypocrites “who speak much but do nothing of what they say” (*Bava Metzia 87a*), for their words are nothing but lies.

The world was destroyed by the flood as punishment for the crimes committed by men against one another. After the flood, G-d entered into a covenant with Noah, promising all the creatures on earth that there would never again be another flood. He designated the rainbow as a sign of that promise, as it is written, “I have set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth” (*Genesis 9:13*). If in the future G-d wanted to destroy the world again, “the bow will be seen in the cloud, I will remember My covenant between Me and you ... and the water shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh” (*vv.14-15*). There will never be another flood.

Ephron, through his deception and baseness, could have provoked another flood if it had not been for the sign of the covenant – the rainbow in the cloud – preventing

it. This is indicated in his name, עֶפְרָיִם, which (without the ו) would have a numerical value of 400. This number, added to the 400 shekels of silver that he extorted from Abraham, comes to 800, the numerical value of the word קַשְׁתָּ, the rainbow. The rainbow must have appeared in the sky when Ephron deceived Abraham in the eyes of all the people of the city.

What is the meaning of the word תּוֹמָם (twins), written without the א? Rebecca went to the Academy of Shem and Eber (Bereshith Rabba 63:6) in order to ask them about her future and the meaning of the jostling in her womb. They told her that even though she was carrying twins – which usually means that the children will resemble one another – her children were completely different than each other: “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples shall be separated from your insides” (Genesis 25:23). This one will journey on his path in the steps of Moses, who studies Torah day and night, and that one will follow the path of Ephron the Hittite, who deceives and pulls the wool over people’s eyes.

In decomposing the word תּוֹמָם (twins), we get תּו and מָם. תּו has the same numerical value as the name Ephron, which recalls Esau the liar. מָם doubled has the same numerical value as the name Jacob, a man similar to Moses, who studied Torah for forty days and forty nights without stop.

### ***Repentance is in Itself a Trial***

It is written, “All the wells that his father’s servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines stopped up and filled them with earth” (Genesis 26:15).

This is surprising. Nothing is worth more to people than the benefits of a well that satisfies thirst. How did the Philistines have the heart to stop up the wells that Abraham’s servants had dug for their survival?

A person who repents should not think that this repentance is enough to solve all his problems, or that now he will have an easy life and all the doors that were previously closed to him will be opened. The Sages tell us, “The Gates of Tears are never closed” (Berachot 32b) and “The Gates of Repentance are always open” (Eicha Rabba 3). The Gates of Tears and Repentance are open, but it does not necessarily follow that all the gates of Heaven are open and that it will now be easy for the one who has repented to mend all his ways. Reality proves that, on the contrary, when someone repents, it is just then that he must confront all sorts of trials. Sometimes these are so difficult and bitter that he risks falling even lower than he was before having taken the first step in returning to G-d.

Everyone should realize that the goal of the Satan is to capture and trap in his net the one who repents, otherwise that person represents a loss to the Satan. He therefore tempts him with all sorts of difficult ordeals – hardships dealing with his wages, his household, attacks from those around him, or personal isolation – to the extent that he

actually feels that doors are being closed before him. With superhuman obstinacy, the devil tries to sap and shatter his will.

Sometimes, it is even G-d Himself Who puts a man to the test. This is in order to wash away his past sins and make him experience His love, as it is written: “So as to afflict you, to test you, to know what is in your heart, whether you would observe His commandments or not” (*Deuteronomy 8:2*). Despite everything, a man’s love for G-d should not depend on a reward, but rather it should be a love that “is not dependent upon a specific consideration” (*Perkei Avoth 5:16*).

Based on what we have said, when someone repents and begins to mend his ways, he confronts a first test, namely the decision to not repeat his past sins. This occurs until, as the Rambam writes, “the Knower of all that is hidden testifies about him that he will never return to that sin again” (*Hilchot Teshuvah 2:2*). In addition, many doors will begin to close for him after he has repented, and therefore the very fact that he has repented constitutes one of his most difficult trials, for he must be particularly careful to insure that his repentance is sincere, like a selfless love.

We must raise another question. Concerning Abraham it is stated, “The souls they made in Haran” (*Genesis 12:5*), which our Sages explain as follows: “Abraham converted the men and Sarah the women” (*Bereshith Rabba 39:21; 84:2*). We must therefore ask ourselves what became of all these souls that Abraham and Sarah converted. Since the Torah does not mention them afterwards, did they disappear? This is quite surprising.

All the people that they converted disappeared as if they had never existed because their repentance was performed out of self-interest. These people thought that by attaching themselves to G-d, all the doors of Heaven would be opened before them and all their undertakings would succeed without problems, even faultlessly. They did not think that repentance is but a beginning and that they must continue to progress despite difficulties and accept Heaven’s yoke every instant without flinching, doing so until they have proved that they will not repeat their past sins. One must realize that it is the Satan who places these difficulties before them and who will not rest until he has caught them in his net. Without permanent effort, it is impossible for a person to succeed. Attaining a position in the World to Come demands a great deal of effort, and this is not achieved without difficulty.

The people who converted in Abraham’s time enjoyed great benefits while Abraham was still alive, yet when hardships began after his death, they were incapable of overcoming them. Their repentance was motivated by reward; their love was selfish. This is why they failed when confronted by numerous problems and why they ended up by returning to their previous lifestyles. They reverted back because they did not manage to overcome the trials of time. They preferred an unfettered life, one without problems, for they did not understand the primary meaning of the test of repentance.

During Abraham's time these people lived well, but after his death this comfortable lifestyle turned into pain and suffering. They therefore turned against Abraham's ways because he had led them to repent, which was now the cause of their suffering. These are the Philistines concerning whom it is said that they stopped up the wells that Abraham had dug (*Zohar III:302b*), the wells of living waters of Torah (which is compared to water – *Bava Kama 17a*), and which is called "life" (*Avoth D'Rabbi Nathan 34:10*), for they abandoned the yoke of their conversion. It is possible that they plugged these wells in order to erase all memory of Abraham, the one who had converted them.

Such is the gratitude of the wicked, as reflected in the statement: "Cursed are the wicked, for even the good that they do is defective" (*Bereshith Rabba 89:9*). Righteous men guide them along the right path and protect them, yet the wicked repay them evil for good. When they confront difficulties, they stop up the wells of living water, renounce the Torah – which is called a well (*Berachot 56b*), as it is written: "Well that the princes dug" (*Numbers 21:18*) – and they forget the kindnesses they have received, paying them back with evil.

Everyone should realize that not only is repentance an essential trial, but that life itself and its demands constitute one great and difficult test. Trials not only confront the one who repents; every Jew is continually tested at every occasion. Someone who during his entire life gives his goods to the poor, who supports those who study Torah (like the tribe of Issachar, who supported the tribe of Zebulun – *Vayikra Rabba 25:2*), and who gives a tenth of his wages to charity may all of sudden see fortune turn against him, resulting in a loss of all his possessions. Someone such as this may rightfully turn to G-d and say, "It is written, 'You shall surely tithe' [*Deuteronomy 14:22*] and 'Tithe and you shall be rich' [*Shabbat 119a*]. Yet I have given great amounts of my money to help the needy, I supported those who study Torah, and I was kind over and over, yet I still lost all my possessions! If such is the case, what became of Your promise?"

It is certainly true that losing all one's possessions is a severe ordeal, but one must overcome it because the pain that it causes can lead to giving up hope (G-d forbid). A person must accept this decree, for "the L-RD has given, and the L-RD has taken away. Blessed be the Name of the L-RD" (*Job 1:21*) and he should say, "You are just in all that has come upon us." He should strive to be, at every possible moment, one concerning whom it is said, "Who is wise? He who foresees events" (*Tamid 32a*). This means that as soon as he becomes richer, he should realize that this wealth is not his. Rather it belongs to G-d, as it is written: "For everything is from You, and from Your hand have we given to You" (*I Chronicles 29:14*), for it is He Who gives and it is in His power to take back. If He bestows riches, and if He has decided to withhold them, no doubt it is for a reason. It is possible that G-d has deprived him of his wealth in order to make him endure a hardship proportional to the greatness of his soul, this being so as to purify him and bestow more merit upon him. Or perhaps G-d has deprived him of his possessions well before he abuses them, for G-d has anticipated and seen that in the long run he would abuse his wealth. It is also possible that He deprived him of his wealth for having, at one time or

another, shamed a man of Torah, something that the Sages speak of: “Whoever scorns a man of Torah has no remedy for the harm he has caused” (*Shabbat 119a*). It is even possible that G-d made him rich at first so that he could correct some character fault, and now that he has corrected it, this wealth has been taken away from him.

The test of riches or poverty is one of the most difficult. King Solomon prayed, “Give me neither poverty nor wealth” (*Proverbs 30:8*), these two things being capable of leading a man to despair or stopping up the wells of the Torah. In other words, they can lead a man to rebel and revolt. One must grow stronger through these hardships, in the sense of the verse: “Do not throw a stone into the well from which you drank” (*Bava Kama 92b*). One must not deny one’s good deeds. On the contrary, one must realize that everything stems from G-d and that “we must bless G-d for the bad that occurs to us just as we thank Him for the good,” for we do not know how things will end up (*Berachot 54a*). The one who accepts this fact will continue to follow the right path, as it is written: “In order that you may walk in the way of the good and keep the paths of the righteous” (*Proverbs 2:20*). May G-d come to our aid.

### ***If A Person Merits It, His Work Will Be Performed by Others***

On the verse, “And Isaac sowed in that land, and found in the same year a hundredfold; and the L-RD blessed him” (*Genesis 26:12*), the holy Rabbi Yitzchak Zelig Morgenstern of Sokolov-Kotzk writes amazing things in his book *She’erit Yitzchak*, statements that we shall cite at length because we value them greatly:

“The Torah attributes the act of sowing to Isaac, yet it is certain that Isaac, who was sanctified as a consecrated offering (*Beresith Rabba 64:3*), did not perform mundane work himself, much like it is forbidden for an consecrated animal to perform any labor. Others did this work for him. In addition, Isaac – who had left the category of the children of Noah – had servants who were all gentiles. ‘A gentile cannot be appointed as the emissary of a Jew, so what he does cannot be attributed to a Jew’ (*Bava Metzia 71b*). Concerning the wells, it is once stated, ‘Isaac dug anew the wells’ (*Genesis 26:18*), and then it is stated, ‘Isaac’s servants dug’ (*v.19*). We must therefore explain why this act was once attributed to Isaac and once to his servants.

“This allows us to corroborate the view of the *Mahane Ephraim* (*Halachot Sheluchin 31*), who stipulates that a worker, even a gentile, can act in the name of his master. The *Shaar Hamelech*, in the *Halachot Trumot*, disagrees with him, advancing the view that if ‘Isaac converted people’ (*Beresith Rabba 84:2*), they had the status of Jews, which enables the deeds they performed to be attributed to the person who sent them. Whenever work is attributed to Isaac, we must realize that it means he had servants who performed this work in his name. Yet in these verses we still need to understand why this work is once described as having been done by his servants, and once as being done by himself.

“Besides this, we must stress that those who converted to Judaism during the time of the Patriarchs (before the Torah was given), even though they are called ‘converted,’

they retained their status as children of Noah with respect to the possibility of being sent as envoys. This is because we find nowhere in the words of our Sages that these converts lost their status as gentiles, excluding the Patriarchs themselves (*Moreinu HaRav Yaffe, Genesis 16:9, Vayigash 93:5*). As for those who believe that even the Patriarchs did not lose their status as children of Noah (as Ramban cites the French Sages in his commentary on Leviticus 24:10), this does not resolve our case (whether gentiles can be named as envoys), and the question again becomes why their work was attributed to Isaac.”

Rashi states, “Whoever studies Torah and submits to the will of G-d has the merit of seeing his work performed by others” (*Berachot 35b*). In addition, the one who studies Torah is himself like an offering (*see Zohar III:80b*), as it is written: “When a man among you brings an offering” (*Leviticus 1:2*). (Note: In Hebrew this may be read as, “If a man among you brings himself as an offering”). If it is stated that he himself is an offering, it follows that it is forbidden for him to do any work. If he devotes himself to Torah, he will have the merit of seeing his work performed by others, as Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said.

Afterwards it is written, “And Isaac sowed in that land, and found in the same year a hundredfold; and the L-RD blessed him” (*Genesis 26:12*). Should it not have stated that he had an abundant harvest *after* having been blessed? Certainly the idea here is that of a spiritual harvest, meaning that the observance of the commandments and the study of Torah are everyone’s seeds in this world, as it is written: “Of the one who studies, it is said that he sows” (*Sanhedrin 99a*). We find the same analogy concerning acts of kindness and obedience to the commandments, as it is written: “Sow for yourselves righteousness and you will reap according to kindness” (*Hosea 10:12*). The Sages explain this to mean: “That which we acquire is proportional to the effort invested” (*Bava Kama 17a*). Similarly, the 100 blessings that we must all recite each day (*Menachot 43b*) allude to *meah shearim* – a harvest 100 times more abundant than normal. This is because “each blessing has its measure” (*see Zohar III:271a*), and it was in this way that Isaac grew (*Genesis 26:13*) and progressed “from strength to strength” (*Psalms 84:8*) in Torah and the fear of G-d.

Isaac’s life consisted of trials. He was sanctified by the holiness of a sacrifice presented on the altar, which obligated him to refrain from all mundane work. In fact his holiness was greater than that of a Nazir, of whom it is written: “From new or aged wine shall he abstain, and he shall not drink vinegar of wine or vinegar of aged wine; anything in which grapes have been steeped shall he not drink, and fresh and dried grapes shall he not eat” (*Numbers 6:3*), whereas *all* work was forbidden to Isaac. This constituted a tremendous trial for him, for he had a great amount of work to perform and many possessions to oversee, as it is written: “He had acquired flocks and herds and many enterprises” (*Genesis 26:14*).

Isaac’s work was performed through the intervention of angels who acted in his name and as his proxies. It is written, “Isaac dug anew the wells of water” (*v.18*) because the angels that came to do his work were like him in the sense of the expression, “The one sent is like the one who sent him” (*Berachot 34b*); he is like him in every way. This

is why everyone thought that Isaac himself dug the wells, whereas in fact his angels had done so. This is because Isaac himself resembled an angel, for at the time of the *Akeidah* his soul departed and was rendered back to him with even greater spiritual standing (*Zohar I:60a*), as the Arizal explains. This is also why Isaac possessed the attribute of power (*Zohar III:302a*), for it is not easy for a celestial being to live in this lower world, as it is written concerning the “sons of G-d” (*Genesis 6:2*) who sinned in this world (*Zohar III:208a*). However Isaac surpassed them, and even in this lower world he managed to elevate himself.

The Torah states, “Isaac’s servants dug” (*Genesis 26:19*), which indicates that because of the merit of the Torah that he had acquired during his life, all the created beings of this world put themselves at his disposal and acted according to his will, to the extent that his work was done by itself, without it being necessary for Isaac himself to intervene.

We learn a fundamental principle from here. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai teaches that if someone has in fact the merit of occupying himself with sacred things – to cling to Torah and be filled with the fear of G-d – then his work will certainly be done by others, even by angels. We know that “the performance of a commandment creates a good angel who fully resembles the one who carried out the commandment” (*Zohar Ruth 92a*), which is his envoy. Rabbi Yishmael is not of this opinion, for “many people acted like Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, yet they were not as successful as him” (*Berachot 35b*). According to Rabbi Yishmael, someone who works a great deal (who wants to behave like everyone else, so as not to benefit from the Torah) loses his dignity, for all men are considered as an offering, as it is written: “When a man among you brings [himself as] an offering” (*Leviticus 1:2*). How can we both study Torah and work if we are considered to be as holy as sacrifices presented on the altar? Concerning the angel Michael, the Sages said: “He sacrifices the souls of Israel – the righteous – on the altar” (*Menachot 110a*), which clearly shows that they are considered as sacrifices. Would it be forbidden for them to do any work, since work is forbidden for an animal offered as a sacrifice? Is it really impossible to join Torah study to work? This is why Rabbi Yishmael believed that a person must apply himself to Torah study with fervor and thus attempt to become the pure sacrifice that the angel Michael presents on the altar to G-d. All the angels will thus be the envoys of those who attain the degree of Isaac’s sanctity. Every Jew should strive to become like Isaac, for “the acts of the fathers are a sign for their children” (*Sotah 34a*).

### ***Truth and Torah – The Purpose of Creation***

It is written, “You grant truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham” (*Micah 7:20*). How can the attribute of truth that was granted to Jacob be recognized? Why was it granted specifically to Jacob, and what is the deeper significance of this?

The Midrash states, “When the Holy One, blessed be He, came to create Adam, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and parties, some them saying, ‘Let

him be created,' while others urged, 'Let him not be created.' Thus it is written, 'Love and Truth fought together, Righteousness and Peace combated each other' [*Psalms 85:11, as interpreted by the Midrash*]. Love said, 'Let him be created, because he will dispense acts of love.' Truth said, 'Let him not be created, because he is compounded of falsehood.' Righteousness said, 'Let him be created, because he will perform righteous deeds.' Peace said, 'Let him not be created, because he is full of strife.' What did the L-RD do? He took Truth and cast it to the ground. Said the ministering angel before the Holy One, blessed be He, 'Sovereign of the Universe! Why do You despise Your seal? Let Truth arise from the earth!' Hence it is written, 'Let Truth spring up from the earth' [*Psalms 85:12*]\* (*Bereshith Rabba 8:5*).

First of all, we must ask why G-d asked the angels for their opinion, as it is written: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (*Genesis 1:26*). The Hebrew word for "Let us make" is in the plural, which indicates that G-d took counsel from the angels and asked them if He should create man or not. We must also ask why G-d cast Truth down, rather than Peace, since it too opposed man's creation. Rashi's response is brought by the commentary *Etz Yossef* on the Midrash: "Peace's opposition was not as serious an impediment as that of Truth." Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk said concerning this subject that "when truth is expelled, it necessarily follows that we make peace, for nobody can any longer claim that he is correct."

If we understand why Truth was cast to the ground, we will also understand why the attribute of Truth was specifically granted to Jacob.

We know that the world was created with the attribute of Truth, since it is G-d's seal (*Shabbat 55a*; *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 1:1*), and Creation confirms the existence of the Creator. The last letters in the words *Bereshith bara Elokim* form the word *Emet* (Truth – see *Ilana D'Chayei*, among others). Truth told G-d to create neither the world nor man, and that it was better to leave things as they were. G-d responded, however, that it was essentially and primarily for man that the world was created, for man is the goal of Creation in the Divine scheme of things. The entire world would be entrusted to man, and he would receive the Torah, which is Truth (*Yerushalmi Rosh Hashanah 3:8*), as it is written: "Buy the truth and sell it not" (*Proverbs 23:23*).

To say that G-d created the world for the Torah and Israel means that it was necessary to create the world, and man must of course be created with Truth – the Torah – in order to understand his purpose and the world can continue to exist.

Therefore Truth did not present a valid argument to G-d. If man had not been created, there would have been no reason to create the world, which is why G-d rejected Truth. However He did not reject Peace, for it may be that its argument did not refer to the Torah, but only to the fact that man would be quarrelsome, and *Shalom* (Peace) is one of G-d's Names (*Shabbat 10b*). Hence the reason why G-d did not reject Peace.

It is stated that Jacob "was a wholesome man, abiding in tents" (*Genesis 25:27*), which indicates that he studied Torah in the academies of Shem and Ever (*Bereshith Rabba 63:10*). It was specifically for men such as he that the world was created, for he was an

upright man, one attached to truth and who, according to Rashi, “did not know how to lie.” The fact that Truth was granted to Jacob is indicated by the word *ish* (man), the first letter of which (*aleph*) along with the letters of the word *tam* (wholesome, upright) together form the word *Emet* (Truth). Jacob is the purpose of the world, as it is written: “For the L-RD’s portion is His people; Jacob is the measure of His inheritance” (*Deuteronomy 32:9*). Jacob is also the “elect of the Patriarchs” (*Bereshith Rabba 71:1*). It was therefore appropriate that he be created and come into the world.

We now understand why G-d was so angry at Truth, which was opposed to the creation of man. Man’s creation was a good thing, since later on Jacob (whose primary characteristic was truth) would be born. The attribute granted to Abraham, namely Kindness (“Love” in the Midrash), agreed with man’s creation, which demonstrates that the merit of Jacob, the upright man, is sufficient to justify the creation of the world. This is because G-d desires the deeds of upright men, as it is written: “Light [alludes] to the actions of the righteous” (*Bereshith Rabba 2:5*). G-d finds delight and rejoices in seeing that the world is not lacking upright men, and the existence of the wicked does not diminish the pleasure that He receives from people who are truly upright.

We know that the world was created because of Jacob’s merit, since from him would descend the 12 tribes of Israel, “The tribes of G-d, a testimony for Israel” (*Psalms 122:4*). *Israel*, Jacob’s name that designates the entire people, is formed by the words *yashar* (upright) and *E-L* (one of G-d’s Names). This means that in every place and at all times, the tribes of Israel are witnesses to divine justice and wisdom. They testify to G-d’s justice, to His faithfulness in all that He does, and to His kindness in man’s creation. The attributes and the image of our father Jacob are engraved on the Celestial Throne (*Zohar I:168a*). This testifies to G-d’s kindness, charity, and justice in the creation of the world and man, and for its part the Jewish people recognize divine justice and testify that the world has a Creator. G-d was angry at Truth because it is precisely the attribute of Truth – the Torah – that necessitates and indeed justifies the creation of the world and man. The goal of Creation is the Torah, and man’s task is to observe, study, and obey its commandments.

### ***Pride Does Not Bring Blessings***

Before dying, our father Isaac wanted to bless his firstborn son Esau. How did he choose the time to bless him? The Sages say, “When a man comes to his parents’ age, for five years before and five years after he must fear death” (*Bereshith Rabba 65:12*). At that time Isaac was 123 years old, and he was unsure whether he should consider the age at which his mother had died (127 years). If he did take her age into account, he could possibly die in four years. Otherwise he would reach his father’s age. This is why Isaac wanted to bless Esau now, for he could possibly die in the near future.

However when we closely examine the blessings he bestowed, a crucial question arises: If Isaac believed that he would soon leave this world, why did he decide to bless

only Esau? Why did he not bless his younger son Jacob as well? Was Isaac unaware of Jacob's extraordinary character traits? Was Jacob less valuable than Esau in his father's eyes, even though Jacob was a righteous man who dwelled in tents – the tents of Shem and Eber – spending his time in Torah study? Why not bless Jacob as well?

There is something else we need to understand. We know very well, as our Sages have said, that these blessings were given on the night of Passover. Now if Isaac had already chosen to bless Esau, why did he do so on the night of Passover, a time consecrated to the Children of Israel, not to the nations, and especially not to such a wicked man as Esau! Isaac should have postponed the blessings to another time. Here the Torah wants to teach us a lesson for all times. We know that regardless of the sins that a person has committed before G-d – even to point of being filled with sins – G-d does not put him to death immediately. Instead He waits, allowing him time to completely repent, as the verse states: “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked should turn from his way and live” (*Ezekiel 33:11*). Furthermore, Hashem Himself carries out the verse, “Knocking! It is the voice of my Beloved” (*Song of Songs 5:2*), meaning that He knocks at the doors of the wicked in order that they wholeheartedly repent. Here we may ask how someone who is completely filled with sins, continuing to sin to the point that the forbidden seems permitted to him, can change his ways and return to G-d. How can he transform himself into a righteous person and come closer to Hashem?

We find an effective way of doing so among the works of our Sages, who said: “There is no man who does not have his hour” (*Perkei Avoth 4:3*), for certainly everyone has at least one mitzvah that he fulfills. Hence if an individual, even a wicked one, has one mitzvah that he fulfills with all his strength, and from which the evil inclination cannot dissuade him, that mitzvah can lift him out of the mud. Because of that mitzvah, the teaching “One mitzvah brings about another” (*Perkei Avoth 4:2*) will be fulfilled in him, and he will perform one mitzvah after another until he completely returns to G-d. However in order to wholeheartedly carry out that mitzvah, a person needs a push, some outside help. How can he get such help? The Tzaddik can procure it for him by infusing a little faith into his heart, a measure of trust in G-d, showing him that He created the world and directs it. The Tzaddik has the power to remove jealousy, hatred, and other defects from a person's heart, which will free him from the yoke of the evil inclination. He can then take upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven.

Such was the case with Esau. The Sages recount that one mitzvah was of great importance to him, one to which he devoted his entire heart and soul, namely the mitzvah of honoring one's father and mother. The Sages say, “When Esau attended on his father, he attended on him in royal robes” (*Bereshith Rabba 65:16*), which means that he possessed an effective mitzvah that could take lead him out of wickedness and allow him to mend his ways.

This is why Isaac, who knew that his son Esau possessed such an important mitzvah, believed that he could help him – through the merit of that mitzvah – to completely

repent of all his sins. He therefore wanted to bless Esau and bestow blessings upon him so that he might merit eternal life, a life of Torah.

Not only that, but Isaac also wanted to bless him before dying. That is, he wanted to remind him of the day of death. He wanted to teach him that the fate of all men is death, and that one should prepare himself in this world and repent. Isaac did not need to bless Jacob, however, because Jacob had always been filled with Torah, mitzvot, and good deeds.

What did Isaac do? He chose the very night of Passover – the night protected from the forces of evil – to bless Esau. By doing so, Isaac alluded to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, to the victory of Israel over Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, and to the freedom of the Jewish people. Isaac suggested to Esau that this was the reason why it was better for him to repent. There was nothing to be gained by living with a feeling of hatred for his brother Jacob, for that was the night of the Children of Israel’s deliverance.

However the wicked Esau was so immersed in his sins, as always, that he continued to despise his brother Jacob. He felt superior to him because he, Esau, honored his parents more than Jacob did. Thus pride made Esau lose his senses, to the point that he said: “When the days of mourning for my father are at hand, then I will slay my brother Jacob” (*Genesis 27:41*). Why did Esau plan on doing this? It was because he thought that he could take Jacob’s blessings after killing him. From here we see that blessings were denied to Esau because of his pride, which meant that he did not deserve to come closer to the Holy One, blessed be He, as did his brother Jacob.

All this teaches us a lifelong lesson to follow, namely the extent to which we must distance ourselves from pride and negative character traits, running from them as from a burning building. Pride can make us lose all blessings, for we can only merit them by acting with humility.

### ***The Importance of Exiling Yourself to a Place of Torah***

Our parsha states, “The children struggled together within her, and she said: ‘If so, why am I thus?’ ” (*Genesis 25:22*). Rashi cites our Sages in explaining the nature of this struggle: “When she passed the doorways of Torah study of Shem and Eber, Jacob would run and struggle to come out. When she passed the doorway of idolatry, Esau would run and struggle to come out.” The verse continues by stating, “She went to inquire of the L-RD.” Where did she go? The Sages say, “Surely she went only to the academy of Shem and Eber” (*Bereshith Rabba 63:6*), going there in order to learn of her fate. This is surprising, for why would Rebecca’s unborn children, especially Jacob, not struggle while she was in the home of Abraham and Isaac? Why did Jacob not want to get out when Rebecca was there, for there he could study Torah? We are familiar with what the Sages said in the Mishnah: “Exile yourself to a place of Torah” (*Perkei Avoth 4:14*), which means that a person only retains the Torah he studies by going elsewhere, to a yeshiva, and learning there under difficult circumstances. Such is not the case when

a person studies at home, in peace and tranquility, with all the material comforts of home. In that case it becomes difficult for him to acquire Torah. Such is the path that our fathers transmitted to the entire Jewish people: Exiling oneself to a place of Torah. We find something similar regarding Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, who did not want to exile himself with his friends to a place of Torah, but instead went to a place that was pleasant to live in. The result was that his learning vanished, for when he was called upon to read from the Torah, he erred by misreading every word (*Shabbat 147b*). In fact the Sages have said, “Do not rely on your own understanding” (*Perkei Avoth 4:14*), meaning that we should not think that we will do better by learning at home. Instead, we must leave for a place of Torah.

Assuming this to be correct, we can understand the story concerning Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma. He was asked by someone to come and live in his town, and as a reward he would be given a million golden *dinars*, precious stones, and pearls. Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma refused, however, saying: “Even if you were to give me all the silver and gold, precious stones and pearls in the world, I would dwell nowhere but in a place of Torah” (*Perkei Avoth 6:9*). This means that if he had been asked to go and live in a place of Torah, and to open a yeshiva and houses of study, *mikvaot* and Torah institutions, then perhaps he would have agreed. However he would not go and live in a place where the inhabitants only wanted the honor of saying that a great Torah figure lived among them, without acquiring Torah and the fear of Heaven from him. In that case their intention would only be to glorify themselves or exalt the fame of the wealthy individual who brought the *tzaddik* to them. He would not live in such a place, for that would not constitute an exile to a place of Torah. In fact nothing good would come of it, and it fuel a neglect of Torah, even more so if an abundance of wealth were involved. It is impossible to buy a great Torah figure with money.

Since we have reached this point, we can understand the matter of Rebecca’s two children struggling within her. Jacob did not want to emerge in the house of Isaac, his own home, because he wanted to fulfill the teaching, “Exile yourself to a place of Torah.” That is, he did not want to study in his own home in peace and tranquility. This is why it was precisely when Rebecca passed by the academy of Shem and Eber that Jacob struggled to emerge, for he wanted to exile himself there to learn Torah and elevate himself. [The Midrash states: “Jacob wished to live at ease in this world, whereupon he was attacked by Joseph’s Satan [*i.e.*, by troubles concerning Joseph]” (*Bereshit Rabba 84:3*). Actually, it was in his mother’s womb that Jacob decided to exile himself to a place of Torah, not to live in peace. So why change course?]

Furthermore, from the time he was in his mother’s womb, Jacob understood the meaning of the soul’s exile from the supernal world by living in this world. This also constitutes an exile. He therefore realized that he could fulfill the primary aspect of exile by leaving his home and going to study in a yeshiva. Hence he struggled to emerge in order to fulfill both exiles: The exile from the supernal world to this world, and the exile from home to study in yeshiva. It is not without reason that the Torah

says, “Jacob was a *tam* [upright] man, abiding in tents” (*Genesis 25:27*), for the letters of the word *tam* are the same as those of *met* (“dead”). That is, he was constantly like one who killed himself for the Torah by exiling himself to a place of Torah, toiling in its study with great effort.

We have already heard of cities that were devoid of Torah, yet by the merit of a *tzaddik* who exiled himself there, opened Torah institutions, and led people to repentance, many became Torah observant. This is perhaps what the Sages meant by saying, “Exile yourself to a place of Torah,” That is, exile yourself there and teach people Torah in order to lead them to repentance, that everyone should become Torah observant. Or they may have simply meant that we must exile ourselves to a place of Torah, for there we will have an opportunity to elevate ourselves even more.

The path that Esau took was diametrically opposed to Jacob’s. Esau did not struggle to emerge from his mother’s womb when she was at home precisely because it was a house of Torah, for he did not want to live in one. Thus even when his mother passed by the academy of Shem and Eber, Esau did not struggle to emerge. He only wanted to be a hunter, as it is written: “Esau was a man skilled in hunting, a man of the field” (*Genesis 25:27*). Hence even in the home of Abraham, Esau did not struggle to emerge from his mother’s womb, for he did not want the Torah of Abraham. He only yearned to emerge near places of idolatry.

At this point we can say that the main reason Rebecca went to consult Shem and Eber was to ask them about her destiny. She had no difficulties with regards to Jacob, for he did not make her suffer much. On the contrary, she rejoiced in the pains that came from her unborn child struggling to emerge near a yeshiva, proving that he was a *tzaddik* and desired to exile himself to a place of Torah, not to live in comfort. In fact there is no greater satisfaction for parents than to see their sons becoming Torah scholars, yearning to acquire Torah in a yeshiva by working for it, as the Sages have said: “The more sitting down [to study], the more wisdom” (*Perkei Avoth 2:7*). Thus in self-annulment and scarcity they take upon themselves the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven.

From here we learn just how important it is to exile ourselves to a place of Torah. When we go elsewhere to learn, the heart becomes more open to the Torah, and in turn the Torah becomes easier to attain. May Hashem help us in opening our eyes to the Torah and to serve Him with all our hearts. Amen, may it be so.

## *Parsha Vayeitzei*

### *Who is Strong? He Who Subdues His Evil Inclination*

When Jacob “rolled the stone from the mouth of the well” (*Gen 29:10*), our Sages tell us that he did it as easily as “someone who uncorks a bottle” (*Bereshith Rabba 70:12*), which shows us just how strong Jacob was.

Some questions may be asked here:

Q1. It is written, “When Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban, his mother’s brother, Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well.” Why didn’t he do this sooner? Why only when Rachel came with the flock?

Q2. If Jacob was in fact so strong, why didn’t he fight when Eliphaz, acting on his father Esau’s orders (*Sefer Hayashar, Vayeitzei*), chased him in order to kill him?

There are several possible answers to this second question:

A1. If Jacob had killed Eliphaz, Esau’s hate would have been further fueled, and he would never have forgiven him for this crime.

A2. We know that Eliphaz had grown up with the Patriarch Isaac and was raised in the way of Torah (*Sefer Hayashar, ibid.*). The Sages add that Eliphaz, Esau’s son, was a virtuous man, and not only that, but he possessed Divine inspiration (*Devarim Rabba 2:13*). If he were to have killed him, Jacob would have inflicted great pain on Isaac, which is why he didn’t do so.

A3. The fact is, Jacob wanted to see if Eliphaz would be satisfied in only taking his possessions, while leaving him alive. And this is precisely what happened. If, however, Eliphaz would not have been content in only taking his possessions, it is highly probable that Jacob would have fought him.

A4. Actually, Jacob could have fought, but G-d wanted to hand his possessions over to Eliphaz. This is clear by the fact that, despite the blessings that Jacob received from his father and the promises made to him by G-d, Eliphaz nevertheless pursued him with intention to kill. This occurred because G-d didn’t want Jacob to become wealthy through his father’s inheritance, but rather from what G-d would give him.

A5. Finally, Jacob wanted to reduce the severity of the decrees that would be levied against his descendants over the course of the generations, since “the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children” (*Sotah 34a*). In the case where the descendants of Esau would want to harm the Children of Israel, they would only be able to harm their possessions, not they themselves. They would only be able to take their goods, not extinguish their lives.

This is also the answer to the first question. Jacob didn’t demonstrate such great strength until Rachel approached with her flock because he wanted her to see him and

tell Laban her father just how strong he was, and thus discourage him from warring against him. On the contrary, it was preferable to have him keep the flock, which he would watch over day and night.

There is a lesson to be learned here concerning Jacob's strength. When a man is weak and doesn't have the courage to fight the evil inclination that burns inside him, he thereby falls into its trap. Just as Jacob removed the rock from the mouth of the well, everyone can learn from him how to strengthen himself in the study of Torah (*Torat Hacohanim Vayikra 26:3*) and to evade the evil inclination, which is called a "rock" (*Sukkah 52a*). Jacob possessed the strength that the Torah provides, a strength that, as our Sages say, is compared to a well of living waters: "The Torah is called 'life'. It is an elixir of life for all parts of the body." The Sages add: "If you encounter this scoundrel, drag him along to the house of study; if he is of rock, he will be shattered; if he is of iron, he will be melted, as it is said, 'Behold, My word is like fire – the word of the L-RD – and like a hammer that shatters a rock' [*Jer 23:29*]" (*Sukkah 52b*). Such is the power of the Torah.

### ***Progressing Step by Step in the Service of G-d***

It is written, "And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set earthward and its top reached heavenward" (*Genesis 28:12*). Concerning this subject, the commentators say that the ladder symbolizes man, who is placed on earth, standing on his own two feet. By the strength that he acquires, he can reach the heights of heaven.

Let us explain this concept. If the Torah wants to make us understand that man, well attached to the earth both by his physical and terrestrial nature, is capable of soaring and acquiring a level of spirituality akin to that of the angels, why does it tell us this by showing Jacob a ladder? Why not show him that he himself can make it to the heavens? What is the exact nature of the ladder?

It should be noted that a ladder is made of rungs that allow one to ascend – or to descend – which would be impossible without these steps. This means that to attain these heights, a man is forced to put himself in danger and to take it upon himself to make an effort to climb, for the service of G-d is a progressive ascent. The one who climbs the rungs gets tired and becomes short of breath. He groans as much for the effort that he has to put in so as to continuing climbing, as for the time that it takes before reaching the goal (which is contrary to climbing down, which requires little effort or time). All this is because the goal that he aspires to – the top of the ladder – is still far away. In the same way, the one who wants to progress and attain spiritual goals should advance upwards with his own strength, progressively, and elevate himself in stages. It is precisely by a progressive elevation on the ladder of perfection that one can make it to the top. We find the following instruction several times in the Talmud: "Rabbi Pinchas Ben Yair said, 'Torah leads to prudence, prudence leads to diligence, diligence leads to cleanliness, cleanliness leads to separateness, separateness leads to purity, purity leads to piety, piety leads to humility, humility leads to fear of sin, fear of sin leads to holiness,

holiness leads to the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit leads to the resurrection of the dead. And piety is the greatest quality of all' ” (*Shekalim 6a*). In books of ethics, this teaching is called “The Ladder of Rabbi Pinchas Ben Yair,” and it serves as the foundation for Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzato’s book *Messilat Yesharim*, concerning which the Vilna Gaon said that there was not one superfluous word to be found therein.

The word מַלְאכָה (ladder) has a numerical value of 130, which points to the 130 years that Adam separated himself from his wife Eve (*Eruvin 18b*) after having eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge. Adam wanted to separate himself from material things, so much was he mortified after having brought death into the world. This separation allowed him to be called “pious” (*Eruvin 18b; Zohar III:76b*). This teaches us that to attain the degree of piety which is the summit of the ladder (since piety is the greatest of qualities on Rabbi Pinchas Ben Yair’s ladder), a man should separate himself as much as possible from the desires of this world in order to make them meaningless to him. In this way, he will be able to elevate himself ever more in the rungs of sanctification, and after having successfully climbed every rung that leads to piety, he will reach the height of perfection.

Jacob’s ladder – and its secret – represents a progressive march, a step-by-step climb that allows one to attain ever greater heights, until reaching the virtue of piety and the resurrection of the dead.

We should also mention that the verse which states, “and behold, angels of G-d were ascending and descending on it” (*Genesis 28:12*) teaches us that abandoning the lures and temptations of this world is so difficult that, despite himself, man “ascends and descends” – there are rises and there are falls. But a man should not panic, nor should he get discouraged, for it is written right afterwards, “the L-RD was standing over him” (*v.13*). If a man understands that G-d is standing above him, that He is there to support him despite his falls (failures that are due to the fact that man is “on the earth,” attached to material and earthly things), he will realize that G-d will always be there to help him climb to ever higher levels and to make it to the highest rungs, allowing him to reach the very heavens.

Nevertheless, a man risks becoming discouraged and telling himself, “How is it possible that a being such as myself – a creature of flesh and blood, dust and ashes, and sunk in materialism – can climb and attain the level of an angel in heaven?” Yet this thought should not bother him or create impediments in his mind. He should realize that G-d loves him and will not abandon him, but that He demands ever more effort from him. It is clear that this is not an easy thing to achieve because the evil inclination stands on the lookout and “everyday tries to kill the righteous man” (*Kiddushin 30b*). The evil inclination tries to catch man in the net that it throws for him, and to make him fall to the lowest levels. A man should guard himself from these dangers, knowing that G-d watches over him and calls him to serve and honor Him with all his heart.

In fact, we see that Jacob elevated himself progressively, even above the angels, as during the fight with Esau’s ministering angel (*Chullin 91a*). He defeated the latter and said

to him, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (*Genesis 32:27*), and the angel could not leave without Jacob’s permission: “He said to him, ‘let me go’, and the one who sends is greater than the one who is sent” (*Bereshith Rabba 78:2*). Furthermore it is written, “You fought against the heavenly powers and you defeated them; you fought against the earthly powers and you defeated them. The heavenly powers refer to the Esau’s angel” (*ibid. 78:6*).

It seems necessary for us to read the passage which states, “And you shall spread to the west and to the east, and to the north and to the south” (*Genesis 28:14*), which Rashi explains as: “ ‘And you shall spread’ – you shall be powerful,” powerful in your service of G-d. Rabbi Chiya explains the verse that states, “Bless the L-RD, O His angels; the strong warriors who do his bidding” (*Psalms 103:20*) as follows: “ ‘His angels’ are those upright men of the earth who are, in the eyes of G-d, like heavenly beings, for they heroically overcome their desires, as a courageous man overcomes his enemies ... and henceforth who can stand by their side, other than those who are sanctified, and whom the Divine Presence never leaves?” (*Zohar 190a, 108*).

“The entire world receives its sustenance because of righteous men” (*Zohar III:216a*). When Israel walks in the ways of Torah and “your people will all be righteous” (*Isaiah 60:21*), all the prosperity they receive from on high is rightfully theirs, and the nations of the world also rejoice, thanks to Israel (*Zohar III:147b*). In such a case, the Children of Israel, who as we know have the status of the “sons of the King” (*Shabbat 67a*), are like the King himself, who opens the way (*Pesachim 110b*), going from the front and uniting everything that they undertake, for everything was created for them and their merit. This allows us to understand what G-d told Jacob: “And you shall spread” (*Genesis 28:14*) – you will have the strength to rise and to elevate yourself on the ladder of perfection, and this will allow you to receive that which was promised to you; “And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you” (*ibid.*) – all the peoples will be blessed and rejoice in the prosperity that stems from you.

It would be disastrous if the situation were otherwise, if the Jewish did not follow the ways of Torah and justice, for then the nations of the world would receive all the good destined for Israel. Thanks to upright behavior, we can dominate our own desires as much as we can dominate our enemies, and we can elevate ourselves on the ladder of perfection until we reach the virtue of piety and the resurrection. As it is written, “Who is the pious man? The one who shows himself to be pious towards his Creator” (*Zohar Mishpatim 114b; Pinchas 222b*). G-d stands by his side and watches over him, and He helps him to climb the rungs and to elevate himself ever higher.

### ***Diligence in Torah Study Enables Personal Growth***

It is written, “And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set earthward and its top reached heavenward. And behold, angels of G-d were ascending and descending on it” (*Genesis 28:12*). The Midrash comments on this verse as follows: “Rabbi Berachiah said in

the name of Rabbi Meir, ‘This teaches us that G-d showed Jacob the ministering angel of Babylon ascending and descending, the one of Media ascending and descending, the one of Greece ascending and descending, and the one of Edom ascending. ... Jacob was then overtaken with fear and asked, “Just as they have fallen, will I fall?” G-d told him, “Do not fear, Israel. If you ascend, you will not fall.” But he did not have faith and he did not ascend. ... G-d then told him, “If you had had faith and ascended, you would not have fallen. However, since you did not have faith and you did not ascend, your children will be enslaved in this world to these four kingdoms” ’ ” (*Bereshith Rabba* 68:21).

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler of blessed memory, author of the book *Michtav Me-Eliyahu*, asked the following question: “How is it possible that Jacob, raised among the Patriarchs, did not have faith in G-d’s word? For in the end G-d Himself guaranteed Jacob that if he would ascend he would not fall, and that he would not be like the other nations of the world that ascended and fell. Why did Jacob not have faith in G-d and in His word?”

Another question must be raised. Concerning the verse that states, “And Jacob settled in the land of his father’s sojournings” (*Genesis* 37:1), Rashi cites the Midrash as follows: “Jacob wanted to live in peace, and this is why the tragedy of Joseph was brought upon him. G-d said, ‘Is the reward reserved for the righteous in the World to Come not enough for them, that they also demand to live in peace in this world?’ ” (*Bereshith Rabba* 84a). In fact, “Jacob suffered all the days of his life, and barely had the suffering caused by Dinah abated, that the tragedy concerning Joseph occurred, and then that of Shimon. ... Jacob endured great suffering” (*Tanhuma Mikeitz* 10). Why was he struck by the tragedy of Joseph? Why did G-d not allow Jacob to live in peace for a short time in this world? Why overwhelm him with the loss of Joseph?

If G-d did not want Jacob to experience tranquility, why did He make him suffer a tragedy like that of Joseph as opposed to another one, for finally G-d has many means available to Him. Hence why choose that one in particular? What is the meaning of this?

We must understand that G-d had His reasons for preventing Jacob from living in peace in this world.

Concerning the verse that states, “If you follow My decrees...” (*Leviticus* 26:3), the Sages say that this refers to Torah study (*Torat Kohanim ad loc.*), and concerning the verse that states, “The working spirit works for itself” (*Proverbs* 16:26), the Sages say: “He works on one hand, and the Torah works for him on the other” (*Sanhedrin* 99b). In other words, a man should strive to understand Torah, and this will allow him to advance in the attainment of the most sublime traits. It will also prevent him from forgetting what he has learned, as it is written, “The one who studies but does not review what he has learned is like one who sows but does not reap” (*ibid.* 99a); that is, he forgets what he has learned. G-d knew that Jacob yearned for a little tranquility in this world in order to study Torah in peace, without effort. He did not allow this to happen because Torah is only retained if one diligently strives to learn it, not if it is easily acquired. Hence Jacob was struck

with the tragic loss of Joseph, and because of the tragedies and losses that he suffered, he reflected upon his own ways, as the Sages have said: “If a person cannot attribute the cause of his misfortune to his deeds, let him attribute them to his neglect of Torah study” (*Berachot 5a*). Thus Jacob reflected upon his ways and, having found no fault therein, he attributed his suffering to a neglect of Torah study, meaning an absence of diligence in study. Far be it from us, however, to suggest that an actual lack of diligence was found with Jacob – he whom the Torah testifies was “a wholesome man, abiding in tents” (*Genesis 25:27*) – and who never in his life abandoned Torah. Yet given his greatness, if he studied it in ease, it is as if he acquired nothing, for “G-d is very demanding with those close to Him” (*Yebamot 121b*). This is the reason why G-d struck him with the tragic loss of Joseph, and it explains why G-d did not want Jacob to live in tranquility in this world (which answers our second question).

When G-d invited Jacob to ascend the ladder, He assured him that he would not fall if he climbed up. Jacob understood that G-d would help him and give him the strength to continually progress, but this also meant that he would not be climbing on his own. This is because Jacob took after his grandfather Abraham, concerning whom it is said, “Walk before me and be perfect” (*Genesis 17:1*). This means that Abraham progressed on his own, contrary to Noah, of whom it is said: “Noah walked with G-d” (*Genesis 6:9*). The Sages explain this to mean that “Noah needed help, encouragement, and support, but Abraham progressed by himself, with his own strength” (*Bereshith Rabba 30:10*). This is because a man’s primary efforts should be devoted to advancing by his own means, without counting on G-d’s help. Similarly, the Vilna Gaon refused to learn Torah with Elijah the prophet, preferring instead to learn by himself.

This is also what Jacob thought. He wanted to ascend the ladder on his own. And G-d, seeing that Jacob refused His help in order to bring his own strength into play, said to him, “Your descendants will be enslaved to four kingdoms.” They would be exiled, for it is in exile that one is pursued, and it is then that a person must learn to overcome all obstacles and elevate himself through his own strength, without G-d’s help. This explains the question raised by Rav Dessler of blessed memory. We see that Jacob in fact strived to study Torah throughout his life despite the fact that he was constantly pursued.

We can now answer our third question. Why was Jacob struck by the tragedy of Joseph, rather than by another misfortune? It was precisely because G-d said to Jacob, “You have chosen to advance by means of your own effort, without My help? In that case, what do you need with a life of tranquility? Joseph’s disappearance will mark the beginning of the exile. The exile will begin right now, and henceforth you can serve G-d with your own strength, just as you desired.”

We find a confirmation of the need to advance by means of our own effort with Joshua, the servant of Moses our teacher. It is stated, “Three thousand paragraphs of the law were forgotten during the time of mourning for Moses” (*Temurah 15b, 16a*). Why did this

occur? It was because Joshua wanted G-d's help. He yearned to receive the abilities of his teacher Moses, and he did not seek to elevate himself on his own. We also find the following in the Midrash: "When Moses passed away, Joshua mourned excessively and cried bitterly. G-d told him, 'Why are you mourning? It is I Who should mourn. As for you, go and lead the people in the way of Torah' " (*Yalkut Me'am Loez, Devarim 34:5*). Although it is necessary to mourn for the righteous who have passed away, we know that prolonged mourning can potentially make us lose hope in G-d. On the contrary, immediately after seven days of mourning, a person should arm himself with courage and pursue the study of Torah. The one who mourns for too long loses more than he gains, as was the case with Joshua, who forgot 3,000 paragraphs of the law.

Mourning must not be carried on for too long. Neither should one rely on the support of upright men who are like guides and Divine helpers, for each person should advance by himself and elevate himself through his own effort and practice. It is in this way that one will merit all good things, in this world and in the World to Come.

### ***The Temple: Source of Israel's Prosperity***

It is written, "He lighted upon the place, and tarried there all night...and he dreamed, and behold: A ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of G-d ascending and descending on it. ... Jacob awoke out of his sleep...and he was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of G-d, and this is the gate of heaven' " (*Genesis 28:11-17*).

Jacob rested when he reached this holy place, the Temple Mount (*Chullin 91b*), and in his dream he saw a ladder whose feet were set up on earth and whose summit reached the sky, with angels climbing up and down the ladder. In his dream G-d promised him, "Your offspring shall be as the dust of the earth" (*Genesis 28:14*), but it was only upon awakening that he realized the holiness of that place, since he said: "This is none other than the house of G-d."

This incident is difficult to understand, and indeed even surprising.

1. Why did Divine Providence bring Jacob to sleep in the exact location of the Temple, rather than in another place? In addition, since G-d could just as well have revealed Himself to Jacob anywhere, why did He choose to do so in that exact spot?

2. We also need to understand and explain the connection that exists between the ladder on which the angels ascended & descended and G-d's promise to Jacob: "The ground upon which you are lying, to you will I give it and to your descendants" (*Genesis 28:13*). What did G-d want to convey to him by this?

It was G-d's will that Jacob, "the chosen of the Patriarchs" (*Bereshith Rabba 76:1*), should rest precisely in the spot where the Temple would later be built. This was done in order for us to realize through whose merit Jews enter the Temple, approach the Holy of Holies, and connect themselves to G-d. It was also to make us understand that

prosperity, blessings, and success originate from that location. Likewise, on that same night Jacob enjoyed a spiritual and physical elevation by sleeping there (after having lived 14 years without sleep), as the Sages said: “Jacob slept in only that place, for he never slept during the 14 years he spent in the academy of Shem and Ever” (*Bereshith Rabba* 68:11) because he studied without stop.

In fact, after having sensed the holiness of that place, Jacob was gripped with fear and exclaimed, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of G-d, and this is the gate of heaven.” In other words, such an abundance of holiness and purity could only be found in the Temple, and thus Jacob understood that from there – from that spot destined for the Temple – sprang the source of all holiness. Those who would come to visit it would bathe in the holiness of “the house of G-d” – the Sanctuary – and the hearts of Israel would remain drawn and connected to G-d and be sanctified. (Note that the word *Mishkan* [“Sanctuary”] and the word *moshech* [“to draw”] share the same root). “This is the gate of heaven” means that the Temple (and the merit it procures for us) elevates, sanctifies, and connects us to the Torah, which is acquired by 48 ways (*Perkei Avoth* 6:6; *Kallah* 8). When a person attaches himself to his Creator, he enjoys a supreme feeling of elevation and becomes similar to the “ladder set up on the earth” and whose top “reached to heaven,” and he elevates himself ever higher.

Nevertheless, the Children of Israel were in danger of “ascending and descending” in their spiritual life, sometimes conquering the evil inclination, sometimes being conquered by it, as the Sages have said: “When we enter the arena, we leave either victorious or conquered” (*Shemot Rabba* 27:8).

This teaches us a lesson for life. Today, as we live in exile with the Temple destroyed because of our sins, and since our glory, protection, and sanctification has left us, all that we have left is the Torah, which alone saves us from the effects of our bitter exile (*Zohar* I:152b; III:176a). All that remains to sanctify us are synagogues and houses of study, “miniature Temples” (*Megillah* 29a), and we must visit them often in order to escape from harmful influences. The Sages have said, “From the day the Temple was destroyed, all that remains for G-d in this world is four cubits of Halachah” (*Berachot* 8a), four cubits of Torah and prayer. It is also written, “The L-RD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob” (*Psalms* 87:2). The “gates of Zion” refer to the gate of heaven that Jacob saw in his vision; “the dwellings of Jacob” refer to the houses of study and prayer that stand in place of the Sanctuary and the Temple. It is only when we visit them that we are saved from stumbling, for as the Sages say: “The Torah protects and saves” (*Sotah* 21a).

### ***The Virtue of the Matriarchs: An Example of Love for Others***

It is written, “Rachel saw that she had not borne children to Jacob, so Rachel became envious of her sister. She said to Jacob, ‘Give me children – otherwise I am dead.’ Jacob’s anger flared up at Rachel, and he said, ‘Am I instead of G-d, Who has

withheld from you fruit of the womb?’ ” (*Genesis 30:1-2*). Rashi comments: “[Rachel] was envious of [Leah’s] good deeds. She thought, ‘Were she not more righteous than I, she would not merit bearing children.’ ”

It is written, “G-d remembered Rachel; G-d hearkened to her and He opened her womb” (*v.22*). On this, Rashi comments, “He remembered that she gave her signs to her sister, and that she was concerned lest she fall to Esau’s lot should Yaakov divorce her because she had no children. This also entered the mind of the wicked Esau when he heard that she had no children.”

We need to answer all the questions confronting us:

1. Rachel was afraid that Jacob would repudiate her because she had no children. Yet in that case, why would Esau marry her, for he thought of doing so when he learned that she had no children? Why would Esau marry a sterile woman, and why was Rachel afraid that this would happen?

2. How could Rachel, who was so righteous, think that Jacob would send her away because she had no children? It is explicitly stated that she sacrificed herself for her sister Leah by giving her signs of recognition [signs that demonstrated to Jacob that the signaler was Rachel]. Is it conceivable that Jacob would send away a woman as righteous as this, one who had transmitted her signs of recognition to her sister in order to save her from marrying the wicked Esau? The Torah tells us that the eyes of Leah were tender (*Genesis 29:17*), for she cried tremendously. “She heard people saying: ‘...The elder to the elder [Leah to Esau] and the younger to the younger [Rachel to Jacob].’ ...And she wept until her eyelids sagged” (*Bava Batra 123a*). Why would Jacob think of sending away a woman as righteous as Rachel, whom he so greatly loved?

3. Why did Rachel tell Jacob, “Otherwise I am dead”?

4. Why is not having children compared to death? The Sages have said, “A man who is childless is accounted as dead” (*Nedarim 64b*). Yet why did Rachel use this very same argument when she asked Jacob to give her children? What is the meaning of this expression?

5. Furthermore, how could Rachel have put herself in danger when she gave her sister Leah the signs of recognition? Jacob could have cursed her, and she could have possibly been wedded to Esau if Jacob refused to marry her for having deceived him.

6. Even if Leah heard people gossiping and saying that she would be wedded to Esau, why was this so bad that she cried about it? She could have lived an honorable and comfortable life with Esau, and moreover she could have brought him back to the right path. What harm is there in that?

7. Above all, how could Leah have understood “the elder to the elder” to mean “Leah to Esau”? We know that Esau had sold his birthright to Jacob (*Genesis 25:33*), and therefore Jacob was considered as the firstborn.

This entire account comes to teach us marvels about the sublime traits of our Matriarchs.

By carefully reflecting upon the motives of the Matriarchs and their way of serving G-d, we realize that they did not take their own personal interests into account. Rather, they only considered the wellbeing of others, even if that meant putting themselves in danger and risking their own lives. They only thought about the good of other people through helping, supporting, encouraging, and comforting them. How did they do this?

Rachel was grieved to see her sister shedding so many tears at the thought of having to marry Esau. She therefore decided to give her place with Jacob to her sister Leah, her rival, and she risked being rejected by Jacob afterwards and falling into Esau's hands. This is because Jacob could have been so upset with Rachel's deception that he would refuse to marry her.

Despite this risk, Rachel acted without taking her own interests into account, acting only so Leah would stop crying. She gave up, in favor of her sister, the notion of becoming Jacob's wife, even though this could force Rachel to live miserably for the rest of her life in the home of a crook and a thief, the accursed Esau. However Rachel accepted this risk for the love of Heaven, since she definitely did not spurn her right to live with Jacob. Rather, her only intention above all else was the good of others. The Sages say, "Jacob sent wedding gifts to Rachel, but Laban gave them to Leah" (Tanhuma Vayeitzei 6). Rachel saw these gifts in Leah's hands but kept quiet, for she saw how happy Leah was. All this clearly shows us how noble and upright Rachel was.

Jacob noticed this as well, and he was astonished at Rachel's many virtues. Instead of getting upset or rejecting her for having resorted to such a ruse, he felt even more love for her. This was not because she was beautiful of form and appearance (*Genesis 29: 17*), for "Charm is deceptive and beauty is naught; a G-d-fearing woman is the one to be praised" (*Proverbs 31:30*). Rather, it was because Jacob knew just how good her heart and how sensitive her soul were, as well as how generous she was. Concerning Rachel, the Sages said that she hid under the marriage bed. Thus when Jacob spoke, it was Rachel who answered so that he would not hear Leah's voice (*Eichah Rabba, Proem 24*).

Rachel's goodness of heart and her spirit of sacrifice for her sister are indeed amazing. When she heard Jacob speaking to her sister and asking her many questions while performing the first commandment of the Torah (to be fruitful and multiply in complete holiness and purity) – precisely on this, their wedding night, at the start of their married life together – instead of protecting her right of keeping her signs of recognition to herself (meant to protect Jacob from being deceived), she kept quiet and controlled herself, transmitting these signs on behalf of her sister. By doing so, she potentially deprived herself of a happy future. It seems possible that Rachel would have preferred not to have transmitted these signs to Leah. Yet Rachel knew just how much her sister would be shamed if Jacob sent her away and she had to marry Esau, as the rumor had said. She responded for Leah and transmitted the signs to him, acting in this way only so that her sister would not be put to shame and suffer, for Rachel only desired her good.

Despite all this, we must ask why Rachel sacrificed herself for her sister by putting herself in danger. Did she have to be victimized on account of her sister? Why did Leah cry as a result of not wanting to marry Esau? As we said earlier, would she not have lived an easy life?

Precisely because Rachel saw that Leah did not stop lamenting her fate, she understood that Leah preferred a life of poverty and exile, one of suffering and restriction with a truly righteous man, rather than a life of ease and comfort in this world with a wicked one. It was because of this that she wept. She cried to the extent that her beauty began to fade, for “Leah was just as beautiful as Rachel in shape and beauty, and it was only because her eyelids sagged that her sight weakened” (*Tanhuma Vayeitzei 12*). Rachel thought that she had to do something for someone as virtuous as her sister.

Here we see the greatness and nobility of Leah. She preferred to live in poverty, given that it be with a righteous man, than in luxury with a wicked one. We also see the greatness and nobility of Rachel, who understood just how meritorious her sister was, to the point that she was willing to give up her place and perpetual happiness for her.

However G-d, “the searcher of hearts and minds...the righteous G-d” (*Psalms 7:10*) probed Rachel’s feelings and thoughts. He perceived Rachel’s kindheartedness for her sister, and He augmented Jacob’s love and compassion for her. Thus Jacob loved and respected her even more than before. Instead of accusing her of having deceived him, Jacob accused Laban by saying, “Was it not for Rachel that I worked for you? Why have you deceived me?” (*Genesis 29:25*). He was angry with Laban for having tricked him into marrying Leah, as well as for having forced Leah to accept Esau against her will – if Rachel in her goodness had not saved her from such a fate. This is why Jacob loved Rachel even more, to the point of serving Laban for seven more years.

### ***We Can Overcome All Of Life’s Trials!***

At the beginning of our parsha, Jacob leaves his father’s home in Beersheba on his way to Haran (*Genesis 28:10*). Yet as we know, Jacob did not immediately travel to Laban’s home. He went to study in the Beit Midrash of Shem and Eber for 14 years, as the Sages have said (*Megillah 17a*). This is difficult to understand: Isaac sent him to Laban to take a wife, yet he postponed this for 14 years while on route? He should have gone there right away to obey his father’s command. Furthermore, why was Jacob sent to find a wife for himself, since Isaac could have sent an emissary to do that? After all, Isaac’s father Abraham sent Eliezer to find a wife for him!

Our parsha next describes Jacob’s dream, wherein he sees a ladder with “angels ascending and descending on it” (*Genesis 28:12*). What is the meaning of such a vision, with angels climbing up and down a ladder? Even if our Sages have said that Jacob was shown the future kingdoms that would rise and fall on earth, what was being conveyed to him by such a revelation?

Most remarkable of all is the fact that while Jacob was on route to Laban's home, he made a vow and said: "If G-d will be with me...and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear" (v.20). Now imagine a person fleeing from his brother because he wants to kill him. What would such a person ask of Hashem? It would obviously be to be saved from his brother, from the hand of the wicked! Yet what did Jacob ask for? Bread and clothing! Is that something people ask for when their lives are at stake? Rather, he should have asked to be saved from Esau's sword! If we look carefully at what is happening in this passage, however, we see that Jacob is beginning a special period in his life here. We know that Abraham experienced trials, as did Isaac, but for Jacob we see none; that is, none until this parsha. It is now that his problems start, for previously he had remained studying Torah. All the same, a person cannot go through life without confronting problems, which is why Isaac sent Jacob out into the vast world – him and not an emissary. Where did he send him? To Haran, a place of Hashem's wrath (*haron*), where he would stand alone against a multitude. This was done in order for him to emerge victorious from all the trials that he would encounter there. It was to make him grow in the service of Hashem.

When Jacob heard this, he knew that he had to suitably prepare himself for the coming trials. How can a person succeed? Through the study of Torah, as our Sages have said: "Torah protects permanently...it protects and rescues" (*Sotah 21a*). This is why Jacob did not immediately go to Laban, but first went to study with Shem and Eber for 14 years. He did this in order to acquire the Torah, which would protect and support him in all hardships. After studying for 14 years in the tents of Torah, he would be able to depart for his long journey to the home of Laban, and there he would courageously overcome all the trials that presented themselves to him. Before reaching his destination, however, other things happened to him.

As soon as he set out on his journey, Jacob encountered his first trial. The Holy One, blessed be He, caused the sun to set at an unusual time, obligating him to stop while on route.

### *Conquering the Evil Inclination by the Power of Prayer*

It is written, "Jacob departed from Beersheba...and he encountered the place and spent the night there because the sun had set" (*Genesis 28:10-11*). Rashi cites the Sages in saying that the expression *vayifga* ("and he encountered") designates prayer. From this we deduce that Jacob instituted *Arvit* (the evening prayer), and in fact the Gemara tells us that the holy Patriarchs instituted our three daily prayers: Abraham instituted *Shacharit*, Isaac instituted *Mincha*, and Jacob instituted *Arvit* (*Berachot 26b*).

I would like, however, to raise some questions regarding this subject. First of all, why did the holy Patriarchs institute these prayers for us? Is it not enough to study Hashem's Torah and perform the 613 *mitzvot*? Why must we also pray? Furthermore, is there really something specific in prayer that we do not find in the Torah?

In this regard I would like to explain a fundamental principle in serving Hashem. Torah study, prayer, and *mitzvot* observance constitute different paths to the Creator, intermediaries that draw us closer to Him and allow us to take upon ourselves the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven. True, the holy Torah is the foundation that establishes a connection between the Creator and ourselves. However in their holiness, the Patriarchs wanted to give Jews a special path to the Creator, an important intermediary filled with holiness. That intermediary is prayer, thanks to which Jews can come closer to their Creator and connect to Him.

Allow us to explain. When a Jew readies himself to pray, he pictures himself standing before the Creator. He focuses on just Whom he is praying to, and to Whom he is addressing his requests for goodness and blessing. Thus he begins to pray with a reverent fear before the King of kings. He opens his mouth and utters words of prayer much like someone counting his money – calmly and deliberately – regardless of whether he is reciting *Birkot HaShachar*, *Pesukei D’Zimra*, and above all *Shema*. In fact the Sages tell us, “If one distinctly pronounces the letters in reciting *Shema*, hell is cooled for him” (*Berachot 15b*). Thus a powerful and indestructible bond is created between a person and his Creator. However despite all the elation of a Jew in prayer, he may feel a sudden letdown and apathy afterwards. This occurs because the evil inclination comes after prayer and places itself before a person as it tries to control him once more. After a Jew prays, it immediately tries to break the bond between him and the Creator. Therefore it is not enough for a Jew to have aroused his heart only during prayer, since right afterwards the evil inclination attacks in order to make him fall into its trap.

On this subject the Sages have said, “If this repulsive wretch meets you” – if the evil inclination comes to you after prayer in order to disrupt your service of Hashem (since it is always lying in wait to ensnare you), what must you do? “Drag [it] to the house of study” (*Sukkah 52b*). In other words, conquer the evil inclination by means of Torah study! There’s more. The power of prayer is mentioned at the time the Torah was given to the Jewish people, as we read: “Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain” (*Exodus 19:2*). Here the Sages describe the people as “a single person, with a single heart” (*Mechilta ibid.*). This means that the Children of Israel achieved an extremely high degree of unity for the giving of the Torah. Yet how did they do this, since they had not actually received the Torah at that point? It is obvious that they achieved it through the power of prayer, a power that they possessed due to the Patriarchs, since they were the ones who instituted the daily prayers. The power of prayer is what purified the Children of Israel and led them to a level high enough to receive the Torah. Now it was not without reason that Jacob instituted *Arvit*. As we know, the Sages have said that Torah scholars should not go out alone at night, for the forces of evil are more powerful at that time (*Berachot 43b*). Yet Jacob, who was alone at night, instituted *Arvit* in order for people to conquer the forces of evil at night and reach the sources of holiness. I reflected upon the greatness of prayer, for there is almost no Jew who comes closer to Hashem simply because he studied the laws of Shabbat, purity, tithes, and so on.

A Jew who is far from Torah and *mitzvot* does not understand that he can come closer to Hashem in this way. On the contrary, he mocks everything he hears! Therefore how should we proceed with such an individual? We teach him to pray, to believe in the Creator of the world. We open his heart to a love of Hashem and a reverent fear of Him. It is only in this way, by the power of prayer and through the help of Heaven, that we can bring a person closer to the Creator.

On the other hand, to our regret and shame, we find many people who pray three times a day, yet they are still ignorant, scorning everything that is holy. How is this possible? It is clear that “prayer without concentration is a like a body without a soul.” If there is no body in the soul, then there is no life within! Therefore if we fail to concentrate during prayer, it becomes lifeless. An absent-minded prayer does nothing for the person who utters it. It has no power to sustain and uplift the body, and it certainly cannot help a person progress in Torah.

There are two kinds of ignorant people. Some do not pray at all, not even understanding the nature of prayer. It is only when their hearts are aroused, and when they are taught, that they begin to pray a little. On the other hand, some people pray while being scornful of it all the same. Their reproach is far greater, for they understand what prayer is. They can come closer to the Creator and spiritually progress by the power of prayer, yet they choose not to. This is why every Jew must remind himself of the power and greatness of prayer, for it only by an attentive prayer that a person can progress in Torah, perfect his service of G-d, and completely defeat the power of the evil inclination. In fact, who understands the power of focused prayer more than we do? It has the power to open all the gates of Heaven!

## Parsha Vayishlach

### ***The Good Inclination Must Always Overcome The Evil Inclination***

It is written, “And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau to brother” (*Gen 32:4*). Referring to the Midrash, Rashi explains: “these messengers were literally angels” (*Bereshith Rabba 75:4*).

Some questions may be asked here:

1. Why did Jacob send messengers to his brother? Couldn't he have approached him directly, even by surprise, and meet him without being preceded by messengers?

2. If he wanted to know about his brother's arrival, why do it through the intermediary of angelic messengers? Why not just use regular messengers? If it was to impress and scare his brother, he could have at first simply sent regular messengers, and then afterwards sent angelic ones to frighten him. Concerning the verse that states, “What do you mean by all this camp that I met?” (*Gen 33:8*), the Sages say, “The angels struck Esau several times” (*Bereshith Rabba 78:11*).

3. Before sending messengers, it is stated that Jacob “divided the people that were with him ... into two camps” (*Gen 32:8*). Why divide the members of his family into two camps? If the angels served and watched over him, surely G-d Himself was with him. What was he afraid of? Moreover, Jacob was afraid of Esau to the point of calling him “my lord”, as it is stated, “Thus you shall say to my lord, to Esau” (*Gen 32:5*). What was Jacob so afraid of that he accorded so much honor to Esau in calling him “my lord”?

It is written, “And the first came out red ... and they called his name Esau. And after that his brother came out, and his hand was holding Esau's heel, and his name was called Jacob” (*Gen 25:25-26*). Why in coming into the world was Jacob holding Esau by the heel? And why exactly by the heel? It's because the one who wants to overcome his evil inclination must from the moment he is born – from the moment he comes into the world – hold the evil inclination in hand, like a prisoner, as it is written, “When the Children of Israel obey G-d, they dominate their evil inclination” (*Avodah Zarah 5b*). In what way? In consecrating a portion of their time every day to the study of Torah. In the next world everyone will be asked, “Did you fix a time for the study of Torah?” (*Shabbat 31a*).

The directives of the Torah allow people to overcome their evil inclination, for “I created the evil inclination, and I created its remedy, the Torah” (*Kiddushin 30b; Bava Batra 16a*). The Torah weakens the desires of men and submits them to its will. This is the sense of the expression, “holding Esau by the heel”. A man must seize his evil inclination in order that it not escape his control. The word עקב (“heel”) is composed of the same letters as the word קבע (“to fix”). When the evil inclination is imprisoned, it

tries to escape and save itself. One must catch and tame it, as it is written, “The good inclination must always dominate the evil inclination” (*Berachot 5a*), and Jacob teaches us how to do this.

What we have said allows us to understand why Jacob sent angels to his brother Esau: He was only doing what the Sages recommend be done. Using an example to illustrate this, imagine that two enemies are at war with one another. Each fight with sophisticated weaponry in order to insure complete victory, and each observes the other in order to detect weakness. Yet is possible to defeat one’s enemy even if he is better armed, and this is done by striking first, and by striking decisively. Such an attack doesn’t allow the enemy time to react and use his weapons, even if they are more modern and sophisticated.

It is the same in man’s war with his evil inclination. If one wants to be sure to conquer this powerfully armed adversary, one must know how to put up one’s good inclination against him. And even if one isn’t well versed in the art of war, one can strike the evil inclination with a first fatal blow in order to assure victory. It is in this way that the good inclination dominates its evil counterpart.

And this is precisely what Jacob did. He demonstrated to Esau (to the evil inclination) that he dominates it. This is why he first sent Esau celestial beings – angels – not simple messengers. These were not just any angels, but rather those which he created through his good deeds. He sent these because he wanted to let Esau know that he didn’t fear him. These angels testified to the fact that Jacob never abandoned the study of Torah, concerning which it is stated, “When the voice of Jacob makes itself heard in the houses of study and the houses of prayer, the hands of Esau cannot grab a hold of him” (*Peticha of Eicha Rabba 2; Pesikta Zutah Toldot 27:22*). The houses of Jacob therefore have the upper hand, and they take hold of the heel of Esau, of the evil inclination. Jacob demonstrated the power of his weapons (the Torah and its observance), which constitutes a fatal blow to the evil inclination, an inclination for whom these weapons are the most menacing and frightening of all.

Yet we shouldn’t think that this is sufficient to conquer the Satan (the evil inclination). We must always fear it, as it is written, “Happy is the man who always fears” (*Pr 28:14*), for the evil inclination can always gain the upper hand. Even if it has been defeated once, “It gains new strength every day and relentlessly seeks to make us fail” (*Sukkah 52b; Kiddushin 30b*) since it knows neither rest nor repose. We should always fear it, as the Sages say: “Do not be sure of yourself until the day you die” (*Perkei Avoth 2:4*). We have as our example Yochanan the High Priest, who served in the Temple for 80 years, yet became a heretic at the end of his life (*Berachot 29a; Tanhuma Beshalach 3*). Jacob also divided the members of his family into two camps in order to show Esau, to the evil inclination, that he was prepared to wage war against him. “If Esau comes to one camp and destroys it, the camp that is left will escape” (*Gen 32:9*) and continue in the way of Torah and the service of G-d. In making two camps, he also showed Esau and future generations that men should not be too sure of themselves or think



These passages raise many questions that should be answered.

1. Why did Jacob send angels to appease Esau? He knows that Esau hates him, as his mother said, “Your brother Esau is consoling himself regarding you to kill you” (*Genesis 27:42*). Esau hates him for having deprived him of his birthright and blessings, and all the gold in the world would not have sufficed to assuage his hate. Sending angels before him could seem like a provocation and a declaration of war. In order to avoid meeting Esau, whom he had not seen for a long time, would it not have been better that Jacob take another route to get to his father Isaac? In that way they would never have met, and Jacob would not have had any reason to be afraid.

2. If Esau hated Jacob for so long, why did he do nothing up to that time? During those 22 years, he could have gone to Haran and wage war against Jacob, for really now, Esau did not lack audacity. Was it therefore Laban that he feared?

3. Why did Jacob fear Esau? When he left his father’s house, G-d promised him, “I will guard you wherever you go, and I will return you to this soil, for I will not forsake you” (*Genesis 28:15*). And while at Laban’s, G-d also promised Jacob that “I will be with you” (*ibid. 31:3*). Why then was he afraid of Esau? And if in fact he had no reason to fear, why did he need to prepare himself for all eventualities by means of gifts, prayer, and waging war?

4. Jacob’s intentions when he told Esau, “I have sojourned with Laban” need to be explained. Did Esau not know that Jacob had lived all this time with Laban?

In fact, all the time that Jacob stayed with Laban, he was surprised that his brother did not come to Haran to declare war against him, for Esau was not afraid of Laban and he had the power to fight both Jacob and Laban at the same time. However, when Jacob understood just how much a liar and wicked man Laban was, he correctly understood that Esau had no intention of killing him by taking his life. Rather, Esau wanted to kill him in another way – not physically. If Jacob would have allowed himself to be influenced by his uncle Laban, he himself would have also become wicked, and since “the wicked are dead even during their lives,” that would have been his end. It necessarily follows that Jacob would have, in that case, lost all the advantages of Isaac’s blessings. This is why Esau had no reason to go to Haran and to declare war against him, since Laban would accomplish what he himself wanted, and Esau was happy with every passing minute that Jacob spent in Haran in the presence of that awful man (*Rashi on Genesis 24:50*), called by everyone “the king of liars” (*Tanhuma Vayishlach 1*).

This is the reason why Jacob had him told, “I have sojourned with Laban,” which means “I observed the entire Torah and I have not become wicked as you think. On the contrary, during all that time I continued to follow the path of the Torah. Even more, I learned from Laban how not to act, as it is said, ‘Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies’ [*Psalms 119:98*]. All the goods that I possess, I acquired them by hard work, and consequently the blessings of my father have not been diminished, and they remain good for myself and my descendants until the end of time” (*Midrash Haggadah, Tanhuma Vayishlach*).

It remains for us to explain why Jacob did not prefer to take another route to arrive at his father's, rather than to confront Esau.

The reason for this was that Jacob wanted to instruct all the generations on how to serve G-d. He teaches us that it is forbidden to flee from the Satan, “who is the evil inclination, who is the Angel of Death” (*Bava Batra 16a*). On the contrary, one must confront and dominate it, as it is said, “One must always make the good inclination dominate the evil inclination” (*Berachot 5a*), which Rashi explains to mean, “One must wage war against it” (*Rashi ibid.*) in order to destroy it forever. In addition, it is possible to put it to work in the service of G-d, as it is written: “ ‘You shall love the L-RD with all your heart’ – with both inclinations of your heart, the good and the evil” (*Berachot 54a*). Just as we are afraid to wage war, we must fear the war against the evil inclination, all while maintaining our full trust in G-d, the Creator of the world, and know that He will come to help and provide us with victory. This is what Jacob did when he intentionally went out before Esau, in order to meet, confront, and defeat him. However Jacob feared that some sin on his part would make him lose this war (*Berachot 4a*), as it is written, “My sin is before me always” (*Psalms 51:5*). Why? Because Esau observed to perfection the commandment of honoring one's parents (*Shemot Rabba 46:3*), whereas Jacob, during his long absence, was not able to honor his father, and this sin could have caused his defeat. And thus when Jacob attacked Esau, he began by repenting for not having served his father. Even though Jacob had no reason to fear Esau, since G-d had promised to watch over him, he nevertheless feared that in meeting Esau he would forget, albeit for just a moment, G-d's protection, and this sin would cause his downfall. This is why he prepared to offer gifts, to pray, and to wage war.

The behavior of Jacob is a lesson for his children. It comes to teach them that one should always be in a position to employ these three methods: Gifts, prayer, and waging war. How can we do this?

In studying Torah and by following its ways, one is assured of being able to overcome the evil inclination, since “Torah is the remedy for the evil inclination” (*Kiddushin 30b*) and “it protect and saves” (*Sotah 21a*). Despite this, when we fight against the evil inclination, we risk breaking away from G-d, albeit for just a moment, which could seal our defeat. Therefore Jacob warns us that even in the heat of action, we should not forget the fear of G-d, and that any break in our connection to G-d can make us lose the battle. One should therefore be ready for three things: To wage war, meaning to attack the evil inclination (as we said earlier); to pray that G-d saves us from the grip of the enemy; and to, above all, give gifts, which means to seize the Torah, which is a gift.

In fact it is written, “And from Mattanah to Nahaliel; and from Nahaliel to Bamoth” (*Numbers 21:19*). Basing themselves on the fact that Mattanah means “gift”, the Sages have said, “The Torah is called a gift” (*Berachot 5a*) and it is a teaching, as it is written, “I give you a good teaching, do not forsake My Torah” (*Proverbs 4:2*). In remaining constantly attached to the Torah, it will definitely help us to defeat the evil inclination. Even though we have G-d's promise, if we separate our thoughts from Him, even for a

moment, that promise may not be realized. This is what Jacob feared, and it is this lesson that he transmitted to his descendants for all the generations.

There is another lesson to draw from Jacob's behavior with Esau. One must pursue the evil inclination everywhere it hides, and this because it has several appellations, as the Sages say: "The evil inclination has seven names" (*Sukkah 52a*). It is called "a mighty king" (*Ecclesiastes 9:14*), David called it "Sinner" (*Zohar I:165*), and it is also named "Impure" and "Base" (*Zohar III:101b*). It can therefore appear under forms as diverse as they are various, and it can be present even without us being aware of it. We must always be wary of and watch for it on all sides, as we recite in the daily prayers: "Remove the Satan from before us and from behind us," meaning, from whatever side it may come. This is because the evil inclination may present itself to us in the form of a man who is full of merits, just as it may attack us from behind like a wicked man who wants to kill us.

Examples illustrating these facts are not lacking. Sometimes the Satan presents itself to us in the early morning: It awakens us for prayer, and we in fact wake up and do all that we have to do. However afterwards, the evil inclination makes us proud, as we tell ourselves, "I woke up early this morning and I prayed." It then infuses evil thoughts within, making us say, "I woke up so early this morning. I'm *so* tired!" and thus it makes it impossible for us to study during the rest of the day.

We must therefore stay ahead of the evil inclination and strike the first blow, as it is written, "When you will go out to war against your enemies" (*Deuteronomy 21:10*) act with the fear of the sins that you have committed. Do not become boastful, and do not break your connection with G-d at the moment of battle.

This is what Jacob said to Esau: "I have sojourned with Laban, and I did not learn from his evil ways. However you lived with Isaac, a righteous man, and you remained wicked. You did not learn from his good ways." As the Sages say, "Esau lived with two upright people and did not learn anything from their behavior" (*Yoma 38b*). Jacob added: "I remained up to now," meaning: Do not think that I mimicked Laban's evil ways because of the fact that I lived with him a long time. On the contrary, I lived with him for 22 years and, despite that, I remained upright and I did not sin as he did.

It is the same concerning Jacob's encounter with Esau's angel. After having sent his message to Esau, Jacob confronted and fought with Esau's angel, whose goal was precisely to make him forget G-d by causing him great pain in his thigh. This fight occurred during the night, for the Satan and evil and destructive spirits reign during this time (*Bava Kama 60b*). Yet it is stated, "And he [the angel] saw that he could not prevail against him" (*Genesis 32:26*), meaning to say that the Satan did not succeed in turning Jacob from his attachment to G-d, and he but injured his leg. Jacob remained righteous during the entire fight.

The angel then told him, "Not Jacob shall your name be called any more, but Israel, for you have fought with G-d and with men and have prevailed" (*v.29*). Israel (יִשְׂרָאֵל) has the meaning of יָשַׁר ("right"), for during this fight Jacob remained

upright and attached to G-d, which is why he won. Esau's angel was forced to surrender, and in particular to agree to the blessings that Jacob received from his father (*Bereshith Rabba* 78:2), as Esau conceded to afterwards: "My brother, let what you have remain yours" (*Genesis* 33:9). Jacob, who was victorious in this war, teaches his children and his descendants that "through strategies, you can wage war" (*Proverbs* 24:6) – with gifts, with prayer, and through combat. In this way you will manage to crush the evil inclination and you, the Jew, will survive and progress in a life of spirituality and piety.

### *Secrets Belong to G-d*

Jacob suffered so much that he said, "I had barely finished suffering over the tragedy of Dinah, the tragedy of Joseph, the tragedy of Laban..." (*Tanhuma Mikketz* 10). It was in those circumstances that he revealed all his greatness, as the Sages have said: "He suffers yet does not complain about the severity of justice" (*Tanhuma Toldot* 14).

I reflected upon these words. Why did Jacob, who fathered the twelve tribes of G-d (*Psalms* 122:4) and whose face is engraved on the Throne of Glory (*Pesikta Zutah Vayeitzei* 28:13), suffer so much during his life, especially after Dinah was violated and defiled by a non-Jew (*Genesis* 34:2,5)? Why did Jacob have to suffer all this?

It was perhaps in order to point out to future generations that Dinah, in being confined inside (which is likened to being in a yeshiva), teaches us that each Jew should avoid leaving the walls of the house of study, and that if he leaves he must suffer the consequences. Institutions of Torah learning must be created in order to protect against assimilation. Be that as it may, we may rightly ask why Dinah was kidnapped and violated by this immoral gentile.

We learn from here just how exacting justice is, since even for the Patriarchs – who were the vehicle for the Divine Presence (*Bereshith Rabba* 47:8), who stood upon the heights of perfection, and who were "as resplendent as the angels that ministered to them" (*Bereshith Rabba* 75:4) – judgment was severe. Even though they had angels at their service, ones created by the good deeds that they performed solely to obey their Creator's will, they were not protected from the strictness of justice.

Jacob had just attained great spiritual heights since he had conquered Esau's angel (*Chullin* 92a) and rejected Esau's offer: "Travel on and let us go – I will proceed alongside you" (*Genesis* 33:12). Esau wanted to accompany and go along with him only so as to harm and prevent him from progressing. Jacob should have therefore immediately carried out his vow in order to attain an even greater degree of perfection, for there is no limit to perfection and a man can deepen his understanding every day and at each moment. A man should continue to advance from strength to strength, without stopping at what he has. He should progress every day, every hour, and at every moment, for true perfection is without limit.

When Jacob attained his great spiritual level at that moment, he should have continued to progress. He still had much to do before reaching the level of the “All” in the World to Come (in the sense of “All Israel has a portion in the World to Come” [*Sanhedrin 90a*]), and this “All” is without limit. It was only the performance of his vow that could have assured him of perfection (*Bereshith Rabba 81:2*), and it was why he was punished by the tragedy that struck Dinah.

Jacob sought to fundamentally distance himself from evil, since he said to Esau, “My lord knows that the children are tender, and the nursing flocks and cattle are upon me” (*Genesis 33:13*). He explained to his brother that he did not want to live with him because he did not want the education of his children to be disrupted, an education that cost him much money and that required great effort. This is why he said to him, “I will make my way at my slow pace according to the gait of the drove before me and the gait of the children” (*v.14*). In other words, I will go step by step, from strength to strength, for it is only because of the Torah that I will attain the “All” in the World to Come, without being diverted from my goal by wealth, which is also called “all”, as it is written: “For upon his death he will not take *hakol* [literally: ‘The all’]” (*Psalms 49:18*). Jacob possessed what he needed, since he said, “G-d has been gracious to me and because I have all” (*Genesis 33:11*). In other words, he was rich in the sense of being “happy with his lot” (*Perkei Avoth 4:1*), and he generously used the excess of his possessions to perform good deeds.

And yet, justice’s severity overtook him because there was a defect in his level of perfection. This was because he did not immediately fulfill his vow and promise. Far be it from us to think that Jacob did not keep his word, yet his stay in Shechem was considered as a defect in spite of the house of study that he established there. It is difficult for us to understand the exactitude of justice that was then awakened against him, even though he progressed in other domains. This occurred because he had not yet fulfilled his vow towards G-d, Who had recently saved him from the hands of Esau and confirmed his blessings (*Bereshith Rabba 78:11*). It was only the fulfillment of his promise that could have allowed him to attain the summit of perfection. Even though the text says that at that very moment, “Jacob arrived *shaleim* [intact, whole]” (*Genesis 33:18*) – “whole in his body, in his goods, and in his Torah” (*Shabbat 33b*) – he did reach the summit of perfection in “All”, this being an instruction for future generations concerning the strictness of justice and its exactitude.

The one who makes a vow to serve G-d with all his strength is considered as being flawed as long as he has not accomplished his vow, or if he accomplishes it partially, even if in other areas his conduct is flawless.

The Sages said, “For having confined Dinah inside, she ended up falling into the hands of Shechem, the son of Hamor” (*Bereshith Rabba 80:4*). Why did this happen? It was because the sentence had already been pronounced against Jacob because of his lack of perfection. If G-d had promised to watch over him and his family, why did he fear the ill-intentioned gaze of Esau? If Jacob had hastened to fulfill his vow after having confined Dinah inside, it is possible that the sentence could have been annulled. We

would have then explained that Jacob could have rejected the marriage proposal of Esau for Dinah by using the pretext that she was still too young. Yet we see that he stopped at the city of Shechem and that he delayed in fulfilling his vow. Such is the strictness of justice towards one who lacks perfection. Jacob's conduct teaches us to always aspire to greater perfection.

***What is the right path to follow?***

*Each individual should perform good deeds and carry out his vows to progress in serving G-d, this being in every area. The opportunity to progress should not be put off until later. For example, as soon as one is free from current occupations, he must run towards the house of study, otherwise the strictness of justice will weigh down upon him for having let an opportunity pass to perform good deeds with his possessions, as Jacob demonstrates for us.*

***Humility: A Barrier Against Pride***

It is written, "So said your servant Jacob: 'I have sojourned with Laban and have lingered until now.' ... The messengers returned to Jacob saying, 'We came to your brother, to Esau. Moreover, he is heading toward you, and four hundred men are with him.' Jacob became very frightened, and it distressed him" (*Genesis 32:5-8*).

1. What did Jacob want Esau to understand? Jacob aroused his brother's anger, and Esau's hatred was even more potent than when his father blessed Jacob by saying, "When the voice of Jacob will be heard in the houses of study and prayer, Esau's hands will be powerless" (*Bereshith Rabba 65:16*).

2. How is it possible that Jacob observed all the commandments of the Torah while staying with Laban, since in exile he could not honor his parents or observe the commandments that apply to the land of Israel, or fulfill other obligations as well?

3. Why did Esau have 400 men accompanying him? What does this number indicate? Moreover, why was Jacob so afraid of him, since after having defeated Esau's angel (*Chullin 92a*), surely he could have also defeated Esau?

To answer these questions, let us first cite the verse, "Take words with you and return to the L-RD" (*Hosea 14:3*), which Rash explains as meaning: "Please accept the words that we recite as a replacement for the sacrifices that we should have offered to You." The Sages have said, "The one who studies Torah is considered as if he presented a sacrifice" (*Menachot 110a*), which means that studying the laws relating to a certain Torah commandment is considered as if one had actually carried out that commandment. Therefore Jacob, who studied all the laws of the Torah, made Esau understand that this study would surely save him from his attacks.

It is possible to add that Jacob observed Shabbat in Laban's home (*Bereshith Rabba 79:6*). Therefore since Shabbat is equal to all the commandments of the Torah (*Shemot Rabba 25:16*), it was as if Jacob observed all the commandments without exception.

That being said, let us explain the meaning of Jacob's words in light of the fact that Esau came with 400 men to attack him.

The number 400 symbolizes exile, as it is written: "And He said to Abraham, 'Know with certainty that your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own – and they will serve them, and they will oppress them – 400 years'" (*Genesis 15:13*). We know that the exile began with Jacob (*Zohar II:2b,5b*). Such was the message that Jacob transmitted to Esau: I was in exile with Laban, yet despite this I did not imitate his wicked ways. On the contrary, I studied the details of the 613 Torah commandments and I progressed to such a point that even the angels serve me. However you, Esau, did not live in Haran but in the land of Israel, whose air makes one wise (*Bava Batra 158b*). You were not in exile. You lived with our father Isaac, yet despite this you did not learn from his pious ways (*Yoma 38b*). You could have progressed and elevated yourself to such a point that the angels would have been at your service, and now you want to scare me with these 400 men – with exile? It was precisely in exile that I attained the highest level, but you lost out because you could have repented of your sins and elevated yourself in Torah and the fear of G-d.

We learn a profound lesson from this, namely that it's tragic for a young yeshiva student, surrounded by teachers, to not benefit from such a situation and perfect himself in the fear of G-d, and instead to waste a great deal of precious time. In the future he will realize that he did not take advantage of such a great opportunity, and he will regret what he lost. Imagine how shameful, how sorrowful, and how harsh his punishment will be!

Esau, however, thought that in exile a person becomes lazy and abandons Torah study, for "the one who lives outside the land of Israel is like one who lives without G-d" (*Zohar III:29b*). Esau came accompanied by 400 men in order to make Jacob understand that he was still in exile. This is because Esau wanted Jacob to remain in exile, and since as such he was similar to one living without G-d, he would be punished. Esau hoped in this way to dominate him.

However Jacob replied that the opposite was true: I sojourned with Laban, and if it is true that living outside the land of Israel is like living without G-d, I myself stayed close to G-d. "When a student is exiled [in a city of refuge], his teacher exiles himself with him" [Makot 10a], and the Torah is what connects us to G-d. The Divine Presence accompanied and saved me from the exile.

The words לַבָּן עִם ("with Laban") have the same numerical value (192) as *bakol mikol kol* (an expression that indicates abundance). They are also equal to the words *hadda Yaakov* ("I am Jacob" in Aramaic). This means: I sojourned with Laban and I dominated everything [*bakol mikol kol*]. I studied Torah and observed all its laws. Instead of falling, I elevated myself to the point that I merited having angels serve me (*Bereshith Rabba 75:4*), and G-d's word was revealed to me. The angels I sent you are a sign that you cannot deny.

However Esau was not impressed by the words of his brother, and he decided to attack him by using his forces of impurity (*Zohar III:163b*) and the power of 400 years of

exile. With their help, Esau thought to conquer Jacob. This is what the angels reported to Jacob: “We came to your brother, to Esau. Moreover, he is heading toward you, and four hundred men are with him” (*Genesis 32:7*).

It seems to me that here we have an indication of how the Satan works. Even when a righteous person dominates the evil inclination, it does not give up. With its remaining strength it once again tries to fight him, to the point that a righteous person needs to ask G-d for help throughout his life, as the Sages have said: “Without G-d’s help, it would impossible to conquer the evil inclination” (*Sukkah 52b*). Even if a righteous person manages to conquer it once or even several times, he does not rid himself of it for good, since the evil inclination never surrenders. Thus G-d’s constant help is essential.

Jacob, seeing with what pride Esau came to confront him and the wicked forces that he used, chose to conquer him by confronting him with the attribute of humility. He prayed and said, “I have been diminished by all the kindnesses” (*Genesis 32:11*), meaning: I am not worthy of all these miracles.

Jacob continued his prayer and said, “Rescue me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau” (*v.12*), meaning: Save me from his pride, that I not boast in seeing him, for “it is forbidden to look at the face of the wicked” (*Megillah 28a*) and I only desire to remain “diminished.” The hand of Esau was his pride, and the Sages have said, “Save me from the hand of Esau, who does not act towards me as a brother, but as an enemy” (*Bereshith Rabba 75:7*). A brother feels sympathy, but Esau exhibited no sympathy whatsoever, even on the outside. This is why Jacob prayed for G-d to save him from the evil that, in his pride, his brother wanted to inflict on him. Jacob said: Save me from the hand of my brother, from the pride that hides in my brother’s heart, and which can be seen on his face and in his words.

The pride and wickedness of Esau made him lose his senses, and even after having lost the right of the firstborn, he pursued his wickedness – even though he knew that Jacob was the firstborn and legitimate heir. We find a parallel situation when Abraham died. It is written, “His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him” (*Genesis 25:9*), and the Sages said: “This teaches us that Ishmael repented” (*Bava Batra 16b*). At the time of Abraham’s funeral, Ishmael allowed Isaac, his father’s heir, to walk before him. However at Isaac’s death it is written, “Esau and Jacob his sons buried him” (*Genesis 35:29*), which indicates that even at the time of Isaac’s death, Esau did not repent or allow Jacob to go before him. Not only had Esau *not* changed, he grieved his father even in the grave when he rushed to go before Jacob on that day. The birthright meant little to Esau, as did the fact that Jacob succeeded his father, for Esau remained just as wicked as before and did not repent as Ishmael had done.

This is also why G-d hated him, as the prophet said: “I loved Jacob, but Esau I hated” (*Malachi 1:2-3*). The great pride that dwelled within him was abhorrent. He refused to recognize the truth and yield to it. Nevertheless, he had the perfect opportunity to mend his ways: His extremely pious father, whom he served with such great respect,

had just died, and death provides an opportunity for an individual to reflect, for there is no better time to repent. This is what the Sages have said, “Reflect upon three things and you will not come to sin...” (*Perkei Avoth 3:1*) as well as, “Repent one day before your death” (*ibid.* 2:10). But no, not only did Esau *not* change, he became filled with pride and walked before Jacob at his father’s funeral, to the mockery of his father at such a solemn time.

As for Jacob, he was insulted and dishonored by Esau, yet he said nothing because he was among those “who are insulted yet do not insult” (*Yoma 23a*). It is possible that the verse, “Let those who love Him be like the powerfully rising sun” (*Judges 5:31*) refers to those who are insulted yet do not respond, for Jacob is compared to the sun (*Bereshith Rabba 84:10*). This again shows us the greatness of Jacob and the wickedness of Esau.

We may now explain why Jacob feared Esau, even though he had defeated an angel and received his blessing. He did not fear the angel or the injuries that Esau could have caused him, but rather he feared confronting Esau’s pride. Jacob needed special heavenly assistance in order that none of his family members be subjected to Esau’s influence, as it is written: “For I fear him, lest he come and strike me down, mother and children” (*Genesis 32:12*), which means that he feared Esau’s evil influence on the members of his family.

### *The Importance of a Minor Commandment*

Commenting on the verse, “Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn” (*Genesis 32:25*), Rabbi Elazar said: “He remained behind for the sake of some small jars. Hence [it is learned] that to the righteous, their money is dearer than their body. And why is this? Because they do not stretch out their hands to robbery” (*Chullin 91a*).

In this same section, the Talmud recounts the opinion of Rabbi Yitzchak: “A scholar should not go out alone at night,” since Jacob was attacked while he remained alone that night on the other side of the river. Why did Jacob put himself in danger by going to retrieve such insignificant objects? Should he not have taken better care of himself than these objects? Furthermore, is it possible that a man like Jacob could forget to gather up such trivial items, since we know that “to the righteous, their money is dearer than their body”? How could he have forgotten them on the other side of the river?

The partiality that righteous men show to their possessions stems from the fact that they realize that their bodies are but instruments that allow them to serve G-d. The Sages teach that “the wicked...in their lifetime are called dead” (*Berachot 18b*), for they fail to use their strength to serve G-d. Thus their body is considered to be dead, even during their lifetime. Such is not the case with upright men, who even after their death are called living (*ibid.*), for they continually progress in the service of G-d. They do so without any ulterior motives, and their every deed extols His glory. Their possessions are of more value to them than their bodies, for the former give them the means to do

much good, such as helping people, supporting them materially, redeeming captives, teaching Torah, etc. Their only goal is to carry out G-d's will, and they possess nothing that stems from theft. Their possessions are not sullied by fraud, and everything they own is honestly acquired.

Righteous men also know that without money, they would not be able to accomplish things that require an expenditure. They would also fail to perform other commandments, such as acquiring the four species that make up the *lulav* of Sukkot, or obtaining matzah for Passover. Every cent counts, and "a law-suit involving a mere *perutah* must be regarded as having the same importance as one involving a hundred *mina*" (*Sanhedrin 8a*). Money gives them the ability to do things that they could not otherwise do. It enables them to provide for their needs, to consecrate themselves to the service of G-d, and to spiritual elevate themselves.

This allows us to understand why Jacob returned to gather these insignificant objects, precious but without value. It is because he often used them for a sacred purpose and had no reason to discard them. He could therefore continue using them, giving them to the poor or selling them and distributing the money to the needy. This is why he returned from the other side of the river, alone and at night, to look for these trivial items.

We see that Jacob was worried about his fellowman and that he constantly thought of helping others. Such was his purpose in life, as was the purpose of the Patriarchs, who were G-d's chariot (*Bereshith Rabba 82:6*). All of them strived to help others in this world as much spiritually as physically, and their actions were aimed exclusively at pleasing their Creator. Jacob went out alone at night to search for objects with apparently no value, for the smallest kindness was so important in his eyes that he was ready to risk his life for it. The fact that Jacob was ready to do this for something whose benefit was questionable in our eyes is astonishing. We can thus imagine just how enthusiastically he performed the stricter and weightier commandments. We have no way of knowing how the Patriarchs lived their daily lives, yet we can draw a great lesson from their attitude of self-denial and their spirit of self-sacrifice. The Sages teach, "Be as careful of a minor mitzvah as of a major one, for you do not know the reward given for the mitzvot" (*Perkei Avoth 2:1*). There are no criteria for determining which commandments are more important than others, for a gesture as simple as relieving the pain of another can have enormous consequences.

Let us add that all the implements of a righteous man – even insignificant objects without any apparent value – are as important in their eyes as "religious" objects, especially those used by Jacob, which had special sanctity. He used them to serve G-d, which is why he risked his life, alone and at night, to retrieve them. He was afraid that Esau would find and profane them through evil use. Jacob therefore chose to put his life in danger in order to prevent Esau from spreading evil in the world through their inappropriate use. G-d, Who knows the depths of the heart and mind, knew that Jacob's intentions were pure. He therefore gave Jacob the strength and courage to

conquer Esau's angel, who fought with him during the entire night (*Chullin 92a*), for that angel also came to profane Jacob's sanctity. With G-d's help, Jacob fought bravely. Not only did he conquer the angel, he also retrieved his "religious" objects so they would not fall into the hands of someone who would use them incorrectly, thus saving them from being profaned by impure hands.

Righteous men attach more value to their possessions than to their own bodies. This is because their goal is to ensure that their money and possessions do not fall into the hands of those who would profane them through wrongful use. Hence they seek to deprive them of this possibility.

We must demonstrate an attitude of great self-sacrifice in order to sanctify G-d's Name in the world, and we must realize that it is forbidden to minimize the value of any commandment or delay its performance. On the contrary, we must perform each commandment immediately, even if it seems of little importance to us or we do not see the advantage of observing it. We are unaware of the reward for each commandment, even the least, and we must perform all of them with the intention of responding to G-d's will.

Who was greater than Jacob, immersed as he was in Torah at every moment of his life? He practiced the commandments and performed good deeds. He divided his people into two camps and said, "If Esau comes to the one camp and strikes it down, then the remaining camp will survive" (*Genesis 32:9*), thus continuing to serve G-d. In spite of this, he risked his life for insignificant objects by going out at night, doing so in order to help others afterwards. Even when they are absorbed in spiritual meditation, righteous men do not forget others. They put themselves in danger to help them, which serves as a lesson for us all.

We may offer yet another explanation:

Righteous men try to serve G-d fairly by doing difficult things under difficult circumstances. They do so in order to confront the evil inclination that is constantly hounding them, for it is precisely in this fight that they express their great love for G-d. They put all their efforts into serving G-d by overcoming the evil inclination and its temptations, and in this way they elevate themselves in Torah, in the fear of G-d, and in holiness and purity.

How wonderful, and indeed touching, are the words of King David, the beloved singer of Israel and "the fourth wheel of the Divine Chariot" (*Zohar 1:99a*). The Sages said: " 'If you walk in My statutes' [*Leviticus 26:3*]. This bears on the text, 'I considered my ways and returned my feet to Your testimonies' [*Psalms 119:59*]. David said, 'Sovereign of the Universe! Every day I used to plan and decide that I would go to a particular place or to a particular dwelling-house, but my feet always brought me to synagogues and houses of study' " (*Vayikra Rabba 35:1*). In the final analysis, King David went to houses of prayer and study each day in order to serve G-d with all his heart and soul. We must ask ourselves why at first he said, "Every day I used to plan and decide." For what reason and with what purpose in mind did King David lose precious time by thinking about

useless things (such as walking about in a certain place or going to visit a particular dwelling), which would add nothing to his service of G-d? When he was about to fulfill his plans, he stopped and instead went to those places where he could sing G-d's praises. Why then did he first think about such useless things? Was there any benefit whatsoever in thinking of these things beforehand?

Indeed there was! King David, who greatly devoted himself to G-d, put himself to the test. He was not content with constantly fighting the evil inclination. Instead, he continually provoked it. Each day he thought of a certain sin, and so the evil inclination would awaken a great desire in him to commit it. Then, just when it seemed that David would submit to the advice to the evil inclination and transgress in that way, he gathered all his strength and overcame his desires, going to the house of study to devote himself to the Torah. King David served G-d in the most difficult way possible, exerting a supreme effort and permanently dominating the evil inclination.

This is quite surprising. It is stated that David fled from before Saul, who sought to kill him: "David fled and escaped, and came to Samuel at Ramah. He told him all that Saul had done to him, so he and Samuel went and stayed at Naioth" (*1 Samuel 19:18*), which Rashi states was a house of study. There, David and Samuel studied together. The Sages state, "Rav Huna, the son of Rabbi Yossi, said that on that night, when David fled from before Saul, he learned from the prophet Samuel what no student of the highest level could learn in 100 years" (*Yalkut Shimoni ad. loc.*). This is puzzling, for at that point David was in danger of being killed, with a terrifying threat hanging over his head, and it would have been natural that he could not concentrate. However he overcame his fear and the danger, and he immersed himself in Torah study. That night he acquired what a student of the highest level could not learn even in 100 years. What he learned in that night was worth everything he had learned, and would learn, during his entire life (since he only lived 70 years). This shows us just how devoted and connected to the Torah he was, precisely at such a difficult time and under those trying circumstances, for this was his way of serving G-d.

The same applied to Jacob. He knew that Esau's angel wanted to attack and wage war against him, to slander and accuse him, which is why Jacob provoked him. He intentionally left several insignificant objects behind so as to give Esau's angel the impression that he could take and use them as he wished. He wanted Esau's angel to believe that he could conquer Jacob if he caught him sinning, since it is forbidden to abandon objects that could have some use. It was precisely at that point, when the situation was the most tense, that Jacob returned to look for these objects. He did so without putting any of his own men in danger, for he himself went to retrieve them. He then deprived the Satan of his prey. He fought against him during the entire night, until the break of dawn, and by doing so he conquered him for good and took back all the holiness that the Satan had taken. Our father Jacob, just like King David, served G-d by provoking the evil inclination.

When righteous men serve G-d, they do not allow the evil inclination to get the upper hand. On the contrary, they confront it and make it believe that they are ready to make a mistake or transgress one of G-d's commandments. However they only do this to deceive the evil inclination and deliver a fatal blow to it. G-d helps them to conquer the evil inclination, for He knows that their intentions are good and He is aware of their innermost thoughts.

Such was also the case with Rabbi Akiva. Just before dying, he was filled with sublime joy: "His disciples said to him: 'Our teacher, even to this point?' He said to them, 'All my days, I have been troubled by this verse [Deuteronomy 6:5]: 'with all thy soul,' [which I interpret as] 'even if He takes your soul.'" I said: "When shall I have the opportunity of fulfilling this?" Now that I have the opportunity, shall I not fulfill it?" " (Berachot 61b). David, Jacob, and Rabbi Akiva all found themselves in extremely difficult situations. However we, who find ourselves in less difficult circumstances (perhaps even easy and favorable to serving G-d), can perform seemingly difficult commandments with intense joy, and we can express this joy to the whole world so as to sanctify G-d's Name.

This is a lesson for every Jew. If Jacob fought and defeated Esau's angel because of his Torah and the prompt performance of the commandments, this teaches us that every Jew has the capacity and ability to overcome the evil inclination by fulfilling his Torah duties. Jacob fought Esau's angel until daybreak, and that "day" is the Torah, since the Torah is called "light" (Proverbs 6:23). This is the light of day, as the prophet said: "Then your light will burst out like the dawn and your healing will speedily sprout" (Isaiah 58:8). In addition, light symbolizes the deeds of righteous men, which demonstrates that the light of Torah allows a man to elevate himself (just as the day rises). The Torah gives a man the courage to fight, and the more he understands it, the more he arms himself in his daily fight against the evil inclination.

Before the Celestial Court, the Satan himself will admit that such and such a person fought and defeated him. That person will then become Israel, meaning *Yashar E-L* (upright before G-d), as it is written: "You have striven with the Divine and with man and have overcome" (Genesis 32:29). This is because of the Torah that a person acquires during his life, for it enables him to conquer the evil inclination and merit great rewards, ones reserved for good men in the World to Come.

### ***How Should We Conduct Ourselves?***

*The law is the same concerning small or large sums. We must therefore not scorn things that have little value, for anything of value, any amount, can be used for good and to help others.*

### ***A Penny Has The Same Status as a Hundred Gold Coins***

On the verse, "Jacob was left alone" (Genesis 32:25), the Sages state: "Rabbi Eleazar said, 'He remained behind for the sake of some small jars.' Hence to the righteous,

their money is dearer than their body. Why is this? It is because they do not stretch out their hands to robbery” (*Chullin 91a*).

Let us try and imagine what was happening to Jacob at that point. He had already crossed the Jabbok with all his children, when suddenly he realized that he had forgotten some jars on the other side. What did he do? He returned alone to get them. Is that possible? Was it not dangerous to go there alone at night? The Sages have said that a Talmid Chacham is forbidden to venture outside alone at night. Therefore why did Jacob do so? The answer is that the Holy One, blessed be He, created man with two parts. One is his soul, a spark of divinity, completely spiritual and devoid of materiality. The other is his body, the material aspect of man. Nevertheless, it is forbidden to think that the body has no value, or that it is permissible to harm it or make it suffer in any way. Not at all. The body is a very effective tool that enables an individual to do good deeds, serve Hashem, study Torah, and perform mitzvot.

All this allows us to understand a teaching of our Sages: “The righteous in their death are called living. ...The wicked in their lifetime are called dead” (*Berachot 18a-b*). Since the wicked do not use their bodies to perform mitzvot, they may be considered as being dead. As for the righteous, who always put their bodies to use in accomplishing mitzvot, they continually elevate themselves in the supernal world, in Gan Eden, and not only while alive, but also while dead. This is why they are called living even when their physical bodies are dead. Everyone knows, however, that some mitzvot are absolutely impossible to accomplish with simply the body alone. If someone does not have money, there are many mitzvot he cannot do. These include purchasing matzah for Passover, buying the four species for Sukkot, giving to charity, and many others. These all require a person to have money. This is why the Sages say that since the Tzaddikim desire to accomplish all the mitzvot to perfection, without missing a single one, money is more important to them than their bodies. This is due to the fact that with money, they can accomplish all the mitzvot without exception.

Such was the way of Jacob. He did not relinquish a single penny, not even small jars that people sometimes treat carelessly. He wanted to have all his possessions in order to perform the mitzvot, which is why he returned to the other side of the river to recover some small jars. Because he wanted to accomplish all the mitzvot that depend on money, he was not even afraid to go out alone at night. The “money” in this case consisted of those small jars. Hence he did not abandon them, but instead returned for them.

My fellow Jews, our father Jacob is teaching us a great lesson by this.

Unfortunately, today there are many people who disparage what may seem like, at least to them, a small amount of money, treating it as being almost worthless. We often hear people everywhere – be it in the home, the synagogue, or the street – saying, “What’s a few pennies? What’s a few dollars?” Sometimes we even hear, “What’s a few hundred dollars?” What is happening here? Is it impossible to perform mitzvot with just a small amount of money? Can a person not give to charity even if he has

only fifty cents in his pocket? As everyone knows, coins are round. One day I may own them, and the next day you may own them. Why scorn this “small change”? Even for a mitzvah that may be performed with just a few pennies, it is said: “Man enjoys its fruits in this world, while the principle remains in the World to Come” (*Kiddushin 40a*).

Each person is obligated to learn from the deeds of the holy Patriarchs. Money was more precious to them than their bodies, since with money they could perform mitzvot. It is not without reason that the Sages said, “A lawsuit involving a mere penny must be regarded as having the same importance as one involving a hundred gold coins” (*Sanhedrin 8a*), for a mitzvah can be performed with just a few pennies. The Sages have also said, “Whoever gives a penny to the poor receives a blessing,” not “Whoever gives tens of dollars,” for even a few pennies have enormous importance.

In addition, we can draw another lesson from Jacob’s actions, one that will enable us to emulate him. There are some people who, unfortunately, only want to please others. Hence when they see an opportunity to perform a “great” mitzvah, off they go running to do it. Donating money for the construction of a large Torah edifice so that their names will appear on the building in large letters, that is perfectly acceptable to them. However when it comes to a small mitzvah – such as a small gesture of kindness that will go unnoticed – this is not so pleasing to them, and we do not see them running to accomplish it. They avoid such mitzvot; indeed, they flee from them.

Jacob returned even for tiny jars. He did not neglect even a small mitzvah, but instead endeavored to accomplish it. From Jacob’s example, each of us must realize that a person has to put an effort into accomplishing even minor mitzvot. At that point we will have a good reward in this world and the World to Come.

### ***Vanity of Vanities: Material Life Compared to Spiritual Life***

It is written, “Isaac expired and died...and Esau and Jacob his sons buried him” (*Genesis 35:29*). However in the description of Esau’s descendants that is given in the next chapter, we are told: “Esau took his wives and his sons...and all his property that he acquired in the land of Canaan and went to a land because of his brother Jacob. For their possessions were too great to dwell together, and the land of their sojourns could not support them because of their livestock” (*ibid. 36:6-7*).

Commenting on the last verse, Rashi gives three reasons for Esau’s departure: The first is that the land could not provide enough pasture for their animals. Rashi cites a second reason from the Midrash (*Bereshith Rabba 82:13*), which interprets the expression “because of his brother Jacob” (*Genesis 36:6*) as meaning: Because of the obligation of the decree “that your offspring will be strangers” (*Genesis 15:13*). Although this decree was placed upon Isaac’s descendants, Esau thought he could escape it: “By leaving this place, I will have neither a share in the gift – for the land was given to him – nor in the fulfillment of the decree.” From the same Midrash, Rashi cites a third reason for Esau’s departure: He was ashamed of having sold his birthright.

This seems difficult to understand. The verse explicitly tells us why Esau departed: “The land of their sojourns could not support them because of their livestock.” It is therefore obvious that only Rashi’s first reason is valid. Thus how could two more reasons (avoiding the decree and feeling shame) be forwarded to explain his departure? The verse explicitly gives us the first reason, not the others, which are completely new. We must therefore find the Sages’ two additional reasons hidden somewhere in the text.

Let us try and explain. After Isaac’s death, Esau began to feel tremendous fear about remaining in Canaan, he and all his family. As we know, Esau believed very strongly in the prophecies of his holy ancestors, and he knew that if he wanted to receive the Torah and merit the land of Canaan as well, he would have to undergo many harsh trials. This is because, as we well know, the land of Israel and the Torah are acquired only through trials (*Berachot 5a*). However since Esau always fled from hardship and tried to acquire things the easy way, such as by theft and murder, he had no desire for such a gift, one acquired only through hardships. Because Esau wanted a free gift, he left the land to his brother Jacob, who accepted trials with love.

Let us say that these three explanations are mutually dependant. Esau was perfectly aware that everyone knew he had sold his birthright to Jacob. Nevertheless, he had the audacity to walk at the head of the funeral procession for their father Isaac, as it is written: “Esau and Jacob his sons buried him” (*Genesis 35:29*). This is the exact opposite of what happened between Ishmael and Isaac during Abraham’s burial (*ibid. 25:9*), for Ishmael had repented (*Bava Batra 16b; Bereshith Rabba 30:4*) and bowed his head before Isaac as he let him pass ahead. Thus Esau’s shame was revealed in public. If he continued to believe that he was the firstborn and that the land of Canaan was rightfully his, then Esau would have to repay the debt to his brother. He would also have to go into exile, both he and his descendants, instead of Jacob and his. However Esau did not want all this, which is why he left the land under the pretext that it could not support their livestock and that he had to look elsewhere. In reality, the wicked Esau thereby demonstrated that the land did not belong to him in any way, and that it rightfully belonged to Jacob and his children alone. This is because they studied Torah, and a consequence to studying Hashem’s Torah is that the Holy Land – the land of Israel – also belonged to the Children of Israel.

If we are correct in this regard, then the two reasons cited by the Midrash are alluded to in Genesis 36:6. The first part of the verse, “For their possessions were too great to dwell together,” signified that there was not enough pasture for their animals, which is what Esau claimed. The second part of the verse, “The land of their sojourns could not support them because of their livestock,” relates to the first reason given by the Midrash, for one of the brothers was a resident of the land while the other was a sojourner there, having to leave for exile and pay the debt against him. This was due to their *mikneh* (livestock) – consisting of the *kinyan* (transaction) between Jacob and Esau – meaning the birthright that Jacob purchased from his brother Esau.

However it is certain that Esau's claim (wherein he was leaving the land because there was not enough pasture for his animals) was not accepted, for there is no reason to leave the land of Israel. Thus Esau's shame was revealed in public, since everyone then knew that he left because he had the gall of wanting to remain the firstborn and because he had sold his birthright to Jacob. In other words, he left "because of his brother Jacob," for he did not want a gift that comprised hardships. The one who was truly the firstborn, and who wanted to acquire the Torah and the land of Israel by hardships, would inherit the land.

The Torah states, "If you walk in My statutes" (*Leviticus 26:3*), which the Sages have said refers to toiling in the study of Torah (*Torat Kohanim 26:2*). A person must realize that the Torah is only acquired through hard work, by hardship and with difficulty. This is in order for him to feel that he is acting in this way solely because he loves his Creator, as it is written: "Because for Your sake we are killed all day long" (*Psalms 44:23*).

If we act in this way, then the end of the passage will also be fulfilled: "You shall dwell in safety in your land" (*Leviticus 26:5*), meaning we will receive the land of Israel. However if we only want to benefit from a free gift, from *mitzvot* all prepared, then this will not last. Persistent and laborious effort in Torah study can only be achieved when a person devotes himself totally and exclusively to the Torah, not when he devotes himself entirely to increasing his wealth.

Jacob conquered this path for all his descendants after him. If we want to benefit from a *mitzvah*, we must endure many trials of love in an unselfish way. The proof is that Jacob gave all his possessions to acquire a tomb in the cave of Machpelah. He put a large pile of gold and silver before Esau and said, "My brother, do you prefer the portion that is yours in this cave, or all this gold and silver?" (*Shemot Rabba 31:17*).

Jacob was prepared to endure hardships uniquely to inherit the land and to acquire *mitzvot*, for the land of Israel belongs solely to the Children of Israel. We learn a great lesson from this, which is that only a person who devotes himself to the Torah in the land of Israel has a portion in the Holy Land.

## Parsha Vayeishev

### *Peace and Idleness Prevent the Study of Torah*

Our Sages have said, “Jacob desired to settle down in peace when he was struck with the tragic news concerning Joseph” (*Bereshith Rabba 84:1*).

Jacob truly wanted to enjoy peace in this world, a world that did not belong to him because he had shared worlds with his brother Esau (*Tanna d'bey Elyahu Zutah*). How could he have wanted to rest peacefully in this world? And why was he struck with the bad news concerning Joseph, as opposed to another child?

It is because Jacob, a man who symbolizes the toil of study, didn't want peace for enjoyment's sake. Rather, he wanted to alleviate the burden of exile for his children. G-d, however, didn't want Jacob to rest in tranquility, for in such a case his children would have been at risk of diminishing their studies and would have forgotten the Torah. The word וַיִּשָׁב (“and he rested”) can be restructured as וַיִּשָׁב, meaning that if Jacob had only aspired to rest in peace (וַיִּשָׁב), he would have misled future generations to search for comfort. This would have had consequences that are disastrous (וַיִּשָׁב) because the Torah is only acquired through toil.

Thus it was the tragedy of Joseph (and precisely Joseph) that grabbed hold of Jacob because of his name; Joseph means, “who adds, who grows” (*Taanith 31a*). One must put in extra effort, without respite, to study Torah because this is the only thing that can rectify our exile.

The Mishpat Tzaddik confirms our hypothesis. He cites the amazing words of the Zohar as follows: “If the Children of Israel knew why G-d reprimands them more than any other people, they would understand that G-d gave up on what is due to Him” (*Zohar III:66a*). He explains that G-d created His legions of angels to serve Him. When He created the Jewish people, He fashioned them on the model of the Celestial Assembly (*Zohar II:169b: III:66a*). G-d made it such that everything that happens in the world depends on Jews. When Israel abandons the Torah and the service of G-d, the angels also stop short, for everything depends on the acts of men. When Israel abandons the path of Torah and no longer serves G-d, the Celestial Court ceases to fulfill the will of G-d, as it is written, “When Israel does not conduct itself with perfection in this world, the Name of G-d is not complete in Heaven. And so G-d says, ‘If you know that your actions prevent all the numerous legions from serving Me, you also know that you don't deserve to continue living in this world, not even for an hour’” (*Zohar III:4b*).

It's thanks to the Torah of Jacob – who is the head of the Celestial Chariot (*Bereshith Rabba 82:7*), “whose portrait is engraved on the Divine Throne” (*Pesikta Zutah Gen 28:13*) and “who himself is a throne” (*Zohar I:97a*) “whom G-d is so proud of” (*Isa 49:3*) “that is the foundation of His splendor” (*Zohar III:32a*) – that we glorify G-d. If Jacob rests, be it only

in thought (even for the intention of devoting himself to Torah), he commits a sin that is transmitted to all his descendants.

On the basis of this, I would like to explain the expression “the voice is the voice of Jacob” (*Gen 27:22*). Why is the word “voice” used twice? It is because in this world, when one hears the voice of the Torah being uttered by the Children of Israel, the voice of Jacob is also being heard in Heaven. It is towards him that all the legions of angels turn. They know that the voice of the Torah is also being heard here in the world below and that men serve G-d, as it is written, “When Israel is united in this world to serve G-d, the Name of G-d is praised in the Celestial world” (*Sifre Brachah 33:5*). When the voice of the Torah is heard, the hand of Esau does not prevail (*Bereshith Rabba 65:20*), and no people can conquer Israel when he follows the ways of the Torah (*Ketubot 66b*). If not, Israel could not survive, not even for an instant. Why? Because when the Children of Israel forget the Torah, G-d also turns His face away in the world above, angels can no longer see the image of Jacob engraved on the Throne of Glory, and so they halt their service. Only G-d has the image of Jacob before Him, and thanks to him G-d does not punish his children with the severity that they deserve, as it is written, “when the Children of Israel sin, G-d acts as if He were sleeping” (*Yalkut Shimoni Esther 1057*).

May the Name of G-d be praised, Who granted more importance to the honor of the Children of Israel than to the heavenly angels that carry out His word, for it is only the study of Torah and the service of the Children of Israel that give the angels the strength to sing G-d’s praises. The Children of Israel count more than the angels because the angels stand “upright”, whereas the Children of Israel “walk about”, as it is written, “I will grant you passage among these [angels] who stand here” (*Zec 3:7*). The Children of Israel can be compared to the electricity that makes a motor function, which in turn runs mechanisms. In the same way, Israel makes all the worlds function.

The Sages have said, “When G-d gave the Torah, He silenced all of creation” (*Shemot Rabba 29:9*). Why was that necessary? Up to the giving of the Torah, the angels obeyed the will of G-d, but from the moment it was given to Israel, the latter became the world’s bearer of destiny, and all depends on Israel’s merit.

At the moment that the Torah was given, the entire world held itself silent, and there was a brief interruption in the angels’ service. It is only through the study of Torah that the world continues to exist, and the angels and the Seraphim employed in the matters of this world pursue their affairs when they hear the voice of Jacob, the voice of Torah that makes itself heard in the mouth of the Children of Israel.

However if Israel abandons the Torah, the world would not survive: “If My covenant [the Torah] with the night and with the day would not be; had I not set up the laws of heaven and earth ...”, which means, “If it were not for the Torah, the Heavens and the Earth would no longer survive” (*Nedarim 32a*). For the angels assigned to the matters of this world perform their tasks dependent on the Children of Israel, and if the latter rest, the angels also rest.

Every Jew has a great responsibility to the Torah, especially during vacation time, free time, and during the long winter nights. If they don't study, they put the world in danger. We learn from Jacob that one should not seek out comfort, and "Jephthah in his generation was equal to Samuel in his generation" (*Rosh Hashanah 25b*). If our efforts are not equal to our potential, our punishment will be great. On the other hand, if we elevate ourselves in the study of Torah to the degree that we can comprehend and understand, we will awaken Divine Favor in the supernal worlds, and we will glorify G-d in all His splendor.

### ***Torah and Love of Others: Reparation of the Egyptian Exile***

It is written, "And Jacob dwelt [וישב] in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan" (*Genesis 37:1*). The Midrash explains: "Jacob expected to live a tranquil life, but he was prevented from doing so when the tragedy of Joseph's disappearance took hold of him. The promise of the world to come is therefore not enough for the righteous, as they still aspire to a tranquil life in this world!"

One must understand the sense of the expression וישב (lit. "and he sat"). Why does the Torah not use the word "live"? It is because the intention of the verse is precisely to indicate the seated position, in the same way that the yeshiva is the place where Torah is studied. Jacob our Father desired to dedicate himself to the study of Torah and the service of G-d in all tranquility, yet the grief that seized him because of Joseph prevented him from doing so.

Sometimes the study of Torah can be done quite easily, but oftentimes study demands that a person overcome quite a bit of distress. This is what our Sages have said, namely: "Torah is acquired through suffering" (*Berachot 5a*). The pains that one must endure for acquiring Torah by means of its study are as trying as those endured by one who acquires Torah through suffering.

In order to annul the decree of exile for the Children of Israel, our Father Jacob desired to establish a permanent place for the study of Torah in the land of Canaan. This is because Torah study has the power to annul punishment, as the Sages say, "The Torah protects and saves us" (*Sotah 21a*). Why then was he struck with such tremendous grief? It was because G-d wanted to make him understand that Torah study is not an easy activity, to be performed with head rested in comfort and tranquility. Rather, Torah should be studied despite the torments of exile, and even if the pain and anguish that we endure are great, this does not mean that we should neglect the study of Torah.

It seems that the expression בארץ כנען ("in the land of Canaan") – the last letter of each word together forming the word נץ ("blossom") – signifies the idea that the time of the exile approaches and, as it were, "blossoms". As it is written, "The blossoms have appeared in the land" (*Song of Songs 2:12*), which Rashi explains as meaning "the days of summer are near." In the same way, concerning our verse, the idea is that the time of exile approaches. At such a moment, it is not appropriate to rest on the pillars of Torah

and piety. One must overcome suffering and study Torah in order to annul the rigors of exile. In fact, instead of being prolonged for 400 years (according to the decree given to Abraham), the exile of Egypt lasted but 210 years, precisely because Jacob did not enjoy tranquility in this world. For having overcome all his suffering, he managed to reduce the exile by 190 years and to diminish the severity of the decree.

If we look at this passage a little more closely, we will see that the exile was caused by behavior that was erroneous and apparently wicked. Studying Torah together, whether we learn or teach it, engenders love and feelings of fraternity for others, and it leads to friendship between individuals.

It is written, “And he [Joseph] was a lad with the sons of Bilhah and with the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives” (*Genesis 37:2*). The Torah expressly witnesses to the fact that Bilhah and Zilpah were Jacob’s wives proper. Yet Joseph suspected his brothers, the sons of Leah, of scorning the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, as if they ignored the aforementioned fact. Rashi explains: “Joseph was spending his time with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah because his brothers scorned them and he himself wanted to reconcile them by conciliatory actions.” Given that the Torah testifies that Bilhah and Zilpah were the wives of Jacob, it goes without saying that their children were not scorned by the other brothers, and the unfounded suspicions of Joseph caused a great wrong, finally leading to the exile into Egypt.

We can now understand the end of the verse that states, “and Joseph brought the evil report of them to their father” (*v.2*). What type of slander did this consist of? Our Sages have said, “When Joseph saw his brothers, the sons of Leah, behaving improperly, he reported the matter to his father, telling him that they ate meat torn from a living animal, that they scorned the children of the maidservants by treating them like slaves, and that they themselves behaved immorally” (*Bereshith Rabba 84:7*). To understand Joseph, we need to realize that he passed his time with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, the wives of his father, meaning to say that he became friendly with them, but not with the sons of Leah. This led Joseph to suspect them of disparaging the sons of the maidservants. Such suspicions concerning the fathers of the tribes of Israel were uncalled for. How could “the tribes of G-d, a testimony for Israel” (*Psalms 122:4*) disparage their brothers and treat them like slaves? Joseph was punished measure for measure, as he himself was sold as a slave, and in the final analysis this is what caused the exile of our ancestors in Egypt.

When Joseph was sold as a slave, Jacob refused to accept any consolation: “But he refused to be comforted and said, ‘For I will go down to the grave mourning for my son’ ” (*Genesis 37:35*). Why? Our Sages tell us, “Jacob knew that if none of his sons would die during his lifetime, it would be a sign for him that he would not see hell. However now, thinking that Joseph was dead, he believed that his marital relations were lacking in perfection and that he would have to suffer the torments of hell” (*Tanhuma Vayigash 9*). If all of his children were alive, it was a guarantee for Jacob that he would not see hell. However if but one of them was gone, it would mean that he had lacked perfection, something that Jacob especially dreaded.

We can now better understand that which was stated above, namely that Joseph frequented the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, the wives of his father, which makes us think that he didn't love his other brothers, the sons of Leah. This is the reason why Joseph slandered them to his father. In fact this is what the righteous Joseph, who did not spend time with his older brothers, implied by his accusations. If the brothers treated the sons of the maidservants as slaves, it follows that as slaves, they only have the right to marry maidservants, and it is forbidden for them to marry women from non-slave families. This is the meaning of Joseph's accusation of immorality, whereas imputing them with acting scornfully with the sons of the maidservants and speaking slanderously of them is similar to "eating a limb torn from a living animal."

Joseph should have been more wary. In light of his own greatness, he had no reason to limit his fraternal relationships to the sons of the maidservants and to incite his other brothers' mistrust of him. On the contrary, he should have conducted himself with all his brothers in the same way. For not having done so, he was punished.

The Sages warn us: "A father should not favor one son more than the others. He should not spend more time with one of them to the detriment of the others, for it was the favoritism of Jacob for Joseph that led the brothers to jealousy, and which in the end brought them all to Egypt" (*Bereshith Rabba* 84:8). Joseph himself, in showing a preference for the sons of the maidservants, simply imitated his father, and this caused the exile into Egypt.

Let us now return to our first concept. Joseph's accusations caused the bitter exile, however the study of Torah in difficult conditions is a remedy that can correct the three sins that he accused them of: Eating meat torn from a live animal, slander of others, and immorality. Let us see how this is so.

The Sages tell us, "The Torah is called Life" (*Avoth d'Rabbi Nathan* 34:10), and also, "The Torah is an elixir of life for the entire body" (*Eruvin* 54a). This is to say that a life sanctified by Torah will rectify having eaten a limb torn from a living animal, since Torah is a remedy for the body.

The Sages say further: "The Torah is a tree of life; it is a remedy against slander" (*Tanhuma Metzora* 2), meaning to say that it rectifies the slander of others and gossip-mongering directed against those who have been enslaved to nothing other than Torah. Furthermore, "The Torah and Israel are connected one to the other like an engaged couple" (*Sifri Beracha* 4). Thus the Torah rectifies immorality, in the sense of the statement, "The Torah is figuratively represented by the righteous woman" (*Yebamot* 63a), meaning that it protects and saves us from all improper conduct. All this goes hand in hand with the love of others, which indicates that the Torah – which is learned and taught by one to the next – can rectify the sufferings of exile and bring the time of redemption closer.

From the story of Joseph, who was punished for having attached himself to the sons of the maidservants and not to the sons of Leah, we learn of our duty to associate with every Jew, as it is written, "All Jews are connected in friendship one to another." Above

all, one must desire the good of each (*Perkei Avoth 4:15*) and look to achieve unity of all, to the point of being “like a single man with a single heart” (*Mechilta Yitro 19:2*). Conversely, since “from that which is said we understand that which is not said” (*Bamidbar Rabba 9:47*), a person who associates with some to the exclusion of others expresses a lack of love by doing so, and it is forbidden not to love another Jew, as it is written, “You shall not hate your brother in your heart” (*Leviticus 19:17*). This was demonstrated by Joseph’s conduct, for which he was punished.

It is for every Jew to bind himself in friendship to all other Jews, which will save us and bring about the Final Redemption, speedily in our days. Amen.

### *Torah Study in Exile*

It is written, “And Jacob dwelled in the land of his father’s sojournings, in the land of Canaan” (*Genesis 37:1*). Rashi relates the statement of the Midrash on this: “Jacob wanted to settle down in peace. It was then that he was struck by the tragedy of Joseph” (*Bereshith Rabba 84:1*).

The following questions may be asked:

1. It is difficult to believe that Jacob could have made the mistake of wanting to live in peace, for in fact Jacob is described as “a wholesome man, abiding in tents” (*Genesis 25:27*), meaning “in the academy of Shem and Ever” (*Bereshith Rabba 65:15*). The word **קַיָּ** (wholesome) is formed by the same letters as **קָוָה** (death), in the sense of labor, as it is written: “Only one who labors [literally “kills himself”] to learn Torah retains its teachings” (*Shabbat 83b*). Thus if Jacob “killed himself” in the house of study, without respite, how is it possible to say that he sought peace, and why would he be struck by such tragedy and punishment? How much more is this in question, since the Sages said of him, “Jacob grew old while in the house of study” (*Yoma 28b*)? Thus up to his old age, he never stopped studying Torah with devotion. How then can we say that he sought peace?

2. Is it possible to believe that Jacob desired peace in order to devote himself entirely to study? If such is the case, why would he be punished for wanting to study in tranquility, free from all worry?

The study of Torah consists of two things. The first is putting effort into study, as it is written: “If you follow My decrees” (*Leviticus 26:3*), which the Sages deduce as referring to laboring in study (*Torat Kohanim ad loc.*). The second is the pursuit of Torah study in exile, as the Sages say: “Exile yourself to a place of Torah” (*Perkei Avoth 4:14*). The one who exiles himself in order to study elsewhere demonstrates just how precious the Torah is to him, for he has taken the trouble to go to such a point to study it. Actually, most students exile themselves in order to study, and they end up seeing the results because they retain what they have struggled to learn.

Jacob sinned by looking for peace at that time, for during his entire life he had exiled himself in the tents of Shem and Ever. Commenting on the verse that states,

“Jacob arrived whole at the city of Shechem” (*Genesis 33:18*), the Sages have said: “Whole in his body, in his possessions, and in his Torah” (*Shabbat 33b*). This shows that he exiled himself to a place of Torah in order to perfect his character and to progress spiritually. Yet now he desired to settle down in peace in the land of his father’s sojournings, and to study Torah in peace and holiness there! Someone like Jacob should be a model of behavior for his children and all those who study Torah. In fact, Jacob is called the most perfect of the Patriarchs because he acquired the Torah through strenuous effort and withdrew himself to a place of Torah.

Jacob’s desire to settle down in peace was a mistake, for his descendants would also want to settle down and study in comfort, and then the Torah’s priority would be lost. Even if Jacob did not need to exile himself (for he knew how to dominate his evil inclination, and he would never have arrived at the point of abandoning the path of Torah), his children, descendants, and all the Jewish people would have sought tranquility and not put in the effort necessary to adhere to the Torah. Such is not the way of the Torah; it is not acquired in comfort, but rather through effort. As it is written, “This is the way [to acquire] Torah: Eat bread with salt, drink water in small measure, sleep on the ground, live a life of deprivation and toil in the Torah” (*Perkei Avoth 6:4*).

Joseph was exiled from his father Jacob’s house for the same number of years as Jacob himself was absent, against his will, from his father Isaac’s house (*Megillah 17a*). It was precisely by means of Joseph that Jacob was punished, for it was to Joseph that Jacob had transmitted the greater part of his wisdom (*Bereshith Rabba 84:8*), and everything that happened to Jacob also happened to Joseph (*Bamidbar Rabba 14:16*). Joseph was exiled precisely in order to fulfill the Torah in exile, a place where he was harshly tested. Joseph overcame these tests, and he attained a great spiritual state, as the Sages have said several times. Let us cite some of these.

(1) “Joseph had the merit of secretly sanctifying the Name of G-d in exile, and one of the letters in G-d’s Name was added to his, as it is written: ‘He appointed it as a testimony for Joseph when He went out over the land of Egypt’ [*Psalms 81:6*]” (*Mechilta Bo 12*). In that passage of Psalms, Joseph’s name is written with the extra letter *hei*.

(2) “Joseph will expose the sins of the wicked on that great day, for if someone wants to plead before the Celestial Court that ‘I was bothered by temptations, I was too good looking,’ he will be told ‘Were you bothered more, or better looking than Joseph?’ ” (*Yoma 35b*).

Joseph’s greatness is confirmed by the fact that Moses personally carried his remains out of Egypt (*Sotah 9a*). It is said, moreover, that “the 12 Tribes could have descended from him” (*Sotah 36b*), and “the descendants of Esau fall prey only to the descendants of Joseph” (*Bava Batra 123b*). In addition, Joseph “observed Shabbat before G-d gave this commandment” (*Bereshith Rabba 92:4*), as it is written: “Then there was an opportune day when he entered the house to do his work” (*Genesis 39:11*). Now this day was Shabbat, so what work did he need to do? Actually, “he entered the house to review what his father had taught him” (*Yalkut Shimoni Vayeishev 146*).

For having controlled this temptation, he attained the heights of perfection (*Yalkut Shimoni Tehillim 817*). How did he succeed? He exiled himself to a place of Torah where he studied day and night. He strived to understand Torah laws in order to practice them, and he had the merit of being emulated by future generations.

When we find ourselves in the presence of good people, their influence makes us inclined to behave properly and honestly. The true test occurs when we are far from a good environment and without support in withstanding temptation. In such cases, if we succeed in following the ways of Torah, we elevate ourselves to the highest degree and enjoy great prosperity. Thus exile has two advantages, one being that it accentuates the importance of Torah study (since we have exiled ourselves to study it), and the other being that in exile a man becomes accustomed to overcoming his evil inclination by himself because he has nobody to help him do so. There in exile, he strives to put into practice everything that he has learned while in his father's house or in yeshiva. If he performs the commandments in exile and keeps himself from yielding to temptation (like Joseph, who practiced what he learned from his father after having left home), he thereby proves himself. This is also the reason why Jacob was not punished physically or through his possessions for having wanted to study in peace, but rather in that Joseph was exiled to Egypt. This is because Jacob should have wanted his sons to exile themselves to a place of Torah, where they would be able to perfect their traits, not to stay at home where they would have been unable to perfect themselves as required.

We may now explain what the Sages have said, namely: "If a person sees that he is being assailed by troubles, he should review his conduct. If he has reviewed it and has not found a reason for his suffering, he should attribute his troubles to an abandonment of Torah study" (*Berachot 5a*). This is because all kinds of suffering result when we abandon the Torah. Such abandonment "brings pestilence into the world and causes the death of young children" (*Shabbat 32b, 33b*). When we are afflicted with suffering, we must first of all check to see if we have not abandoned the path of Torah. If we have examined our deeds and concluded that we have not abandoned the Torah, there should be no reason to suspect that this suffering stems from a slackening in Torah study.

In such a case, suffering is caused neither by sins (since we have behaved corrected) nor by a lack of Torah study (since we have continued to study), but rather by the fact that we have not put enough effort into study and have not exiled ourselves to a place of Torah. It is in these things that we have "abandoned" the Torah.

When Jacob was stuck with the tragedy of Joseph, as well as by many other tragedies (*Tanhuma Mikeitz 10*), he examined his conduct and was able to note that he remained whole in his body, in his deeds, and in his Torah. The tragedy involving Joseph struck him because he did not exile himself to a place of Torah and did not send his children away to perfect themselves. This is why Joseph was exiled from his father's house.

If a man does not exile himself to a place of Torah, circumstances will bring him to exile, for without exile he will come to abandon the Torah (G-d forbid). We may add

that in the time of the Patriarchs, the sparks of holiness that Adam rendered impure had still not been repaired, and it was the Patriarchs' task to effect such a repair. It was therefore necessary for Jacob to go down into Egypt to repair these sparks of holiness and to restore them to their supernal source (*Ohr HaChayim Bereshith 49:9, among others*). If Jacob had stayed in the land of Canaan and studied in peace, these sparks of holiness would have remained scattered in Egypt. It was only after repairing them – after chasing the reign of evil from this world – that Jacob could settle down in peace. These sparks still remained in Egypt, and Joseph went down into that land before Jacob to start effecting this repair. Thus Jacob and all his family could then go down into Egypt to carry out the work of repairing the sparks of holiness, as it is written: “Like a rose among thorns, Israel in Egypt was to blossom and make the sparks blossom, to make the flowers bloom, and to restore them to their source” (*Zohar II:189b*). It is only through exile, meaning by the pain of finding oneself in a land which is not one's own, that a person can refine his character traits and attain perfection. How? Solely by exiling himself to a place where he is not known, and there to elevate himself in acquiring Torah in 48 ways (*Perkei Avoth 6:5[6]*), studying Torah through toil and thus correcting himself and bringing the entire world to yield to G-d's sovereignty. Amen.

### ***Abandoning Torah: The Cause of the Temple's Destruction and the Exile***

It is written, “But Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the eyes of the L-RD, and the L-RD caused him to die. ...What [Onan] did was evil in eyes of the L-RD, and He caused him to die also. Then Judah said to Tamar, his daughter-in-law, ‘Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up’ ” (*Genesis 38:7-11*).

The account of Er and Onan requires a few clarifications:

1. Why does the Torah tell about the sin of Er and Onan, who according to the Sages refused to have children: “They refused to give children to Tamar so she would retain her beauty” (*Bereshith Rabba 85:5*). It is a known fact that whoever spills his semen in vain is punished from Heaven with the penalty of death.

2. We also know that a woman whose two previous husbands have died no longer has the right to remarry (*Yebamot 64b*). How is it possible that Judah told his daughter-in-law Tamar to wait until his son Shelah grows up? If the death of two husbands had been attributed to her, she could still not marry Shelah when he grew up, for she would represent a danger to him.

It is certain that there are frightening secrets contained in this account, and the verses serve only to cover them. We must understand the meaning of the account of Judah, Tamar, Er, Onan, and Shelah by means of the Torah's allusions, and we know that “the Torah says nothing unnecessarily” (*Zohar III:149b*).

To explain this section, we must first point out that it refers to the two Temples, the Torah, the Messiah, and the Divine Presence. We also need to present a brief introduction that will lead us to a clear and proper understanding of the subject.

It is a fact that G-d causes His Presence to reign in this world so that we may connect to Him. The Divine Presence connects itself to us when we please our Creator, which allows us to receive and rejoice in the abundance of G-d's kindnesses. Man was created in order to obey his Creator's will, and he should sense that He breathed into him a soul and life (*Genesis 2:7*). A person should perceive the image of G-d, and he should feel that G-d watches over those who fear Him and that the light that connects to man gives him life. It is then that he will yield unconditionally to his Creator.

Such was the greatness of Adam, the first man. He knew that he was immortal, since G-d had forbidden him to eat from the Tree of Knowledge under penalty of death (*Genesis 2:17*), which indicates that if he had not eaten of it, he would not have died (*Bereshith Rabba 9:6*). Adam did not eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life before the sin, for he did not require the attribute of everlasting life. How could he die, since G-d had breathed life into him? However after the sin, Adam's life was shortened and his greatness diminished. King David said of Adam, "I said, 'You are angelic, sons of the Most High are you all'" (*Psalms 82:6*). Adam was so filled with wisdom that "the angels took him for divine and wanted to sanctify him" (*Bereshith Rabba 8:9*). It is difficult for us, ordinary people, to imagine how and in which form G-d created man and breathed life into him. Concerning the subject of the Tree of Knowledge, the Sages teach us that G-d "gave Adam a simple commandment and he transgressed it" (*Shabbat 55b*) – Adam, who was created in the image of G-d – and they add that "Adam could see from one end of the world to the other" (*Hagigah 12a*). It is difficult for us to imagine and describe his greatness.

We understand just to what extent Adam spiritually fell when we consider that he ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, an act that earned him the penalty of death. If he had not heard the "voice of the L-RD G-d walking in the garden" (*Genesis 3:8*), the Torah testifies that he would have quickly eaten of the Tree of Life as well (*v.22*) in order to live forever (*Bereshith Rabba 21:6*). He was immediately chased from the Garden of Eden (*Genesis 3:23*) before he could eat from the Tree of Live, since it is true that "one transgression brings about another" (*Perkei Avoth 4:2*). In order to minimize his punishment, G-d immediately chased him out of the Garden of Eden.

We must add that when Adam ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, he damaged all the sparks of holiness that the Patriarchs and the Children of Israel would later extract, purify, and return to their source during their long exile in Egypt (*Ohr HaHayim Bereshith 49:9*). The entire world could have been repaired and put under the sovereignty of G-d, since the evil inclination was uprooted from the hearts of the Children of Israel (*Kohelet Rabba 3:14*), as it was at the Giving of the Torah (*Zohar 1:63b*), and they could have immediately entered Eretz Israel after their departure from Egypt. Similarly, they could have then built the Temple, which would have been indestructible, as it is written: "Before having committed the sin of the golden calf, the Divine Presence accompanied each Israelite," and the Messiah would have come because they accepted the incontestable sovereignty of G-d when they stated "the L-RD shall reign for all eternity" (*Exodus 15:18*).

However the Satan confounded and deceived them, and they worshipped the golden calf and spiritually stumbled, taking with them the sparks of holiness that they had repaired. When they repented of this sin, they merited entering Eretz Israel, and they could have brought about the Final Redemption. However they again sinned when the spies “brought forth to the Children of Israel an evil report on the land that they had spied out” (*Numbers 13:32*), and it was then that it was decreed that since the Children of Israel had “cried over nothing, I will give you something to cry over” (*Taanith 29a*). This would occur until the advent of the Messiah, when again all the sparks of holiness will be repaired. Even though the Messiah can come in each generation, he delays because of us, because we perpetuate the sin of the spies, for the reparation of their sin depends on us and our abilities. In the meantime, the first Temple was destroyed, as well as the second Temple, because of the sins of idolatry and baseless hatred (*Yoma 9b*), and also because we “abandoned the path of the Torah.” The prophet laments: “For what reason did the land perish and become parched like the desert, without a passerby? And the L-RD has said, ‘Because of their forsaking My Torah that I put before them. Moreover they did not heed My voice nor follow it’ ” (*Jeremiah 9:11-12*). We know that Jerusalem was destroyed because they abandoned the Torah (*Shabbat 119b*), to the extent that G-d sighed: “If only they had abandoned Me, yet observed My Torah...” (*Yerushalmi Hagigah 1:7*), for the light of the Torah would have shown them the path to follow.

We are now in a position in which we can understand the account of Er and Onan, Judah, Tamar, and Shelah, for everything is related.

Judah alludes metaphorically to Hashem, Who gives the Torah, for Judah’s name is composed of the letters of G-d’s Name. Tamar alludes to the righteous, as it is written: “A righteous man will flourish like a palm tree [*tamar*]” (*Psalms 92:13*). There are many things in common between the righteous and a palm tree. For example, “The palm tree awakens desire, and the righteous have a desire to know G-d” (*Bereshith Rabba 41:1*), and “The palm tree has thorns just as the righteous have thorns, and it is forbidden to harm them” (*Yalkut Shimoni 690*). The palm tree also figurative alludes to the Torah, for both are sweet, as it is written: “Taste and see that the L-RD is good” (*Psalms 34:9*), and “They [the words of Torah] are...sweeter than honey and drippings from the combs” (*ibid. 19:11*). The palm tree also alludes to the Temple and the Torah, for the Divine Presence dwells in the Temple because of the Torah, and just as the palm tree is not affected by any wind, so too does the Torah not change under any circumstances. Er and Onan allude to the Children of Israel, to whom G-d gave the Torah in order to bring the world under His sovereignty and bring about the Final Redemption.

What we have just stated may be read between the lines in the storyline of our verses: Judah [who represents G-d] gave Tamar [the Torah] to Er and Onan [the Children of Israel]. The Torah was given as a gift to Israel for having brought the sparks of holiness back to their source. Afterwards they sinned in the desert, but they could purify themselves of their sin through the Torah, since “impurity does not affect the Torah” (*Berachot 22a*), and the Redemption will only occur because of the Torah.

The Torah continues the story, recounting how instead of effecting a repair and bringing the world under the sovereignty of G-d and ushering in the Redemption, the Children of Israel (Er and Onan) profaned the Torah (Tamar). The Temple was destroyed because the Torah was abandoned, in that Er and Onan wasted their seed. They seemed righteous and occupied with the Torah, but in fact they spilled their seed, practiced idolatry, and hated one another without justification, to the extent that both Temples were destroyed. It is not without reason that the Sages associate the Torah and the exile to the palm tree, as it is said: “G-d exiled Israel to Babylon only so that there they would nourish themselves with dates and be occupied with the Torah” (*Pesachim 87b*), meaning that they were only exiled in order to correct the sins that had caused the destruction of the Temple and the neglect of the land. The Sages also said, “Forty years before the destruction of the Temple and the exile, they planted palm trees in Babel” (*Yerushalmi Taanith 4:4*). For having neglected the Torah that had been given to them in 40 days (*Menachot 99b*), already 40 years earlier (one year for each day), the Sages had prepared a path for the exile – palm trees – meaning the study of Torah in order to correct the sins that had brought about the exile. It was for all these reasons that G-d punished Er and Onan with death. Which death was that? The exile of the Children of Israel, who were chased from the land of their fathers for having abandoned the path of the Torah, and we know that “children die because of the abandonment of the Torah” (*Shabbat 32a*). Such was the death of Judah’s children.

Despite all the delays, Jews have retained their belief that the exile will end with the arrival of the Messiah. This is indicated in the words of Judah to Tamar: “Until my son Shelah grows up.” This means that the Children of Israel will wait for the arrival of the Messiah, who is also called Shelah (*Sanhedrin 98b*), which is to say that they will correct their sins “until Shiloh arrives” (*Genesis 49:10*) and the Temple is rebuilt. While waiting, they will remain in exile where they will have their sins forgiven. When the Messiah arrives, he will bring them to the land of Israel and rebuild the Temple. Until that day, the Children of Israel must vigilantly keep the Torah in the fear of G-d in order to repair everything that has been damaged. When they will have effected this repair, the Messiah will be sent in order to unite us and build the Temple. He will teach the Children of Israel the secrets of the Torah, and with G-d’s help we will experience the Final Redemption. Amen.

### *Trusting in G-d*

It is written, “ ‘If only you would think of me with yourself when he benefits you, and you will do me a kindness, if you please, and mention me to Pharaoh, then you would get me out of this building.’ ... Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but he forgot him” (*Genesis 40:14,23*).

Following the Midrash, Rashi comments as follows: “ ‘The chief cupbearer did not remember’ – on that day. ‘But he forgot him’ – afterwards. Because Joseph depended on him to remember him, it was necessary that he remain imprisoned for two years,

as is stated: ‘Happy is the man who has made the L-RD his trust, and turned not to the arrogant and to strayers after falsehood’ [Psalms 40:5] – and does not put his trust in the Egyptians, who are called arrogant.” The Midrash adds: “Because he [Joseph] said to the chief cupbearer, ‘If only you would think of me...and mention me’ [Genesis 40:14], two years were added to his suffering. Thus, ‘And it came to pass at the end of two full years’ [Genesis 41:1]” (*Beresith Rabba* 89:2).

Joseph was punished for having asked the chief cupbearer to remember him. This is something of extreme importance that requires an explanation.

1. How is it that the righteous Joseph, the foundation of the earth (*Zohar* 1:59b), placed his trust in a human being, for “Accursed is the man who trusts in people and makes flesh his strength and turns his heart away from the L-RD” (*Jeremiah* 17:5)? Is it possible to say that Joseph is under a curse? Far from us to even think such a thing, especially since we know that Joseph remained upright while in Egypt (*Tanhuma Nasso* 28) and served G-d everywhere! Yet how are we to understand the words of our Sages?

2. The Midrash seems to contradict itself, as the *Imrey Chen* underlines. First of all, according to the Midrash, the verse “Happy is the man who has made the L-RD his trust” applies to Joseph, which indicates that Joseph maintained his trust in G-d. In the end, however, the Midrash says that Joseph was punished by having to stay two more years in prison. This punishment was because he placed his trust in the chief cupbearer by asking him to remember and speak favorably of him to Pharaoh. Does this mean that Joseph placed his confidence in the chief cupbearer and not in G-d?

First of all, let us examine how Joseph preserved his Judaism while in the house of Potiphar, before he was thrown into prison. This will allow us to evaluate his trust in G-d and demonstrate that he did not accept favors from people.

It is written, “He would not listen to her to lie beside her, to be with her” (*Genesis* 39:10). The Midrash states: “‘To lie beside her’ – in this world; ‘to be with her’ – so that he should not be with her in the Gehenna in the World to Come” (*Beresith Rabba* 87:6). Even though Joseph was sold as a slave in Egypt, he did not allow himself to be influenced by those around him. He remained upright despite all the efforts of Zuleika, Potiphar’s wife, to seduce him, as it is written: “And so it was – just as she coaxed Joseph day after day, so he would not listen to her” (*v.10*). The Sages explain that Joseph did not want to become guilty before G-d by lying “beside her, to be with her” (*see Yoma* 35b). This means that he did not even want to be in her presence, even without sinning, for our Sages say that the evil inclination first invites a man to touch the forbidden, then to make use of it. If Joseph had agreed to be in her presence, even without doing anything, he could have enjoyed a promotion in his master’s home. Despite this, he controlled himself and put his life in danger so as not to sin before G-d. He also did this so as not to give free reign to his desires, for giving the slightest opening to sin is a transgression against G-d, as the Sages have said: “When [the evil inclination] sees a person rolling his eyes, smoothing his hair, and lifting his heel, he exclaims, ‘This man belongs to me!’” (*Beresith Rabba* 22:6). It is in this sense that “unchaste imagination is more injurious than the sin itself” (*Yoma* 29a).

Thus Joseph kept himself from sinning with his master's wife. Later on in prison too, it is certain that he kept away from sin, such as by not eating forbidden foods (*Me'am Loez, Ramban, and Sifte'i Kohen*). He did not allow himself to be carried away by Egyptian customs either, something that demands firm willpower and great strength. He was not ashamed of being mocked or scorned, or to be disparagingly called a Hebrew slave (*Bereshith Rabba 89:7*), as it is stated: "With us was a Hebrew lad, a slave of the captain of the guard" (*Genesis 41:12*). At all times, every Jew may learn from Joseph's example that despite the scorn of gentiles for Jewish customs, names, and way of dress, which are particular to Jews (*Vayikra Rabba 32:5*), one must continue to trust in G-d. Without G-d's help, a Jew would not be able to survive among gentiles, not even for a day.

Still, despite Joseph's virtues, his request that the chief cupbearer speak to Pharaoh on his behalf is considered a sin. This is despite the fact that the Torah obligates us to try everything in our power to placate those in power and to escape the suffering they inflict on us. The reason for this is that Joseph knew that Providence wanted him to descend into Egypt and become a prisoner there, and he also knew that the sole aim of his descent and sojourn in Egypt was the exile of the Children of Israel. All the suffering of Joseph and the Children of Israel – even the fact that Joseph was appointed to govern Egypt – resulted from G-d's will. It was therefore forbidden for Joseph to make even the smallest effort to leave prison, and therefore he should not have tried to free himself prematurely. He was to stay in prison until G-d directed events in such a way so as to liberate him. His request was a sin, a lack of trust in G-d, and he was punished in proportion to his greatness and holiness. His imprisonment was prolonged in order to expiate this sin, for he should have known that his sojourn in Egypt and prison were Divine decrees, and thus he should not have tried to precipitate events. We cannot say that he did not trust G-d, for who served Him with as much faith as Joseph? However his desire to precipitate events was a sin, for he knew that everything results from G-d's will.

If Joseph trusted in G-d, why did he ask the chief cupbearer to mention him to Pharaoh? The reason is that Joseph was afraid of having committed a sin, just as Jacob had also been afraid that he had committed a sin that would deliver him into Esau's hands (*Berachot 4a*). Thus Joseph feared remaining in prison due to some possible sin on his part, and he was punished in order that others may realize that a person must trust in G-d alone.

Joseph tried to rectify this sin afterwards, as we see when he explained Pharaoh's dream to him: "Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying: 'That is beyond me. It is G-d Who will respond with Pharaoh's welfare'" (*Genesis 41:16*). Joseph's response is surprising, for he ended up interpreting the dream.

First of all, we must realize that when a person commits a sin, if he is to rectify it he must repent "through the very thing [he] sinned with" (*Shemot Rabba 23:3*). When a person is presented with the opportunity to sin in a similar way as before, yet he does not again sin, then "the Knower of all that is hidden testifies about him that he will

never return to that sin again” (*Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:2*). If the opportunity to commit the same sin comes to a person again, yet he does not commit it, his regret and repentance are accepted, and his evil inclination will no longer incite him to sin anymore. At that point, the Sages say, “his repentance is total and complete” (*Yoma 86b*).

This is also the case for one who possesses any inborn character fault. If he wants to rectify it, as soon as this natural tendency presents itself, he must suppress it and control his feelings without fail. From that point on he can be assured that this vile tendency will disappear, giving way to a virtue.

For example, humility is the opposite of pride; contentment is the opposite of greed; confidence in G-d is the opposite of lacking faith in G-d.

This allows us to say that Joseph repented “through the very thing [he] sinned with.” When he stood before Pharaoh to explain his dream to him, he could have certainly attributed his divination abilities to himself and told Pharaoh, “I will explain your dream according to my wisdom.” That would have earned him tremendous honor and surely have procured him great wealth. However Joseph knew that he had previously sinned by placing his trust in a man and that he had lacked faith in G-d. This is why he put himself in danger before Pharaoh by proclaiming, “It is G-d Who will respond with Pharaoh’s welfare.” Joseph in this way conveyed the following idea to him: I myself have no knowledge or wisdom, for wisdom comes only from G-d, and He alone can explain Pharaoh’s dream. This means that Joseph placed all his confidence in G-d, and he repented in exactly the area he had sinned.

By doing so, however, Joseph put himself in danger. We know that Pharaoh made himself out to be a god (*Shemot Rabba 8:3*) and he boasted, “The river is mine; I created it.” Pharaoh believed in no deity other than himself, and so when Joseph told him that “G-d will respond with Pharaoh’s welfare,” he could have replied, “Who is the L-RD that I should heed His voice?” (*Exodus 5:2*). Pharaoh could have said that there was no deity other than himself, and he could have thrown Joseph into prison. However Joseph was not afraid of this, for he knew that he had committed a sin by trusting in the chief cupbearer instead of having faith in G-d. This is why he used this occasion to express, before everyone there, his complete confidence in Hashem, telling Pharaoh that only G-d could appease him, no one else. It was precisely at that critical moment, when Joseph’s fate would be decided and he would be either punished or saved, that he rectified his sin and attributed greatness to Whom it rightly belongs (*Bereshith Rabba 89:9*). Joseph asserted his confidence in G-d without fear of being sent back into prison, and he corrected his sin by repenting in the appropriate way, namely in a situation similar to the one in which the sin occurred.

We therefore see that the Midrash was right in stating that the verse, “Happy is the man who has made the L-RD his trust” applies to Joseph (*Bereshith Rabba 89:3*). This is because Joseph expressed his confidence in G-d at a critical moment, just as he had previously distanced himself from the Egyptians and separated himself from them in Potiphar’s house, not imitating their customs. However Joseph knew that he

had sinned by having placed his confidence in a man, be it just briefly. Thus before Pharaoh, instead of promoting his own wisdom, he based the explanation of Pharaoh's dream on G-d's wisdom, without fear that he would be thrown back into prison. This is because, at that very moment, Joseph remembered his sin and placed his complete trust in G-d.

G-d actually demonstrated His kindness by keeping Joseph in prison for two more years. If Joseph had been set free two years earlier, before Pharaoh's dream, the latter would not have heard of Joseph or called upon him to explain the meaning of his dream. In that case, Joseph would not have been able to rectify his sin by expressing his confidence in G-d. If he had been set free two years earlier, another master would have purchased him as a slave, perhaps even bringing him to another country. In that case, all his prophecies of greatness would not have been fulfilled. Yet because Joseph remained in prison, he was later appointed as the governor of Egypt and all his prophecies were fulfilled. The Midrash confirms what we have said: "Why were two years added to his imprisonment? So that Pharaoh might dream a dream through which he [Joseph] would become great" (*Bereshith Rabba* 89:3). Each one of us must place his trust solely in G-d, which will earn us good in this world and the next.

### ***Torah Study in Exile Opens the Gates of the World to Come***

Concerning the first verse of our parsha, "And Jacob dwelled in the land of his father's sojournings" (*Genesis* 37:1), our Sages make the following comment: "Jacob wished to live at ease in this world, whereupon he was attacked by Joseph's Satan [*i.e.*, by troubles concerning Joseph]" (*Bereshith Rabba* 84:3).

During his entire life, our father Jacob had remained in the tents of Torah of Shem and Eber, to the point that he was described as "an upright [*tam*] man" (*Genesis* 25:27). The letters of the word *tam* are the same as those of the word *mot* ("death"), for he literally killed himself for the Torah. That being the case, how can we say that he wanted to live at ease? How can we define him as a man who wanted to live in peace? Was it for this reason that he received such a severe punishment as the calamity surrounding Joseph?

Furthermore, we know that Jacob encountered tragedy and suffering throughout his life, namely the tragedy surrounding Dinah, the pain caused by Laban, and suffered engendered by Esau, etc. As a result, perhaps he now wanted to really live in peace, studying Torah without such problems and constant hardships? Why would that – the desire to study Torah in peace and tranquility – earn him such a severe punishment?

Insofar as Torah study is concerned, we find two fundamental elements. The first is the effort that we put into it, as the Sages have said on the verse: "If you walk in My laws" (*Leviticus* 26:3). They explain this to mean that without effort, it is impossible for a person to acquire the Torah, for its understanding can only take root in a person through the toil of study.

The second element is exiling oneself to a place of Torah; that is, not remaining in a single place to study, but instead going elsewhere to acquire the Torah. The saintly Ohr HaChaim, in the seventh of 42 explanations that he gives on “if you walk in My laws,” states that the word “walk” literally means walking. It means not studying in the same place, but going to another place of Torah. We can thereby conserve all that we have studied, as we have already been taught: “Exile yourself to a place of Torah” (*Perkei Avoth 4:14*).

Throughout his life, our father Jacob was known as a man who exiled himself for Torah. He went to study in the Beit Midrash of Shem and Eber for 14 years, and concerning him it is said: “Jacob arrived whole at the city of Shechem” (*Genesis 33:18*). This means that he was “whole in his learning” (*Shabbat 33b*), having forgotten nothing while living with Laban. These two elements were found in Jacob: He put an effort into studying Torah, and he exiled himself to study it. It was in this way that he succeeded in acquiring everything possible in Torah, to the point that he became the greatest of the Patriarchs.

Yet here in our parsha, Jacob wanted to rid himself of one these elements of successful Torah study. He suddenly wanted to settle down in peace and tranquility to study it, without having to exile himself. This is why he was immediately assailed by the calamity involving Joseph. At that point the Holy One, blessed be He, said: “They [the righteous] are not content with what is in store for them in the Hereafter, that they wish to dwell at ease even in this world!” (*Bereshith Rabba 84:3*). This means that in the World to Come, the righteous live in peace and tranquilly and bask in the radiance of the Shechinah. In this world, however, one who wants to be righteous must journey from one place to the next to study Torah. He must not settle down in tranquility in this world, but instead exile himself to a place of Torah, for it is only in this way that he can preserve his learning.

From this we see just how important it is to travel to a place of Torah, to go elsewhere for Torah study. The Gemara speaks of an Amora who traveled for three months on his way to a school, and three months on his way back, all in order to study for a *single day* (*Hagigah 5b*). The reason for this is simple: If a person were to stay home and study, it would become so routine for him that he would sense almost no renewal in his study. The Torah might eventually become a heavy burden to him, and he might possibly tell himself that it is better to drop it entirely.

However when a person goes to a place of Torah, it takes on tremendous importance for him. “I’ve traveled such a long way for the Torah, I have to study it like a true Ben Torah,” he will tell himself. This is why exile increases the importance of Torah, thereby making us study it in greater depth and pushing us to be more diligent. We will thereby secure the second element for acquiring the Torah, namely putting an effort into its study.

If we were to examine the importance of going to a place of Torah, we would see that one who travels far for Torah gains an extra benefit.

When a person finds himself in familiar surroundings, near his home, he knows both the place and the people there. As a result, he is automatically drawn to his circle of friends and behaves accordingly, studying Torah and performing mitzvot. Yet what happens when he leaves his home and goes to study Torah elsewhere? He suddenly knows neither the place nor the people there. He then begins to feel that Torah study is a burden, and he has great difficulty in knowing how to conduct himself.

Yet it is precisely at that point – if he manages to overcome these difficulties in a new, distant reality, and puts a real effort into Torah study – that his reward becomes that much greater. This does not necessarily mean going to another country, for even yeshiva students who go to another place or another city to study Torah are also fulfilling the adage, “Exile yourself to a place of Torah.” They will therefore earn a great reward from Hashem.

### *The Tzaddik Lights the Way in Serving Hashem*

It is written, “Jacob dwelled in the land of his father’s sojournings, in the land of Canaan” (*Genesis 37:1*). Rashi cites the Sages in stating that the word *vayeishev* (“and he dwelled”) indicates that Jacob wanted to dwell in tranquility, yet the troubles of Joseph sprang upon him (*see Bereshith Rabba 84:3*). Rashi states: “[When] the righteous seek to dwell in tranquility, G-d says: ‘Is what is prepared for the righteous in the World to Come not enough for them, such that they seek to dwell in tranquility in this world?’ ”

The commentators are surprised at this, for was Jacob not entitled to a little peace and quiet in life, especially after all the years of suffering with Laban, Esau, and Dinah? That goes without even mentioning the war brought about by the murder of the inhabitants of Shechem (*Genesis 34:30*). Here was a chance for Jacob to finally have some peace and quiet, a time to devote himself to Torah study and serving Hashem after seeing that all his children turned out to be *tzaddikim*. We must also understand why his peace was disrupted precisely by the events surrounding Joseph, rather than in another way.

There is another problem here. As a Rav once told me, citing some great Torah figures, the land of Canaan carries a name that designates submission (*keniah* and *hachna’ah*). A person who lives in the land of Israel, the palace of the King and the place where Hashem’s glory appears, must be especially filled with humility and reverence before the glory and grandeur of Hashem. The word *megurei* (“sojournings”) also suggests fear, as in “*Vayagar* was Moab” (*Numbers 22:3*), which Rashi explains as meaning fear. It follows that Jacob served Hashem in humility and fear, and he also cared for his father with self-effacement and submission, even though he himself was already at a high level at that time. This is difficult to understand, for how can these two things – peace on one hand and fear on the other – go together, since they seem contradictory? If we say that the peace in question consisted of serving Hashem in fear and submission, then why would Jacob actually be refused this?

We may say that the *tzaddik* bears a resemblance to the Holy One, blessed be He, in miniature. This is similar to the idea expressed by, “The fear for your teacher [should be as] the fear of Heaven” (*Perkei Avoth* 4:12). Hence everyone should learn from him with regards to the service of Hashem, character traits, prayer, and Torah study. As a result, the slightest deviation in the conduct of a *tzaddik* is liable to provoke disaster. We see that the Holy One, blessed be He, punished the *tzaddikim* on several occasions because they caused a profanation of His Name, even if it occurred in the minutest way possible.

In general, however, the *tzaddikim* teach us that the service of Hashem should be accompanied with arduous work and effort, as it is written: “Man is born to toil” (*Job* 5:7). Here the Sages explain that man “was created to labor in the Torah” (*Sanhedrin* 99b). Nevertheless, there are some who learn from the *tzaddikim* that we must indeed work, yet they do not use this understanding to actually toil in the study of Torah. Instead, they are content on applying themselves to *mitzvot* that have a connection to this world. That is not the right path to follow. From the *tzaddik* we must learn to put our efforts only into the service of Hashem, Torah study, and prayer. It is in this way that we must serve Hashem – with laborious effort – since in peace and tranquilly we are liable to relax and stumble. This is not the case when we actually exert ourselves, for this maintains our alertness and pushes us to constantly yearn for greater progress and to elevate ourselves in Torah and the fear of Heaven, including the performance of *mitzvot* that deal with our world. Consequently, let us say that Jacob certainly wanted to serve Hashem through laborious effort. The Sages said (*Tanhuma Vayeishev* 1) that the word *vayeishev* denotes pain, as it is written: “*Vayeishev Israel* [And Israel dwelled] in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry” (*Numbers* 25:1). Furthermore, the word *megurei* denotes the fact of being a sojourner, for Jacob studied the Torah in exile, in accordance with the Sages’ adage: “Exile yourself to a place of Torah” (*Perkei Avoth* 4:14). There is no greater pain than the pain of exile, for exile atones in the same way as death (see *Sanhedrin* 37b and Rashi starting from the word *shelosha*).

From all this we learn that Jacob certainly served Hashem in pain (*vayeishev*), fear, and in exile (*megurei*), as well as with humility (*Canaan*). However he did this with a great deal of discretion, to the point that none of this could be seen on the outside. On the contrary, he gave people the impression that he was living in peace, acting in this way so as not to become proud and begin loving honor. Jacob also did this in order not to damage his father’s honor, for perhaps people would respect Jacob more than his father. The result, however, was that people did not learn how to act and serve Hashem from Jacob. Hence the Holy One, blessed be He, was not satisfied with Jacob’s conduct. In fact people did not pay attention to him and thought that this was how a person should serve G-d, namely in peace and tranquility. Now this is incorrect, and Jacob should have demonstrated the importance of effort on the outside, not to abstain out of fear that people might overly respect him.

This is why the tragedy involving Joseph struck Jacob. He did not teach everyone – for his generation and the generations to come – that there can be no peace for the *tzaddikim* in this world. He did not teach them that peace resides in the self-effacement and humility that *tzaddikim* demonstrate in serving Hashem. There is no other peace than this for the *tzaddik*, and he must serve Hashem openly in order for everyone to learn this from him. If he acts with discretion, he should not do so because of some potential risk to the honor of another – such as Jacob’s fear of infringing upon the honor of his father Isaac – but because of the importance of discretion itself. Now since Jacob did not teach this to everyone, he was assailed with the tragedy of Joseph, making it impossible for him to continue living in peace, as he had wanted.

From here we learn that the primary component of Torah study is laborious effort, something that the *tzaddik* must teach to the entire generation. In turn the generation must learn this from the *tzaddik*. They must not believe that the Torah can be acquired in peace and tranquilly. This is why the Torah revealed in our parsha that even when something appears peaceful on the outside, lofty things are hidden on the inside, namely a life of pain and submission. This is *vayeishev* – denoting pain – which teaches that our effort is the primary component in the path of Torah, and that the *tzaddik* must teach this to everyone. If the generation of the *tzaddik* manages to learn this from him, it will be good for it in this world and the World to Come.

## Parsha Mikeitz

### *The Children of Jacob were Conceived in Complete Purity*

“Their father Jacob said to them, ‘I am the one whom you bereaved! Joseph is gone, Simeon is gone, and now you would take away Benjamin?’” (*Gen 42:36*). Rashi cites the Midrash: “He suspected them of wanting to kill or sell Benjamin, just as they had sold Joseph” (*Bereshith Rabba 91:9*).

The sale and story of the bloodstained tunic that Jacob was alluding to indicates to us that he suspected them, which is something new. One must ask why he didn’t believe their story.

Let us first cite some verses that deal with this subject. This will allow us to clearly understand the entire episode.

It is written, “He recognized it and he said, ‘My son’s tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph has surely been torn to bits!’ ... But he refused to comfort himself and said, ‘For I will go down to the grave mourning for my son.’ And his father bewailed him” (*Gen 37:33,35*). Afterwards, when they went to Egypt to buy grain, it is written: “Behold, I have heard that there are provisions in Egypt. Go down there and purchase for us from there, that we may live and not die” (*Gen 42:2*). And so upon their father’s request (*v.3*), the ten sons of Jacob went down to Egypt to buy things to eat.

In the verses that relate the sale of Joseph and the subsequent pain of Jacob, that which is not stated is by far more than that which is. Based on this, we may ask the following questions:

1. Why was Jacob’s mourning so great? He had faith in G-d, and he knew that everything that happened came from Him. What was he afraid of then?

2. How is it that he suspected the brothers? Did he not know that “the one who suspects the innocent is punished for it” (*Shabbat 97a*)? He was certain that the brothers, “heads of the tribes of Israel” (*Ps 122:4*), were men without fault, upright and just (*Shabbat 146a*). Why then did he suspect them without proof or reason? Moreover, after the sale of Joseph, Jacob lost Divine inspiration (*Tanhuma Vayeishev 2*). How then was he able to know that his sons were guilty (since G-d didn’t reveal it to him)?

3. How does one explain that all of Joseph’s ten brothers went down to Egypt to buy grain? One or two would have sufficed to accomplish that task.

The Sages tell us, “Jacob should have gone down to Egypt in chains, but his merit protected him” (*Shabbat 89b*). For his part, Jacob would certainly have preferred to go down to Egypt in chains, and to make the prophecy given to Abraham come true, rather than to suffer the pain of Joseph’s sale and the loss of Divine inspiration (*Tanhuma Vayeishev 2*). The prophecy to Abraham stipulated: “Your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own – and they will serve them, and they will oppress them – four hundred years” (*Gen 15:13*).

From the time that Jacob was told that Joseph was dead, Jacob served G-d in pain. He refused to let himself be consoled, and he feared that a lack of perfection (*Pesachim 56a*) prevented him from becoming “a receptacle for the Divine Presence” (*Bereshith Rabba 47:8*). Since he felt that he was missing such perfection, it meant that the fault lay in him, to the extent that he cried, “I will joint my son in the grave,” so great was his pain and grief at the thought that he himself was the cause.

Concerning the verse that states, “he has surely [תן] been torn to pieces” (*Gen 44:28*), we may add that the word תן always expresses a limit (*Pesachim 5a*). This indicates to us that Jacob wasn’t sure that a wild animal had devoured his son, and that’s the reason why he refused all consolation. The Sages even said, “A law desires that the deceased be forgotten, since one doesn’t accept consolation over a person who is still alive” (*Bereshith Rabba 84:21*). As such, Joseph would still have been alive in Jacob’s mind, and Jacob would have continued to pray to G-d, asking Him in His mercy to allow him to find his son. Jacob would have thereby known that his seed was perfect. Thus Jacob never lost hope of finding his son Joseph alive.

We can understand why Jacob hesitated so much to send his son Benjamin to Egypt, as it is said, “You will take Benjamin away!” (*Gen 42:36*). It is because “all roads are dangerous” (*Yerushalmi Berachot 4:4*) and “the Satan appears only at a time of danger” (*Yerushalmi Shabbat 2:6*). Jacob feared that “should trouble befall him on the journey which you shall take, then you will have brought down my gray hair in sorrow to the grave” (*Gen 42:38*). If Benjamin were to die, it would be because the children of Jacob were not perfect. We see in this just how much suffering a man is prepared to accept, just as long as the Divine Presence doesn’t leave him.

It’s a known fact that there are some Jews that proclaim to be Jewish, yet don’t at all hesitate to marry non-Jewish women. They should realize that not only does the Divine Presence abandon them when they distance themselves from the G-d of Israel, but that they also create enormous danger for the Jewish people as a whole. They especially cause their parents great suffering when they see their children leaving their people “to go feed in foreign pastures.” Parents such as these prefer to die rather than to see their children assimilated among foreign peoples. Children such as these are guilty of selfishness, having acted this way only to satisfy their own desires, without thinking of the pain and suffering that they’ve caused.

When G-d saw the pain of Jacob, a man who longed for perfection, in His great goodness He restored to him a little Divine inspiration, as it is said, “Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt” (*Gen 42:1*). On this the Sages remarked: “By Divine inspiration, he saw that there was some hope by way of Egypt” (*Bereshith Rabba 91:6*).

In learning that his son Joseph was alive and that he was the governor of the entire country (*Gen 42:6*), life came back to the heart of Jacob (*Gen 45:27*). Rashi explains as follows: The Divine inspiration that previously left him now came back (*Tanhum Vayeishev 2*). Jacob feared that his offspring lacked purity, this being the reason for why the Divine Presence abandoned him. But then, upon learning that Joseph was the governor

of Egypt and that he had remained a righteous man, Jacob understood that such was not the case. What's more, Divine inspiration was restored to him.

When Divine inspiration came back to him, he also knew that his sons, those who had sold Joseph, had prepared the journey down to Egypt, and that their intentions had been pure, since G-d Himself took part in the oath not to reveal the truth to Jacob (*Tanhuma Vayeishev 2*). For what reason, therefore, did Jacob suspect his sons up to that point?

Everyone knows that the kindness that we experience in this world comes only because of the righteous, and that the entire world enjoys prosperity because of them, as it is written: "The whole world is fed thanks only to the merit of my son Hanania" (*Taanith 24b*). Actually, Jacob at first thought that his son was dead, and he was in mourning. Yet afterwards, upon seeing that Egypt was enjoying material and spiritual prosperity, he understood that this was thanks to Joseph. Jacob had no further doubts that his son was alive and that he had remained righteous, as the Sages testify (*Vayikra Rabba 32: 5*), and he therefore had no further reason to suspect his sons in the sale of Joseph. He understood that everything had been motivated by pure intentions so that the Children of Israel could prepare for the descent into Egypt.

Now we can explain why Jacob sent his ten sons (except Benjamin) to Egypt. The elation felt in Jacob's home was great when they said that grain was for sale in Egypt. The reason for this joy was not because they had lacked food (since we know that some of the harvest still remained (*Taanith 10b*)), but rather because Divine inspiration had been restored to Jacob, and he was preparing himself to meet Joseph. He therefore sent all his sons to make peace with Joseph and to ask for his forgiveness. Finally, he also sent Benjamin so that the brothers could be reunited.

If there had not been a famine in the land of Canaan, the sons of Jacob would not have been able to descend into Egypt to find Joseph without awakening the suspicions of their father. The famine forced the brothers to descend into Egypt, which then gave them a pretext to look for Joseph without raising their father's suspicions.

### ***The Fight Against the Evil Inclination***

It is stated at the beginning of Parsha Vayigash, "Then Judah approached him [Joseph] and said, 'If you please, my lord, may your servant speak a word in my lord's ears and let not your anger flare up at your servant' " (*Genesis 44:18*).

We must understand the hidden meaning behind Judah and Joseph's surprising discussion.

1. Parsha Mikeitz recounts the story of the cup that was eventually found in Benjamin's sack. When Joseph's servant caught up to Joseph's brothers and accused them of having stolen his master's cup, Judah took the initiative. Without having been asked to decide upon their fate, he immediately said: "Anyone among your servants with whom it is found shall die, and we also will become slaves to my lord" (*Genesis 44:9*). It is impossible to renege on such a declaration, and so when the cup was finally found

in Benjamin's sack, why did Judah begin to discuss Benjamin's fate? Joseph's servant had already diminished the severity of the sentence, stating that only the individual with whom the cup was found would be made a slave, while the other brothers would be absolved (*v.10*). Had Judah not declared his own sentence?

2. If we say that Judah spoke with Joseph's servant because Judah had offered to be Benjamin's guarantor (as it is stated, "I will personally guarantee him; of my own hand you can demand him" [*Genesis 43:9*]), and he was ready to lose both worlds for him (as the Sages have said [*Bereshith Rabba 91:10*]), why didn't Judah weigh his words more carefully, especially before Joseph's servant began searching through the brothers' possessions? Could he not have refused and instead have saved Benjamin without entering into this discussion?

3. Concerning the verse, "Then Judah approached him," the Sages have said: "He approached Joseph as much to appease him as to fight him, and he threatened him by saying, 'If I draw my sword, I will begin with you and finish with Pharaoh'" (*Bereshith Rabba 93:6*). This is troubling. Why would Judah want to fight Joseph because of Benjamin, since he himself had decreed a death sentence for the individual with whom the cup was found (and it was only Joseph's servant who commuted the sentence)?

4. Finally, we must understand the meaning of the mission that Joseph's servant was sent on. It is written, "When Joseph said to the one in charge of his house, 'Get up, chase after the men; when you overtake them, you are to say to them, "Why do you repay evil for good? Is it not the one from which my master drinks, and with which he regularly divines? You have done evil in how you acted!"' " (*Genesis 44:4-5*).

Note that we learn extraordinary things in this parsha: We learn of the cup that was concealed in Benjamin's sack, the words of Judah to Joseph's servant, and finally the confrontation between Judah and Joseph.

The account concerning Judah and Joseph teaches us how to conduct ourselves, showing us how to conquer the evil inclination, distance ourselves from it, and not listen to it. This account also teaches us to repent wholeheartedly, confess our sins, and come closer to G-d.

If a man sins and regrets it, he should realize that confessing his sin is an essential part of repentance, as the Rambam writes: "Confessing one's sins is a Torah commandment, as it is written: 'A man or woman who commits any of man's sins...they shall confess their sin that they committed' [*Numbers 5:6-7*]" (*Hilchot Teshuvah 1:1*). Sins committed by people when they are children are erased on condition that they are not repeated in adulthood, the age at which we become responsible for our actions and understand their meaning and gravity. It is therefore essential for us to repent, and in this way our sins will be transformed into merits (*Yoma 86b*).

The Satan continues to provoke people and make them sin, even those who have decided to repent and have seen a glimmer of light – the light of the Torah, as it is written: "The Torah is light" (*Proverbs 6:23; Megillah 16a*) – people who desire to break away

from their materialism, as it is written: “The day dawned and the men were sent off, they and their donkeys” (*Genesis 44:3*). However the evil inclination doesn’t give a person the possibility of escape (“he overtook them” *[v.6]*), nor to appease or fight it. Based on the discussion between Joseph’s brothers and his servant, we may say that the evil inclination tells a person who wants to repent, “The way of the wicked succeeds. As long as you were with me, you were successful. Why do you want to leave me now and repay evil for good? Instead of being punished for all your sins, you would have succeeded. It’s only because of me that you got richer and progressed in life.”

To convince a person to return to it, as well as to maintain its hold over a person, the evil inclination lists in detail the advantages that he received, and it rebukes him for having repaid evil for good. However the evil inclination does not mention the damage that a person causes it when he repents and distances himself from it, nor does it state the misfortunes that occur to a person as a result of his sins and transgressions.

A person who has repented has the duty to reply to the arguments of the evil inclination and emphasize that before he sincerely repented, he was like a child who didn’t know where his sin was or what its consequences were. Now, however, he has repented of his sins, and not because he wants to repay evil for good to the evil inclination, but because he has decided to overcome every difficulty he may encounter, and little does it matter to him if he is deprived of all the evil inclination’s “kindnesses,” which in the final analysis are truly harmful. He realizes that he is now experiencing suffering and difficulties as a result of his previous bad behavior. From now on, he is even ready to die rather than to sin by following the advice of the evil inclination. He prefers to be a servant of G-d, Whose goodness and benevolence he recognizes at every instant of his life. This is indicated by the verse, “Anyone among your servants with whom it is found shall die; and we also will become slaves to my lord” (*Genesis 44: 9*). He prefers to die, for he chooses to be a servant of his master, of G-d.

All the same, the evil inclination does let go of a person, threatening that he will regret having abandoned it. In fact the evil inclination tells all those who repent that they will suffer for it, facing trials until they place themselves back under its yoke as before, as stated in the verse: “The one with whom it is found shall be my slave.” In the battle between the one who repents and the evil inclination, each tires to make the other fall, in the sense of the verse: “Hurriedly, each one lowered his sack to the ground” (*v.11*). Even though the one who repents occupies himself with Torah and desires to drink from that elixir of life, he risks falling back into the traps of the evil inclination, which possesses more than one trick up its sleeve. It is capable of making a person believe that if he has become poor or lost his job, it was for having chosen the path of Torah and neglected his material needs. Such are the arguments that the evil inclination uses, even with a man of Torah.

However we must overcome it and realize that this fall is necessary for elevating ourselves. We should realize that hope is not lost, and that by diligent Torah study and prayer we will once again ascend with G-d’s help. If the evil inclination asks, “How is it

that now, while you're following the path of Torah, you're in such a hopeless situation, one whose future seems bleak?" It is with the goal of convincing us to follow its advice that the evil inclination asks such questions, luring us with the promise of more success in the future than in the past. We must reply by saying, "G-d has uncovered the sin of your servants" (*Genesis 44:16*), meaning that because of the sins we committed, we fell into the difficult situation in which we find ourselves today, yet despite everything we will continue – and desire to continue – to be G-d's servants.

However the evil inclination is not, even after all that, discouraged, and it does not allow itself to weaken. As the Sages have said: "The evil inclination grows with a man from infancy to old age, and each day it tries to make him fall" (*Tanhuma Beshalach 3*), "The evil inclination of each man gains the upper hand each day and tries to make him fall. It first presents itself as a guest... and in the end it becomes the master of the house" (*Sukkah 52a*), and "It tries to seize him in its traps" (*Bereshith Rabba 22:11*). Each day the evil inclination presents itself differently and uses new arguments in order to make a person commit some offense, leaving him no respite. Until a person dies, the evil inclination tries by all possible means to distance him from G-d and subjugate him as before. However we must be ready to even risk our lives in the fight against the evil inclination, since a man is the "guarantor for the child" – for the child that he once was – and so willful sins are considered inadvertent sins, and they are forgiven and erased. Yet now, "how can I go up to my father if the youth is not with me?" (*Genesis 44:34*), for now he realizes the gravity of his sins and the justice of his punishment, as well as the reward for obeying the commandments. If he commits a sin now, he is judged retroactively for the sins he committed in his youth, as if he had acted with full knowledge.

This is the reason why a person should declare a continual war against the evil inclination, "which is the Satan, which is the Angel of Death" (*Bava Batra 16a*) – even though he knows that the Satan is stronger than himself because "he is an angel of fire" (*Zohar I:80a*) – whereas a person is but "flesh and blood." In spite of everything, victory is promised to the person who does battle with it, as it is written: "When you go to war against your enemies, and the L-RD your G-d delivers them into your hand" (*Deuteronomy 21:10*). The person who confesses his sins is like Judah, who was not ashamed to confess his sin, and who actually ended up inheriting the World to Come (*Sotah 7a,b*).

Once a person has repented and begins to distance himself from the evil inclination, it is essential that he not fall into the traps that it sets out for him. At first the evil inclination present itself as a friend who seeks a person's good, asking him: "Why do you want to repay me evil for good?" The repentant person should reply that up to now he was unaware that his behavior was contrary to G-d's will, which was the only reason that he followed its advice. Yet now he prefers to die rather than to listen to it, for he desires to remain G-d's servant. The evil inclination will then try to persuade him that he lost his job because he chose the Torah and a religious life, but a person must not be taken in by this argument. Rather, he should realize that this new situation atones for his previous sins. In the same way that the evil inclination declares war

against us, we are obligated to wage war against it openly and resolutely, for the words *vayasigem, vayigash* indicate an aggressive approach.

Everyone should realize just how necessary it is to watch out for the traps of the evil inclination and the trials that it sets for us. It is likely to cause us great suffering, to deprive us of a means of living, and to try us with sickness. Nevertheless, we must reject it. The evil inclination whispers to us: “You will succeed as long as you don’t observe the Torah or concern yourselves with good deeds. And now, not only does the Torah not support you, it harms you! You lost your means of living, and you don’t even have the means to do what the Torah commands.”

This test must be overcome and it must be conquered. A person must fight the evil inclination to the point of death, since he has become a guarantor for his past self (the word ערב [“guarantor”] is formed by the same letters as the word עבר [“past”]) in order that the sins he committed in the past be forgiven. How great is our loss if we fall into the traps of the evil inclination, which sometimes approaches us as a friend and sometimes as an enemy. We must have faith in G-d, Who comes to our aid and supports us, and we must tell ourselves: “G-d is with me – in me – and I have no reason to fear the evil inclination, even though it is made of fire.” G-d actually resides in each person, and there is no reason to fear the Satan and his enticements. Instead, we must fear G-d alone.

### *The Fleeting Dream of Money*

It is written, “At the end of two full years, Pharaoh dreamed” (*Genesis 41:1*).

The Gemara speaks of Choni Hameagel, who for a long time was troubled over the verse, “A song of ascents. When the L-RD will return the captivity of Zion, we will be like dreamers” (*Psalms 126:1*). How could a person sleep and dream for so many years? At the same time, however, the Gemara states that Choni Hameagel slept for 70 years, and when he awoke he recognized nothing from the past. He then completely understood the expression “we will be like dreamers” (*Taanith 23a*).

We see all kinds of people in our tiny world, for as the Sages have said: “The mind of each is different from that of the other, just as the face of each is different from that of the other” (*Berachot 58a*), which is the plain truth. Everyone has a different opinion about each subject, and reality shows that when Reuven says one thing, Shimon absolutely has to say something else. Thus everyone has a different way of expressing his views on the world and everything it contains. Yet we as Jews – believers and children of believers – must see the world with an open mind and thereby realize how to conduct ourselves materially, and above all spiritually.

If we observe everything that surrounds us, be it even for a moment, we will notice something odd: People have no spare time. They are always in a rush and constantly running in different directions, with little time on their hands and fearful that they will lack something. What’s the reason behind all this? In general it has to do with earning

a living, with people on the run to feed their families. They hurry to arrive at work, and all their thoughts are geared toward money – how to earn more of it! A Torah giant from a previous generation was once walking in the street when he saw a Jew running somewhere. The Tzaddik asked him, “My dear Jew, where are you headed so quickly?” The man replied, “I’m going to [such and such a place] because I need some money.” The Tzaddik then smiled and said, “How do you know that you’re headed in a place where you’ll find money? Perhaps it will be found in the opposite direction, and you’re turning your back on it?” My friends, we find ourselves in a time that corresponds exactly to this story. Everyone is running around without stop, and without satisfaction either. “I have no time and I have no money” – at least that is what people tell themselves. However if we were to stop someone in the middle of an errand and ask for a small, trivial favor, he would immediately respond: “What will I get out of it? Will I be able to make some money from it?” Why such a reaction? Why is it so difficult to help others without being financially compensated? Pharaoh’s dream shows us just how true this is. Pharaoh had two dreams, which were really one and the same. In the first, he saw seven lean cows swallowing up seven fat cows. In the second, he saw seven withered and dried up ears of grain swallowing up seven healthy and lush ears of grain, yet no one could tell what had happened. This is the situation today: People swallow each other up alive; they are not inclined to help others when it comes to money. However if we were to think about it, we would understand that the world has a Director and that material things are ephemeral. After he arose, Pharaoh called Joseph and asked him to interpret his dreams. What did Joseph tell him? “The dream of Pharaoh is one. What G-d is about to do, He has told Pharaoh” (*Genesis 41:25*). Joseph continued his explanation by saying, “Seven years are coming of great plenty...and seven years of famine will arise after them, and all the years of plenty in the land of Egypt will be forgotten” (*vv.29-30*).

The essential thing, Joseph told Pharaoh, was to name leaders throughout the land of Egypt. They would be responsible to prepare, during the seven years of abundance, for the seven years of famine. In other words, if preparations are not made for the years of famine, all the good years will be forgotten.

This is a lesson for each of us in our daily lives. People spend all their time trying to save their silver and gold, keeping their wealth close to their heart, but not helping others in need. They must realize that they will not be protected indefinitely. A coin (money) is round – it rolls – and it is here today and elsewhere tomorrow. Today it may be with Reuven, but tomorrow it may be with Shimon.

Money has been entrusted to us by the Master of the world, but only on condition that we do something useful with it, namely to perform mitzvot and good deeds. If we act otherwise, the trustee will come and reclaim his goods, giving it to someone who may act in a better way.

We see this in Pharaoh’s dream. People may swallow each other up, yet we will not be able to tell that they consumed anything. Furthermore, they claim that they had

only the best intentions in doing so. However Hashem knows and understand what is hidden in the heart, as well as what resides in the minds of each person. This is why everyone must prepare himself during the good years, in anticipation of the years that may not be so good. People must use their money to practice mitzvot, in order that they may have some left in more difficult times.

This is what the verse is saying: “At the end of two full years, Pharaoh dreamed.” When a person comes to the end of his days in this world, he is liable to see that everything was but a dream and that he really did nothing in life, nothing good with his money. We must therefore be very careful in this world in order to arrive intact and meritorious for the day of judgment in the World to Come.

### *Faith in Hashem Brings Abundant Blessing and Success*

The Gemara tells us that when Pharaoh decided to make Joseph the ruler of Egypt after he had successfully interpreted his dreams, the Egyptian astrologers wanted to test Joseph and see if he knew the 70 languages. The angel Gabriel then came and taught them to Joseph, and thus he was able to converse with Pharaoh in any language that he spoke. On the other hand, when Joseph spoke to Pharaoh in the holy tongue, he could not answer because he did not understand it. Pharaoh then made Joseph swear not to reveal the fact that he knew the holy tongue while Pharaoh did not (Sotah 36b).

This implies that in Egypt, the custom was to appoint the wisest man among the people as a ruler, one who knew the 70 languages. Otherwise, we would be unable to understand why Pharaoh was afraid that people would find out that Joseph knew one language more than him, since he was the king and ruler of Egypt. Pharaoh knew that if the Egyptians learned that Joseph was wiser than him, they would have removed him from the throne and placed Joseph there instead. Pharaoh therefore made him swear not to reveal this secret, so that he could remain on the throne and not be stripped of power. This needs to be clarified. Pharaoh was incredibly deceitful and completely estranged from the truth. That being the case, how could he believe that Joseph, who had recently come from prison, would keep his promise and not reveal his secret? When he would bestow Joseph with greatness by making him his viceroy, a love for honor would certainly grow in him. He would eventually want to reign in Pharaoh's stead, thus paving the way to reveal the secret to people and become king in his place. To understand this, let us examine what Pharaoh went through during that day. He had strange dreams about cows and ears of wheat, dreams that he did not understand. He awoke that morning completely bewildered, and he called upon the wise men and magicians in Egypt to interpret his dreams. Although this demonstrated his weakness to the people (insofar as his request for help was an admission that he needed the assistance of his wise men), his disturbed frame of mind did let him consider the consequences. All he wanted was to understand what his dreams meant. The wise men and magicians, however, were unable to satisfactorily interpret his dreams.

Joseph was then called up from prison, for he was experienced in interpreting dreams. Pharaoh said to him, “I have dreamed a dream, and there is no one interpret of it. Now I heard it said of you that you understand a dream to interpret it” (*Genesis 41:15*). In other words: You are therefore wiser than I am, and you should be seated on the throne instead of me, but this doesn’t bother me, for I prefer to liberate the throne just as long I learn the meaning of my dreams. Joseph answered Pharaoh with self-effacement and humility: “Not in me. G-d will answer” (*v.16*). That is: Even once I have given you the interpretation of your dreams, and once everyone sees that I am wiser than you, I will still have no desire to take the throne and reign over Egypt. This is because I am nothing, and all my wisdom comes from G-d. The world has a Creator, and He made us both. Only He exists and we are simply His creations. Even if I interpret your dreams, that does not make me wiser than you because everything comes from G-d, and therefore I have nothing for which to be proud. Thus Joseph interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams with complete submission and humility before the Holy One, blessed be He. In order for the Egyptians not to revolt against Pharaoh and place Joseph on the throne, Joseph took the initiative by stating: “G-d shall answer the welfare of Pharaoh” (*v.16*) and “What G-d is about to do, He has told Pharaoh” (*v.25*). In other words, Joseph wanted Pharaoh to remain on his throne and continue ruling over Egypt, for Joseph did not want to reign in his place after having interpreted his dreams. This is because it was not Hashem’s will that he should be king, but that Pharaoh should continue in that role.

At that point Pharaoh was amazed at Joseph’s wisdom and intelligence on the one hand, and by his humility on the other. Joseph could have easily ascended to the throne, yet he refrained from doing so simply because it was not Hashem’s will. Pharaoh immediately decided that Joseph should govern Egypt under his supervision according to Hashem’s will, and the wise men of Egypt also understood that Joseph was the best-suited man for the task. Hence they decided to appoint him as such. However since it was impossible to appoint a person to govern Egypt unless he was familiar with the 70 languages, they had to test him to see if he actually knew them. A miracle then occurred, for the angel Gabriel came and instantly taught them to Joseph.

Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of G-d?” (*Genesis 41:38*). In other words: Despite his wisdom and intelligence, the humility that this man demonstrates, and his distaste for flattery, makes the spirit of G-d dwell in him. Far from considering himself a god, he is self-effacing before G-d and believes that everything comes from Him. He believes solely in Him and submits to Him. In fact by saying these things, Pharaoh was publicly recognizing that the world has a Creator, that everything comes from Him, and that He created everything and rules the entire world. However the wicked, even when they believe in Hashem (that is, when reality leaves them no choice but to believe), they do so only because of personal interest. Hence after the death

of Joseph, Pharaoh pretended not to know or acknowledge the Creator, and he began to reduce the Children of Israel to slavery. However Jews do not act in this way, for they believe in the Creator of the world and know that everything comes from Him. It is precisely by believing in the Creator of the world that they merit abundant blessing and success, as we see with Joseph when he achieved royalty following the demonstration of his faith.

## *Parsha Vayigash*

### *Imitation Increases Wisdom*

Joseph was not crying on the shoulders of his father because he had missed him for 22 years. He cried in reflecting upon the greatness of Jacob's soul and the degree that he had reached in his service of G-d. Joseph sensed just how far he was from that level, and realized that he still required much time, practice and contemplation before ever reaching such a high state.

At that moment, Joseph learned that in the service of G-d, "imitation increases wisdom" (*Bava Batra 21a*). This is a positive kind of emulation, a type that makes a person more enthusiastic. Someone who sees his fellow serving G-d in a completely unselfish and enthusiastic way feels, no doubt, like lamenting over not being able to do as much. Only this type of regret and jealousy allows a person to gain wisdom.

In expanding on this notion, it seems that the evil inclination can also provoke in a person authentic jealousy for his fellow. If a person's fellow serves G-d better than he does, the evil inclination can incite that person to serve G-d in the same way, with an intention that is pure, and perhaps even better, than his fellow. The evil inclination thus loses what it thought to have gained by this incitement.

The Sages said, "I have learned many things from my teachers, from my companions..." (*Taanith 7a*), which means that a person learns to serve G-d neither through imitation nor by jealousy. After having eliminated selfish feelings – after having wept before G-d – we don't become jealous of our fellow, but instead continue to love this person, one who has taught us a chapter, a law, or a verse, and who merits being called our teacher (*Perkei Avoth 6:3*).

What we have just mentioned explains the first verse in Parsha Beshalach: "G-d did not lead them by way of the Philistines, because it was near, for G-d said, 'Perhaps the people will reconsider when they see a war, and they will return to Egypt'" (*Ex 13:17*).

This verse shows us that G-d advised men not to cross the country of the Philistines, meaning that a man should not try to seek out and face trials, nor should a man think that he can affront dangers with impunity. The Talmud relates that two Sages were discussing with each other whether it was safer to travel near an area where there were idolaters or near an area where there were prostitutes. It's a mistake to think that one can mix with wicked people without being influenced by their behavior or without having improper thoughts. We are forbidden to "shut [our] eyes from seeing evil" (*Isa 33: 15*) and, because the risk of sinning is great, "if there is another way, we err not to take it" (*Bava Batra 57b*). The evil inclination lurks in the heart of man (*Sukkah 52b*) and sets traps for him. It is the evil inclination that inspires such improper thoughts and that advises man to court danger precisely in places where wicked people are found, all while making

him think that he won't sin. But in such areas there is a war going on, a difficult war between man and the evil inclination, and so "they return to Egypt," which means that man risks falling again under the hold of the evil inclination.

The man who wants to stay connected to G-d should not expose himself to unnecessary danger. If he is tempted to take chances without weighing the risks, he should remember that such thoughts are inspired by the evil inclination. One must not listen to advice to serve G-d while taking risks or through jealousy of one's neighbor. One must serve G-d solely because He commands us to do so. If we envy our neighbor, be it only because we want to better serve G-d, increase our wisdom, or have a better understanding of the Creator, the evil inclination will eventually take advantage of this envy and lead us down paths that are not conducive to our spiritual health.

### ***Joseph Reveals Himself – A Rebuke for all the Generations***

It is written, "Then Judah approached him and said, 'If you please, my lord'" (*Genesis 44:18*).

Rabbi Yehudah says, "He approached to wage war against him"; Rabbi Nechemia says, "to make peace"; the Sages say, "to beg".

This means that Judah, in approaching Joseph, was ready for all eventualities. He was ready to fight against him, and it is certain that Judah put himself in danger before Joseph's soldiers and Egypt's army because he made himself Benjamin's guarantor, as it is written, "I will personally guarantee him; of my own hand you can demand him. If I do not bring him back to you and stand him before you, then I will have sinned to you for all time" (*Genesis 43:9*).

Everything that is mentioned in this section is astonishing, and we will attempt to clarify the questions that are raised by it.

1. The Sages say that when Joseph's envoy discovered the cup in Benjamin's sack, all the brothers began to strike him and to insult him by treating him as a thief, reminding him that his mother had stolen Laban's idols. Yet Benjamin proclaimed his innocence, so well in fact that his brothers understood that the cup found in his sack was a ploy. Yet if such were the case, why did Judah take an additional risk and put Benjamin's life in danger by returning to the city, to Joseph's place? He could have immediately sent Benjamin back to his father with all or some of the brothers and himself have gone back to Joseph alone – to face life or death – in the war that he declared against him. Having made himself a guarantor to his father, he returned to Egypt with the intention of making himself a slave. Regardless of the cost, he would not have allowed Benjamin to become a slave, as he told Joseph, "Now, therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the youth as a servant to my lord, and let the youth go up with his brothers" (*Genesis 44:33*). Why didn't he send Benjamin to his father right away? Why did he instead return with Benjamin to the city, to Joseph?

2. The brothers understood that Benjamin had not stolen the cup, and that Joseph simply wanted to provoke and make trouble with them. It was a difficult situation. They should have killed Joseph's envoy and continued on their way. The fact that they returned to the city indicates their weakness, their insecurity. They put Benjamin's life in danger, for were a conflict to erupt, could Benjamin not possibly die?

3. It must also be explained why, after Joseph revealed himself to his brothers and after he showed them that he was circumcised (*Bereshith Rabba* 93:8), his brothers "could not answer him, for they were terrified at his presence" (*Genesis* 45:3). Concerning this, in the Midrash the Sages have said, "Woe to us on the Day of Judgment, woe to us on the day of retribution" (*Bereshith Rabba* 93:10). In fact, aside from Benjamin, Joseph was the youngest of the brothers, and if they could not face his accusations, how much more will we have difficulty in facing our accusations on the Day of Judgment? This Midrash should be explained. Where in this passage is there an indication that Joseph criticized his brothers and accused them so that we could draw a lesson concerning the rebuke that will be leveled at us in the future? The verse simply says that in their astonishment they jumped back, and Joseph told them, "'Come near to me, please.' And they came near" (*Genesis* 45:4). From where do we know that he criticized them?

4. The Sages say, "When Joseph revealed himself and made himself known to his brothers, they wanted to kill him" (*Tanhuma Vayigash* 5). How is this possible? It is also said that when the brothers arrived in Egypt, they dispersed so as to look for Joseph throughout the country because they worried about his fate. Why then, having finally found him, would they want to kill him? Why did the Sages say that they wanted to kill him? The brothers took note of Joseph's courage (*Bereshith Rabba* 93:7). He was the governor of all Egypt, it was he who distributed grain to all the people (*Genesis* 42:6), all the Egyptians circumcised themselves at his command (*Bereshith Rabbi* 91:5), and he remained just and upright at the end of his life as he had at the very beginning of it, for "when he was a slave he feared G-d just as much as when he was king" (*Tanhuma Nasso* 28). If the brothers killed Joseph now, all of Egypt would have learned of this news, and it would have reached the ears of Jacob in Eretz Israel. What benefit could they have drawn from such a tragic event? How much more so since Jacob told them, "there is grain in Egypt" (*Genesis* 42:2), which the Sages have explained as follows: "It was revealed to him that his hope lay in Egypt, it being his son Joseph" (*Bereshith Rabba* 91:6). At present, the brothers understood that their father Jacob had spoken to them of Joseph. Is it not surprising that they now wanted to kill him? How could G-d have agreed to such a thing?

To explain this entire section, we should understand that the Torah does not solely relate historical events or anecdotes, and the Zohar has already cursed those who believe that the Torah only recounts various facts (*Zohar III:149b*). Some accounts in the Torah are incomprehensible because we do not grasp their profound meaning, hidden in its words. We are only trying to understand them as is, on the surface. We should understand that all the accounts of the Torah, in their most minute detail, are directives and instructions

for all time and for every situation in which a man can find himself, and he should draw lessons from them. The section before us also hides sublime things.

By the grace of the Supreme King, we shall in good taste explain the account of Joseph and his brothers, as it should be. The righteous Joseph told his brothers, “Do this and live. I fear G-d” (*Genesis 42:18*). It is surprising that in Egypt, in this country filled with idols and impurity and known for its debauchery (*Shemot Rabba 1:22*), one of its leaders should declare that he fears G-d. This is astonishing, for the fear of G-d is one of the foundations of the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, men who truly possessed this fear of G-d and who inculcated this fear in all hearts and brought people to submit themselves to G-d. And it was precisely there, in Egypt, a place where the fear of G-d was unknown, that the brothers discovered that there was a great and powerful king, kind towards all the peoples, who did not keep all his harvests solely for his own people, but who distributed them to all the lands, as it is written, “And all the earth came to Egypt” (*Genesis 41:57*). Jacob had the revelation that grain would be sold in Egypt, or in other words, he saw that an offshoot of his descendants was there, a man characterized by kindness and generosity. In fact, if these characteristics are found in Egypt, it is a sign that there exists in that land a person who has great trust in G-d, for he worries not only about his own country, but about every country touched by the famine.

In addition, the brothers could see that in Egypt, where there were many thieves, armed robbers, and extortionists, there were nevertheless honest people. When the brothers came to bring back the money that they had found in their sacks, they said, “When we arrived at the inn and opened our sacks, behold, each one’s money was in the mouth of his sack. It was our own money in its full amount, so we have brought it back in our hand. We have also brought other money down in our hand to buy food” (*Genesis 43:21-23*). The Egyptian replied to them, “Your payment has reached me” (*v.23*), meaning, “your payment has already entered into the state’s treasuries, and it is forbidden for us to receive another payment from you.” Was such a thing possible? The brothers were impressed, and they understood that the sovereign and governor of the country was in fact an upright man, holy and filled with the fear of G-d. This is why Judah did not fear to return to the city (which answers our first question), for he knew that the king of the land feared Heaven and therefore it would be possible to reach a compromise with him, without quarrel or dispute.

In digging ever deeper, we find other reasons that erased all fears from Judah’s heart, so well in fact that he agreed to return to the city, even with Benjamin. Joseph asked his brothers, “Is your aged father of whom you spoke at peace?” (*v.27*). It is certain that one who asks such a question will allow himself to be cajoled and would accept a compromise in order not to cause pain to an old father. Moreover, Judah did not want to kill Judah’s envoy and return to his father in the land of Canaan because he did not want to profane G-d’s Name. If he had acted in such a way, everyone would see his actions as proof that they had stolen the cup. Moreover, the king (whom they didn’t know was Joseph) feared G-d. If he were to have learned that the sons of Jacob had

done such a thing, he risked losing his fear of G-d by thinking in his heart, “If the sons of Jacob, who taught the fear of G-d, acted in such a way, it is because ‘there is no judge, and there is no justice’ ” (*Shochar Tov 47:6*). He would therefore conclude that all is permissible. Concerning such a situation, the Sages have said, “Sages, be careful with your words, for you may incur the penalty of exile and be banished to a place of evil waters [that is, where heresy is taught], and the disciples who follow you there will drink and die, and consequently the Name of Heaven will be desecrated” (*Perkei Avoth 1:11*). This means that others would arrive at conclusions that were not in conformity with the truth. Judah therefore took the trouble to return to Joseph, and not to kill the envoy (which answers our second question), in order not to cause Joseph to have doubts about G-d.

This is the sense of the phrase, “then Judah approached him.” He approached him to wage war against him – the war of the Torah – in order to publicly sanctify the Name of G-d, and he returned to Joseph with Benjamin and all his brothers in order to justify himself before Joseph, whom Judah considered to be a G-d fearing man. Such was the path of Judah, who admitted his own faults (*Sotah 7b*). He didn’t think for a single moment that in returning to Joseph, he would wage actual war against him. In arriving before him Judah said, “I have come with my brother Benjamin and I didn’t escape to my father in Canaan because ‘your servant took responsibility for the youth from my father’ [*Genesis 44:32*].” The Hebrew word for “took responsibility” is **בָּעַר**, and it is formed from the same letters as the word **בָּעַר** (“foolish”), meaning that if Judah had fled, or if he had killed the envoy, he would have profaned G-d’s Name by such a foolish act. Because of him, Joseph would have come to doubt G-d’s existence. This is why Judah took the risk of openly returning to Joseph, a man who was “equal to Pharaoh,” although Pharaoh did not fear G-d or believe in Him. Judah did all this in order so as not to profane G-d’s name.

Judah’s virtue was that he recognized his faults. The cup being found in Benjamin’s sack, Judah should have recognized that Benjamin was, apparently, the thief. He could not deny this evidence. In fact, Judah went back to Egypt. He presented himself to Joseph with Benjamin and admitted to the accusation so as not to cause a desecration of G-d’s Name. He acted in the same way with Tamar, his daughter-in-law, when he publicly admitted, “She is more righteous than I” (*Genesis 38:26*).

### ***Humility and Confessing Our Sins is Worthy of Praise***

It is written, “And he [Jacob] sent Judah before him to Joseph, to show the way before him to Goshen” (*Genesis 46:28*). The Midrash states that this was “in order to prepare a house of study from which Torah teachings would emanate” (*Beresith Rabba 95:3*).

The following questions may be raised:

1. Why did Jacob send Judah rather than another of his children to set up a house of study? It is written, “To learn Torah, a man should see himself as a bull that carries

a yoke or like a donkey that carries a load” (*Avodah Zarah 5b*). Issachar is compared to a “strong-boned donkey” (*Genesis 49:14*) and “the children of Issachar [are] men with understanding for the times, to know what Israel should do” (*I Chronicles 12:33*). If such is the case, Jacob could have sent Issachar first. Furthermore, if we want to say that he sent Judah because he had precedence with respect to the kingship (*Bereshith Rabba 92:5*), and that Judah alone was capable of preparing a house of study for the dissemination of Torah, we should realize that it was not necessary to send someone with the qualities of a king for this specific task. Any son could have fulfilled this mission.

2. We also need to understand why Jacob had to send someone before him to set up a house of study. Apparently, he could have waited until coming to Egypt himself before deciding where the best place to build a yeshiva would be. In such a case, he could have benefited from even greater Heavenly assistance, since G-d specifically promised him: “I shall descend with you to Egypt” (*Genesis 46:4*). With G-d’s help, he could have easily found a place for his yeshiva, even more so since the Sages have said, “During their entire lives the Patriarchs did not stop studying, even when they were in Egypt” (*Yoma 28b*).

The basis and foundation for acquiring Torah is to realize that if we want to gain wisdom, we must lower and humble ourselves. The Sages say, “Torah is compared to water. In the same way that water flows from a higher place to a lower one, so too is Torah only acquired by one who lowers himself” (*Taanith 7a*), meaning that it abandons haughty and arrogant people and remains only with those who are modest and humble. The Torah is figuratively called water (*Bava Kama 17a*), as it is written: “Everyone who is thirsty, go to the water” (*Isaiah 55:1*). We have seen that Moses our teacher received the Torah because he was extremely humble (*Numbers 12:3*), and Mount Sinai had the merit of being chosen for the giving of the Torah precisely because it is a low mountain (*Sotah 5a*).

Why is the Torah acquired only in humility? When a modest person sees that he has sinned with respect to a particular law or teaching, he is capable of immediately recognizing his sin. He is not ashamed by his lack of knowledge, and with G-d’s help he progresses in his Torah study. It is only by admitting his sins that he can rectify them, and his views that were at first erroneous will later allow him to deeply probe the words of the living G-d. It is only by recognizing his sins that he is capable of correcting them, not repeating them again, and sanctifying G-d’s Name in public. One of the 48 ways in which a person acquires Torahs is by “knowing his place” (*Perkei Avoth 6:6*), meaning to recognize his sins. The Sages say, “A person only grasps a Torah concept after having erred in it” (*Gittin 43a*), and acknowledging errant ways guarantees success.

It is nevertheless very difficult for a person to acknowledge his sins. If this person is a teacher, admitting in public that he has erred is incomparably harder still. If he does not acknowledge it, “his advantage is cancelled by his disadvantage” (*Perkei Avoth 5:12*), however if he pays no heed to his personal feelings and admits the mistake he committed in his study, his reward will be great in this world and the World to Come.

The greatness and importance of the School of Hillel lay in the fact that they first taught the opinion of the School of Shammai, and only afterwards did they teach their own opinion (*Eruvin 13b*). We also find in the Talmud a discussion concerning the status of a person who is half-slave, half-free (*Hagigah 2b*). The School of Hillel retracted its own opinion and taught the law according to the School of Shammai's decision, something that shows us that they behaved with extreme humility. For having done so, the Sages say: "The law goes according to the decision of the School of Hillel, not according to the School of Shammai" (*Eruvin 6b*). Besides this, we know that Hillel himself was a descendant of Judah.

Judah possessed this trait of "acknowledging his sins without shame" (*Sotah 7b*), especially after Joseph's rebukes. This is why he was sent beforehand to look for an appropriate place to set up a yeshiva where students would acknowledge all their sins and not be ashamed to have their opinions scrutinized. This would allow them to attain a level of perfection in the study and practice of the commandments, similar to Judah, who admitted his sins without shame and retained the teachings of the Torah.

It is possible to say that this is precisely the sense of the verse: "He sent Judah before him to Joseph," meaning that each Jew, a descendant of Jacob, should feel that there is always someone "before him" in yeshiva, one who is greater than him. The one who learns Torah or teaches it, who acknowledges "his sins without shame," and who knows that others are greater than himself, acquires Torah and puts it into practice with all humility. This is an eternal teaching from our holy Patriarchs.

We must add that by Jacob having sent Judah before him to Egypt, we learn an essential principle for a person's spiritual well-being, wherever he may be. When someone wants to live in a certain town or country, he should first of all make an effort to see if there is a place of Torah, a mikveh, and a religious school in that town or country. He should not settle down first and then try to find a place of Torah, for before actually finding a place of Torah to quench his soul (which thirsts for spirituality), he risks falling prey to multiple temptations. A place lacking a synagogue and house of study is no doubt without the Divine Presence, for the Divine Presence abides only in a holy place (see *Perkei Avoth 3:6*). A person puts himself in great danger by living in an area devoid of Torah study. This is why, even before going there, a man should determine whether the Divine Presence is found there, and only then should he go. As for children's education, if that place has no Jewish school, the situation is even worse. Rabbi Yosai ben Kisma said, "I would dwell nowhere but in a place of Torah" (*Perkei Avoth 6:9*). We learn from Jacob that a man should first concern himself with his spiritual life, and only then should he worry about his material needs. Before leaving for the land of Goshen, which was the most fertile of lands in Egypt – as it is written, "I will give you the best of the land of Egypt" (*Genesis 45:18*), and we know that this refers to Goshen – Jacob first concerned himself with setting up a place for Torah where he would immediately be able to go. If he were to have looked for a place of study once he got there, several days would have passed, perhaps even months, and it is wrong to

waste even a single moment. Moreover, that would have put Jacob's descendants in danger of coming to a prosperous and pleasant area that was devoid of Torah, an area where they would partake of the good things of the earth, and this could have had a negative influence on them. As the Sages said, "The wine of Perogaisa and the waters of Diomisis were the ruin of the Ten Tribes" (*Shabbat 147b*), for they were led astray by the pleasures of this world.

We know that "if you encounter that scoundrel [the evil inclination], drag him to the house of study" (*Sukkah 52b*). Yet for this to happen, we must live in an area where there are houses of study to which we can drag the evil inclination and subjugate it. Jacob feared for his children in Egypt, a land of immorality and perverted individuals (*Shemot Rabba 1:22*). He feared that some of them would be swept away by the evil inclination.

Today there are people who are concerned first and foremost with a beautiful, spacious home. They care primarily about living in a place where the air is clean and pure, even if no mikveh or house of study is found nearby. It is impossible to describe the danger that this represents, for when entrapped by the evil inclination, that detestable scoundrel, to where can they escape?

Even during vacation time, a period when we travel to areas of rest and relaxation, we must try to spend them in towns where there are houses of study, and to set ourselves fix times for Torah study. Rabbi Elazar ben Aruch, who went to Perogaisa and Diomisis and allowed himself to be seduced by its wine and waters, ended up forgetting what he had learned (*Shabbat 147b*). It is certain that by going to a place of Torah, we can conquer the evil inclination.

### ***What is the right path to follow?***

*The Torah is acquired by humility, which is why one should learn how to appreciate a person who is greater than himself, and to acknowledge his own sins. Similarly, wherever we decide to live, we must make certain that a place of Torah study exists there, and that we live in a place filled with holiness. Even when on vacation, we must look for a town with a place of Torah study, one that we can go to and subjugate the evil inclination, that scoundrel, and conquer him at all times.*

### ***Stolen Money Yields No Profit***

It is written, "They took their livestock and their wealth which they had amassed in the land of Canaan and they came to Egypt – Jacob and all his offspring with him" (*Genesis 46:6-7*). Concerning this subject, Rashi cites the words of the Sages: "Jacob gave Esau everything that he had acquired in Padan Aram in exchange for a place in the Tomb of the Patriarchs, saying that all the goods acquired outside the land of Israel had no value in his eyes, as it is written further on: 'In my grave, which I have hewn for myself in the land of Canaan – there you are to bury me' [*Genesis 50:5*]. Jacob placed a pile of gold and silver before Esau and said to him, 'Take this in exchange' " (*Shemot Rabba 31:17*). See Rashi's commentary on this subject.

1. How could Jacob, who had worked day and night in order to earn his wages (*Genesis 31:40-41*) – and who, as we know, benefited from numerous miracles while in Laban’s house – have considered the possessions that he had acquired as being of little worth?

2. If in fact righteous men “consider their possessions as being more important than themselves” (*Sotah 12a*), what is the difference between possessions acquired in Eretz Israel and those acquired elsewhere? This is especially true of Jacob, of whom it is said: “Jacob was left alone” (*Genesis 32:25*) “because of tiny objects left behind” (*Chullin 91a*), which shows that he placed particular importance on his possessions. Therefore why did he give them to his brother Esau?

Jacob did not want to draw any profit from the goods he acquired while staying with Laban. He knew Laban to be a deceiver and a thief, and he feared that a part of his earnings had been dishonestly acquired by Laban (*Tanhuma Vayigash 1*). Even though Jacob had faithfully served Laban and only received what was owed to him, he did not want to profit from earnings whose origin were dubious, and he put his money aside over the years without using it. Jacob did not place the money that he earned working for Laban with his own money, for he thought that stolen money was included in the wages that Laban paid him. He therefore did not want to benefit from it in any way, even though he himself had earned it honestly. Not only did Jacob refrain from using this money, he did not want his children to inherit it from him.

Before descending into Egypt, Jacob gave this entire fortune to Esau in exchange for a place in the Tomb of the Patriarchs. This is similar to what Abraham did when he gave presents to the children of his concubines (*Genesis 25:6*), for Jacob wanted his children and their descendants to rejoice in the land of Goshen only with wealth that had been earned honestly.

This is truly astonishing! For 39 years, Jacob made no use of his wages – money whose origins were dubious – and he was content to put it aside.

From this we see the greatness of righteous men and their devotion to upright values. Even though their possessions are precious to them, money of dubious origin has no value in their eyes. This is a lesson for us all. We must differentiate between money that is honestly gained and money that stems from dishonest transactions, between good wages “that support a man” (*Pesachim 119a*), and possessions that must not be used, even if they are acquired in a completely honest way. This is because such possessions may be defective in some way, especially if they originate from dishonest people living in a place that, like Haran, “draws the anger of G-d.” We must therefore only use money that is free of all traces of fraud.

### ***Jacob’s Hardship: There Is No Life But Torah***

It is written, “And Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen; and they had possessions therein, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly. And Jacob lived

in the land of Egypt seventeen years; and the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were one hundred and forty-seven years” (*Genesis 47:27-28*).

Rabbi Yochanan said, “Whenever [Scripture] writes ‘*Vayeishev* [And he dwelt],’ it denotes hardship. Thus, ‘And Israel dwelt in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab’ [*Numbers 25:1*] and, ‘And Jacob dwelt in the land of his father’s sojournings, in the land of Canaan...and Joseph brought the evil report of them to his father’ [*Genesis 37:1-2*] and, ‘And Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen...and the days of Israel grew near to die’ [*Genesis 47:27,29*]” (*Sanhedrin 106a*).

These remarks must be explained point by point:

1. Was Jacob’s sojourn in the land of Goshen really so difficult, given that it is stated: “The seventeen years of Jacob in Egypt were the best of his life” (*Ohr HaChaim, Vayechi*) and, “The end of his life was good” (*Tanna D’vei Elyahu Rabba 5*)? It is also stated, “During his lifetime [Rabbi Judah HaNasi] lived seventeen years in Sepphoris, and he applied to himself the verse: ‘And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years’ ” (*Bereshith Rabba 96:5*), which seems to contradict the opinion of Rabbi Yochanan.

The verse, “And Jacob dwelt in the land of his father’s sojournings” (*Genesis 37:1*) indicates that he lived in hardship. Furthermore the Sages say, “The Patriarch Jacob wished to live at ease in this world, whereupon he was attacked by Joseph’s Satan [*i.e.*, he was shaken out of his tranquility by his troubles with Joseph]” (*Bereshith Rabba 84:3*). However our verse indicates that Jacob’s years in Egypt were happy and tranquil, since concerning the Children of Israel’s sojourn in Egypt it is stated, “and [they] were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly” (*Genesis 47:27*). Afterwards it is written, “the days of Israel [Jacob] grew near to die” (*v.29*), which indicates that all these years were good and tranquil. That being the case, why should we regard the term *Vayeishev* as denoting hardship?

2. Since we know that Goshen is in Egypt, why the redundant expression, “in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen”? What does the Torah want us to understand by this?

The answer is that the very act of settling down in tranquility leads to idleness, the mother of all sins, as the Sages have said: “Idleness leads to unchastity...idleness leads to dullness” (*Kelubot 59b*) and, “Talmidei Chachamim have no rest, either in this world or in the World to Come” (*Berachot 64a*). The same applies to the righteous (*Bereshith Rabba 84:3*). If they were to rest, they would arrive at idleness and not be so righteous, for it is only in the next world that the evil inclination is powerless. In addition, tranquility in this world seems to be a reward for good deeds, yet “there is no reward for commandments in this world” (*Chullin 142a*). The righteous must not want to receive their reward in this world, only in the next, where they will “sit with their crowns on their heads” (*Berachot 17a*).

From Jacob we learn a fundamental principle that is valid for all generations, namely that Jews should not seek tranquility in this world, even if it is available to them. Jacob could have settled down in tranquility, but he did not do so because that

would have been considered as his reward, and as we mentioned, “there is no reward for commandments in this world.”

In the Talmud we find the story of Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa and his wife (*Taanith 25a*). She yearned for a little comfort and less hardship in this world, for they were very poor. Rabbi Chanina prayed, and his prayer was answered: From heaven a leg of a golden table was given to them. In a dream that night, Rabbi Chanina saw that the pious would one day eat at a three-legged golden table, whereas he would eat at a two-legged table. He said to his wife, “Are you content that everybody shall eat at a perfect table and we at an imperfect table?” She replied, “What shall we do? Pray that the leg should be taken away from you.” Rabbi Chanina prayed, and his prayer was again answered. The meaning of this story is that a tranquil life in this world lessens by the same amount the reward reserved for us in the World to Come.

Rabbeinu HaKadosh (Rabbi Judah HaNasi) was extremely rich. Before dying, he testified that he never derived the slightest pleasure from things in this world (*Ketubot 104a*), and we are aware of the great physical suffering that he experienced in life (*Bava Metzia 85a*). The Talmud tells us that Rabbi Elazar ben Charsom will serve as a witness against the rich, for his great wealth did not prevent him from studying Torah (*Yoma 35b*).

Comfort leads to idleness and sin, especially in the Holy Land, where tranquility may awaken the evil inclination. It is especially in a holy place such as Israel that a person must push himself to not be idle, but rather to practice the Torah, particularly since “there is no Torah like the Torah of the Land of Israel” (*Vayikra Rabba 13:5*). The Sages add, “Gehenna has three gates: One in the wilderness, one in the sea, and one in Jerusalem” (*Eruvin 19a*), meaning that in Jerusalem, and Israel in general, the evil inclination is very powerful. Hence a person must control it by a permanent connection to the Torah and service of G-d, in a degree of holiness befitting the Land of Israel, a land that is “holier than all other lands” (*Bamidbar Rabba 7:8*). It is “a land that the L-RD your G-d seeks out. The eyes of the L-RD your G-d are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year’s end” (*Deuteronomy 11:12*). If we are not immersed in Torah, but instead delight in tranquility, the evil inclination will turn us away from serving G-d, and once it traps a person in its net, it distances him from the good and straight path.

It is written, “From the days of Moses up to Rabban Gamliel, the Torah was learned only standing. When Rabban Gamliel died, feebleness descended upon the world, and they learned the Torah sitting” (*Megillah 21a*) and, “When Rabban Gamliel the elder died, the glory of the Torah ceased” (*Sotah 49a*). As long as Rabban Gamliel was alive, people studied the Torah while standing, with great effort. This custom was maintained until the Second Temple was destroyed and the exile began, so great was Rabban Gamliel’s influence on his generation. After his death, however, nobody exerted such an influence on his contemporaries. Because the generation had weakened, the custom ceased.

Jacob was afflicted by the tragedy surrounding Joseph because he wanted to live in tranquility. If this occurred in a holy place such as the Land of Israel, how much more was Jacob not to live in comfort while in Egypt! The province of Goshen was

prosperous and flourishing, the richest in all of Egypt, as it is written: “Settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land; let them settle in the region of Goshen” (*Genesis 47:6*). There is no doubt that the evil inclination is powerful; hence a person must be careful not to seek out comfort, but instead to occupy himself with the Torah and serving G-d. In this way he will experience wall-like protection from all surrounding temptations.

Concerning the verse, “[Jacob] sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph” (*Genesis 46:28*), the Sages say that he did this “to prepare an academy for him there, where he would teach Torah and where the tribal ancestors would read the Torah” (*Bereshith Rabba 95:3*). Jacob did not wait until having personally arrived in Egypt; he made preparations in advance so that his children would immediately find a place of Torah where they could go and study as soon as they arrived, not losing a single moment.

We now see just how right Rabbi Yochanan was in saying that the expression, “And Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt” (*Genesis 47:27*) denotes hardship. This consisted of the effort involved in Torah study, as it is written: “Commensurate with the painstaking effort is the reward” (*Perkei Avoth 5:21*). The verse is praising Jacob because he persevered in the path of Torah and service of G-d, laboring without respite, even in an immoral country such as Egypt and a pleasant area such as Goshen.

What we have said also explains the repetition, “in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen” (*Genesis 47:27*), which points out Jacob’s virtues to us. The verse states, “They had possessions therein, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly” – they believed in the Torah and took firm hold of it, in the sense of, “It is a tree of life to those who grasp it” (*Proverbs 3:18*).

Rabban Yochanan was indeed correct in saying that the hardship refers to what is mentioned afterwards: “The days of Israel grew near to die” (*Genesis 47:29*). This is because in addition to all the hardships he endured during his 17 years in Egypt, an extra hardship was added. Jacob felt that it was possible, while living in the land of Egypt, to serve G-d in an exceptional way by constantly fighting against the evil inclination. He was therefore happy to faithfully serve G-d there – specifically in Egypt, in the land of Goshen. Those years were the best of his life precisely because he elevated himself in his service of G-d, advancing “from strength to strength” (*Psalms 84:8*). This is why he felt great sorrow when his days approached their end, for he wanted to continue serving G-d in toil and suffering. He was therefore distressed to see that he was going to leave this world and his days of serving G-d would soon end.

We learn a fundamental principle from this, namely that it is precisely while in exile that a person can reach lofty levels in serving G-d. If he does not take advantage of this, he will lose out greatly. Jacob shows each generation in this bitter exile how to elevate oneself and achieve desired perfection. It is good to do this as soon as possible, so as not to leave this world with regret for having failed in one’s task.

Afterwards it is written, “Then Jacob called for his sons and said, ‘Assemble yourselves and I will tell you what will befall you in the End of Days’” (*Genesis 49:1*). The

Sages explain: “Jacob wished to reveal to his sons the ‘End of Days,’ whereupon the *Shechinah* departed from him” (Pesachim 56a). The date of the End of Days escaped him, yet he still revealed something to his children. By telling them, “Assemble yourselves,” he gave them two pieces of advice that would protect Jews during their long exile: First, to be united like a single person; and second, to increase their Torah study. The word *asfu* (from *hai’asfu*, “assemble yourselves”) also means “to add,” and the Sages say, “He who increases [*mosif*] will have his life prolonged [*yosif*]” (Taanith 31a). Torah study and Jewish unity would protect them against the evil inclination, which cannot sidetrack multitudes of Jews connected to Torah, and which only has power over a few weak, isolated people. The Sages have said, “If you occupy yourselves with the Torah, you will not be delivered into his hand” (*Kiddushin 30b*) and they add, “When they do the will of the Omnipresent, no nation nor any tongue has any power over them” (*Ketubot 66b*). In addition, G-d said to Moses, “Tell Israel: ‘My children! Occupy yourselves with the Torah and you need not be afraid of any nation’” (*Vayikra Rabba 25:1*). The power of unity is great, as indicated by the verse: “Ephraim is attached to idols; let him be” (*Hosea 4:17*). This means that even when they worship idols, they cannot be defeated if they are united. The Final Redemption will only occur because of Jewish unity, as the Sages have said: “Israel’s redemption will only take place once they are united” (*Tanuma Nitzavim 1*), and it is solely by Torah that they can be. It is possible that this is what the Sages meant when they said, “He who shares in the distress of the community will merit to behold its consolation” (*Taanith 11a*) and, “Whoever puts effort into studying Torah in this world, G-d will place a halo of benevolence over his head” (*Tanna D'vei Ellezer Zutah 17*).

Concerning the verse itself (“And Jacob lived [וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב] in the land of Egypt seventeen years” – *Genesis 47:28*), we note that the word וַיְחִי can be divided into two parts: וַי (vei) and חַי (chai). In other words, all the years that Jacob lived in Egypt were *vei*, filled with hardship, as we said earlier. However these 17 years (the numerical value of the word *tov* [good]) were all good, since Jacob conquered the evil inclination and elevated himself in Torah through constant effort. He was distressed when he saw his life coming to an end. This is something very instructive, something that we can all draw a lesson from.

### ***The Shema – A Last Hope of Salvation For All the Generations***

Jacob had not seen his son Joseph for 22 years. In fact he thought that Joseph had been torn apart by a wild animal, and he had already mourned for him. However his suffering finally came to an end. When his sons returned home from Egypt, Serach the daughter of Asher played a song on the harp, a song in which she suggested that “Joseph is still alive, and he rules all the land of Egypt.” When Jacob heard this good news, he immediately prepared himself to travel to Egypt and meet his son Joseph.

The Torah describes the emotional reunion between father and son: “Joseph prepared his chariot, and went up to meet Israel his father, to Goshen. He presented

himself to him and fell on his neck, and he wept on his neck a good while” (*Genesis 46: 29*). Although Joseph wept, what was Jacob doing at the time? The Torah does not say, but the Sages tell us that Jacob did not weep on Joseph’s neck. Instead, he recited the *Shema* at that point (*Midrash Aggadah, ad loc.*).

Let us try and picture it. After 22 years, during which time Jacob and Joseph did not see each other, was it possible that Jacob was not deeply moved upon seeing his son? Is it possible that he was content on reciting the *Shema*? Why did he not recite it later on, after his encounter with Joseph? Furthermore, why was it only Jacob who recited the *Shema*? Why did Joseph not recite it as well?

Let us consider the basis for reciting the *Shema*. The Sages say that the foundation of the *Shema* is that every man must give his life for the sanctification of G-d’s Name, to that point that he must feel it at each instant and be ready to give his body and soul to sanctify it (*Sifri Devarim*). However we still need to understand how a person can prove that he is ready to give his life for Hashem. Perhaps someone is doing it for show, and when the time comes for action he will not be ready to give his life for G-d. Perhaps everything is but deception on his part.

We know that if someone wants to give his life for Hashem, he must try to emulate Him, meaning to emulate Him in all deeds and conduct. The Sages have said that Hashem asks us to be merciful just as He is merciful, to have pity on creatures just as He has pity on creatures. When a person acts in this way, it clearly proves to everyone that he truly loves Hashem. If he loves his fellowman and is truly prepared to give his life for others, to help them both materially and spiritually, this means that he also loves G-d and will be ready to give his life for Him.

This is why, when Jacob encountered Joseph, it was precisely at that point that he recited the *Shema*. By doing so, he wanted to teach his children a lesson for all the generations, which is that they would not have sold their brother Joseph if they had truly loved one another. If they had been ready to give their lives for G-d, they would have been ready to give their lives for their brother. If they had conducted themselves in this way, they would not have ended up selling Joseph. Thus Jacob wanted to teach them a way of life that was valid for all time: The way of loving one’s fellowman and giving one’s life for him, for that is the foundation of the *Shema*.

This principle of the *Shema* has supported the Jewish people throughout the generations, especially during the Second World War, the years of the Holocaust, when Jews were led to the ovens with the *Shema* on their lips. Who knows as well as we do how much self-denial was required during those years. Jews shared their last piece of bread with their friends, which clearly proved that each person was ready to give his life for the other. From that came the will and the ability to give one’s life for Hashem.

This is the place to briefly recount a well-known story that happened immediately after the Holocaust. Several rabbis wanted to rescue children from the Church, but the question was how. One priest from a church mission that housed Jewish children asked

them how they knew who exactly was Jewish and who was not. The rabbis did not know how to respond, and so the Holy One, blessed be He, gave them some help. An idea arose in the mind of one rabbi, who said: “We will come back when the children are ready to go to sleep, and we will show you then.”

At seven o’clock that night, when all the children were in bed, the rabbis arrived at the mission. One of them got up on a small chair in the middle of the dormitory and shouted: “*Shema Israel, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad!*” Many of the children began to cry at that exact moment, for the *Shema* reminded them of their homes. They remembered their Jewish mothers reciting the *Shema* with them when they went to sleep, and thus the rabbis were able to rescue the Jewish children from confinement in the mission.

From this we see just how powerful the *Shema* is. In every generation the *Shema* has been the symbol of the martyr, the symbol of love for the Jewish people and for Hashem, and the symbol of devotion to others and to Hashem. There is a reason why today there are a million Jewish children who, unfortunately, do not know what *Shema Israel* is, a fact that we are well aware of. These children think neither of others, nor of Hashem, but mainly of themselves.

The tremendous power of the *Shema* can save the Jewish people from its enemies, and it can save Jews from the Church. This is why each person should strengthen his fellowman in this important mitzvah, for then our reward will be great.

### ***The Need For a Place of Torah Study Wherever We Go***

It is written, “He sent Judah before him to Joseph, to prepare ahead of him in Goshen” (*Genesis 46:28*). Rashi gives two explanations for why Jacob sent Judah before him: (1) To clear a place for him and to show him how to settle in it; and (2) To establish for him a house of study, from which Torah teachings would emanate (*Tanhuma Vayigash 11 and Bereshith Rabba 95:3*). This is somewhat surprising. First of all, why did Jacob send Judah to prepare a place for him, since he could have assigned Joseph to do that for him? After all, Joseph was already living in Egypt, and it would certainly have been easier for him than for Judah, who lived in Canaan.

Secondly, why did Jacob want to prepare this place? Given that Joseph had already asked his father and the entire family to come to Egypt, it is obvious that he had already prepared a place for them. This included a place for study, since Joseph had sent his father *agalot* (wagons) to remind him that when they last saw one another, they were studying the passage on the *egla* (heifer) that is beheaded (*Bereshith Rabba 94:3; 95:3; Tanhuma Vayigash 11*). Since Joseph governed the entire land of Egypt – the perversion of the whole earth – all while remaining connected to the Torah and *mitzvot*, and since he had not profaned the covenant of circumcision, why did Jacob not trust him enough to prepare a place where he could teach Torah? Why did he send Judah instead?

Jacob had heard of the greatness and righteousness of Joseph, and the Holy One, blessed be He, had even told him, “Joseph shall put his hand upon your eyes” (*Genesis 46:4*). Nevertheless, since it is written, “Do not be sure of yourself until the day you die” (*Perkei Avoth 2:4*), and since what can be discerned from a person’s reputation is not the same as seeing him in person, it seems to me that as long as Jacob had not personally witnessed Joseph in his righteousness, his conduct in the home, and the education of his children, he did not want to entrust him with preparing a place of Torah for him, nor a place for them to live according to his own principles. Even if Joseph was his favorite son, the principle characteristic of Jacob was truth.

True, Jacob could have waited until having met Joseph to see if he was still righteous, at which point he could have asked that he prepare a place for Torah and a dwelling place for them. Jacob did not want to do this, however, because his troubles with Joseph all began because he had wanted to settle down in peace and tranquilly (*Beresith Rabba 84:3*). Thus Jacob did not want to wait in order to ask Joseph to prepare these places for him, lest in the meantime his sons and grandsons would want to live in peace and tranquility under the protection of Joseph, the ruler of the land. Hence Jacob wanted to prevent a neglect in Torah study from occurring.

This is why Jacob guided his sons and grandsons in the concept that we must not live in peace in this world, but instead we must study Torah at each instant. He therefore immediately sent Judah to prepare a place for him before they arrived in Egypt, in order for them to be ready upon arriving and begin studying without delay.

From personal experience, Jacob was familiar with Judah’s righteousness and greatness, and he trusted him to prepare a place for them to live and study Torah according to his own principles. This is why it is stated that he sent Judah “before him” (*Genesis 46:28*), for him to do everything according to his own principles. It would be a place to dwell where everyone could live together and be near Jacob, and where they would be united and could ensure that none of them mixed among the Egyptians. He also had to prepare a place for Torah that was near their dwellings, much in the same way that Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma stated, “I would dwell nowhere but in a place of Torah” (*Perkei Avoth 6:9*). That is, a place of Torah had to be close to where they lived. Nevertheless, Jacob could not trust Joseph in this matter. Although he prepared a place according to the principles that his father had instilled in him as a youth, Jacob could not trust him before having closely examined his spiritual state.

We may add that by sending Judah before him, Jacob was hinting to his sons and grandsons that before leaving the Holy Land to go into exile, a place of Torah had to be prepared first. This was to prevent them from thinking that they could go and rest easily under the protection of Joseph, the governor of Egypt. Rather, already in the middle of their journey and even before having arrived in Egypt, Jacob sent Judah before him to prepare a place for Torah study in order that everything would be ready as soon as they arrived.

Jacob made them understand that they were not exchanging an ox for a donkey, meaning the Holy Land for such an impure land as Egypt. It was true that they going down to Egypt, for there was a famine in the land of Canaan and it was Hashem's will that they should descend into Egypt and that the exile begin. In any case, if they did not want to feel that they were in exile, they had to study Torah and prepare for themselves a place of Torah next to their dwellings upon their arrival, a place already established and set up.

Similarly, Jacob let his children know that his consolation over the grief of having to leave the Holy Land – the place where Hashem dwelled – was the yeshiva, a place of Torah that had been prepared before their arrival. It was only by toiling in the Torah in all places, despite their exile, that the Children of Israel could arise from the exile and become a people that differed from all the rest, “a people that dwells *levadad* [alone], and among the nations shall not be reckoned” (*Numbers 23:9*). The word *levadad* has a numerical value of 40, recalling the 40 days in which the Torah was given to Moses. When Jews study the Torah that was given in 40 days, they become “alone” in the sense that no other nation can harm them, and they do not mix among the nations. When Jews have no regard for the culture of the other nations, they suffer no harm, neither from their weapons nor from their influence. From here we learn that we must always prepare a place of Torah wherever we go, for it is our life preserver in every place and at all times.

## Parsha Vayechi

### *Love for Jews Brings the Redemption*

It is written, “And Israel stretched out his right hand and put it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand upon the head of Manasseh. He crossed his hands, although Manasseh was the firstborn” (*Gen 48:14*). And then we read of an argument between Joseph and Jacob: “And when Joseph saw that his father put his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him. And he took hold of his father’s hand to remove it from Ephraim’s head onto Manasseh’s head. And Joseph said to his father, ‘Not so, my father. This is the firstborn; put your right hand on his head.’ And his father refused and said, ‘I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. But truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations’” (*Gen 48:17-19*).

This incident should be explained. The Sages have said, “Because Jacob preferred Joseph over his other children, he made him a special tunic that provoked his brothers’ jealousy and brought our ancestors to Egypt” (*Shabbat 10a*). If such is the case, why did Jacob cross his hands and place his right hand on the head of Ephraim, the younger child, thus risking to provoke Manasseh’s jealousy? In addition he said, “May G-d make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh” (*Gen 48:20*). Why is the younger mentioned before the elder? If he blessed them with such a benediction, why does the Torah add, “And he set Ephraim before Manasseh” (*ibid.*)?

Such an order of priority would have provoked jealousy, and Joseph asked his father Jacob to place his right hand on the head Manasseh, the first-born. But Jacob intentionally put Ephraim and Manasseh to the test, in the same way that he put his own children to the test in order to verify that they had been reconciled to Joseph with all their heart. Harmony was to be the foundation of their future. If their descendants know how to give way one before the other, their sins would be pardoned (*Yoma 23a*). In conducting oneself with respect towards the other, in thinking first of all to the good of one’s neighbor, one guarantees good social relationships, relationships built on love and respect.

To put his grandchildren to the test, Jacob first of all asks, “Who are these?” (*Gen 48:8*). Rashi explains his words as meaning, “From where come these children who don’t deserve a blessing?” For Jacob saw that Jeroboam and Ahab would descend from Ephraim, and that Jehu and his children would descend from Manasseh. And he was troubled” (*Tanhuma Vayechi 6*). If both of them would have descendants that would be equally wicked, one must ask why he gave preference to one of them, since that was only meant for putting them to the test to determine if they would accept such a preferential situation and continue to love one another. In that case, the children of the other tribes would also learn how to live conflict-free in peace with one another.

Joseph pointed out the error to his father, but the tribes accepted the decision of Jacob and resolved to conduct themselves lovingly with one another. “And he set Ephraim before Manasseh” in view and knowledge of all so that everyone understands that no one should be jealous of others, but rather should behave with fraternity and love towards one another.

The remainder of the story becomes clear. It is written, “And Jacob called his sons and said, ‘Gather yourselves together and I will tell you what will happen to you in the latter days. Assemble yourselves and hear ...’” (*Gen 49:1-2*). Jacob wanted to make it known to them that they will only be saved because of fraternal harmony and the attention that each gives to the feelings of others, as it written: “Redemption will only come when the entire Jewish people will be united” (*Tanhuma Nitzavim 1*).

What remains for us to explain is why, when Jacob wanted to reveal to his sons the events of the latter days, Divine inspiration left him (*Pesachim 56a*). He therefore thought that there lay a fault in them. His sons told him, “Hear O Israel, the L-RD is our G-d, the L-RD is One.” He then replied, “Blessed be the Name of the glory of His kingdom forever and ever.” It is difficult to understand how Jacob could have suspected his sons of having any doubts concerning the unity of G-d, to the point that they were obligated to make this proclamation. Precisely why did they say, “Hear O Israel”? And what is the sense of Jacob’s response: “Blessed be the Name of the glory of His kingdom forever and ever”? Moreover, if they actually had been whole in their faith in G-d’s unity, why was Jacob deprived of Divine inspiration?

To clearly respond to these questions, it must be stressed that hate and jealousy risk leading a man to damage the image of G-d that is in his neighbor. To cause harm to him is to deny the existence of G-d (*Bereshith Rabba 34:20*), as if there were many gods, and to give strength to the forces of evil. In addition, if a man’s faith is not whole, each commandment that this man performs reinforces his mistaken faith, and in that case his good deeds will benefit people that he has slandered (*Chofetz Chaim, Shmirat Halashon*) and he loses all Divine likeness. In effect, how could he still carry the image of G-d in himself after having denied the image of G-d in others?

The Sages say that Jacob actually revealed to his children the end times, for in gathering and uniting them, he made them know that this unity will bring about the redemption. It was when he wanted to reveal to them the details of the redemption that Divine inspiration left him. And so he feared that there still remained in their hearts a feeling of hatred towards Joseph because Jacob had given him “one portion above your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow” (*Gen 48:22*).

“From the moment that Joseph was sold into slavery, I lost Divine inspiration” (*Tanhuma Vayeishev 2*) and it only returned to Jacob when the brothers were reconciled, as it is written, “then the spirit of Jacob their father was revived” (*Gen 45:27*). And then all of a sudden, Divine inspiration again left him. Perhaps they again felt hatred in their hearts for Joseph because Jacob gave him precedence, or because he gave him the city

of Shechem. Or perhaps it was because he gave to his sons Ephraim and Manasseh two inheritances (*Tanhuma Vayechi 6*), as it is written, “Ephraim and Manasseh are mine like Reuben and Simeon” (*Gen 48:5*). Was it possible that Jacob’s sons still felt hatred for Joseph?

And so his sons replied, “Hear O Israel, the L-RD is our G-d, the L-RD is One,” which is to say, “we feel no hatred or jealousy, G-d forbid! Neither towards Joseph nor towards anyone else.” The declaration of *Shema Israel* means that before we can come to a love for G-d – a true reverence for Him and a faith that is whole – we must love our neighbor, be attentive to his feelings, and share his pains. The children of Jacob told him that they love their neighbor and support one another, and that it wasn’t because of them that Divine inspiration had left him. Jacob responded, “Blessed be the Name of the glory of His kingdom forever and ever,” or in other words, “the honor and reign of G-d are intact solely when the Children of Israel are united, and so His Name is complete and His reign is made apparent.” Divine inspiration left him only so that he not reveal the details of the events concerning the end times.

Later, when he was blessing them, Jacob reprimanded his sons, yet they did not turn to jealousy. Although he rebuked some and blessed others, “he included them all in a single unified whole” (*Bereshith Rabba 13:8*) because they were all united with the same intention when they made their common declaration of *Shema Israel*.

It is also possible that Jacob thought that his children had not understood the lesson that he gave them when he met Joseph. “He gave to Joseph the city of Shechem” (*Midrash Haggadah Vayigash 28:29*) precisely to remove all jealousy from their heart. When they replied with *Shema Israel*, Jacob understood that they had been reconciled to Joseph and that they weren’t jealous that he had received that city. It is written, “with my sword and with my bow” (*Gen 48:22*), meaning, “with my prayers and supplications” (*Bava Batra 123a*). It’s a known fact that something acquired through prayer doesn’t provoke jealousy, for it was not obtained through natural means. Man must sanctify his spirit as much as his body, and to consecrate both to G-d. He must do this in the same way as “when a man shall sanctify his house to be holy to the L-RD...” (*Lev 27:14*). In the same way, a man’s body and his entire being is sanctified when he serves G-d with enthusiasm. When harboring jealousy, no one can do this. Thus the love for Jews is spread and brings the time of the Final Redemption closer.

### ***Israel is Saved Because of the Merit of the Torah***

It is written, “And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt 17 years. And the days of Jacob – the years of his life – were 147 years” (*Genesis 47:28*).

Rashi cites the words of the Sages in his commentary: “Why is this section ‘closed’? It is because when Jacob died, the eyes and the heart of Israel closed due to the sufferings of slavery that then began. There is another reason as well: He wanted to reveal to them the end times, but this prophetic revelation escaped him” (*Bereshith Rabba 96:1*).

The tradition we have received from the prophet Ezra tells us that this section is “closed” in Scripture, and that we have nothing to add to this subject. However we may at least try to understand the meaning of it. The following points come to the fore.

1. If this section is “closed” because it deals with Jacob’s death, why is it written, at the end of the previous Parsha, that “Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen, and they had possessions there, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly”? Surely this was a cause for joy. The Sages say, “Our father Jacob did not die, and in the way that he is alive, his descendants are alive” (*Taanith 5b*). Hence if his teachings are perpetuated from generation to generation, there is nothing sad at his death.

2. The Sages say, “When Jacob died, the eyes and the heart of Israel closed due to the sufferings of slavery that then began.” This contradicts that which was stated concerning the verse “and the years of the life of Levi were 137 years” (*Exodus 6:16*), namely that the length of Levi’s life is related to us in order to make known the duration of the slavery. As long as one of the fathers of the tribes was alive, there was no slavery, as it is said, “And Joseph died, and all his brothers ... and there arose a new king over Egypt,” and Levi lived longer than any of the brothers (*Seder Olam Rabba 3*). It was thus that the slavery began with the death of Levi, and not at the death of Jacob. Therefore the question remains: Why is our section “closed”?

3. The second reason given by the Sages is that Jacob wanted to relate to his children the end times, but prophecy escaped him, something that is difficult to understand because our section only deals with this revelation afterwards: “Gather yourselves together and I will tell you that which will happen to you in the latter days” (*Genesis 49:1*). On this passage the Sages comment: “He wanted to reveal the end times, but prophecy escaped him” (*Pesachim 56a*). Why is this section of the Torah “closed” from the beginning, and not in that place?

4. If Jacob desired to reveal the end times to his sons, one must try to understand why he was prevented from doing so. One must also ask why Jacob wanted to make such a revelation, for in any case the sufferings of Israel would last for a long time, so how would such information comfort them? If the Children of Israel repented of the sins that caused their suffering, their deliverance would be hastened, as it is written: “In its time I will hasten it” (*Isaiah 60:22*). This is because the end times do not have a fixed date. What advantage is there to reveal such a date? We must especially understand why we have but evasive prophecies concerning the end times, without any precise indications.

5. Concerning the verse that states, “And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt 17 years” (*Genesis 47:28*), the commentators explain that he was in full possession of his entire strength and that he finally lived a tranquil life, after 130 years of a life filled with suffering (*Ohr HaChayim, Kli Yakar*). In the land of his fathers’ travels, there was no possibility for him to live a tranquil life, since he was struck with the tragedy of Joseph’s disappearance (*Bereshith Rabba 84:3*). It was specifically in Egypt, in a land of perversions (*Shemot Rabba 1:22*), that he had the chance to live in peace for 17 years. How is that possible?

One must understand that the two reasons provided by the Sages are connected to and complement one another. As long as the Jews were few in number in Egypt, as long as they felt secure, they supported each other and felt no lack. However later, when they multiplied (*Genesis 47:27*), they were no doubt happy because of their growth, but at the same time they began to experience servitude because they were forced to work for the Egyptians for their sustenance. The fact is, someone who is used to independence does not feel comfortable working for someone in order to earn a salary. Already then, during the lifetime of the fathers of the tribes, the Children of Israel had begun to experience servitude and the weight of exile. Although it was not yet slavery, they did not feel at home as in the land of Canaan, where they were respected.

In fact, as long as Jacob was alive, his status protected them. His influence was beneficial and he sustained their morale. Yet after his death and that of his sons, the Children of Israel experienced lack. They worked for the Egyptians for their sustenance, and “the slavery and exile began” (*Shemot Rabba 1:4*).

At the end of his life, Jacob sensed and foresaw that the slavery of his children would henceforth begin, for he saw on the faces of his children and grandchildren an expression of fear as to their future. He wanted to reveal the end times in order to encourage them by making them understand that this situation would end. Yet he was prevented from doing so, and this is why the section is “closed” from its start.

In spite of everything, this situation had something positive to it. The Torah specifies that Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for 17 years, which is the numerical value of the word טוב (“good”). This alludes to the Torah, as it is written, “I have given you a good teaching, do not forsake My Torah” (*Proverbs 4:2*) and also, “And the [true] good is only Torah” (*Perkei Avoth 6:3*). It was precisely in Egypt that Jacob lived a life filled with Torah. One must not conclude from this, however, that he settled down comfortably in Egypt, for G-d does not allow the righteous to live in comfort in this world, and He reserves their reward in the world to come (*Bereshith Rabba 84:3*).

However it was precisely in Egypt that Jacob knew a bit of rest, and this period of time was considered as the best of his life, for there he served G-d with all his strength. Those years were also ones in which his children were united. The Children of Israel “dwelt in the land of Egypt” (in the Torah), “were fruitful” (in understanding), “and multiplied exceedingly” (by discipline). The teachings of Jacob continue to spread and the effects of the exile are nothing to worry about.

Nevertheless, Jacob wanted to reveal the end times to his children. Why? It is written, “The precepts of the L-RD are upright, gladdening the heart” (*Psalms 19:9*), for the Torah rejoices the heart, and it is acquired through joy (*Perkei Avoth 6:6*). Furthermore, “joy is only obeying the commandments” (*Rokeiach 3:1*). When Jacob felt happy, he desired to reveal the end times because “prophecy is only given in joy” (*Midrash Hagadol Vayigash 45:27*) and “Ruach Hakodesh is only found with one who is happy” (*Shabbat 30b*). Yet this prophecy was hidden from him. Heaven desired that Jacob be shown that the one who stays connected to the Torah has nothing to fear, since “the Torah protects from all

evil” (*Kiddushin 82a*) Moreover, the Final Redemption can happen before its set time, as the Sages say: “The Children of Israel were saved only by the merit of the Torah” (*Pesikta Zutah Va’etchanan 4:32*). Redemption depends on our attachment to the Torah.

There is another reason as to why this prophecy escaped Jacob. He desired to make known to his children that the redemption would take place after 6,000 years (*Avodah Zarah 9*), and to reveal the course of history to them. However, it is possible to precipitate events and to hasten the redemption because of the Torah and repentance, and moreover Mashiach can come at any moment. This is why Jacob was not able to reveal anything to them. In the verse that states, “Gather yourselves together and I will tell you that which will happen in the latter days” (*Genesis 49:1*), the last letters of the final two words form the word מָוֶת (“death”) which implies: I want tell you when G-d will judge the world and when the Satan – who is the Angel of Death – will die (*Bava Batra 16a*). He revealed to them that the Torah and the observance of its laws can hasten the redemption, and that this can occur at any time and in every generation. In fact, it is said that King Hezekiah could have been Mashiach (*Sanhedrin 94a*). The Sages also say that in Ezra’s time, the evil inclination was blinded and no longer led people to sin, yet the Final Redemption did not occur then because the Jews had mixed themselves with the peoples (having married foreign wives), and were serving the nations. The redemption also did not arrive at that time because not all Jews had left their place of exile to live in Israel, as the prophets affirm (*Ezra 9; Nehemiah 9*). The Talmud recounts that Rabbi Yoshua ben Levi encountered Mashiach at the gates of Rome and asked him, “When will my master reveal himself?” He answered: “Today – today if you obey G-d’s voice!” In the same way, the righteous of all the generations, such as the Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid of Kuznitz, the Chozeh of Lublin, and the holy Rabbi of Rymanov anticipated the redemption.

Given that the redemption can come at any moment, and that it depends only on us, G-d does not want the Children of Israel to try to determine the date of the end times, as it is written, “The thing is very close to you – in your mouth and in your heart – to perform it” (*Deuteronomy 30:14*). Furthermore it is said, “The Children of Israel will only be saved from the grip of the world’s nations by the merit of the Torah” (*Pesikta Zutah Va’etchanan 4:32*).

In fact, knowing that he did not have the right to live in tranquility in this world, not even in the Land of Israel, Jacob did not settle comfortably in Egypt, but rather plunged himself into the Torah in order to be saved from the harmful influences of that perverse place. The Torah is called Life; “it is an elixir of life” and “a tree of life” (*Proverbs 3:18*), and “the one who attaches himself to the Torah is attached to the tree of life” (*Zohar III:176a*). The Torah itself testifies concerning Jacob that during these 17 years, it was his source of life.

This is a teaching for all those who live in countries where idolatry, immorality, and crimes are commonplace. To save oneself from this collection, one must know and attach oneself to the values of the Torah that protect and save from all evil and suffering.

### ***The Holiness of Joseph Protected Jacob and all the Children of Israel***

It is written, “Do kindness and truth with me – please do not bury me in Egypt” (*Genesis 47:29*). Such was the request of Jacob to his son Joseph.

The following questions may be raised:

1. Why did Jacob ask Joseph not to bury him in Egypt? Instead, why did he not ask another of his sons, for they were just as courageous and upright as Joseph was (*Shemot Rabba 1:1*)? They too could have removed his coffin from Egypt. Since Jacob had to ask such permission from Joseph, the governor of the country, was it forbidden to remove a dead man from Egypt in order to bury him elsewhere?

2. We must also understand why, before he died, Joseph “adjured the Children of Israel, saying: ‘When G-d will indeed remember you, then you must bring my bones up out of here’” (*Genesis 50:25*). This oath would prevent them from leaving Egypt without bringing Joseph’s remains with them. In fact, the Sages say that they also took the remains of the other tribal heads, who themselves had requested the same thing (*Bereshith Rabba 100:12*). Why is only Joseph’s request recorded in the Torah, not the request of the other brothers?

Concerning the verse that states, “Hurry – go up to my father and say to him, ‘...G-d has made me master of all Egypt’” (*Genesis 45:9*), the Darkei Mussar relates the question posed by the Rabbi of Rozhin: “Does such a position hold any value in the eyes of Jacob?” He replies by stating, “His intention in saying this was to convey the idea that he, Joseph, was the divinely-appointed leader of Egypt.” In other words, Joseph wanted his father to know that he had instilled the fear and knowledge of G-d into Egypt and proclaimed G-d’s sovereignty over its entire empire. Such news was certainly comforting for Jacob, and he would be happy to know that the Egyptians had attained, thanks to Joseph, a knowledge of G-d. The greatness and holiness of Joseph is that he was able to influence the Egyptians to the point that they accepted him as their divinely-appointed ruler. His righteousness was in direct opposition to all the defilement of Egyptian society, and wherever he went he rid the land of impurity to such a degree that the Egyptians easily managed to have faith in G-d.

This is what Joseph told his father: “G-d has made me master of all Egypt. Come down to me; do not delay.” In other words: “Do not fear coming down to Egypt, for I have already prepared the groundwork for the Children of Israel. We have already constructed yeshivot, and the Children of Israel can continue to study here.” Joseph did not go to the land of Canaan himself to get his father, for in that case Jacob would not have allowed his son to return to Egypt, and “Jacob our forefather should by rights have been taken to Egypt in iron chains, but his merit saved him” (*Shabbat 89b*). Yet at least Joseph consoled his father by telling him that he proclaimed G-d’s Name throughout Egypt, and that there was nothing to fear from the land’s immorality and impurity.

Even though Jacob was convinced of the truth of that message, he sent Judah ahead to prepare a house of study for him (*Bereshith Rabba 95:3*). This is quite surprising. Joseph

had already established places of study, since Manasseh and Ephraim studied Torah. We must therefore ask ourselves why Jacob wanted to set up another place for Torah, and why he was not content with the ones that Joseph had established.

We learn a fundamental principle from this: A man should not be content with the strength that he possesses, but rather he should aspire to increase and improve his service of G-d. In that which concerns Torah, one must not be satisfied with what he has acquired; he must try to deepen his Torah knowledge. That is why, even though Jacob was aware of the existence of Joseph's yeshivot, he wanted to personally insure that he would be able to study Torah while in Egypt. Joseph had already been there for several years, but Jacob's other children were only now going down to Egypt with the Torah and fear of G-d that they had acquired in the land of Canaan. They needed a place that responded to their needs.

We can now answer all the questions that we previously raised. It is written, "When the Children of Israel descended into Egypt, the exile had already begun and there was no way to escape from it" (*Zohar II:8b*). Jacob knew that he could not move his own remains out of Egypt, and that only Joseph – the one who had succeeded to crush impurity under his feet and proclaim the Name of G-d in Egypt – would have the power to remove his body so that the Egyptians would not try to benefit from it in any way. Jacob's other children did not have the power that Joseph possessed, since his conduct was upright in that defiled place. This is why Jacob asked Joseph to bury him in the land of Canaan "so that the Egyptians do not make an idol of my remains after I die" (*Bereshith Rabba 95:6*), which would have caused Joseph to lose everything that he had worked for up to that point.

To this we must add that if Jacob had been buried in Egypt, the exodus of the Children of Israel would have been delayed, for after having made Jacob's body into an idol, the Egyptians would have also mistreated his children and worsened their situation. In that case they would have been unable to purify the sparks of holiness in Egypt (see *Ohr HaChayim on Genesis 49:9*). For those who understand, it is not necessary to elaborate on this subject.

G-d said to Jacob, "I shall descend with you to Egypt, and I shall also surely bring you up, and Joseph shall place his hand on your eyes" (*Genesis 46:4*). G-d promised Jacob that he would be buried in Israel (*Yerushalmi Sotah 1:10*), and Jacob understood that "Joseph shall place his hand on your eyes" meant that only Joseph would bury him in Israel.

Joseph also asked his brothers to take his body out of Egypt. It is written, "The righteous become greater after their death" (*Chullin 7b*). Just as during his lifetime Joseph (and nobody else) had the power to subjugate the forces of evil, so too after his death, when the Children of Israel departed from Egypt after having repaired the sparks of holiness, did Joseph have a beneficial influence on them. When the Children of Israel were by the Sea of Reeds, the accusing angels protested, "These here [the Egyptians] are idolaters, and these here [the Jews] are idolaters. Why judge them differently?" (*Zohar II:170b*). Because of the argument presented by Egypt's

ministering angel, the attribute of justice hung over their heads. Already while he was alive, Joseph knew that the sea would not part before the Children of Israel, and that only he could shut the mouth of that accuser and make the sea split, as it is written: “The sea saw and fled” (*Psalms 114:3*). “What did it see? It saw the coffin of Joseph, who had fled from before Potiphar’s wife” (*Shochar Tov ad loc.*). Joseph therefore asked his brothers to remove his body from Egypt in order for the sea to split by his merit and so that the Children of Israel could receive the Torah and enter the land of Israel. It is not without reason that the Sages said, “The body of Joseph and the Tabernacle, where the Tablets of the Law were kept, traveled side by side in the desert, for the former practiced what was written on the latter” (*Sotah 13a,b*). In other words, Joseph had the power to protect the Children of Israel and watch over them because of his holiness.

Only Joseph had the power to silence the accusers that arose by the Sea of Reeds. This is because he left his garment in the hand of Potiphar’s wife (*Genesis 39:12*), even though this garment would be used as evidence against him. By the Sea of Reeds, it became obvious that his children were capable of the same holiness as he was. The accusation of Egypt’s ministering angel (“these here are idolaters”) only applied to those who were forced into practicing idolatry (*Shemot Rabba 16:2*).

Despite the fact that Joseph had not committed any transgressions, he was thrown into prison and suffered greatly as a result. Nevertheless, his conduct gave the Children of Israel the merit to witness great miracles when they crossed the Sea of Reeds, such that “what the plainest maidservant saw, Ezekiel ben Buzi did not see” (*Mechilta ad loc.*). There they succeeded in attaining complete faith in G-d and in Moses (*Exodus 14:31*), to the point of receiving the manna and the Torah, conquering the land of Israel, and later building the Temple. This shows just how the performance of each commandment is a powerful weapon, since in performing a certain commandment at a given time, a person and all his descendants are protected, even after 400 years. This is because G-d knows all that has been and all that will be, and everything is taken into account. He knows the results of every action, good or bad.

When Moses asked G-d, “Why have You done evil to this people?” (*Exodus 5:22*), i.e., why must they suffer so much, G-d answered him: “Now you will see what I shall do to Pharaoh” (*ibid. 6:1*). In other words, precisely because they suffered so much, they will return to Me. The word עתה (“now”) is understood as meaning repentance (*Bereshith Rabba 21:6; 38:14*). By their repentance, Pharaoh would be punished and Egypt’s ministering angel would no longer be able to protest against the plagues that struck the Egyptians, whereas the Children of Israel (who had breached the 49 gates of impurity – *Zohar Chadash, Yitro 39a*) would be saved. The daily suffering of the Jews had the goal of enabling them to be saved. It was precisely through their suffering that the Children of Israel would acquire the strength to resist, and this suffering would deliver them. G-d, blessed be He, directs the world according to His will, and He weighs “the loss [incurred by the performance] of a mitzvah against the reward [earned by its observance], and the

gain [derived] from a sin against the loss [that will follow]” (*Perkei Avoth 2:1*). In fact, the holiness of Joseph protected all the Children of Israel.

### ***Torah Study: Rest for Body and Soul***

It is written, “Issachar is a bony donkey, crouching down between the stables. He saw rest, that it was good; and the land, that it was pleasant. He bowed his shoulder to bear, and he became a servant of taskwork” (*Genesis 49:14-15*).

In Rashi’s commentary, which we all study, he writes: “ ‘Issachar is a bony donkey’ – he is a donkey with solid bones. He carries the yoke of the Torah like a donkey loaded with a heavy burden (*Bereshith Rabba 99:9*).” Our Sages have said that when we study Torah we must be like an ox that carries a yoke and like a donkey that carries a load (*Avodah Zarah 5b*). The Midrash states: “ ‘Crouching down between the stables’ – like a donkey that walks day and night from city to city. When it wants to rest, it stops somewhere between the cities where brought its merchandise. ‘He saw rest, that it was good’ – he received a blessed and productive land as his inheritance. ‘He bowed his shoulder to bear’ – to the yoke of the Torah. ‘He became a servant of taskwork’ – he provided all his brothers with the teachings of the Torah, and he knew how to number the years, as it is written: ‘Of the children of Issachar, men with understanding for the times, to know what Israel should do’ [*1 Chronicles 12:32*]” (*Bereshith Rabba 98:12*).

Jacob’s blessing to Issachar concerns the yoke of the Torah and the legal decisions that regulate Israel’s conduct.

Despite everything, however, the verse still remains obscure. If it concerns the yoke of the Torah, why does it state, “He saw rest, that it was good,” for there is no rest in the study of Torah, neither during the day nor the night. Since it is also stated, “He bowed his shoulder to bear,” why is the burden of the Torah compared to resting between cities? If there is rest, there is no burden (this question was asked by the director of our Kollel, Rabbi Wajnine, the administrator of *Ateret Israel* yeshiva).

The word חמור (“donkey”) has a numerical value of 248, indicating that he carries the yoke of the Torah with the 248 members of his body – like a donkey with solid bones – and that he puts all his energies into occupying himself with the Torah. The word גרם (“bony”) points to the Gemara that he studies both day and night, and “between the stables” means between the pages of the Gemara. He employs all his bodily members in occupying himself with the Torah both day and night; such is his rest and the essential part of his trade.

His rest and delight in this world are to occupy himself with the Torah by using all his bodily members (*Torah Kohanim, Leviticus 26:3*). He sees the fruits of his labors and is called “wise” because “he understands things on his own” (*Hagigah 14a*). He is an expert with “understanding for the times” because he has acquired a taste for Torah, as it is written: “Taste and see that the L-RD is good” (*Psalms 34:9*).

The one who occupies himself with Torah day and night in this world is rewarded in the next world, the world of rest and our true heritage, as it is written: “There is hope for your future” (*Jeremiah 31:16*). The one who experiences true pleasure in Torah and understands its worth will become its servant. He will take advantage of every opportunity to study and not lose time in pursuing frivolous affairs. He will then experience true rest and real delight, and his efforts will be rewarded. People will say of such a person: “Happy is the one who was raised in Torah, who carries the yoke of Torah, and who pleases his Creator” (*Berachot 17a*). In addition, he “advances from strength to strength” (*Psalms 84:8*) in order to arrive at his true destination, which is the next world. It is there that he will receive the full wages of his efforts, since “there is no reward in this world for obeying the commandments” (*Kiddushin 39b*).

The verse in question states, “He bowed his shoulder to bear,” meaning that instead of seeking peace and tranquility, a person should bear the yoke of the Torah. In fact he should submit himself to it, like a worker who fulfills his duty, so that by his work (or even by going into exile if necessary) he becomes pleasing to his Master and Creator (*Berachot 17a*). It is then that he will resemble a “bony donkey, crouching down between the stables” – when he takes the path of exile in order to study elsewhere.

The Talmud recounts that Elazar ben Arach asked his colleagues to accompany him to the city where his wife lived, a city famous for the purity of its waters and the abundance of its springs. However his colleagues declined his request, and because he went there alone he forgot everything he had learned.

We should reflect upon this story. Is it possible to believe that Elazar ben Arach wanted to neglect his Torah study so he could rest, and that he invited his colleagues to do the same? Surely not!

No doubt Rabbi Elazar ben Arach invited them to come and study with him in a place where the water was good, since “water refers to Torah” (*Bava Kamma 17a*), as it is written: “Everyone who is thirsty, go to the water” (*Isaiah 55:1*). Rabbi Elazar did not want to abandon his Torah study. Rather, he simply wanted to study in tranquility. The other Sages feared this tranquility, which risked bringing about idleness, and they were correct. They went to study elsewhere and progressed in their learning, whereas Rabbi Elazar forgot everything he had learned. From this we learn that a person must not rely on his own understanding (*Proverbs 3:5*), nor count on his own strength, but on the contrary should study in adversity, which alone enables a person to retain what he has learned and achieve true peace. The two explanations that we have given complement one another, for they concern the peace and tranquility that Torah study provides.

It is possible that these Sages learned to be suspicious of the tranquility (“rest”) mentioned in our verse: “He saw rest, that it was good.... He bowed his shoulder to bear, and he became a servant of taskwork.” It is only in studying Torah through adversity that one retains what he has learned and achieves true rest, that of the next world, where G-d has reserved our just reward.

### *Unity, Solidarity, and Fraternal Love Hastens the Final Redemption*

It is written, “All Israel are guarantors one for another” (*Shavuot 39a*). The guarantee of one for another is what unites us like a single body, and thus by force of circumstance we are united to G-d, Who is the link between all Jews. Man’s goal is to connect himself to G-d, which is why we say *Shema Israel* in the singular (not in the plural). G-d is One and His Name is One, and His people Israel are one, like a single body.

In Egypt, Jews strived to be guarantors for each other, which is what prepared them to receive the Torah. It is written, “Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain” (*Exodus 19:2*), on which Rashi relates the Midrash: “As one person with one heart” (*Mechilta ad loc.*). How did they achieve such a result in only a few days? It was because they practiced this during the many years that preceded the giving of the Torah, whenever they suffered under the yoke of the Egyptians as they tried to divide them, destroy their faith, and exterminate them. Despite all this, the Children of Israel felt the collective responsibility that united them, and each one knew that everyone else shared his pain and supported him, that there were 600,000 companions that cared for him and desired his good, as Jacob had instructed them. It is written, “The Children of Israel were going out with an upraised arm” (*Exodus 14:8*). They had defeated the Egyptian’s efforts at breaking their solidarity and, on the contrary, the more the Egyptians oppressed them, the more they reinforced their unity, which brought them closer to G-d and enabled them to be free of the yoke of slavery.

The Sages state that the Second Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred (*Yoma 9b*), and that generation was punished with the exile that we still find ourselves in. On the other hand, “During the time of the First Temple, there existed good and upright men, and the length of their exile was revealed, as it is written: ‘After seventy years for Babylon have been completed, I will attend to you and I will fulfill for you My favorable promise, to return you to this place’ (*Jeremiah 29:10*)” (*Tanna D’vei Eliyahu 14*). Hence they emerged from the exile after seventy years. To explain the difference, the Sages have said, “The former ones, whose iniquity was revealed, had their end revealed” (*Yoma 9b*). Thus the bitter exile that we still find ourselves in today is even graver than the first exile, since its length is not known. However if our exile has no fixed length, its duration depends only on us; it is in our power to end it. The destruction of the Temple was caused by sins between man and man, baseless hatred and strife, and it depends solely on us to correct these sins, be it sooner or later. We are the ones who must put an end to the painful time of the exile, for “if one comes to purify himself, he is given help” (*Yoma 38b*). Despite the difficulties accumulated over the course of time that weaken us from generation to generation, despite our physical differences, variations in character traits, different ideals, and so on, we must remain united “as one person with one heart.” Concerning man and woman it is stated, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (*Genesis 2:24*). Even though they are different beings, one male and the other female, apparently

belonging to two different worlds, they form but one body, and the Divine Presence abides with them when they are united (*Sotah 17a*).

Attaining such unity is only possible if each person renounces selfishness – if he is not content with simply declaring that he loves his fellow, but truly feels this love and wholeheartedly shares the pains and joys of others.

Unfortunately, we are afflicted with grave sins and it has become the norm to disparage others, even though each person was created in the image of G-d. By doing so, we are hurting ourselves and we will end up by disparaging the Torah and its commandments. Concerning this the Sages have said, “In the footsteps of the Messiah...the face of the generation will be like the face of a dog” (*Sotah 49b*), an expression that we need to understand. Why is it precisely the face of a dog that such a generation will resemble? We know that a dog naturally looks to its master with pleading eyes in order to arouse his compassion. On the other hand, a dog always walks before his master, meaning that it puts itself ahead of him. This comparison indicates that people will also have “the face of a dog” before the coming of the Messiah. This means that they will look at one another with eyes full of compassion, as if they desired their good, yet in their hearts they will give priority to themselves, always wanting to be first. Such behavior demonstrates that this “love for others” is not sincere, and we must be wary of it and distance ourselves from such hypocritical signs of love. We must take to heart the advice of Jacob and remain sincerely united, for this is the only attitude that will help and save us.

On this subject, it seems appropriate to recall the mitzvah of giving the half-shekel, an act that teaches solidarity.

It is written, “Moses addressed himself to the Holy One, blessed be He, saying: ‘Sovereign of the universe, how shall the horn of Israel be exalted?’ He replied, ‘Through taking their ransom’ ” (*Bava Batra 10b*). It is difficult to understand how numbering the Children of Israel (achieved when each person brought his half-shekel) would exactly exalt Israel’s honor.

A poor person would bring a half-shekel just as a rich person would, and the former would not complain that he was required to bring the same amount as one who was wealthy and had more means. Similarly, the wealthy person would not be offended to bring a half-shekel like one who was poor, for this would not bring the rich person honor (since he has the ability to bring more). Both rich and poor bring the same amount, in perfect equality, and it is in this way that Israel’s honor is exalted. How much more is this the case when, by giving a half-shekel, each person realizes that he is but a half (and therefore imperfect), and that it is only by associating himself with the other that he becomes complete, that he becomes whole. G-d commanded each person to bring a half-shekel in order to be numbered, rather than each person writing his name on a piece of paper or bringing a sheep, bull, or some object. G-d wanted everyone to be equal before this commandment (rather than some being superior or inferior to others), so that each person would feel both his own deficiencies and the virtues of his

fellowman. He wanted that everyone should desire to help his fellow in order to rectify his own defects, thus allowing him to perform the commandments in joy.

We can now understand what the Sages meant when they said that Moses had difficulty understanding the commandment of the half-shekel: “God removed a coin of fire from under his Throne of Glory and He showed it to Moses, saying, ‘This is what they shall give’ ” (*Tanhuma Ki Tisa 9*). Is it possible that Moses did not know what a half-shekel coin looked like, such that G-d had to show it to him?

Moses certainly knew what a half-shekel looked like. However he did not understand why each person, whether he be rich or poor, had to bring it. It is evident that the Torah decreed an equal amount for everyone in order to signify that they are equal before G-d.

We may also understand why Haman told King Achashverosh, “I will pay ten thousand silver talents [equal to 300,000 shekels] into the hands of those who perform the duties, for deposit in the king’s treasuries” (*Esther 3:9*). Why did he want to deposit this money into the king’s coffers in order to kill the Jews? It is because at that time, the Jews were not equal to one another. They were divided, to the extent that Haman could tell the king, “There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples” (*v.8*). They were divided, their customs varied, they differed from one another, and they stood out from each other. That being the case, Haman’s money would be able to tip the scales to their detriment.

Nevertheless, the decree was annulled when the Jews were united, as Esther told Mordechai: “Go, assemble all the Jews” (*Esther 4:15*) – that they unite and assemble themselves. Afterwards they remained united, as it is written, “The Jews that were in Shushan assembled again...the rest of the Jews that were in the king’s provinces assembled” (*Esther 9:15-16*)— united by the same will.

Jews gave the half-shekel on Purim in order to express their unity and proclaim that it was solely this which saved them from Haman’s decree, as he himself admitted: “Your ten *manehs* have conquered my ten thousand silver talents” (*Esther Rabba 10:4*). The bonds that united them were what saved them, thanks to Esther, who tied her fate to that of her people when she directed the Jews to assemble and be united.

It is written, “When Israel stood before Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, the Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘In truth, shall I give you the Torah? Bring Me good guarantors that you will keep it, and then I will give it to you.’ ...They said to Him, ‘Our children will be our guarantors’ ” (*Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:24*), which G-d accepted.

The Lev Eliyahu asks why G-d demanded guarantors from the Children of Israel before giving them the Torah, since they explicitly said, “We will do and we will hear” (*Exodus 24:7*). G-d, Who knows the depths of the heart, knew that the Children of Israel had unwavering faith, especially after having witnessed great miracles in Egypt, at the Sea of Reeds, and during the war against Amalek. Therefore why did G-d only give them the Torah once they presented their children as guarantors?

In response, we see with our own eyes that even the extra guarantee that the Children of Israel presented to G-d was unfortunately not enough to prevent both parents and children from committing sins and abandoning the Torah. Just how much worse would the situation have been had they had no guarantors! G-d is well aware that the evil inclination is powerful and that it pushes a man to sin precisely by abandoning Torah. It means little to the evil inclination that Jews perform many commandments and good deeds; what bothers it above all else is to see us engaged in Torah study. G-d Himself says that He would prefer that Jews abandon Him and observe the Torah (*Yerushalmi Hagigah 1:7*), for the light of Torah would always lead them back to G-d. Thus G-d asked for guarantors in order to give them the Torah, which is the remedy against the evil inclination.

The Sages have said, “If a man sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct. ...If he examines and finds nothing [objectionable], let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of the Torah” (*Berachot 5a*). Why is this so? It is because G-d does not immediately punish a person’s children (his guarantors) when he has abandoned Torah study. G-d instead warns him through suffering and misfortune in order that he examines his conduct and finds the reason for his ills. If he does not find the reason, his children will then be punished. Great fear will take hold of anyone who realizes that, if he neglects the Torah, his children will suffer as a result. The Sages have said, “Children die as a punishment for...the sin of Torah neglect” (*Shabbat 32b*). This is because they are the guarantors for their parents. We must recall what Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said, “There is no greater pain than seeing one’s children being harmed.” If they take to the wrong path, they will be considered as dead (G-d help us) because of the sin of parents who neglected the Torah.

The Children of Israel sincerely declared, “We will do and we will hear.” G-d, however, added that they must realize just how powerful the evil inclination becomes when it sees them occupied with Torah study, trying by all means to turn them away from it. This is why G-d asked them to present guarantors, for this would prevent them from abandoning the Torah; these guarantors would remind them of their duties. G-d rejected their proposal of making themselves guarantors, since they were directly concerned and involved. G-d also rejected their proposal of making the Patriarchs their guarantors, for the Patriarchs themselves needed guarantors. G-d accepted their children, however, who were assuredly firm guarantors.

The suffering endured by children is in fact very painful for parents. It is a known fact that a person will prefer any kind of suffering than to see his children afflicted, to the point that the Sages have termed it “chastisements of love” (*Berachot 5b*). The thought that our children (who are our guarantors) can suffer because of *our* neglect of Torah is so frightening that it gives us an unwavering will to fight the evil inclination.

We note that the punishment of a single man is even worse. If a man has no wife, he has no children and thus nobody as his guarantor. The very prerequisite for giving the Torah was that a man have children who would be guarantors for its observance.

Whoever does not have children annuls this fundamental prerequisite. Furthermore, “Seven are banned by Heaven. They are: A Jew who has no wife; he who has a wife but no children...” (*Pesachim 113b*). Ben Azzai, one of the four Sages who entered the Garden (*Hagigah 14b*), died as a result, even though he said, “My soul delights in the Torah” (*Bereshith Rabba 34:14*) and, “All the Sages of Israel are, in comparison with myself, as thin as the husk of garlic” (*Berachot 58a*). He nevertheless died because he had no guarantors. King Hezekiah also became guilty by his refusal to marry, for he did not want to have unworthy children (*Berachot 10a*). He did not practice the Torah’s first commandment, which is to “be fruitful and multiply” (*Genesis 1:28*).

It is written, “Even though Hezekiah saw by way of prophesy that he would have an unworthy son, he would have been punished in the other world if he had not, in the end, married” (*Tanna D’vei Elyahu 8*). Why is that the case? It is because children are guarantors for parents in this world and the next, for “a son confers privileges on his father” (*Sanhedrin 104a*) after his death. A father who educates his children in the way of Torah and the performance of the commandments ensures that the Torah will always remain alive. This is the purpose of the guarantee.

### ***How To Strengthen Ourselves In The Exile***

The beginning of our parsha states, “Jacob lived in the land of Egypt 17 years” (*Genesis 47:28*). Concerning this subject, our Sages have said that while he was in Egypt during those 17 years, Jacob began to “live.” He had experienced years of pain and trouble up to that point, but the last 17 years of his life were a time of true life. What exactly does this mean?

At the end of Parsha Vayigash it is written: “Israel dwelled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen” (*Genesis 47:27*). This is difficult to understand, for the Sages have said: “Wherever [Scripture] writes *vayeishev*, it denotes trouble” (*Sanhedrin 106a*). What trouble lay in the fact that he dwelled in the land of Goshen? We must also understand why the verse superfluously states, “in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen,” since they essentially mean the same thing.

It is precisely this statement, however, that clarifies things. When the Children of Israel arrived in Egypt, they found themselves in dire straits, for the land of Egypt was known as a place of debauchery and unimaginable sins. At that point Jacob sent his son Judah to prepare a place of study for him, a place from which Torah would emerge. How could the Children of Israel dwell and study in such a location, given that it was so filled with sin? This is why they experienced great trouble.

Nevertheless, the Children of Israel also put an effort into overcoming their hardships, doing so precisely in the land of Egypt. This constituted a great trial for them. How so? The land of Egypt was, as we know, a beautiful land that possessed magnificent and alluring scenery. As a result, how could they dwell in the land of Egypt and devote themselves to Torah and serving G-d without benefiting from the

splendor of the land? Not only that, but Goshen was the most beautiful region in all of Egypt. Let us imagine the Children of Israel living in the most beautiful parts of Egypt, studying Torah without gazing upon the beauty of the land, without seeking the pleasures of this world. Would that not constitute a great trial for a person who wanted to devote himself to Torah and serve G-d? That is why this verse is found next to the first verse of our parsha: “Jacob lived in the land of Egypt 17 years.” When Jacob also arrived in Egypt, it was precisely there – in bitter exile, far from the land of Canaan – that he settled down to study the holy and pure Torah. It was because of this fact that he truly began to live, living a life of Torah, a life of holiness. By allusion, we may add that 17 is the numerical value of the word *tov* (“good”). As we know, the Sages have said that the only good thing is Torah (Berachot 5a). This means that Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for the sake of Torah and serving G-d, which is why those years were a time of life for him.

We learn a great principle from this. There is nothing novel about a person staying at home and learning Torah, and it represents no great achievement on his part. This is because he lives in peace and tranquility at home, and he can therefore study in peace. However when someone dwells elsewhere – in exile, in a strange land – and it is there that he elevates himself in Torah, he invests all his energy into studying. As a result, he comes even closer to the Holy One, blessed be He. This represents a great novelty and wonder, namely that he studies Torah and proper conduct precisely in a place so distant from his home. In addition, he earns the greatest of blessings. This teaches us that studying Torah wholeheartedly is something that can help a person to easily endure his time in exile.



# EXODUS

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## *Shemot*

### *Sufferings are Part of the Redemption*

“Moses returned to the L-RD and said, ‘My Lord, why have You done evil to this people, and why have You sent me?’ ... The L-RD said to Moses, ‘Now you will see what I shall do to Pharaoh, for through a strong hand will he send them out, and with a strong hand will he drive them from his land’” (*Ex 5:22; 6:1*).

How can one imagine that Moses, the faithful shepherd, “the man of G-d” (*Deut 33:1*), could have spoken in such a manner to G-d? And if this mission was to have been a source of harm for the Children of Israel, there was no doubt a reason for it. Is G-d not the “Cause of causes”?

It was because Moses thought that the Children of Israel were completely without hope and no longer even thought of the deliverance. In having announced the news of their soon-to-be liberation, he had renewed their faith: “And the people believed, and they heard that the L-RD had remembered the Children of Israel and that He saw their affliction, and they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves” (*Ex 4:31*). Now, having understood the severity of Pharaoh’s new measures, their despair and disappointment increased even more.

Let us imagine a man beset from all over with problems (overloaded in debt, not being able to eat or sleep properly, etc.) who tries his last chance and buys a lottery ticket. A few days later he is told that he just won first prize, namely an enormous amount of money. He begins to dream already: A beautiful home, servants, marrying off his children, paying off debts, you name it. Then imagine that all of a sudden he’s told that there was a mistake and that he’s not the winner! Wouldn’t it have been better not to have told him that he won in the first place, rather than to cause him such great disappointment?

It was this state of mind that the Children of Israel found themselves in. They had been told that they would go from slavery to freedom and that their lives would finally change, then all of a sudden Pharaoh heaped upon them even more painful work than before. Completely disappointed, they turned towards Moses and Aaron and said, “you have made our very scent abhorrent in the eyes of Pharaoh and the eyes of his servants, to place a sword in their hands to murder us!” (*Ex 5:21*).

“It would have been better had I not told them the news of the deliverance,” Moses said to G-d. “I should only have announced this to them after their punishment was over and they had repaired the sparks of holiness” (*See Ohr HaChayim, Gen 49:9*).

These remarks were certainly cause enough for Moses to be reprimanded for having had, contrary to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, doubts concerning G-d’s plans (*Sanhedrin 111a; Shemot Rabba 5:22*). Yet G-d wasn’t really angry with him, for He knew that it was only the

love that Moses had for Israel that caused him to say such things, and that he was ready to sacrifice his life for them.

“You will see עתה [now]” G-d told Moses. Now as we have seen (Bereshith Rabba 21:6; 38:14) the term עתה always denotes the concept of repentance, as it is written, “עתה [now] O Israel, what does the L-RD, your G-d, require of you? Only to fear the L-RD, your G-d” (Deut 10:12). In other words, the sufferings that the Egyptians inflicted on them drove them to repent, and they finished by repairing the sparks of holiness. Our Sages teach us: “Only suffering atone for sins and leads to repentance” (*Menachot 53b*) and “G-d inflicts suffering on those He loves” (*Berachot 5a*). A person can therefore return to Him and can reach the Celestial Throne (*Yoma 86b; Pesikta Rabba 45:9*). Only G-d can thus help him to triumph over his evil inclination (*Sukkah 32b; Kiddushin 30b*).

### *The Influence of Man’s Profound Character*

It is written, “Come, let us deal wisely toward them, lest they multiply, and it comes to pass that when a war occurs they will also join themselves with our enemies and fight against us and go up from the land. ... And the Egyptians made the Children of Israel serve *befarech* [with rigor]. And they made their lives bitter” (*Exodus 1:10,13-14*).

These verses raise at least two questions.

1. What exactly did the Egyptians fear? Did they not see that the Children of Israel had already been assimilated among them (they were seen everywhere, in the theaters, at the circus, etc. – *Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 1*), to the point that they no longer studied Torah? Why then this fear? The Egyptians should have waited a little longer and they would have been completely assimilated.

2. Some of our Sages, such as Rabbi Elazar, interpret the word *befarech* as meaning *befeh rach* (“with gentle speech” – *Sotah 11b*). How could it be that the Egyptians made the Children of Israel serve *with gentle speech*?

The answer to the first question is that the Egyptians feared the hidden, deep sentiments of the Children of Israel. Certainly they had shown visible signs of being corrupted, but the Egyptians feared that they were fundamentally upright and capable of returning to G-d at any time. The phrase “that when a war occurs” refers to an internal war, meaning a battle against the inner holiness of the Jews. Such a battle would have an effect on their external makeup, an effect evoked by the verse that states, “I was asleep but my heart was awake” (*Song of Songs 5:2*). The phrase “they will also join themselves with our enemies” means that they will join themselves to ever-increasing holiness, and “go up from the land” signifies that they will correct the sparks of holiness.

We therefore see that if a man is basically good, he will end up being delivered.

As for the issue of *befeh rach*, our Sages teach that “all the good of the wicked is bad for the righteous” (*Yebamot 103a*). The gentle speech of non-Jews represents the

most dangerous weapon for the Jewish people. We see this in Moses, who did not want to interfere with G-d's honor and refused to liberate the Children of Israel by himself. Moses knew that "His mercy extends to all His creatures," that "He ponders thoughts so that no one be banished from Him" (*II Sam 14:14*). Moses said to G-d, "I am not a man of words ... *shelach na beyad* [send, please, by Your hand]" (*Exodus 4:10,13*), or in other words, "Liberate them by Your powerful hand and Your outstretched arm, that we may know that it is You Who has brought the Children of Israel out of Egypt."

Such was the virtue of Moses, a man who in no way wanted to appropriate honors for himself, and who jealously watched over the glory of G-d alone. The Holy One, blessed be He, loathes those who seek to honor Him outwardly while simultaneously elevating themselves. People in this way help the forces of evil to seize the attribute of *Hod* (glory, majesty) which has a numerical value of 15, a value equal to that of *ga'avah* (pride). As the Sages instructed us, "'For the hand is on the throne of G-d.' The Name of the Eternal [numerical value: 15] and His throne will only be complete when Amalek is wiped out." Amalek's pride (*ga'avah* – numerical value: 15) prevents the revelation of G-d in the world. In fact, those who take consideration for their own honor associate themselves with Israel's greatest enemy. On the other hand, that which Moses sought with the greatest sincerity was the glory of G-d. This is why he was chosen to liberate the Jews, for the one who is careful to increase the glory of G-d will see himself showered with honors (*Bamidbar Rabba 4:21*), and G-d loves him for it. He also shares, as it were, in the glory given to G-d, as it is written, "They had faith in the L-RD and in Moses His servant" (*Exodus 14:31*).

What the Egyptians feared, therefore, was that the Children of Israel become filled with zeal for G-d, and that as such they rectify and elevate all the sparks of holiness in Egypt. The Egyptians also made them suffer and pushed them to commit sins, the most notorious of which was gossip. Our Sages, commenting on this subject with respect to Moses' statement ("Surely the thing is known" [*Exodus 2:14*]), teach that the Children of Israel were not worthy of being redeemed because of their tendency for gossip (*Shemot Rabba 1:30*).

Besides this, we may ask ourselves why the Children of Israel had in actuality fallen so low, having reached the forty-ninth gate of impurity and running the risk of staying in Egypt forever (*Zohar Chadash Yitro 39a*).

This was because, aside from the tribe of Levi, they had delivered themselves over to gossiping more than to Torah (*Bamidbar Rabba 3:4*).

Even a Tzaddik can reach the forty-ninth degree of impurity if he is without Torah. That which saved the Children of Israel from reaching the fatal fiftieth degree was *Ve'eileh Shemot Bnei Israel* ("And these are the names of the Children of Israel" – *Exodus 1:1*). The first letters of *Eileh Shemot* form the Hebrew word for fire, and the *vav* of *Ve'eileh* (which has a numerical value of six) alludes to Adam, who was created on the sixth day. This is to teach us that a man should adhere to the Torah, which is the

same as fire, as it is written, “from His right hand He presented the fiery Torah to them” (*Deuteronomy 33:2*).

The power of Torah is extraordinary. Just like a name (“these are the names”), the Torah reveals the identity, the essence of man. It is just like the letter *vav* that is added to the aforementioned (*Shemot Rabba 1:2*), for a man has the possibility to extend his study of Torah. The name of our Patriarch Jacob already held great secrets, as it is written, “After that, his brother emerged with his hand grasping onto the heel of Esau; so he called his name Jacob” (*Genesis 25:26*).

It was therefore the holy names that the Children of Israel carried which prevented them from descending into hell and sinking to the fiftieth gate of impurity. Even though they did not study Torah, they were liberated from Egypt because they did not change their language, nor did they change their style of dress, nor their names, and furthermore they were fundamentally good, even in a detestable land (*Vayikra Rabba 32:5*).

Our Sages have on several occasions warned us against the catastrophic results of gossiping. Gossip creates an inordinate amount of accusers against man, his sexual immorality increases (he can have *keri*, or nocturnal emissions), and he is reincarnated in the body of a dog and begins to bark like one (*Zohar III:85a*). Nevertheless, the Children of Israel corrected this sin: “But against the Children of Israel, *lo yehcheratz kelev leshono* [no dog shall whet its tongue]” (*Exodus 11:7*). Note the similarity between the numerical value of *yehcheratz* (plus 1 for the word itself) and *keri*.

After the rectification of the sin, even the *peh rach* (“gentle speech”) of the Egyptians did not succeed in harming the very essence of the Children of Israel. On the contrary, such gentle language turned itself into harsh and oppressive work, work that they had to perform in Egypt so as not to succumb to the filth of that land.

We can therefore better understand the statement of Elisha ben Avuyah (or *Acher*, “the other”) that is brought by the Talmud (*Hagigah 15a*). His father, Avuyah, had invited the great men of Israel to his Brit Milah, among them being Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua. On that occasion, when these men were deeply involved in Torah study, a fire descended from the sky and encircled them.

“Is it to burn down my house that you came?” asked Avuyah.

“We were only studying Torah, which was given on Mount Sinai by fire,” they responded.

“If the Torah is endowed with such greatness ... I will devote my son to the Torah,” Avuyah replied.

Two questions arise as to this account:

1. Why did Avuyah fear that his house would be burned? He could clearly see that such was not going to happen. Why then did he begin to shout?

2. Why did he not promise to devote his newborn son upon seeing the fire? Why did this apparently upright man not devote his son to Torah until such time as he understood its power?

The reason for this is because Avuyah allowed himself to be deceived by the outward appearance of the great of the generation; he did not grasp their profound holiness. He thought that they resembled him – empty on the inside and full on the outside. When he saw the fire, he perceived only its external aspect, one that could burn things down. He did not grasp the internal aspect of the fire or its sublime holiness. And even when the Tzaddikim explained to Avuyah that it was there that lay the power of Torah, and that this fire could not cause harm, he still only saw its external aspect, and therefore decided to devote his son to Torah only when he understood its power. It was this grave sin of not examining things more deeply, and only seeing the external aspect of things, that Avuyah transmitted to his son Elisha, a man whom the Sages accused of reading profane books that only treated subjects superficially and “on the outside” (*Hagigah 15b*).

G-d only looks at the heart (*Sanhedrin 1065b*). He reads the thoughts of man, thought that when pure and upright can greatly influence a man’s external makeup. He can in this way come closer to G-d.

### ***The Reward We Receive By Sharing the Joy of Others***

It is written, “But the midwives feared G-d and they did not do as the king of Egypt spoke to them, and they caused the boys to live ... G-d benefited the midwives – and the people increased and became very strong. And it was because the midwives feared G-d that He made them houses” (*Exodus 1:17, 20-21*).

Why is verse 20 (“G-d benefited the midwives”) not immediately followed by the description of how G-d rewarded them (“He made them houses”)? Instead, why is it interrupted in the middle by the phrase, “and the people increased...”??

I have read in the book *Darchei Mussar* that the reward G-d gave the midwives was that the people increased and prospered. The midwives Shifra and Puah – that is, Yocheved and her daughter Miriam (*Sotah 11a*) – would not be content with personal reward (the establishment of their homes) if the Children of Israel had continued to be oppressed and overwhelmed with hard labor and their newborn males thrown into the river (*Exodus 1:22*), which threatened to exterminate the Jewish people. Yet when they saw that Hashem, in His infinite goodness, annulled the decree of the wrongdoer and that the more the people were oppressed, the more it would “increase and so it would spread” (*v.12*) – that the people multiplied and grew considerably – their joy was complete. Thus it was only when the overall situation of the Children of Israel improved that the midwives were able to appreciate the personal reward that was allotted them: They would give rise to houses of priests and kings of Israel (*Sotah 11a*). In other words, the fate of the people was their primary concern.

The one who merits this, the author concludes, is therefore one who feels and shares the joy and pain of his fellow and all the Jewish people. Does Hashem Himself not proclaim, “I am with him in distress” (*Psalms 91:15*)?

A man should therefore first sympathize with the distress of his fellow, love him, and inquire about his needs. His own private life and interests should be secondary. His reward will be immense when he sincerely thinks of the happiness of others, as it is written: “You shall love your fellow as yourself” (*Leviticus 19:18*). You should first love him and sympathize with his situation with your entire being, and *then* you should think of yourself.

Before continuing, let us relate what Rabbi Tzvi Yechezkel Michaleson, of blessed memory, head of the Rabbinical Courts of Pionsk and its surroundings, wrote about Rabbi Chanoch Henich of Alexander. While he was working in Novidvar, Rabbi Chanoch Henich suffered numerous humiliations, particularly from a certain person who should have been, from all accounts, excommunicated according to Halachah (*Shulchan Aruch, Yore Deah 243:7*). The residents of the city therefore insisted that the Rav excommunicate him, yet he stubbornly refused. Believing that the Rav was afraid of government authorities, those close to him collected 9,000 gold pieces and went to speak to him. “If the government takes you to court,” they explained, “this is the maximum fine they can impose on you. So here it is if you need it, Rabbeinu. Now banish this evildoer so that he no longer dares to humiliate a rabbi!”

Rabbi Chanoch flatly refused this proposal of theirs. To those close to him, who explained that the situation was perfectly clear and that there was no reason for him to be afraid, he replied: “There is no doubt about that. I know very well that this man should, according to Halachah, be excommunicated. Yet I wonder if personal interests are not playing a part in all this. I wonder if this banishment will simply be for G-d’s sake [see *Exodus 29:12*], so as to avenge the honor of the Torah and its scholars (who are angels of G-d), which have been tarnished by evildoers [see *Shabbat 119b*]. I therefore cannot accept to do this, lest personal interests enter into play, and in the final analysis I will not comply with the will of the Torah.”

This account shows us that we must always demonstrate the greatest caution and the utmost composure when humiliated. Shifra and Puah implored Hashem that their actions be for Heaven’s sake (see *Exodus 22:19*). Only the fear of G-d would push them to incur risks to save children made in the image of G-d, and it was this image of G-d that they saw when saving the children from death. That is what generated their fear of G-d (see *Exodus 1:17*).

However the midwives were not yet fully satisfied. Perhaps personal interests had played a role in their decision. Maybe they were allowing the children to live, *not* because of their fear of G-d, but for other reasons. Their joy was only complete when they saw the people multiplying and increasing. They tirelessly made their way from one place to the next in order to help Jewish women give birth. It was then that they perceived G-d’s help in making their work a success, and of this it is written: “Those whose hope is in the L-RD will have renewed strength” (*Isaiah 40:31*).

Consequently, when we serve G-d without experiencing weariness, this is a sign that He is helping us. The building of their houses, that of the priesthood and royalty, was

secondary with respect to their joy over having untiringly covered the land in order to help Jewish women give birth and to see an increasing number of babies. The midwives certainly did not act through pride or for any personal honor whatsoever. They only sought to increase Hashem's glory. There are no boundaries in serving G-d; there is no weariness. The more we serve G-d, the stronger we get. That is what the midwives experienced. The people multiplied and increased, and the midwives felt no fatigue whatsoever. At that point they were certain that they had acted solely for G-d's sake.

We know that G-d repays "measure for measure" (*Shabbat 105b*). Now we see that by having allowed the children to live, the midwives' reward was the building of houses of priesthood and royalty. Was that a case of being repaid "measure for measure"? This is the question raised by Rabbi Daniel Heyman, one that he heard from his Rav.

The verse specifies, "He made them *batim* [houses]" (*Exodus 1:21*), and the term *batim* comes from *Batiah*, Pharaoh's daughter – *bat Y-h* ("daughter of Hashem") – who, as our Sages explained (*Vayikra Rabba 1:3*), saved Moses from the river (see *Exodus 2:5*). Thus G-d acted measure for measure. The midwives saved the souls of Israel, and as a reward G-d sent them Batiah, who saved our teacher Moses, the son of Yocheved and brother of Miriam (the two midwives).

The verse states, "His sister [Miriam] stationed herself at a distance to know what would be done with him" (*Exodus 2:4*). She had prophesied that her mother was destined to give birth to a child who would save the Jewish people (*Sotah 11b*). Now even if the midwives' reward consisted of houses of priesthood and royalty that were to come into being, respectively, through Moses' brother Aaron (the High Priest) and through Miriam herself (by marriage to Caleb from the tribe of Judah), the saving of Moses himself also constituted a reward that was measure for measure. This is because Moses represented the priesthood (since he built the Tabernacle) and royalty (since he led the Jewish people). Thus by sending the midwives Batiah (who saved Moses), G-d repaid the midwives measure for measure.

It is written, "The Children of Israel were fruitful, teemed, increased, and became very strong – very, very much so" (*Exodus 1:7*), for Jewish women were giving birth to six children at a time (*Mechilta Bo 12*). Thus we see that the one who shares the joy of his fellow and strives to help him in all circumstances receives an immeasurable reward from G-d.

### ***Man Versus the Evil Inclination***

It is written, "Moses responded and said, 'But they will not believe me and they will not heed my voice, for they will say, "The L-RD did not appear to you." ' The L-RD said to him, '*Mazeh* [What is that] in your hand?' and he said, 'A staff.' He said, 'Cast it on the ground,' and he cast it on the ground and it became a snake. Moses fled from it. The L-RD said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand and grasp its tail.' He stretched out his hand and grasped it tightly, and it became a staff in his palm" (*Exodus 4:1-4*).

These verses raise a certain number of questions that we will examine individually:

1. Why did Moses hesitate to carry out his mission, and why did he question whether the Children of Israel would believe in him? Had G-d Himself not commanded Moses to go before Pharaoh and demand that he liberate the Children of Israel from Egypt? How could Moses dare ask if they were ready to listen to him? Did he not know that they had long been awaiting the messenger of their deliverance?

2. Why did G-d, for Whom everything is revealed, ask Moses: “What is that in your hand?” Moreover, why did the staff not change into a serpent while it was still in Moses’ hand? What allusion is hidden in that?

3. An even more difficult question is asked by Rabbi Yonathan Eibeshutz in his book *Ya’arot Devash*: Why did G-d specifically choose a snake as a sign, since He had cursed the snake, as it is written: “Cursed are you...above every beast of the field” (*Genesis 3:14*). Moreover, how could Moses (who was not afraid of the Heavenly archangels – see *Shabbat 88b*) have backed away from a serpent? Do our Sages not teach that even if a serpent enwraps itself around a person’s ankle while he is praying, he should not interrupt his prayer (*Berachot 30b*)? How could Moses, standing before the King of kings, back away from such an animal? Even if it bit and killed him, that would have only been a physical death, which is preferable to the death that a person experiences when he is standing before G-d and flees while talking with Him. Finally, why did G-d ask Moses to grasp the serpent by its tail rather than by its head?

The author himself states that when the Arizal wanted to reveal the secret of this mystery to one of his disciples, he was condemned to death. The Zohar proposes some extremely profound solutions to these questions (*Zohar II:28a*), yet since the Torah has 70 different facets (see *Bamidbar Rabba 13:15*), we shall now present some of our own:

When G-d told Moses to go and liberate the Children of Israel from Egypt, Moses was surprised and said, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” (*Exodus 3:11*). In other words, “I am but dust and ashes. By what merit can I speak for my Creator?” Moses was therefore not acting arrogantly towards G-d.

G-d then asked Moses, “*Mazeh* [מה] “What is that?” in your hand?” In other words: “You are only a man – *adam* – whose numerical value is 45 [מה], yet because of the extra soul that you possess, and which is given to man for Shabbat – meaning the Divine portion found within you – you are able to overcome the advice of the evil inclination.” The soul is part of G-d and His Name (*yud-hei-vav-hei*) – *miluy alfine* – whose numerical value is also 45 (*Zohar I:25b*). As for the letter ך (7), it alludes to Shabbat, the seventh day of the week (*Betzah 16a*).

“A staff [*mateh*],” replied Moses. This means that Moses admitted that he seemed to have fallen below (*matah*) his level for having dared refuse the Divine mission of liberating the Children of Israel.

Hashem then said to Moses, “Cast it on the ground.” In other words: “Drop these thoughts. You will then see that the evil inclination has left you.” Moses then saw and

fled from the serpent, which alludes to the forces of evil (*Zohar 1:148a*). This is also what the serpent (the evil inclination) did before the holiness of Moses. Hashem then told Moses, “Stretch out your hand and grasp its tail.” In other words: “Above all, do not let go of it. You have no reason to be afraid, for you are in no way connected to it. You will conquer it, and it will no longer defeat you. Grasp it, for otherwise it will attack you. Grasp it and ‘drag him to the house of study’ [*Sukkah 52b*].”

Many believe that because they are simple Jews (food for “maggots and worms” – *Perkei Avoth 3:1*), they cannot do battle with the evil inclination and conquer it. Nevertheless, they should realize that these thoughts and doubts are the work of the Satan, whose only aim is to make them fall into a trap. A man who possesses a holy soul should never experience such fears.

For this, a person should regularly study Torah, which is the best remedy against the evil inclination (*Kiddushin 30b*). When a person is clear of all these evil thoughts, the serpent – the evil inclination – will be no longer frighten him.

### *The Exile of Egypt*

Why did the Children of Israel descend specifically into Egypt, rather than another country?

Our Sages reply that the goal of the exile and slavery of Egypt was to rectify the sparks of holiness, blemished by Adam, through the bread of misery (an allusion to the holy sparks) that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt (*Ohr HaChaim, Genesis 49:9*). Nevertheless, the question still remains.

As we know, the *yetzer hara*, or evil inclination, carries the name *tzar* (oppressor), a word formed by the two first letters of its name *Tzefuni Rah* (“which hides evil in itself” – *Sukkah 52a*). It is an enemy that bears down on a person and makes him anxious, preventing him from being at peace and carrying out G-d’s precepts. It constantly puts him to the test in order to weaken and dissuade him from performing mitzvot that, according to it, are not appropriate for him. The evil inclination also pushes an individual to conform to G-d’s precepts for reasons of pride or other self-serving purposes.

Nevertheless, the *yetzer tov* (good inclination) also carries the name *tzar*, in the sense that it does not give a person time to think for long before performing a good deed when the opportunity arises. It annuls his doubts and incites him to immediate action, as our Sages have said: “If a chance [to fulfill a mitzvah] presents itself to you, do it immediately” (*Rashi on Exodus 12:17*), “If not now, when?” (*Perkei Avoth 1:14*) and, “Do not say, ‘When I will have free time I will study’ ” (*ibid. 2:4*). The good inclination prevents a person from changing his mind and being influenced by his evil inclination, or from forgetting the mitzvah that he must perform.

A person benefits from exercising his free will. He can either follow the good inclination (which gives a person bliss in the performance of the mitzvot) or he can

follow the evil inclination, which is born with him, as it is written: “The inclination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (*Genesis 8:21*) – “when he leaves his mother’s womb” (*Bereshith Rabba 34:10*). The evil inclination is never idle, but “dwells between the two entrances of the heart” (*Berachot 61a*). It weakens a person to such an extent that he does not rush to perform good deeds, or he no longer thinks of them.

Our ancestors in fact waged a brutal war against the forces of evil and seriously weakened them. Without their help in rectifying the sparks of holiness and removing the *kelipot* (“husks” – the forces of evil that envelop holiness), Jews would not have been able to do anything. Our ancestors endured the worst hardships in order to serve G-d in joy. To rectify the sparks of holiness that were scattered following Adam’s sin, the Children of Israel had to descend from their level by being exiled in Egypt for 210 years (the numerical value of *redu* [“descend”]), whereas our Patriarchs worked toward this goal at lofty spiritual levels. Actually, only Jacob had to descend into Egypt, as it is written: “I shall descend with you to Egypt, and I shall also surely bring you up” (*Genesis 46:4*). The Children of Israel would thus learn from Jacob to rectify the sparks of holiness when they would be in full spiritual regression, for they would know that their spiritual fall had but one goal, and that it would lead to a full spiritual ascension.

The *kelipot* thus had no power over our ancestors, for the evil inclination was, as we know, under their control. Our ancestors ardently yearned to cure souls and rectify the sparks of holiness, which is why they descended into Egypt, the world center of immorality (*Shemot Rabba 1:18*, see *Genesis 42:9*). It was precisely there that the sparks of holiness were located, sparks from which the *kelipot* nourished themselves.

Hashem did not mention the location of the Children of Israel’s exile to Abraham. He simply told him, “Your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own” (*Genesis 15:13*). He also did not mention this to Isaac or Jacob, for the *kelipot* did not yet rage in Egypt at that time. It was only when the righteous Joseph, the foundation of the world (*Zohar 1:59b*), descended into exile in Egypt (eventually becoming its ruler) that Hashem revealed to Jacob that Egypt was where the Children of Israel would settle, be fruitful, and greatly increase in number (*Genesis 47:27*). Jacob also descended into Egypt, as it is written: “They came to Egypt – Jacob and all his offspring with him” (*ibid. 46:6*), and there they remained for 210 years.

Consequently, our ancestors waged a bitter and agonizing fight against the forces of evil, all while revering Hashem. They ended up driving away the *kelipot*, which could no longer derive anything from them. Although Abraham (*Genesis 12:10*) and Isaac (*ibid. 26:1-2*) left Eretz Israel, it was only for a short time in Abraham’s case. As for Isaac, the “sacrifice without blemish,” he never trod upon the land of Egypt (*Bereshith Rabba 64:3*). Nevertheless, since they could not rectify the sparks of holiness while they were living in Israel, Jacob and all the Children of Israel had to descend into Egypt.

The word *Mitzraim* (“Egypt”) alludes to *metzarim* (“narrow paths”). Whoever descended there experienced the feeling of being constricted and fell into the grip of the *kelipot* and evil inclination, which constricts man and prevents him from

servicing G-d. The *kelipah* was bloodthirsty (the first two letters of *Mitzraim* form the word *Tzameh*, “thirsty”). The last letters of *Mitzraim* form the word *Tzarim* (“oppressors”), for it was there that the Children of Israel were oppressed. This is why Jacob sent Judah “ahead of him to Joseph” (*Genesis 46:28*) to establish yeshivot in Goshen (see *Bereshith Rabba 95:3*), thus making the cure precede the illness. We have already seen that the Torah is the most powerful weapon available against the evil inclination (*Kiddushin 30b*). It is therefore not by accident that Joseph descended into Egypt, for his holiness enabled him to weaken the *kelipot* and prepare the way for the Children of Israel.

It is written, “Hurry – go up to my father and say to him, ‘...G-d *samani* [has named me] master of all Egypt’ ” (*Genesis 45:9*). A difficult question arises: What message did Jacob want to convey to his father? Did he want to tell him that he was enjoying the greatest honors (illusionary by nature) of Egypt? The author of *Darchei Mussar* cites the following explanation of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin: “Do not read *samani* [‘has named me’], but *sham ani* [‘I am there’]. There in Egypt, I represent G-d. I instill all the Egyptians with faith in G-d: Only the Holy One, blessed be He, is Master.”

We therefore see just how our ancestors sapped the forces of evil in order to help the Children of Israel rectify the blemish that Adam’s sin created in the sparks of holiness. This allows us to conclude that we must never lose home, but instead we must constantly cling to the performance of mitzvot in order for G-d to help us in our fight against the evil inclination and the *kelipot*.

Our Sages have already taught us that the Children of Israel remembered their Jewishness only after they experienced suffering. Before that, they frequented theaters, circuses, and other places of Egyptian amusement. (*Yalkut Shimoni, Exodus 1*). The Egyptians “became disgusted because of the Children of Israel” (*Exodus 1:12*), for they found them wherever they went. They complained about them to Pharaoh, and so the Children of Israel began to suffer. They then repented and started to perform a certain number of mitzvot, as at Marah for example (*Sanhedrin 56b*). The Holy One, blessed be He, finished by liberating them from Egyptian slavery, particularly because of three mitzvot that they succeeded in observing.

We may ask ourselves why the Egyptians complained to Pharaoh about the Jews. Were the Egyptians not happy to see Jews mingling among them and inspired by their customs? The reason the Egyptians complained was because in the past both they and the forces of evil could draw sustenance from the holiness within Jews. However now that a new generation of Jews arose, one that was far from Torah and holiness, the Egyptians could no longer benefit from them and thus began to complain about them to Pharaoh.

It is exactly in this way that the evil inclination acts. It first makes a person suffer and leads him in becoming wicked, and then it complains about him in Heaven and demands that he be punished for his sins: “The evil inclination entices man in this world and testifies against him in the World to Come” (*Sukkah 52b*). Furthermore, it “comes

down to earth and seduces, then ascends to heaven and awakens wrath...and takes away the soul” (*Bava Batra 16a*). The complaints of the Egyptians, however, had positive consequences. Tormented from every angle, the Children of Israel repented and began to watch their conduct, particularly in the domain of sexuality (since the Egyptians claimed that the Children of Israel resembled them). It is the same for everyone. As our Sages taught, if a man is overwhelmed with suffering, he must examine his conduct and eliminate his wicked tendencies (*Berachot 5a*).

In His great mercy, Hashem afflicts a man with suffering in order to awaken him from his spiritual slumber (*Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Rabba 13*), giving him time to repent (*Mechilta, Pesikta Zutah Beshalach 15:6*).

### ***The Main Thing is Inner Devotion***

When the Children of Israel arrived in Egypt, the Egyptians began to despise them. They said to themselves, “Let us outsmart them lest they become numerous, and it may be that if a war will occur, they too may join our enemies and wage war against us and go up from the land” (*Exodus 1:10*). This is why the Egyptians began to reduce the Children of Israel to slavery, assigning them fieldwork among other things. In fact the Sages have said that the Egyptians “used to exchange their work, giving women tasks suited only for men, and men tasks that women usually performed” (*Shemot Rabba 1:11*).

Now this is difficult to understand. We know that the Children of Israel began to assimilate when they arrived in Egypt, and the Sages have said that they also frequented their circuses and theaters (*Yalkut Shimoni 1*). Since eventually it would be almost fatal for the Jews to feel at home in Egypt, what were the Egyptians so afraid of?

The Egyptians clearly saw that the Children of Israel began to mix among them, but to them it all seemed superficial. On the outside they saw the sins of the Children of Israel, but what they feared was their inner devotion. The Egyptians thought that their inner devotion was possibly intact and able to avoid being damaged. That was what the Egyptians were afraid of.

When the Egyptians said, “Let us outsmart them,” they were not speaking about the outward conduct of the Children of Israel. They knew that this was already in their hands, for if a Jew frequents forbidden places, he will eventually become a non-Jew in every respect, as unfortunately we see today. The plague of assimilation destroys all that is good in the Jewish people, to the point that large segments of the Jewish people have become exactly like non-Jews, may G-d help us. The Egyptians were saying that trickery had to be used against the inner devotion of the Jewish people, that they had to try and defeat the holy interior of the people. This is why the Egyptians were afraid that they would “join our enemies,” meaning that their inner devotion would also become their enemy, to the point that even the wicked exterior of the Jewish people would disappear and they would return to a Jewish way of life. That was the great fear of the Egyptians.

This is why they engaged in all sorts of activities to make the Children of Israel completely forget their Judaism. How did they get entrapped? It was by “hard labor,” *parech* in Hebrew, which can also be read as *peh rach* (“a tender mouth”). The Egyptians began to attract the Children of Israel with their words, with sweet lips of honey – sweet-talking them – to show them how good it was in Egypt. It was in this way that the Egyptians wanted to abolish their inner devotion, in order for the Children of Israel to become exactly like them and eventually cease to exist.

The Egyptians, however, completely failed in their efforts. The Holy One, blessed be He, saw the pain and misery of the Jewish people, and He sent a cure even before the illness. He prepared a savior for them, our teacher Moses, who grew up in the home of Pharaoh the king of Egypt, and who knew all the tricks of the Egyptians. As for Moses, he was completely devoted on the inside. In fact he truly wanted nothing other than the glory of G-d, and when he came to save the Children of Israel, no one could stand before him. This is because all obstacles crumble before a person who is completely sincere, giving way to salvation.

Therein lay the great strength of Moses. He was truly concerned with the glory of Hashem, and he wanted to help the Jewish people with complete sincerity and inner devotion. This is why he was able to deliver them. It is not without reason that the Sages stated that he merited this task because of what he did when he was a shepherd. A tiny lamb wandered off in search of water, and Moses went in search of it and carried it back to the flock on his shoulders. At that point Hashem said to him, “Because you have mercy in leading the flock of a mortal, you will surely tend My flock Israel” (*Shemot Rabba* 2:2), for everything he did was with wholehearted devotion.

All this teaches us how to conduct ourselves in life. What type of conduct is this? There are some people who are prepared to help others, even going through fire and water to do so, but they only act with their bodies. That is, they only take action on the outside. They do not help others with all their heart and all their soul, as formulated in the *Shema*.

Such people are ready to help others, but in their heart of hearts they also want to take advantage of the honor they can get by doing so. They do not want anyone else to benefit from what they do, and they are not truly ready to suffer for others. As a result, they avoid doing every good deed as soon as they can, and they immediately walk away to avoid being asked for things.

However when a person carries out his good deeds with all his heart and soul, with true inner devotion, he has two advantages: It is good for himself, and he also profits from the reward promised to the righteous. At the same time, the things he does for others sometimes enables them to get out of a difficult situation, as we saw concerning the Children of Israel in Egypt. That is, on the outside they had started to sin, yet their inner devotion was still intact. When Moses came and revealed their beautiful interior to them, they immediately began to improve themselves and merited being freed from Egypt – from the mire they found themselves in – in order to arrive in Eretz Israel.

The same thing applies to every Jew. Do we realize that by helping others with wholehearted sincerity, we can sometimes help a Jew come closer to G-d? Let us adopt this good habit, and may it be our reward.

## *Parsha Va'eira*

### *The Greatness of the Virtue of Gratitude*

“The L-RD said to Moses, ‘Say to Aaron: Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt’” (*Ex 7:19*). Why is Aaron responsible for this? Because, our Sages tell us, the river protected Moses when he was cast into it (*Shemot Rabba 9:9*). Is it appropriate to throw a rock into a well that we drank water from (*Bava Kama 92b*)?

In one of his books, Rabbi Nathan Tzvi Finkel of Slabodka writes that it was in this way that our Sages behaved, throughout the generations. He cites as an example the case of the Rif, who was opposed to the sale of a public bath that he used (*Shitah Meubetzeth*). It was the Sages who taught this vision of things, as we see in Midrash Tanhuma: “Why were the water and sand struck by Aaron? Rabbi Tanhum says: The Holy One, blessed be He, told Moses, ‘It is not proper that you strike the waters that saved you when you were thrown into the river, or the sand that protected you when you killed the Egyptian’” (*Tanhuma Va'eira 14*).

Another Midrash recounts that Moses himself was requested to strike the waters: “‘Where do the Egyptians get their water to drink?’ asked the Holy One. Moses replied, ‘From the Nile.’ G-d ordered him: ‘Turn it into blood.’ Moses replied, ‘I cannot do so. Does a person who drinks water from a well throw a stone into it?’” (*Shemot Rabba 20a*).

The transformation of the river to blood and the sand to lice, which was something of a miracle, certainly contributed to demonstrating the Eternal’s greatness, and through this to have encouraged the Children of Israel to believe in Him. But these miracles also contributed to strengthening in Moses his trait of gratitude. Thus, our Sages say, when the Eternal said to Moses, “And now, go and I will dispatch you to Pharaoh” (*Ex 3:10*), Moses replied, “Master of the universe, I cannot do so because Jethro opened wide his home to me. He considers me as his son. I can’t show myself to be ungrateful” (*Shemot Rabba 4:2*). Rabbi Nathan Tzvi comments on this in one of his books and states, “This is a strange remark. How could Moses, on whom depended the deliverance of the Children of Israel, the liberation from Egyptian enslavement, the giving of the Torah, the entry of Israel into the Holy Land, the construction of the Holy Temple – how could he refuse this Divine mission simply to avoid seeming ungrateful?”

It is because, as we have read, the one who shows himself ungrateful towards someone who has done him good ends up by renouncing the existence G-d Himself. This is what Moses feared. What would his mission have been worth if he had not shown his gratitude towards Jethro, a man who not only opened his home to him, but also gave him his daughter in marriage? This is the reason why Moses didn’t give in. What’s more, if he had consented, the example of gratitude that he would have provided, in his capacity as leader, would have been more than suspect.

Can one say as much for Jacob? Arriving at Laban's without a thing (since Eliphaz, Esau's son, had completely robbed him – cf. *Sefer Hayashar, Vayeitzei*), he lived with him for many years and married his two daughters. Then suddenly, “he fled with all he had” (*Gen 3:21*). Didn't Jacob remember that despite his father-in-law's great wickedness, he had opened wide the doors of his home to him (*Bereshith Rabba 70:6*) and even saved him from Esau? Why then didn't Jacob show any gratitude towards him?

If we look a little more closely, the reason is because our Patriarch owed absolutely nothing to Laban, since Laban had only been thinking of himself. Why, for example, did he hug and kiss Jacob (*Gen 29:13*)? It was because, our Sages tell us, Laban thought that Jacob had brought with him some money, gold, or precious stones, and that he kept them in his pockets or his mouth (*Bereshith Rabba 70:13*). However, when Laban found nothing, he told Jacob, “Is it because you are my brother that you should serve me for free?” (*Gen 29:15*). It is as if he said, “I won't welcome you in my house for more than a month.” The Yalkut Meam Loez reports that during his stay with him, Laban would throw bones to Jacob, as with a dog, and Laban did this in spite of everything that Jacob had done to protect Laban's flocks.

Thus Laban didn't help Jacob at all, but on the contrary, he wanted to exploit and rob him to the hilt. Laban even thought of killing him, as it is written, “An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather” (*Deut 26:5*). And even if he didn't succeed, “among the nations, an evil intention is considered as an act” (*Kiddushin 40a*). As a result, all this proves that Laban sought only to harm him.

Commenting on the teaching of our Sages that states: “Do not throw a stone into the well from which you drank,” Rabbi Eliyahu Desler writes in his book *Michtav MeEliyahu*, “How can a well, which is lifeless, feel any sense of ingratitude that is shown it? One can even ask this question with respect to the sand that had saved Moses' life. Furthermore, it would be necessary to realize that the blows that struck the water and the sand transformed them into tools destined to sanctify G-d's Name. How can one thus speak of humiliation?” (*Michtav MeEliyahu*, pp.100-101; cf. *Messilat Yesharim*, end of ch.1).

It is because in all of creation, the mineral and vegetable realms daily proclaim that it is the Holy One, blessed be He, Who created them with a predetermined goal, be it for men to benefit from or simply for the glory of G-d. The one who derives pleasure from it must always thank G-d from having created them. This is what all of creation does, teaches the Talmud: “All was created for man . . .” (*Sanhedrin 37a*). Thus, their use in a miracle brings with it a sanctification of G-d's Name in the world, but when man treats with contempt that which brings him pleasure, he expresses in this way ingratitude. He ends up by expressing ingratitude not to the inanimate object, but to his Creator (*see Kohelet Rabba 7:4; Mechilta Shemot 20*). All the more reason, then, that a man should show his gratitude to his neighbor, a being that senses pain if humiliated and is filled with gratitude when pleased. If a person becomes accustomed to not looking down on G-d's creation, he will then respect man, who is made in His image, and will end up by not disparaging the benefits that the Eternal Himself bestows.

To look at this more closely, one sees that the Creator is the source of all causes. When a man is in need of something and G-d sends it to him indirectly (that is, through someone else), if the beneficiary does not show his gratitude towards him, it's as if he demonstrates his ingratitude towards G-d. It's therefore appropriate to instill in our hearts the virtue of gratitude.

### *Reflecting on G-d's Miracles Leads to Holiness*

If we consider the ten plagues of Egypt, we note that during the first five it was Pharaoh himself who hardened his heart (*Exodus 7:22; 8:11,15,18; 9:7*), while for the last five it was the Eternal Who hardened his heart (*Exodus 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:1*). Concerning this, our Sages have said that even if Pharaoh had wanted to repent, the Eternal hardened his heart to punish him (*Shemot Rabba 11:7*).

A few clarifications are very much needed here.

1. Why did Pharaoh harden his heart so much and stand up to G-d if he realized that everything was caused by the “finger of G-d” (*Exodus 8:15*)? Why would he expose himself, his people, and his country to such great danger? Was he ready to let his country be destroyed for the poor Jews that worked for him for free? We could say that Pharaoh knew that the Children of Israel found themselves deeply mired in the 49 degrees of impurity (*Zohar Chadash Yitro 39a*), and that consequently all the Divine precepts that they performed joined with the forces of evil that Pharaoh led, and from which he drew all his strength. However, as we have seen several times before, in spite of the fact that they worshipped idols in Egypt (*Shemot Rabba 16:2*), the Children of Israel did not change their names, their language, or their customs, and they guarded themselves against adultery (*Vayikra Rabba 32:5*). This prevented them from sinking into the *Kelipah* (lit. “husk” or “shell”) and allowed them to liberate themselves from slavery. The question, however, still remains.

2. Why are we called to remember, throughout the entire year as well as for all the generations, the wonders performed by the Eternal in Egypt, whereas we are called to remember that which He did for our ancestors on Purim, Hanukah, etc. only on the date of those actual holidays?

3. Why did our Sages teach us that “in every generation each person should consider himself as having personally left Egypt” (*Pesachim 116b*)?

4. Why did the Eternal have to personally execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt (*Exodus 12:12*), and not by the intermediary of an angel (*Yalkut Exodus ad loc.*)?

It is because when a man sinks into impurity, he has consideration for neither his country, nor his people, nor himself. Pharaoh lived in impurity, and during his entire life he veered from it neither to the left nor to the right, he who considered himself as a god (*Shemot Rabba 9:7*). And even though he had proclaimed, “The L-RD is the righteous one, and I and my people are the wicked ones” (*Exodus 9:27*), it was difficult for him to escape from impurity. This is what we see with sinners – that although they

believe in G-d, they continue to perform their misdeeds, for it is difficult for them to flee from evil. “I will sin and then return to G-d,” they constantly tell themselves (Yoma 88b). In fact, if Pharaoh and sinners in general were to reflect a little, they would be able to repent and take to the right path, for this is the only way to perform Teshuvah. It is written, “Regarding this the poets would say, ‘Come to Heshbon’ ” (*Numbers 21:27*), which the Talmud explains as referring to those who govern and overcome their inclinations and begin taking an account (*heshbon*) of the situation in the world. Let us not forget that at the beginning, Abraham worshipped idols (*Rambam, Hilchot Akum 1:3*). It was following numerous reflections on his life that he realized and attained a knowledge of the Creator.

Let us not forget that G-d warned the Egyptians over and over again before inflicting new plagues on them. He gave them entire weeks in order to reflect a little and take to the right path (He waited one week after a plague, and for three consecutive weeks afterwards He warned them – *Shemot Rabba 9:12*). If Pharaoh had thought things through, be it ever so little, he would have understood why he was being punished. It is also conceivable that he believed that the Children of Israel had worked only 200 years in Egypt, this being only half the time mentioned to Abraham by the Eternal (*Genesis 15:13*). Yet what he did not understand was that the Children of Israel had even labored at night, which doubled the amount of time that they worked. Consequently, they merited being freed now.

In fact, we can say that as long as Pharaoh did not recognize G-d, he hardened his heart and refused to let the Children of Israel leave because he wanted to enslave them. Yet when he recognized G-d and admitted that he and his people were wicked, it was G-d that hardened his heart by allowing him to think that they had served only half of the allotted time of their slavery. Pharaoh finally understood that the 400 years of servitude had in fact expired when the plague of the firstborn struck them. He then went to get Moses and Aaron during the night (*Yalkut Shimoni Bo 208*) and said to them, “Rise up, go out from among my people” (*Exodus 12:31*). It was then that the verse affirmed that “the habitation of the Children of Israel during which they dwelled in Egypt was 430 years” (*v.40*). The nights therefore also counted. And how did Pharaoh come to this realization? It was by seeing that the Eternal had saved him from the last plague even though he himself was a firstborn. The Midrash states that he had, moreover, asked Moses and Aaron to pray for him (*Shemot Rabba 20:2*). Pharaoh therefore understood that just as the Eternal distinguished between a drop of semen that becomes a firstborn and one that does not (*Bava Metzia 61b*), He also knew how to accurately foresee the liberation date of the Children of Israel from Egypt. Up to that point, Pharaoh had refused to reflect upon his actions and had experienced terrible suffering.

In conclusion, a man should learn to contemplate in order to arrive at a knowledge of G-d, and for as long as he confines himself in impurity and looks for all sorts of pretexts not to change, he will be severely punished. We have personally known people who perform many mitzvot yet slander their neighbor. And when tragedy strikes them,

they ask why G-d acts in such a way. This is due to their lack of discernment. They do not know that one should rid oneself of all traces of evil, and this whether one acknowledges the Eternal or not. Otherwise, one suffers the worst punishments. G-d hardens the heart of the one that does not acknowledge Him, and punishes him until such time as he recognizes Him. He then uproots the evil that defiles the heart of the sinner.

Consequently, every day we should recall the miracles that the Holy One, blessed be He, performed for our ancestors in Egypt. Perhaps they did not merit redemption, but they respected the Divine precepts and refused to assimilate. Why? Because G-d helped them in order to prevent the Kelipah from drawing its strength from these mitzvot. Such was the miracle that the Eternal performed. Without Him, we would be slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt – we, our children, and our grandchildren. And without the miracles of Egypt, the Children of Israel would have not merited other miracles (since the miracles of Egypt constituted the very foundation of all others), a fact that we should recall every day (*Deuteronomy 16:4*). Moreover, the redemption began at night, an allusion to the Kelipah that operates at night (*Zohar III:113a*). That very night, the Children of Israel conquered even the forces of evil. From then on, Pharaoh knew that the Kelipah could no longer do anything against them, for the Eternal had accomplished wonders in their favor.

We can now understand why G-d “passed alone” through the land of Egypt when He inflicted the blows to the firstborn thereof. In fact, the departure from Egypt essentially aimed at sanctifying the Children of Israel before they received the Torah (see *Sefer Emet: Bo, Beshalach*). Even while sunk in the 49 degrees of impurity, they had observed certain mitzvot, and they had accepted the yolk of Divine kingship upon themselves. And just as “G-d helps the one who seeks to purify himself” (*Shabbat 104a; Yoma 38b*), He made it such that they were quickly made ready to serve Him. In this way they were henceforth worthy of direct Divine assistance and of being liberated exclusively by Him (*Tanhuma Bo 7*).

Besides this, it was G-d Himself in all His glory that appeared to the Children of Israel. He did this in order to strengthen their faith in the Eternal and in the righteous, so that they would push themselves to properly understand and apply the difficult precepts of the Torah that they prepared themselves to receive. In seeing His omnipotence, they would never doubt His Torah.

This is why the Children of Israel immediately proclaimed, “We will do and we will understand” (*Exodus 24:7*). “Well said,” the Eternal told them, Who added, “I am the L-RD your G-d, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (*Exodus 20:2*). In other words, “I am the only One Who can change the laws of nature, and of Me it is said, ‘He raises the needy from the dust; from the trash heaps He lifts the destitute, to seat them with nobles, with the nobles of His people’ [Psalms 113:7]. I am the Eternal, Who watched over the mitzvot that you performed in Egypt so that – despite your schemes that could have led you to the fiftieth gate of impurity – the Kelipah could not nourish itself off

of them. It was I Who distinguished between your homes from those of the Egyptians [Exodus 12:27]. I made you leave Egypt by night, when the Kelipah reigns [Bava Kama 60b], to show you that you can only eliminate it by means of the Torah, for the Torah purifies, and impurity cannot attach itself to it" (Berachot 22a). As soon as one accepts the yolk of Torah study, little by little it begins to purify. All this was accomplished thanks to the departure from Egypt, which was achieved by the merit of our Father Abraham.

All this shows us that the wicked person, one who does not think about his behavior and does not look for the truth (always finding excuses to justify himself), sinks even further into his perversity. It is by sound reasoning that one achieves holiness.

### ***Compassion Must Precede Anger***

Let us examine the verse that states, "The L-RD said to Moses, 'Now you will see what I shall do to Pharaoh...' G-d spoke to Moses" (Exodus 6:1-2).

Hashem again spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the L-RD" (v.2). The Zohar asks why at the beginning is it written, "The L-RD said" (using the Tetragrammaton, which denotes the attribute of mercy), whereas afterwards the Torah states, "G-d spoke to Moses" (using the name *Elokim*, which denotes the attribute of justice), and then finally the Tetragrammaton is again used (Zohar III:227a, 30b).

The reason for this is because the Torah commands us to "reprove your fellow" (Leviticus 19:17) if we see him behaving improperly (see *Erchin 16b*). We should do so with great tact by first using soft and gentle language. However if he does not improve his conduct, we should speak to him with a firmer tone, even to the point of shaming him (Rambam, *Hilchot De'ot 7:8*).

This is also the approach that a father should adopt with respect to his son. Otherwise, he might leave his father's home and become morally ruined. Similarly Moses, who spoke inappropriately with the King of kings, was first reprimanded according to the attribute of Divine mercy ("the L-RD said"), then more strongly through the attribute of justice ("G-d spoke").

The Talmud makes the following distinction: "There are four new years: One for kings (the first of Nissan); one for tithes of animals (the first of Elul); one for years, the Shmita and the Jubilee (the first of Tishri); and finally one for trees (the first of Shevat according to the School of Shammai, the fifteenth of Shevat according to the School of Hillel)" (Rosh Hashanah 2a). The Talmud also teaches that the world is judged at four times (*ibid. 16a*), and that on Rosh Hashanah all creatures appear like a flock of sheep before the Holy One, blessed be He, to be judged, as it is written: "He Who fashions their hearts together, Who comprehends all their deeds" (Psalms 33:15). An obvious question arises: Since the entire world is judged on Rosh Hashanah, why is it necessary to set aside three other times for this as well?

The reason is that man resembles a tree of life, as it is written: "For man is the tree of the field" (Deuteronomy 20:19) Yet following Adam's sin, which tainted the Tree of

Knowledge, all of Creation became tainted. For that matter, this is what brought death into the world. Even the ground was punished for the sin it committed. In fact the Talmud (*Yerushalmi Kilayim 1:7*) teaches: “Adam, Eve, and the serpent were all judged, but the earth was cursed with them, as it is written: ‘Accused is the ground because of you’ [*Genesis 3:17*].” Why was it cursed? It is because it broke the Divine command that fruit trees should yield, after their kind, fruit that contained its own seed in the ground (*Genesis 1:11*). In other words, the earth should have produced trees that were edible and that tasted like the fruits they yielded. However “the earth brought forth ... trees yielding fruit” (*v.12*), and so the earth was also punished, as it is written: “Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you” (*Genesis 3:18*).

If all a man’s needs were to be judged at the same time as he was (on the first of Tishri), they would have no time to “defend” themselves, since all of Creation was tainted after Adam’s sin. In fact, our Sages have taught that the accuser does not become a defender (*Berachot 59a*), and that there is absolutely no mercy in judgment (*Ketubot 84a*). Hence it is written, “You save both man and beast, O L-RD” (*Psalms 36:7*), and so man is saved by the merit of animals [even if they cannot intercede for themselves, just as the earth was punished after Adam’s sin].

This is why our Sages fixed a different date for each of the four types of years, one for each of man’s needs. For example, by consuming the products of the harvest, a man can elevate the sparks of holiness that were scattered in Creation and hasten the Final Redemption of Israel and the advent of Mashiach (see Ohr HaHaim on *Genesis 49:9* and *Kedushat HaShulchan*, where the author discusses this subject at length).

We find an allusion to this in the month of Shevat, when we succeed in repairing the incarnations of fruits: During the new year for trees, we receive good news (the initials of *shinitbasser bessorot tovot* form the word *shevat*) by means of our righteous redeemer. Consequently, as we saw above, there exist periods of mercy and periods of strict justice (which is why trees are not judged on the new year that begins in the month of Tishri, the time when man is judged).

Moses asked G-d, “My L-RD, why have You done evil to this people?” (*Exodus 5:22*), or in other words: “Why do You act towards them with Your attribute of justice?” As Moses phrased it, “From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name [the attribute of justice], he did evil to this people” (*v.23*). G-d told Moses that such was not the case, for the attribute of mercy always follows that of justice. In the final analysis, the attribute of mercy takes precedence over the Children of Israel, and as such they will merit being delivered.

### ***Reflecting on G-d’s Miracles Leads to Holiness***

If we consider the ten plagues of Egypt, we note that it was Pharaoh himself who hardened his heart during the first five plagues (*Exodus 7:22; 8:11,15,18; 9:7*), whereas during the last five it was Hashem Who hardened his heart (*Exodus 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:1*). On this subject

our Sages have said, “When G-d perceived that he did not relent after the first five plagues, He decided that even if Pharaoh now wished to repent, He would harden his heart in order to exact the whole punishment from him” (*Shemot Rabba 11:6*).

A few clarifications are very much needed here:

1. Why did Pharaoh harden his heart so greatly and confront G-d, given that he realized that everything was caused by the “finger of G-d” (*Exodus 8:15*)? Why would he expose himself, his people, and his country to such great danger? Was he ready to let his country be destroyed for the despondent Jews that worked for him for free? We could say that Pharaoh knew that the Children of Israel found themselves deeply mired in the 49 degrees of impurity (*Zohar Chadash Yitro 39a*), and that consequently all the Divine precepts they performed joined with the forces of evil that Pharaoh led, and from which he drew all his strength. However, as we have seen several times before, despite the fact that they worshipped idols in Egypt (*Shemot Rabba 16:2*), the Children of Israel did not change their names, their language, or their customs, and they guarded themselves against adultery (*Vayikra Rabba 32:5*). This prevented them from sinking into the kelipah, and it allowed them to liberate themselves from slavery. Nevertheless, the question still remains.

2. Why are we commanded to remember, throughout the entire year as well as for all generations, the wonders performed by Hashem in Egypt, yet we are commanded to remember what He did for our ancestors on Purim, Hanukah, etc. only on the actual dates of those holidays?

3. Why did our Sages teach, “In every generation a man is bound to regard himself as though he personally had gone forth from Egypt” (*Pesachim 116b*)?

4. Why did Hashem have to personally execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt (*Exodus 12:12*), rather than by the intermediary of an angel (*Yalkut Shimoni, Exodus ad loc.*)?

The answer is that when a person sinks into impurity, he does not think about his country, his people, or himself. Pharaoh lived in impurity, and during his entire life he veered from it neither to the left nor to the right, he who considered himself as a god (*Shemot Rabba 9:8*). Even though he proclaimed, “The L-RD is the Righteous One, and I and my people are the wicked ones” (*Exodus 9:27*), it was difficult for him to escape from impurity. This is what we see with sinners, for although they believe in G-d, they continue to perform their misdeeds because it is difficult for them to flee from evil. “I shall sin and repent,” they constantly tell themselves (*Yoma 85b*). In fact if Pharaoh (and sinners in general) were to reflect a little, they would be able to repent and take to the right path, for this is the only way to perform Teshuvah. It is written, “Regarding this, the poets would say, ‘Come to Heshbon’ ” (*Numbers 21:27*), which the Talmud explains as referring to those who control and overcome their inclinations and begin taking an account (*heshbon*) of the world (*Bava Batra 78b*). Let us not forget that Abraham worshipped idols at first (*Rambam, Hilchot Akum 1:3*), and that it was only after reflecting a great deal on his life that he acknowledged and attained an understanding of the Creator.

Let us also not forget that G-d repeatedly warned the Egyptians before inflicting new plagues on them. He gave them entire weeks in order to reflect a little and take to the right path: He would wait one week after a plague, and for three consecutive weeks afterward He would warn them (*Shemot Rabba* 9:12). If Pharaoh had thought things through, be it ever so little, he would have understood why he was being punished. It is also conceivable that he believed that the Children of Israel had worked only 200 years in Egypt, this being only half the time that Hashem mentioned to Abraham (*Genesis* 15:13). However what Pharaoh did not realize was that the Children of Israel had labored even at night, which doubled the amount of time they had worked. Consequently, they merited being freed at that point.

In fact we may say that for as long as Pharaoh did not acknowledge G-d, he hardened his heart and refused to let the Children of Israel leave, for he desired to enslave them. However when he acknowledged G-d and admitted that he and his people were wicked, it was G-d that hardened his heart by allowing him to think that they had served only half of the allotted time of their slavery. Pharaoh finally understood that the 400 years of servitude had in fact expired when the plague of the firstborn occurred. He then went to get Moses and Aaron during the night (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bo* 208) and said to them, “Rise up, go out from among my people” (*Exodus* 12:31). Thus the verse affirms: “The habitation of the Children of Israel during which they dwelled in Egypt was 430 years” (*v.40*). The nights therefore also counted. How did Pharaoh come to this understanding? It was by realizing that Hashem had saved him from the last plague, even though he himself was a firstborn. The Midrash states that he had, moreover, asked Moses and Aaron to pray for him (*Shemot Rabba* 20:3). Pharaoh therefore understood that just as Hashem distinguished between a drop of semen that became a firstborn and one that did not (*see Bava Metzia* 61b), He also knew how to accurately foresee the liberation date of the Children of Israel from Egypt. Up to that point, Pharaoh had refused to reflect upon his actions and had experienced terrible suffering.

In conclusion, a man should learn to think deeply about things in order to arrive at a knowledge of G-d. Furthermore, as long as he confines himself in impurity and seeks out all kinds of pretexts so as not to change, he will be severely punished. I have personally known people who perform many mitzvot, yet slander their neighbors. When tragedy strikes them, they ask why G-d acts in such a way. This is due to their lack of discernment, for they fail to realize that a person must rid himself of all traces of evil, whether he acknowledges Hashem or not. Otherwise one will experience the worst punishments. G-d hardens the heart of one who does not acknowledge Him, punishing him until such time as he recognizes Him. He then uproots the evil that defiles the sinner’s heart.

Consequently, every day we should recall the miracles that the Holy One, blessed be He, performed for our ancestors in Egypt. Perhaps they did not merit being delivered, however they respected G-d’s precepts and refused to assimilate. Why? It is because G-d helped them in order to prevent the kelipah from drawing its strength

from these mitzvot; this was the miracle that Hashem performed. Without Him, we would be slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt – us, our children, and our grandchildren. Without the miracles of Egypt, the Children of Israel would have not merited other miracles. The miracles of Egypt constitute the very foundation of all others, a fact that we must recall every day (see *Deuteronomy 16:4*). Moreover, the redemption began at night, an allusion to the kelipah that works at night (*Zohar III:113a*). That very night, the Children of Israel conquered the forces of evil, and from then on Pharaoh knew that the kelipah could no longer harm them because Hashem had worked wonders for them.

We may now understand why G-d “passed alone” through the land of Egypt when He struck its firstborn. In fact the goal of the exodus from Egypt was to sanctify the Children of Israel before they received the Torah (see *Sefer Emet: Bo, Beshalach*). Even while mired in the 49 degrees of impurity, they observed certain mitzvot and accepted upon themselves the yoke of G-d’s kingdom. Since “if one comes to cleanse himself, he is helped” (*Shabbat 104a*), G-d made it such that they were quickly prepared to serve Him. From that point on, they were made worthy of receiving assistance from G-d and being liberated solely by Him (*Tanhuma Bo 7*).

In addition, it was G-d Himself in all His glory Who appeared to the Children of Israel. He did this to strengthen their faith in Him and in the Tzaddikim, so that they would strive to properly understand and apply the difficult Torah precepts that they were about to receive. In seeing His omnipotence, they would never doubt His Torah.

This is why the Children of Israel immediately proclaimed, “We will do and we will understand” (*Exodus 24:7*). “Well said,” Hashem told them, adding: “I am the L-RD your G-d, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (*Exodus 20:2*). In other words, “I am the only One Who can change the laws of nature, and of Me it is said, ‘He raises the needy from the dust; from the trash heaps He lifts the destitute, to seat them with nobles, with the nobles of His people’ [*Psalms 113:7*]. I am Hashem, Who protected the mitzvot that you performed in Egypt so that, despite your schemes which could have brought you to the fiftieth gate of impurity, the kelipah could not nourish itself. It was I Who distinguished your homes from those of the Egyptians [*Exodus 12:27*]. I made you leave Egypt by night, when the kelipah reigns [*Bava Kama 60b*], to demonstrate that you can only eliminate it by means of the Torah, for the Torah purifies, and impurity cannot attach itself to it [*Berachot 22a*].” As soon as one accepts the yoke of Torah study, little by little it begins to purify. All this was accomplished by the exodus from Egypt, which was achieved through the merit of our Patriarch Abraham.

All this shows us that a wicked person, one who does not think about his behavior or seek out the truth (always finding excuses to justify himself), sinks even further into his perversity. It is by sound reasoning that one achieves holiness.

## *Parsha Bo*

### *Torah: The Key to Redemption*

The Children of Israel were to be found everywhere, as we have read. They were in the theaters, the circuses, etc., completely neglecting the study of Torah, and “they [the Egyptians] became disgusted because of the Children of Israel” (*Ex 1:12*). If they had frequented the synagogues and yeshivas that our Patriarch Jacob had prepared for them, the Egyptians would have neither seen them nor have “embittered their lives with hard work, with mortar and with bricks” (*v.14*). Moreover, they would have repaired the error of Abraham, who used those who studied Torah to wage a war. The tribe of Levi was the only one that devoted itself solely to the study of Torah.

As we have said, the Children of Israel were certainly capable of rising to great levels as a result of intensive Torah study, but “he who does not increase [his knowledge of Torah] decreases it; he who does not study deserves death” (*Perkei Avoth 1:13; Taanith 31a*). Thus, because they hadn’t intensified their Torah study, a harsh exile was decreed for them.

To that end, the Ramban asks the following question: Why, “when the days of his abstinence are completed,” must a Nazirite offer “one unblemished sheep in its first year ... one unblemished ewe ... and one unblemished ram” (*cf. Num 6:10-14*) as an offering? What sin did he commit? It’s because, the Ramban answers, during the entire time of his abstinence he was consecrated to the Eternal (*v.8*), and he had to constantly perfect his purity and holiness. In light of this, he should have remained a Nazirite all his life. However, as soon as he wanted to return to his impure desires for this material world, he was required to offer a sacrifice to atone for his sins. Not being able to intensify and increase his holiness and purity, he was made to seek atonement through a sacrifice.

Once, we asked our young students at the yeshiva the following question: Those of you who are leaving to go into business – if you make it successfully in the business world, it’s no doubt because you’re very talented. Why then not devote all these opportunities to the diligent study of Torah, and elevate yourselves in the fear of Heaven? Why quit the yeshiva? Isn’t this what your Creator asks of you?

There as well, the accusation is the same, namely that not increasing or intensifying one’s Torah study proves to be damaging.

It’s ultimately because the Children of Israel neglected the study of Torah that they nearly crossed the fiftieth gate of impurity without realizing it (*Zohar, Yitro 39a*). But the Holy One, blessed be He, never wrongs any of His creations (*Nazir 23a; Bava Kama 38a*). He liberated them from Egypt because they, as we have seen, were careful to retain their language, their names, and their manner of dress. Nevertheless, if they had devoted themselves to the study of Torah with the same fervor that the members of the tribe of Levi had, they would not have been made slaves in Egypt and would not have

crossed through forty-nine gates of impurity. However, their slavery at least helped them to purify sparks of holiness, sparks that the bread of affliction in the Passover Haggadah alludes to. Now that a repair has been affected, “may all who are hungry come eat,” explains Rabbeinu Arizal.

Nevertheless, if the Children of Israel had invested more effort into studying Torah, they would have corrected these sparks without being enslaved by the Egyptians. For, as the Zohar explains, the Torah is able to liberate us from exile, to bring the Redemption closer, and to protect us from the attacks of the evil inclination (*Zohar III:270*). We see in this something that is stunning: On one hand, the Children of Israel managed to repair the sparks of holiness despite the mediocrity of their spiritual state, and on the other hand they zealously watched over three fundamental tenants of Judaism. How can this be explained? It’s due to the fact that they didn’t fully exploit the spiritual strengths that they inherited from our Patriarch Jacob. As our Sages say, “The acts [and the strength] of the parents determine the conduct of their children” (*Sotah 34a*). Not having sufficiently engaged themselves in the study of Torah, and not having drawn from their souls this Divine element – the strength that comes from the intensive study of Torah – they almost crossed the fiftieth gate of impurity. And yet the Eternal, in His mercy and kindness, freed them from slavery despite everything. And if He acted this way, it was not because He was accommodating (*Bava Kama 50a*), but because He probed the hearts of the Children of Israel and saw that they wanted in all sincerity to be corrected. He therefore helped them and brought them to true redemption.

### ***The Importance of Observing the Covenant***

The servants of Pharaoh said to him, “How long will this be a snare [*mokesh*] for us? Send out the men that they may serve the L-RD their G-d. Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?” (*Exodus 10:7*).

Why did Pharaoh’s servants wait until the plague of locusts to speak in such a way to their master? Moreover, what did they mean by asking, “Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?” Was Pharaoh really unaware of this?

The answer is that the observance of the covenant allows man to conquer the forces of evil where they are found. For the forces of evil, such a man becomes a *mokesh* (snare). The sparks of holiness that dwell within him serve as weapons that he can use to eliminate them. The land of Egypt was filled with impurity (*Shemot Rabba 22*) and its inhabitants were sunk in immorality. The righteous Joseph (righteous because he guarded the covenant [*Zohar I:59b*]) was the first to repair and harvest the sparks of holiness. Later, it was the role of the Children of Israel to do the same when they went down into Egypt. They had to raise the 288 sparks of holiness that had fallen into impurity because of Adam’s sin (*Or HaHaim Genesis 49:9*).

Even though they were not circumcised in Egypt (*Pesikta Zutah, Bo 12:6*), the Children of Israel repaired the sparks of holiness thanks to their hard labor and the fraternity that

united them. They were helped in this by Moses, who was born circumcised, as our Sages have explained (*Sotah 12a*) concerning the verse that states, “She saw that he was good [*good* alluding to the covenant]” (*Exodus 2:2*). Moses, who was equal to the totality of the Children of Israel (*Mechilta Beshalach 10,15a*), enlightened them with his majesty and splendor, and together they managed to rectify what remained in order to bring the redemption closer.

This is what is specified by the passage that states, “It will cover the surface of the earth so that no one will be able to see the earth; and it will consume the remaining residue that was left by the hail” (*Exodus 10:5*). In fact, the Egyptians feared that the forces of evil would be weakened, forces from which they drew their existence. Egypt, struck by these plagues, was henceforth without any protection. Pharaoh and his servants therefore understood that it was dangerous to keep the Children of Israel in Egypt, especially at that time, when the Children of Israel guarded the covenant and drew their strength from Moses, who was considered as equal to the entire Jewish people. The word *zeh* in the verse that states, “*Ad matai yiyeh zeh lanu lemokesh* [How long will this be a snare for us]?” (*Exodus 10:7*) corresponds to the Divine Presence, as it is written, “*Zeh*, he stands behind our wall” (*Song of Songs 2:9*). In other words, the Shechinah guards anyone who observes the covenant (see *Zohar III:297b*, where it is explained that the word *zeh* alludes to the covenant). The word *lanu* (“for us”) has a numerical value of 86, the same as *milah* (85 plus 1 for the kollel). The word *lemokesh* (“a snare”) is the trap that destroys the Kelipah.

Pharaoh’s servants hoped to be a snare for the Children of Israel, who would be assimilated among them, and therefore they expected to form one large nation governed by the forces of evil. Yet as we have seen, it was the opposite that happened. It did not take the Egyptians long in realizing the fact that the Children of Israel (since they observed the covenant, and Moses – born circumcised – supported them) were in fact a trap for them. Providence protected them, and they were able to diminish the influences of the forces of evil that operated in Egypt. This is why Pharaoh’s servants told him, “Do you not yet know that Egypt is *avedah* [lost, ruined]?” It was the Eternal’s 12 tribes that caused their ruin (*avedah* has a numerical value of 12, which alludes to the 12 tribes). Moses, who also carries the name of *zeh* in the verses, “For *zeh* [this] man Moses” (*Exodus 32:1,23*), helped them to triumph over the *Kelipah* (negative forces, the other side). The Egyptians were thrown off balance. It was with regards to them that Jethro said, “For in the very matter in which [the Egyptians] had conspired, [punishment was brought] upon them” (*Exodus 18:11*). “It was the in the pot that they had prepared that they were cooked” (*Sotah 11a*).

We can therefore understand why the Egyptian magicians feared Moses even before he was born (*Tanhuma Vayakhel 7*). It was not his ability to eventually liberate the Children of Israel that frightened them, but his ability to eliminate the forces of evil in Egypt. Thanks to the covenant that they observed on the same day as Passover, the blood of their Passover sacrifice mingled with that of their circumcision (*Shemot Rabba 17:3*). They

“emptied Egypt” and were in a position to vanquish the forces of evil. The Egyptians could thus no longer defend themselves.

Looking at this a little more closely, we note that the plague of locusts aimed at eliminating everything on the surface of the ground so that the forces of evil could no longer have any hold. It was this that the Egyptians feared the most – being cut off from their strength. In truth, it is said that Pharaoh was so frightened of this plague that he called it *mavet* (“death”), as it is written, “Entreat the L-RD your G-d, that He remove from me only this death” (*Exodus 10:17*). Pharaoh saw that his servants were right. Deprived of *Sitra Achra* (the other side, the forces of evil), Egypt was in fact ruined. Pharaoh finished by giving up and deciding to free the Children of Israel from their servitude. However, the Eternal continued to harden Pharaoh’s heart and inflicted three more plagues on him so that he could realize His Divine grandeur, as well as corrective work of the Children of Israel.

This shows us the importance of observing the Covenant, since it brings the Final Redemption closer. This is what our orphaned generation should especially be careful about. Seeing that the advent of the Final Redemption approaches, the evil inclination, aware of our efforts to observe the mitzvot and correct our sins – particularly those that caused the destruction of the Temple (such as baseless hatred) – inflicts a plague on us that we do not even think about, namely sexual immorality. This is so prevalent in our day because of our many sins (may G-d help us), even though until recently the nations have guarded themselves against it, at least in public.

Let us therefore emulate the Children of Israel, who for 49 days following their departure from Egypt (corresponding to the 49 gates of impurity (*Izohar Chadash Yitro 39a*)) put great effort into eliminating the forces of evil so as to be worthy of receiving the Torah. If they attained such a sublime level (particularly the level at which they witnessed the splitting of the Red Sea), it was because they continually worked at eliminating their wicked traits and sanctifying themselves. The Children of Israel, who observed the foundations of Judaism, nevertheless complained to Moses: “We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free of charge” (*Numbers 11:5*), meaning to say that it required neither the study of Torah nor the observance of mitzvot (*Sifri 11:5*). Why, therefore, did they revolt after so much self-denial? It was because, following their long sojourn in Egypt, they had not entirely erased burning desires, greed, and lust from their character. Finally, all depends on the elimination of these faults, as well as the observance of the covenant in purity and holiness.

### ***You Will Know That I Am The L-RD***

It is written, “Moses stretched forth his hand toward the heavens, and there was a thick darkness throughout the land of Egypt for a three-day period” (*Exodus 10:22*).

The Midrash comments as follows: “Blessed be the Name of the Alm-ghty, Who is completely impartial and probes all hearts. Seeing sinners in the midst of the Children

of Israel benefiting from the plague and in no way wanting to abandon riches and honors by leaving Egypt, He said, ‘If I strike them in public, the Egyptians will say, “They suffered as we did.” ’ This is why He plunged Egypt into darkness for three days. The Children of Israel could thus bury their dead without being seen by their enemies, and they could praise G-d” (*Shemot Rabba 14:3*). It was during these three days that four fifths of the Children of Israel died.

The plague of darkness aimed primarily at punishing those among the Children of Israel who did not want to leave Egypt. The plague also allowed them to see where the Egyptians hid their treasures (*Shemot Rabba 14:3*), so that they would be unable to conceal anything when the Children of Israel went to ask them for their possessions. Finally, the plague aimed at bringing the Children of Israel to repentance, for they had witnessed the death of their wicked brothers. The plague therefore did not seek to affect Pharaoh or Egypt, as we have already seen. (The Baal HaTurim writes, however, that the plague of the firstborn is not included among the signs that G-d said He would display to Pharaoh in Exodus 10:1, since the verse “You have not heeded up to now” [*Exodus 7:16*] already alludes to the plague of the firstborn).

Nevertheless, other questions remain unresolved:

1. How can we imagine that the Children of Israel, greatly enslaved with work, could have continued to trust the Egyptians who spoke to them with a *peh rach* (“soft mouth,” i.e., pleasant words), to the point of wanting to lengthen their stay with them? Since it was because of them that the Egyptians had ceased to be a world power, did they not fear that the Egyptians would take revenge on them?

2. Was it not a Divine commandment to leave Egypt in order to receive the Torah and travel to the Holy Land? How could some of the Children of Israel, who in addition witnessed so many miracles that Hashem had performed for them – who saw His awesome power and His mighty hand – dare not carry out such a commandment?

3. The Children of Israel seem to contradict themselves. In the beginning they implored G-d to free them from slavery: “The Children of Israel groaned because of the work and they cried out. Their outcry because of the work went up to G-d” (*Exodus 2:23*), and even their babies were slaughtered so that Pharaoh could bathe in their blood (*Shemot Rabba 1:34*). Yet even after all this suffering, when after having heard their cries G-d sent His deliverance in the person of Moses, how can we imagine that despite all their gratitude, there still remained among them some who wanted to stay in that land of slavery? Let us recall the passage: “And the people believed, and they heard that the L-RD had remembered the Children of Israel and that He saw their affliction, and they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves” (*Exodus 4:31*).

4. After having seen that the Egyptians had remained frozen in place during the plague of darkness (*Shemot Rabba 14:3*), whereas “for all the Children of Israel there was light in their dwellings” (*Exodus 10:23*), and after having seen that four fifths of their brothers had died before them, how could the Children of Israel not have desired to immediately do Teshuvah? Did they want to breach the fiftieth gate of impurity?

5. The Midrash relates the following: “Rabbi Yossi said that the plague of locusts gave the Egyptians great hope, for they said to themselves, ‘Let us fill up our pots and bowls with them.’ The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them, ‘Evildoers! Is the plague that I inflicted upon you not enough?’ Then ‘The L-RD turned back a very powerful west wind, and it carried the locust swarm and hurled it toward the Sea of Reeds. Not a single locust remained within the entire border of Egypt’ [Exodus 10:19], and even the locusts they had salted disappeared” (*Shemot Rabba* 13:6). How can we imagine, asks the author of *Nachalat Eliezer*, that the Egyptians – suffering through the eighth plague – did not comprehend that the locusts could only be harmful to them? Is such a mistaken belief possible? Furthermore, knowing that the Egyptians wanted to salt the locusts and benefit from them, why did G-d inflict this plague on them?

6. Before the plague of locusts, Pharaoh said to Moses and Aaron: “So be the L-RD with you as I will send you forth with your children! Look – the evil intent is opposite your faces” (*Exodus* 10:10). Was Pharaoh a prophet that he could say such things to Moses and Aaron, and why did Moses keep quiet? Did he agree with Pharaoh concerning what he said? Another question: Why did Pharaoh say this precisely before the plague of locusts? Did anything bad happen to the Children of Israel following this warning of Pharaoh?

7. Contrary to all the tactics of warfare that the nations used, why did the Egyptians carry all their wealth with them when they pursued the Children of Israel? The result was that the spoils at the Sea of Reeds were greater than that of Egypt (*Tanhuma Bo* 8).

The reason for this is because at every moment of our lives, we must recall the miracles that Hashem performed for us: “You shall know that I am the L-RD your G-d, Who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt” (*Exodus* 6:7). Actually, given all the difficulties that a man endures in life, he is capable of forgetting his role and goal in this world, and he may even forget his Creator. If a man prospers in his business, he may demonstrate his ingratitude by saying, “My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth” (*Deuteronomy* 8:17). He will then no longer acknowledge that everything comes from G-d.

The awareness that everything comes from G-d is not built into man. G-d certainly did not create man so that he could indulge himself in the “delights” of this world. Man was created in order to acknowledge, praise, and serve G-d. Thus before praying that his body be completely imbued with Torah, a man should pray that the desire for these “delights” not invade his mind (*Tanna D'vei Ellyahu Rabba; Tosaphot Ketubot* 104a: *Lo neheneti*).

The Torah constantly reminds a person of the exodus from Egypt in order to develop the virtue of gratitude in him. The goal of this is to prevent a person from behaving as the Children of Israel did, who after having implored G-d to liberate them from the yoke of slavery, refused in the end to leave the land where they had amassed great wealth. They were not sufficiently aware of the fact that it was Hashem Who was their Redeemer, and that all their possessions came solely from Him.

G-d wanted to enrich the Children of Israel in order for them to realize that everything comes from Him, and in order for them to serve Him in prosperity. That is what Moses said to Pharaoh: "... for from it shall we take to serve the L-RD our G-d, and we will not know with what we are to serve the L-RD until our arrival there" (*Exodus 10:26*). The goal of all wealth is to serve Hashem, and we should not take anything for ourselves, for we are unaware of what G-d requires of us. Perhaps He will "ask of us more than we have in our possession" (*Rashi ad loc.*).

The phrase, "And you shall know that I am the L-RD" (*Exodus 6:7; 10:2, etc.*) constants appears in order to remind the Children of Israel that they benefited from each of the plagues inflicted on Egypt (*Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera 182*) and that everything comes from G-d, hence they should constantly demonstrate their gratitude to Him. Each of the plagues was to bring about an additional awakening in them and make them aware of His unlimited power. If G-d did not kill the Egyptians in one fell swoop, but rather inflicted ten consecutive plagues on them, it was in order to bring the Children of Israel to a greater level of belief and realization that would enable them to receive the Torah.

However to many of the Children of Israel, all these wonders appeared like a recipe for wealth. Thus blinded by their mercantile gains, they preferred to stay in Egypt rather than to conform to G-d's will.

If the Egyptians had returned to the right path, the plague of locusts would have turned into a blessing for them, and they would have been able to live from this "plague" for many years. They could have acknowledged Hashem, even though they were so far from Him. G-d awaited their Teshuvah, yet when it did not come "the L-RD turned back a very powerful west wind" (*Exodus 10:19*).

From that plague, the Children of Israel should have drawn the lesson that everything is for the good, and that every ill has its remedy. The plague of locusts could have been a source of plenty, and it was destined to make the Children of Israel recognize G-d's sublime Name. Hashem dispersed the Egyptians' joy and hardened their hearts because they refused to acknowledge His power. He made both the living as well as the salted locusts disappear, the latter of which Pharaoh sought to keep (*see Keli Yakar, Exodus 10:17*). In the same way, all the wealth of the Children of Israel was in danger of evaporating if they did not do Teshuvah. If they desired to stay in Egypt contrary to G-d's will, it was because all their wealth had been gained illegally and they did not merit it as much as its original owners. Thus instead of praising Hashem and expressing their gratitude to Him, some of the Children of Israel were blinded by their acquisitions. Instead of marveling at the many miracles that G-d performed for them, they considered them as natural events which they were already used to.

### ***Deliverance Through The Merit of Righteous Women***

Our Sages teach that the Children of Israel were delivered from Egypt by the merit of righteous women (*Solah 11b*). Why? Because their faith was stronger than that of the men, for they firmly believed in a veritable deliverance. This is why they made drums

in the middle of their exile in Egypt, as it is written: “Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took her drum in her hand and all the women went forth after her with drums and with dances” (*Exodus 15:20*). Also, in order that their husbands not lose hope during their slavery in Egypt, they encouraged them by saying that their deliverance would not delay.

The holiness of these women was also demonstrated by their great modesty, since they stood at a distance from the men when they sang G-d’s praises. They were thus at the origin of the exodus from Egypt. Our Sages also tell us that for the making of the copper laver they wanted to devote the mirrors they used to beautify themselves in order to beget upright children (*Bamidbar Rabba 9:14*). Moses, however, refused to use these mirrors because they seemed improper to him, until G-d ordered him to use them because He valued the merit and holiness of these women. Hence it was because of these women that the exodus from Egypt took place.

The women of Israel also refused to give their jewelry for the making of the golden calf (*Bamidbar Rabba 21:10*), therefore Aaron had to tell the men, “Remove the gold rings that are in the ears of your wives” (*Exodus 32:2*). However when the Tabernacle was being built, it is stated that they rushed – even before the men – to dedicate their offerings of gold (*ibid. 35:22*), in addition to their labor, as it is written: “Every wise-hearted woman spun with her hands” (*v.25*). It was therefore because of the virtues of such women that the Children of Israel left Egypt.

The women especially loved Eretz Israel with a burning love. According to the Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba 21:10*), they loved it as Joseph did, for it is written: “The daughters of Zelophehad...of the families of Manasseh son of Joseph” (*Numbers 27:1*), demanding their heritage in Eretz Israel. Moreover, while some of the Children of Israel refused to leave Egypt, the women made their drums and prepared to praise Hashem and leave that place. The daughters of Zelophehad, though unfamiliar with Eretz Israel, still expressed their desire to go and settle there. Their purity greatly aided them, and because of it – even in a land of impurity – the holiness of Eretz Israel’s air reached them.

We may finally say that every deliverance and miracle that has occurred over the span of the generations has been because of righteous Jewish women. Let us cite some notable examples: Miriam, who watched over Moses in his basket on the Nile (*Sotah 11a*); the prophetess Deborah, who sang of deliverance and miracles (*Judges 5:1-31*); Yael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, who saved Israel by killing Sisera (*Judges 4:21*); Queen Esther, who brought about the miracle of Purim; Judith, who brought about Chanukah (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 670:2*); and the wife of On, son of Peleth, who saved her husband from certain death by persuading him not to join Korach’s followers (*Sanhedrin 109b*).

We must nevertheless ask how a woman can surpass her husband by her influence. No one denies that women are physically weaker than men, yet it was the women in Egypt who watched over their husbands’ spiritual growth and saved them from feelings of hopelessness by forcing them to leave that land of slavery.

The Midrash states that after the death of Rabbi Elazar (the son of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai), a small worm came out of his ear because he did not react when he heard a Sage being maligned. Before his death, however, his wife expressed her joy at being connected with such a holy body. Whereas he was to be punished, his wife remained upright and righteous (*Bava Metzia 84b*). From where, in the final analysis, does a woman's merit originate?

A man has every opportunity to carry out G-d's commandments: Tefillin, prayer, and especially the regular and diligent study of Torah, the very goal of man's existence (*Sanhedrin 99b*). Women, on the other hand, are exempt from these mitzvot, particularly those that are "time-bound" (*Berachot 20b*). As a result, they have the time to devote themselves to their families and educate their children (see *Berachot 17a*). Despite that, however, women are charged with rebuilding what was destroyed with the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, a sin that, as we have seen, brought death into the world (*Shabbat 32a*). It is therefore incumbent upon women to repair everything. Therein lies the full meaning of the verse, "I will make for him a help as his counterpart" (*Genesis 2:18*). After having been the cause of his banishment from the Garden of Eden (located, according to certain opinions, in Eretz Israel – *Eruvin 19a*), women should help men to rebuild themselves on a personal level, to help them wholeheartedly love Eretz Israel and make them appreciate its beauty and holiness. This is why a woman has more strength than her husband.

If Hashem endowed women with intuitive understand that is greater than that of men (*Niddah 45b*), it was in order for them to use it to strengthen their husbands. Being exempt from numerous mitzvot, women should build their homes, allowing their husbands to study Torah and develop their fear of G-d, and in this way both men and women will merit the delights of the World to Come.

### *Hardening The Heart*

There are many questions that arise concerning the Zohar's remark on the verse, "The L-RD said to Moses, 'Come to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart' " (*Exodus 10: 1*). The Zohar explains: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, 'Let us go, you and I, to Pharaoh.' "

1. Why was it only at that point that G-d offered to accompany Moses on his mission? Was G-d not with him during his previous missions?

2. Concerning the phrase, "so that *shiti* [I can put] these signs of Mine in his midst" (*Exodus 10:1*), the Baal HaTurim explains that *shiti* alludes to *shteh* ("two [plagues]"): The plague of locusts and the plague of darkness. However there were *three* plagues still to occur at that point in time, for the plague of the firstborn had not yet happened (*Pesikta Zutah, Bo*).

3. Why does the next verse ("so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your son's son that I made a mockery of Egypt" – v.2) only deal with these two

plagues, instead of those that preceded them? Were the previous plagues less worthy of mention?

4. Pharaoh's servants said to their master, "How long will this be a snare for us? ...Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?" (v.7). Moses and Aaron were then called back to Pharaoh, who said to them, "Go and serve the L-RD your G-d; which ones are going?" (v.8), and then he "drove them out from [his] presence" (v.11). Now we know that Pharaoh's servants agreed that the Children of Israel should be freed, however Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused to do so. The verse specifies, on the other hand, that it was Hashem Who hardened Pharaoh's heart and those of his servants. Now in reality we see that his servants were too fearful to allow their hearts to harden.

5. We now come to the primary question: Why in fact did Hashem harden Pharaoh's heart and prevent him from exercising his free will? We may answer by saying that deep down, Pharaoh was not really prepared to free the Children of Israel. Thus if he were to have set them free, he would have done so grudgingly, due to the plagues that were beating down on him. Hashem then hardened his heart. In such a case, we cannot say that G-d's Name was sanctified among the Egyptians, for they said: "Egypt is lost." In other words, they only cared about their own country's interests, and deep down they remained sinful (see *Ohr HaChaim, ad loc.*).

Whatever the case may be, even after all the miracles they witnessed at the Sea of Reeds, the Egyptians did not abandon their idolatry. Therefore why did Hashem harden Pharaoh's heart and incite him to pursue the Children of Israel, as it is written: "I shall strengthen the heart of Pharaoh and he shall pursue them, and I will be glorified through Pharaoh and his entire army" (*Exodus 14:4*)? Was it the Egyptians' possessions that G-d wanted to give to the Children of Israel? If that were so, Hashem could have suggested to Pharaoh that he give it to them, without having to harden his heart.

Did G-d want to glorify His Name among the Egyptians (*Rashi on Exodus 14:4*)? He had already been glorified during the plague of the firstborn of Egypt (Mechilta, Exodus 1). In fact the Children of Israel had already received gifts, as it is written: "Take even your sheep and even your cattle" (*Exodus 12:32*), and Pharaoh himself contributed as they had asked him: "They requested from the Egyptians silver vessels, gold vessels, and garments. The L-RD gave the people favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, and they granted their request" (vv.35-36). Thus the question still remains: Why did Hashem need to harden Pharaoh's heart?

The answer is that the last plagues were increasingly severe and constituted a danger to the Children of Israel. Although G-d had enriched them, they still did not acknowledge Him; they even expressed their desire to remain in Egypt. Furthermore, G-d punished the wicked during the plague of darkness, for only a fifth of the Children of Israel departed from Egypt; the remainder perished (*Tanhuma, Beshalach 1*). In addition to being imperiled by the Egyptians, Moses was also in danger from the wicked Hebrews. Completely lost and realizing that they were condemned, the latter could have killed Moses. Thus Pharaoh was ready to kill Moses when he said, "Go from me! Beware

– do not see my face any more, for on the day you see my face you shall die” (*Exodus 10: 28*). In addition, G-d hardened Pharaoh’s heart even more and increased his hatred of the Hebrews, even though the Egyptians recognized G-d’s greatness.

This is why G-d had to tell Moses, “Let us go, you and I, to Pharaoh, for the next two plagues [locusts and the firstborn] constitute a danger for you. The Egyptians know that their country is lost and you alone are in danger, since they have nothing to lose. I have also hardened their hearts. Consequently, you are in need of divine assistance. The Children of Israel will be aware of this. I will advise them to go to the Egyptians’ homes during the days of darkness to see all the riches they are hiding.” This is what they did, since “for all the Children of Israel there was light in their dwellings” (*v.23*), just as our Sages said (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 186*). Everyone would then know that it was in this way that Hashem punished the Children of Israel for their unacceptable behavior, as well as the Egyptians. It is written: “Come to *Paroh* [Pharaoh]” – the word *Paroh* stems from *Piraon* (“payment”), for G-d made the Children of Israel and the Egyptians pay – “so that I can put these signs of Mine in his midst” – these two plagues, that of the locusts and the firstborn, which bore down upon the Egyptians. G-d did not mention the plague of darkness because the Children of Israel were also in danger of it. Hence G-d put these two signs only among the Egyptians, not among the Hebrews.

Hashem acted in this way in order to make the Children of Israel understand that “if they do not take to the divine path, I will punish them.” Thus during the plague of darkness they buried their many dead, unbeknownst to the Egyptians. What’s more, even after this plague the Egyptians did not realize that four-fifths of the Children of Israel had perished. Another miracle!

We may now understand why G-d hardened Pharaoh’s heart and prevented him from exercising his free will. The reason is that G-d judges “measure for measure” (*Shabbat 105b*). He had said to Abraham, “But also the nation that they will serve, I shall judge, and afterwards they will leave with great wealth” (*Genesis 15:14*). Certainly it was G-d who decreed the enslavement of the Children of Israel in Egypt, however the Egyptians treated them too cruelly. This is why G-d punished them by hardening their hearts and preventing them from exercising their free will. This greatly increased their hatred for the Children of Israel, as it is written: “Behold, if we were to slaughter the deity of Egypt in their sight, will they not stone us?” (*Exodus 8:22*).

We may also explain in this way the Zohar’s interpretation of the verse, “Let us go, you and I, to Pharaoh, for G-d’s help is essential.”

The Sages have advised us to use the good inclination to fight the evil inclination: “If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him study the Torah. ... If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him recite the *Shema*. ... If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him remind himself of the day of death” (*Berachot 5a*). The evil inclination is none other than Pharaoh. To conquer it, a person must feel the need for G-d’s help (“you and I”). Nobody can conquer it without G-d’s help, as our Sages teach (*Kiddushin 30b*).

Nevertheless, it sometimes occurs that despite diligent Torah study, the recitation of prayers, and calling upon the Creator, a person does not succeed in conquering the evil inclination. He should then know that “It is I Who hardened his heart,” and the reward will be that much greater.

If a person does not succeed in conquering the evil inclination, G-d’s presents him with signs, “plagues.” The first is *arbeh* (which recalls the plague of locusts) - the *harbeh* (“intensive study”) of Torah. The second is *choshech* (which recalls the plague of darkness) – the recitation of the nightly *Shema*. If a person does not succeed in conquering the evil inclination by means of these two, there remains the plague of the firstborn (which reminds a person of death).

A person should therefore not be frightened by the evil inclination, but instead he must wage a perpetual fight against it. With G-d’s help, he will conquer it through intensive Torah study, sincere faith, and by clinging to his Creator. It is in this way that he will achieve perfection.

“Let us go (אב)...to Pharaoh”: The א is from יא (‘‘I’’, G-d), the ב is the second (ב having a numerical value of 2), and Pharaoh is the evil inclination. The meaning is, “With you; I will come with you.” The Tzaddikim who strive to conquer the evil inclination will be rewarded both in this world and the World to Come.

### ***Three Foundations of Judaism: Language, Names, and Clothing***

Before delivering the Children of Israel from Egypt, Hashem commanded Moses: “Please speak in the ears of the people: Let each man borrow from his fellow, and each woman from her fellow, silver vessels and gold vessels” (*Exodus 11:2*). During the plague of darkness they could actually circulate freely among the Egyptians, since there was light for the Children of Israel but complete darkness for the Egyptians. They therefore saw everything that the Egyptians kept in their homes, and they knew exactly what to ask them for: “Bring me that garment, the one you keep in that room and in that closet.”

All the same, the Sages have said that Israel were redeemed from Egypt because “they did not change their names, they did not change their language” (*Vayikra Rabba 32: 5*), and “they did not change their way of dress” (*Pesikta Zutah, Shemot 6:6*). As a result, how could they have taken non-Jewish garments from the Egyptians, since they were forbidden to wear them? The answer is that by borrowing them from the Egyptians, the Children of Israel were simply obeying Hashem’s command. They were to despoil Egypt, rendering it like husks without grain, like a net without fish, as the Sages have said (*Berachot 9b*). However He never commanded them to wear these clothes, only to borrow them from the Egyptians. If the Sages have said that the Children of Israel were delivered from Egypt by the merit of these three things (language, names, and clothing), it is because they represent the foundations of Judaism.

Joseph understood the 70 languages of the earth, yet when he finally revealed himself to his brothers, how did he prove that he was their brother? The verse states, “For my mouth is speaking to you” (*Genesis 45:12*), which Rashi explains as meaning “in the sacred tongue.” Even though Joseph understood every language, he only used the sacred tongue. It is what distinguishes us – we the Jewish people – from all other peoples and nations. It is not without reason that it is called the sacred tongue, for it is a language of holiness, a language that has been handed down to us through the generations. One who wants to become “progressive,” to be like all the other peoples, starts off by speaking their language. He replaces his own language with a non-Jewish one, which embodies absolutely no sanctity. What eventually happens to him? He becomes increasingly drawn to the actions of non-Jews and their way of life, until he falls to the lowest of levels, to the bottom of the abyss. Unfortunately, even when a person actually speaks the sacred tongue, the Jewish language – Hebrew – he may still end up changing his language. If a person heaps insults on others and speaks lies, if he utters forbidden words, this is also included in the concept of changing one’s language, and this also leads a person to lose out. That is why each of us has the duty to be extremely vigilant in this area and not change our language – and everything it entails – for this is the goal of the redemption.

As for the second principle, a person’s name is an important foundation of Judaism. Kabbalah teaches that a person’s name is his strength, the root of his soul. Let us imagine the root of a soul. What kind of Jewish strength can a person acquire if his name is, for example, Nimrod? What about Ishmael? What of a child named Hagar, like Hagar the maidservant of Sarah? What spiritual strength can a person absorb if he carries a foreign name?

This topic is very relevant to us. To our great regret and shame, we find Jews everywhere who give their children foreign names because they are “nice.” How are they nice – for the root of an impure soul? Why and in whose name can people inflict such spiritual suffering on their children for the future? A foreign name leads a person to think that it may be better to live as a non-Jew, to the point that he will not be ashamed to act like one, since everyone knows just how “enlightened” he is.

A Jewish name has no equivalent, and it never will. An original Jewish name is pure and pleasant to all Jews, and fitting for each and every Jew. We should therefore be proud of our Jewish names, and we should give our offspring only Jewish names, for this is an important foundation of Judaism.

Above all else is the third principle, namely clothing. When we walk outside and see how non-Jews dress, every Jewish soul feels a sense of revulsion. It is forbidden to describe what their attire is like, or how they walk outside in these types of clothing, without any sense of modesty or shame. What should we do about it? We must distance ourselves from them as from a burning building. We must separate ourselves as much as possible from their style of dress, for their clothing is extremely provocative.

To our great regret, however, our generation has been somewhat affected even in this domain. Some people are attracted by this kind of fashionable clothing. We are not speaking of far-off places here; the evil inclination grows stronger wherever people go around dressed fashionably. It eventually leads a person to despise everything Jewish and all distinctive Jewish signs, until he reaches a very low level.

We should therefore strengthen ourselves in these three great principles: A pure Jewish language that is our very own, a pure Jewish name, and modest Jewish clothing. We will hasten the Final Redemption in this way, much like the Children of Israel hastened their deliverance from Egypt.

## *Parsha Beshalach*

### *One Can Merit the World to Come in an Instant*

Commenting on the verse that states, “the Children of Israel walked on the dry land amid the sea” (*Ex 15:19*), the author of *Noam Elimelech* writes, “Just as the Children of Israel did at the Red Sea, the great Tzaddikim managed to perceive the unlimited greatness of the Eternal, even as if they found themselves on dry land in the middle of the Red Sea.”

One may ask a few questions on this passage:

1. How can one imagine that, on one the hand, the Children of Israel had reached such a spiritual level that they saw the Divine Presence, could even point out G-d, and had Divine inspiration enough to sing the *Shirah* with Moses, yet on the other hand were forced to purify themselves of the forty-nine levels of impurity once they left the sea (*Zohar, Yitro 39a*)?

2. Why did they have the merit to see the Celestial Chariot when they passed through the Red Sea, while at the same time they were still stuck in their impurity and continued to worship idols? The Children of Israel should have normally purified and sanctified themselves first, having the privilege to see the Shechinah only after receiving the Torah.

It is because our Sages teach that one can merit the world to come in an instant (*Avodah Zarah 10b, 17a*). Incidentally, one can also lose it in an instant. They could therefore not linger for a second longer, and well before reaching the threshold of the fiftieth gate of impurity, they reached elevated spiritual levels. “For they were driven from Egypt for they could not delay, **דלל** [and also] provisions they could not make for themselves” (*Ex 12:39*). The word **דלל** has the same numerical value (49) as **טט** (forty-nine levels of impurity). Yet in their impurity, they nevertheless did offer the Passover sacrifice, and did circumcise themselves, mixing in this way (as we have seen) the blood of the *Brit* with that of the Passover sacrifice.

Even though they knew that they were not meritorious, they believed in G-d Who promised to strike all the firstborn of Egypt in the middle of the night (*Ex 12:29*). If they sprinkled blood on the lintel of their doors, He would pass above them and spare them (*v.13*).

The behavior of the Children of Israel is thus unique in the annals of history. What other people managed to believe in G-d and offer Him sacrifices while wandering in the desert, in an uncultivated land, far from G-d and devoid of the Torah to guide them?

It was the survivors of the plague of darkness that repented and merited the world to come in a few moments. When the Eternal saw that they devoted themselves

completely to Him, even though they were still impure, He blessed them with *shefa* (abundance), with light and holiness, and enabled them to reach great spiritual heights in allowing them to witness the miracle at the Red Sea. It was because He looked into their hearts and knew that they aimed only to obey Him.

The Children of Israel nevertheless had to rectify all their sins in the desert. Imbued with holiness when they passed through the Red Sea, they knew exactly how to get rid of their impurity, and how to get closer to the Holy One, blessed be He.

But those who didn't improve their behavior showed that, in fact, they refused to get closer to G-d and to leave Egypt. Therefore they died in the plague of darkness because they wanted to "help" the forces of evil that function in the night (*Zohar II:164b*). It was thus the darkness that punished them (*cf. Shabbat 105b*). The Eternal also revealed Himself as much to those that didn't believe in Him, as to those that recognized Him without even having received the Torah or witnessed the miracle at the Red Sea. They could therefore rectify all their bad traits and merit the world to come in an instant.

### ***Let us be Content with Little Let us Serve G-d with Faith***

Commenting on the verse that states, "Moses caused Israel to journey from the Red Sea and they went out to the Wilderness of Shur" (*Exodus 15:22*), Rashi cites the Midrash as follows: He caused them to journey against their will because the Egyptians had adorned their horses with gold, silver, jewels, and precious stones, objects that the Children of Israel collected on the shore. The spoils found by the sea were greater than that which they amassed in Egypt (*Tanhuma Bo, 8*), as it is stated in the Song of Songs (*1:11*).

Why did Moses act in this way? Why did he not let the Children of Israel take as much silver and gold by the sea as they wanted? All they would have been doing by this was to obey an explicit Divine command, as it is written, "and you shall empty out Egypt" (*Exodus 3:22*). Was it not a pity for all these riches, riches that would have allowed them to perform mitzvot and good deeds?

The reason why Moses acted as he did was because he wanted to teach the Children of Israel to be content with little, and not to allow themselves to become seduced by silver or gold, even if it is obtained honestly. The Midrash reports that the Children of Israel became greatly enriched with the spoils of Egypt, and they had more than enough to accomplish mitzvot and build the Tabernacle and Temple (*Bamidbar Rabba 13:19*). Instead of continuing to amass more, they should have prepared themselves to receive the Torah, the sole aim of their departure from Egypt. They learned that the person who is never content with his lot can never seriously engage himself in Torah study, for "the one who has 100 desires 200" (*Kohelet Rabba 1:34*).

The Children of Israel were in constant elevation. Each day they tore down a gate of impurity and crossed through a gate of holiness. They purified their body and soul in order to better serve G-d. Then here, the Torah suddenly proclaims that their hands (an allusion to the study of Torah) had slackened. Amalek then came and attacked them.

As we have said, they were filled with Ruach Hakodesh, wisdom, and intelligence, but the gold and silver that they amassed in Egypt disturbed them a little. Their greed testified to a certain lack of trust in G-d, and it was this fault that weakened their study of Torah.

Moses also had to make them journey from Egypt in all haste, and this because an abundance of possessions is likely to lead to sin (see *Berachot 32a*). The Children of Israel's constant financial worries weakened their Torah study ever more, and they regretted not having taken more valuable items by the shore of the Red Sea. They wondered how they were going to invest their money in the land of Canaan. This money was, essentially, destined for their service of G-d after receiving the Torah. Yet because they thought about it too much, instead of engaging themselves in Torah study, one can say that they sinned (with respect to their lofty spiritual level) by not having been able to master their material instincts.

Moses therefore had to make them leave Egypt against their will. If he had left them by the seashore for one more day, they would not have been ready to receive the Torah on the fiftieth day, meaning to say the day set by the Eternal, the 6<sup>th</sup> of Sivan.

Having left Egypt, the Children of Israel continued to think of the money that they had left there. This is why G-d sent them Amalek – it was to show them the price that one pays for neglecting the study of Torah. The Children of Israel understood the lesson. They repented, waged war against their great enemy, and even triumphed over them, as it written: “Joshua weakened Amalek and its people with the sword's blade” (*Exodus 17:13*). The Eternal then said to Moses, “Write this as a remembrance in the Book” (*v.14*) to show that “The L-RD maintains a war against Amalek from generation to generation” (*v.16*). It is therefore appropriate to take note of the fact that rescinding Torah study generates illness and war (*Berachot 33b*), as well as the death of children and the war brought on by Amalek.

Each one of us should therefore put an effort into fighting the evil inclination, a force that tries to distance us from the Torah.

According to the commentators, it was because the Jews did “not observe the king's laws” (*Esther 3:8*) – meaning that they did not study Torah – that Haman (the descendant of Amalek) wanted to exterminate them. Esther then told Mordechai, “Go, assemble all the Jews” (*ibid. 4:16*), meaning, “Go study Torah, which is acquired only in a group, and pray with them” (*Berachot 63b*). The righteous Mordechai therefore assembled the children in the synagogues, and their prayers and their Torah annulled the sentence of the wicked one (*Yalkut Shimoni, Esther 1057*). The Midrash reports that the voice of the children rose to Heaven, and that night the King could no longer sleep (*Esther Rabba 6:1; 9:5*). Sleep escaped the Master of the world so that He could help His children and liberate them (*Yalkut Shimoni ibid.*).

It is therefore proper for an individual to be content with what he has. We should not think that an abundance of money would help us to accomplish many mitzvot and good deeds. This is the work of the Satan, who only looks to beset us with worries and

difficulties, and to distance us from the Torah. It was this abundance of wealth that drove the Children of Israel to the sin of the golden calf. Instead of being preoccupied solely with escaping from the 49 levels of impurity during the 49 days of the Omer, the time that the Children of Israel devoted to material affairs harmed their preparation to receive the Torah, and this is what led them to the sin of the golden calf. The one who succumbs to greed taints his faith in G-d. In the final analysis, it is G-d Who opens His hand to “satisfy the desire of every living thing” (*Psalms 145:16*).

G-d ordered the Children of Israel to gather the manna, “every man according to what he eats – an omer per person – according to the number of your people, everyone according to whomever is in his tent shall you take” (*Exodus 16:16*). We may well ask ourselves why this was so. What would happen if one took more?

It is the author of *Messilat Yesharim* (*chap 1*) that provides us with the answer. What our Sages teach us is that man was created only to delight in G-d and fully rejoice in the glory of His Shechinah. That is true pleasure. Such a level of refinement is only found in the world to come, which was in fact created for this goal. We cannot reach the desired harbor in this world, which is “like an ante-chamber before the world to come” (*Perkei Avoth 4:16[21]*). Yet it is only in this world that man feels the elevation of his soul and the Eternal’s existence in every place, as it is written, “The whole world is filled with His glory” (*Isaiah 6:3*). An abundance of wealth has never spiritually elevated man, who should be firmly convinced that even a poor income can be the source of blessing.

Yet the evil inclination deceives a man: “Eat much,” it tells him, “and in this way you will be able to better serve G-d.” There is nothing more erroneous than this, for even if one eats little, one can see his body blessed (*see Torat Kohanim, Bechukotai 24:5*). It was only those among the Children of Israel who had kept the manna for the next day that showed their lack of faith in G-d. The result? “It became infested with worms and it stank” (*Exodus 16:20*).

Fearful of losing a faithful friend, the evil inclination searches by all possible means for someone who wants to take to the right path, but only after being “satisfied” with material pleasures. Consequently, a man should distance himself from this as much as possible, and he should stay constantly connected to G-d, both in times of joy as well as in times of grief (G-d forbid). It is in this way that we experience the true pleasures of this world, ones that lead to the sublime pleasures of the world to come.

Nevertheless, let us realize that we attain these pleasures gradually, not immediately. “The one who tries to grab everything,” says the proverb, “seizes nothing.” It was in this way that Yochanan the High Priest, because he incessantly aspired to greatness, became a Sadducee after 80 years of priesthood (*Berachot 29a*). This is also what happened to Elisha (Acher, “the other”), the teacher of Rabbi Meir. Having entered Paradise, he “mutilated the shoots,” and corrupted himself because he wanted to gain access directly to sublime levels (*Hagigah 14b*). Hence one whose ascension is slow, gradual, and controlled, and who only aims at getting closer to G-d, is helped by Him. The Children

of Israel only acceded to the level of “the generation of knowledge” because they corrected their bad character traits regularly, day after day, for 49 days.

### *Plague of Egypt Against Healing of Israel*

It is written, “The L-RD strengthened the heart of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he pursued the Children of Israel” (*Exodus 14:8*), and a little further on “very frightened, the Children of Israel cried out to the L-RD” (*v.10*).

1. Why were the Children of Israel seized with fright? Why did they doubt the power of G-d? “Is the hand of the L-RD short” (*Numbers 11:23*) that a miracle could not be performed for them? Had these Children of Israel forgotten all the wonders that He had performed for them in Egypt, particularly the plague of the first-born, a plague after which Pharaoh himself asked them to leave Egypt?

2. Why did G-d strengthen Pharaoh’s heart so that he could pursue them? G-d could very well have killed Pharaoh, and even all his armies in Egypt.

The Children of Israel certainly saw all the plagues that the Eternal inflicted on Pharaoh, but they considered them as a punishment for his malice towards G-d. They didn’t think about the harm he had caused them. Each time that Pharaoh rebelled against G-d, he was struck. After the plague of the first-born, Pharaoh sent the Children of Israel out of the land, of his own volition, in order to abide by G-d’s will. Therefore he could have, in like manner, made them return to Egypt. The dread of the Children of Israel was thus doubled: Pharaoh was henceforth in a position to make them suffer the worst tribulations. This is why G-d strengthened Pharaoh’s heart and forced him to pursue them. He wanted to show the Children of Israel that He was punishing Pharaoh for the cruelty that he had shown to them, and to make them understand that all the wonders He had performed in Egypt was only for their good. Hence the Children of Israel no longer had anything to fear from Pharaoh and his armies.

We may also suppose that the Children of Israel believed that all the plagues suffered by Pharaoh in Egypt were a response to the pain that he caused them. Considering themselves as worthy, they believed that he did not have the right to persecute them, and that he fully deserved the plagues he suffered. However, after their departure from Egypt, G-d wanted to make the Children of Israel understand that they had no merit whatsoever, for they were guilty of idolatry in Egypt (*Shemot Rabba 16:2*). But in that case, why liberate them from slavery? This is why G-d filled them with dread. It was in order for them to return to Him. And in reality this is what they did. Imitating the response of their ancestors, they began to cry out and pray (*Tanhuma, Beshalach 9; Mechilta*). It was not by their own personal merit that they were saved, but by that of their ancestors, a merit “that exists forever” (*Shabbat 55b*). It was the merit of their ancestors that produced the miracle at the Red Sea (*Shemot Rabba 21:8*).

Another question arises: Why did Pharaoh choose to pursue the Children of Israel at the Red Sea, since it presented so many dangers? In our humble opinion, it seems to

us that if G-d had not strengthened Pharaoh's heart, he would not have ventured into it for fear of getting caught in an ambush. Hence punishment awaited him. This occurred because G-d wanted to show the Egyptians that the waters of the Nile that flowed into the sea were polluted in Egypt because they considered Pharaoh as the god of the Nile (*Shemot Rabba* 9:9). The Eternal acted "measure for measure": It was precisely the sea – which is His servant, contrary to the idea of the Egyptians – that was to punish the king of Egypt (*Shabbat* 105b).

As for the argument of Egypt's ministering angel, which stated that the Children of Israel also worshipped idols, G-d rejected it. "It was against their will that they acted as such," He explained to the angel. They listened only to the Holy One, blessed be He, for if they had worshipped idols of their own free will, how could the waters of the sea (the god of the Egyptians) have arisen as a wall to their right and their left to protect them (*Exodus* 14:22)? These waters were but the Torah that the Children of Israel studied (Bava Kama 17a). Consequently, they merited a miracle that saved them from Pharaoh and allowed them to cross the sea in complete safety.

### ***Only Faith in G-d Leads to Redemption***

It is written, "The Children of Israel raised their eyes and behold – Egypt was journeying after them, and they were very frightened. The Children of Israel cried out to the L-RD. They said to Moses, 'Were there no graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the Wilderness? What is this that you have done to us, to take us out of Egypt? Is this not the statement that we made to you in Egypt, saying, "Let us be and we will serve Egypt?" For it is better that we should serve Egypt than that we should die in the Wilderness.' Moses said to the people, 'Do not fear! Stand fast and see the salvation of the L-RD that He will perform for you today. For as you have seen Egypt today, you shall not see them ever again! The L-RD shall do battle for you, and you shall remain silent' " (*Exodus* 14:10-14).

Several questions need to be addressed:

1. How could the Children of Israel talk in such a way to Moses? What caused this sudden deterioration in their behavior (*Ismah Israel*)?
2. Why were they overcome by panic? They had, after all, witnessed great miracles in a harsh country that was ruled by a cruel king (*Rashi, Exodus* 13:10), and from which no slave could escape (*Mechilta, Yitro*). Had they lost faith and no longer believed in Hashem's deliverance?
3. Furthermore, why did Moses begin to beseech Hashem? Was he not certain that Hashem was going to liberate the Children of Israel? Who then told him to pray for them? Did Hashem not interrupt him during his prayer?
4. Hashem punished the Children of Israel each time they complained to, or irritated Him. Yet here we see that Hashem did not even mention their sin. On the contrary, He performed miracles for them. Why?

The author of *Ismah Israel* replies by citing the Kedushat Halevi, who himself cites the Rambam: “Why should you awaken, or stir up love, until it pleases?” (*Song of Songs 8:4*). In other words, as soon as we feel an awakening above (meaning, as soon as we feel overtaken by a love and fear of G-d), we should make a vessel to receive it. We should perform a mitzvah in order to continue to be imbued with these holy feelings. The author concludes that we should do this because, as we know, this sudden awakening is the spiritual light sent to a person from the celestial spheres above. It is called *Neshama* (soul), and it is appropriate to clothe it with a body (the mitzvah we perform), so that it can firmly preserved.

During the plague of darkness, the Children of Israel who survived experienced a great outpouring of love for Hashem, and they began to fear Him with all their heart. So that this awakening above could continue in them, G-d gave them two additional mitzvot: The blood of circumcision, and that of the Passover sacrifice. Thus the Children of Israel were not afraid of the Egyptians, and they did not hesitate to acquire lambs (which the Egyptians idolized) and bring them to the door of their homes and then slaughter them (*Zohar III:251a*). This occurred because they loved and feared only Hashem, and without these additional mitzvot, their enthusiasm would have dissipated. It was this awakening that allowed them to follow the path made by Hashem in the desert, in a land not sown (*Jeremiah 2:2*), devoid of all provisions other than matzah (*Exodus 12:39*).

A man should therefore advance “from strength to strength” (*Psalms 84:8*). This awakening should encourage him to perform a mitzvah, which always generates ever-new enthusiasm, and which in turn brings about the performance of another mitzvah, as it is written: “One mitzvah brings about another” (*Perkei Avoth 4:2*).

The fact that the Children of Israel respected Shabbat while in Egypt (*Shemot Rabba 1:32*), a mitzvah that is considered as equal to all the rest of the mitzvot in the Torah (*Yerushalmi Berachot 1:5*), indicates that their enthusiasm was indeed very great. In fact, they continued to observe other mitzvot besides Shabbat so that they could have a vessel capable of containing their enthusiasm, their faith, and their fear of G-d.

Hashem told our forefather Abraham that his descendants would be slaves in Egypt, but He promised that they would leave from there with great wealth, meaning that they would remain virtuous even while in exile and despite their prosperity. These were the riches that Abraham appreciated. As for Moses, even though sharing the spoils of Egypt was a great mitzvah, he preferred to perform an even greater one – that of finding the remains of Joseph, as it its written: “The wise of heart will seize mitzvot” (*Proverbs 10:8*).

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba 20:2*) recounts something very surprising: Pharaoh, that cruel king who hated the Children of Israel so much – and whom they completely plundered of all wealth – accompanied the Children of Israel when they left Egypt. Such was the reward of the mitzvot that they performed, and which infused them with ever-new enthusiasm. Even when they did not perform mitzvot, they recited prayers (as at the Sea of Reeds, for example). That is the way a man should act, for mitzvot (ones that we cannot perform) can be replaced by prayer.

As we have seen, before their passage through the Sea of Reeds the Children of Israel felt a tremendous love for G-d and greatly feared Him. Their enthusiasm to serve Him did not stop growing. Yet if so, why were they frightened by the Egyptians pursuing them, and why did they begin to cry out to Hashem? One should not pray to Hashem only during times of trouble and distress; a man should constantly pray to Hashem, both in times of peace and joy as well as during moments of suffering (G-d forbid). If a prayer is not answered, it is perhaps because Hashem keeps this prayerful request in keeping for more difficult times. Hence we should continue to retain our faith in Him.

Hashem takes great pleasure in the prayers of the Tzaddikim, and He complicates their lives in order that they cry out to Him, call upon His Name, and ask Him for help. Nevertheless, we should realize that a true Tzaddik does not wait until misfortune comes before addressing his prayers to Hashem. According to the Talmud, when the Tzaddik (as well as the Jewish people) is in distress, the Divine Presence shares in this suffering and cries, "My head hurts! My arm hurts!" (*Hagigah 15b*).

At their departure from Egypt, the Children of Israel were to organize themselves in their new life. After all the miracles that they had witnessed, the love they felt for G-d and their faith in Him took on a new dimension. Hence they began to laud Hashem and to sing His praises for all things. All the same, they should have known that prayers are not always granted. A prayer is often at the mercy of a man's slightest fault, which risks ruining everything. Even if it is written, "I am with him in distress" (*Psalms 91:15*), Hashem sometimes seems to distance Himself from a man, as it is written: "Though I would cry out and plead, He shut out my prayer" (*Lamentations 3:8*). A man should nevertheless maintain his faith and demonstrate resolve.

Such, however, was not the behavior of the Children of Israel. They revolted against the attributes of G-d. They acted "like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward" (*Perkei Avoth 1:3*). Their love and fear of G-d was self-serving and they revolted against Moses, saying: "Were there no graves in Egypt?" (*Exodus 14:11*). Their prayer was not answered, and their love and faith in G-d decreased.

As for Hashem, He wanted to teach the Children of Israel that their prayers are not always answered. It is necessary, therefore, that we demonstrate perseverance and never give up hope. We should not wait until adversity to pray. Prayer should be a constant, daily practice, and if it is not answered, let us be vigilant, above all, to not revolt against Him. We must continue to perform mitzvot and believe in G-d. Despite all the mitzvot that the Children of Israel performed in Egypt, Pharaoh pursued and wanted to kill them. If they had prayed regularly, they would not have known such distress. Far from being afraid by the Egyptians, they would have had faith in G-d's help and could have awaited a miracle.

We see from here the importance of prayer, which awakens man from his lethargy and reconnects him to his Father in Heaven.

Let us not act, therefore, like those who believe in G-d only during good times and revolt against Him when adversity strikes. Let us also not imitate those who exhibit their faith only when they are tried, for it is only then that they begin to pray and perform mitzvot and good deeds. A man should be firm in his faith, during good times as well as during adversity (G-d forbid), for “is it not from the mouth of the Most High that evil and good emanate?” (*Lamentations 3:38*). When we are assailed by all sorts of difficulties and undergo trials, let us study Torah and pray. That will strengthen our faith.

Such is what Hashem said to Moses, namely: “Speak to the Children of Israel and let them journey forth” (*Exodus 14:15*). It is precisely during times of adversity that it is fitting to strengthen one’s faith in G-d, to fear Him, and to begin diligently studying Torah, without rebelling against Him. “ ‘Why these cries?’ Hashem continued. ‘Why do you only cry out to Me in times of distress? Speak to the Children of Israel and let them journey forth. Let them constantly believe in Me, even in distress, without relying too much on a miracle’ ” (*Pesachim 64b*). G-d does not send trials without good reason. “*Hityatzivu* [wait]! May your faith always be *yetzivah* [firm]. Pray constantly and Hashem will answer all your desires. Devote yourself to serving G-d without faltering in the least.”

That is what Nachshon, the son of Aminadav, did when he became the first to journey into the waters of the Sea of Reeds. His courage and spirit of sacrifice filled all the Children of Israel with faith, and the waters split before them. It was this same Nachshon who nearly caused a great tragedy for the Jewish people during the rebellion of Korach and his assembly. This is why our Sages teach, “Do not be sure of yourself until the day you die” (*Perkel Avoth 2:4*).

### *The Greatness of Gratitude*

The Baal Shem Tov would say that whoever worries about their daily sustenance and any personal business before *Shacharit* does not receive G-d’s help, even if he fears Heaven. This is because he demonstrates that his personal business comes before, and matters more to him, than his religious duties (which is also what our Sages teach [*Berachot 14a*]). Before starting anything, a man should go to synagogue, recite his prayers, and trust in G-d. It is only afterwards that he should think of his material sustenance, the Baal Shem Tov concludes.

In our humble opinion, the one who thinks of his business and works before praying demonstrates that G-d is not able to help him. It especially demonstrates that his love for money prevails over his love of G-d. He therefore becomes unable to pray with concentration, and he rushes to finish so as to get back to the work he started before praying. Such conduct is obviously reprehensible.

On the other hand, one who goes to synagogue before doing anything else demonstrates that he trusts in G-d, Whom he loves with all his heart. Hence Hashem

will surely help him in all the work of his hands. With regards to this, the Talmud cites the exemplary conduct of Rav Safra and applies to him the verse, “[He] speaks truth from his heart” (*Psalms 15:2*). He never reflected upon business or thought about what time it was during prayer (*Makot 24a*).

We often hear the complaints of people who are assailed by all sorts of strange thoughts during prayer, especially during *Shacharit*. These people are generally pious Jews, who rise early and pray without rushing, and who regularly study a page of Gemara or *Chok LeIsrael* after their morning prayers.

“What did you do last night before going to sleep?” we ask in response. “You no doubt watched television, that cursed device, or read a secular book instead of studying Torah. Surely you entertained impure thoughts.” Someone who acts in this way will no doubt not awake with pure thoughts in the morning. What he saw (or read) the night before will remain engraved in his mind. His prayers will not be worthy of being described as such unless he rids himself of the effects that these images left on him. This is why the Halachah commands a man to go to bed only after he has studied some Torah (*Mishnah Berurah 238, from Shnei Luchot HaBrit*). He will therefore awaken with a tranquil mind, filled with wisdom and Torah, and his prayers will be answered.

After reciting the bedtime *Shema*, we are thus assured of a peaceful night. If we “tremble and sin not; reflect in your hearts while on your beds and be utterly silent” (*Psalms 4:5*), meaning that if we make good prevail over evil during the night, we will be in no way harmed. As the Arizal wrote, “At night, man’s soul ascends to the celestial spheres, learns Torah with the Tzaddikim, and rejoices in the glory of the Divine Presence.” When it returns to its body in the morning, it sanctifies it even more. If a person washes his hands upon rising to cleanse himself of impurities that accumulated during the night (*Zohar I:169b*), then goes to synagogue in reverence and love, he will rid himself of all strange thoughts, and his prayer and Torah study will be faultless.

In the final analysis, everything depends on remembering the exodus from Egypt, for our Sages enjoined us to recall it day and night (*Berachot 1:5*), as it is written: “So that you remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt all the days of your life” (*Deuteronomy 16:3*). “The days of your life” refers to the days only; “All the days of your life” refers to the nights as well. It is also appropriate to recall it while on our beds at night and in the morning upon awakening, for the *Shema* that we recite at night ends with the verse, “I am the L-RD your G-d Who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (*Numbers 15:41*), and in the Tefillin four passages refer to it.

Thus when we recall the exodus from Egypt both day and night, we think of the Children of Israel that Hashem brought from slavery to liberty despite all their impurities. We also – we who are free because of our Torah study – need G-d’s help to rid ourselves of our evil inclination. If we unfortunately abstain from studying diligently, we risk falling into the Satan’s net (*Zohar III:25b*).

Let us therefore be careful about what we do at night before going to bed. Let us invoke G-d’s Name and implore Him to forgive and purify us as He purified the Children

of Israel in Egypt, as well as to hasten our Final Redemption. We will achieve this through sincere faith and by being content with what Hashem truly desires to give us.

**“Stand Fast and See the Salvation of the L-RD”**

It is written, “Pharaoh approached. The Children of Israel raised their eyes and behold – Egypt was journeying after them, and they were very frightened. The Children of Israel cried out to the L-RD. They said to Moses, ‘Were there no graves in Egypt, that you took us to die in the wilderness? ...Is this not the statement that we made to you in Egypt, saying: “Let us be and we will serve Egypt?”’ Moses said to the people, ‘Do not fear! Stand fast and see the salvation of the L-RD that He will perform for you today’ ” (*Exodus 14:10-13*).

The Midrash reports that the Children of Israel saw the angel of the Egyptians pursuing them from above (*Shemot Rabba 21:5*), and so they cried out. Moses said to them, “Stand fast and see the salvation of the L-RD” (*Exodus 14:13*). However a little further on it is written, “Why do you cry to Me? Speak to the Children of Israel and let them journey forth” (*v.15*).

Since it is difficult to be satisfied with the literal meaning of these verses, we shall try to expand on them a little:

1. After having seen the angel of the Egyptians pursuing them, the Children of Israel followed the ways of their ancestors and cried out, addressing their prayers to G-d. Afterwards they complained to Moses, “Were there no graves in Egypt?” This is an obvious sign of a lack of faith in G-d, and it was contrary to the prayer that they had just uttered (see the explanation of the Ramban, who cites Yalkut Shimoni 233, according to which the Children of Israel were divided into four groups before they crossed the sea).

2. Why were the Children of Israel suddenly overtaken with fear? Was Hashem’s hand too weak to save them after having performed all the miracles in Egypt? In addition, why did Moses not get angry with them because of their lack of faith in G-d?

3. Since G-d told Moses, “Why do you cry to Me,” this means that he had prayed for the Children of Israel (*Mechilla, Beshalach; see Rashi*). According to the verse, however, it was only the Children of Israel who prayed to Hashem for deliverance. The author of *Divrei Chaim* asks, “Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, object to Moses’ prayers, since we know that He ‘longs to hear the prayer of the righteous’ (*Yebamot 64a*)?” Why did He object to the common prayers of Moses and the Children of Israel when their enemies pursued them?

The Children of Israel knew that, because of the Torah they were destined to receive on Mount Sinai, they would be liberated from Egypt (*see Exodus 3:12; Shemot Rabba 3:4*). This is why they removed all traces of pride from themselves and submitted to G-d, taking “the dough before it could become leavened” (*Exodus 12:34*), an allusion to

the elimination of leaven, a symbol of pride. At their departure from Egypt, they consequently reached extraordinary spiritual levels, so great that Hashem, as we saw, gave them the additional commandments of the blood of circumcision and that of the Passover sacrifice (*Mechilta, Shemot 5:18*).

However when the Children of Israel saw that the angel of the Egyptians continued to pursue them all the way to the Sea of Reeds, their fear increased. This is because they believed that Hashem had performed miracles for them because the forces of evil had disappeared only on Egyptian territory, whereas near the sea, “united by a single heart,” the Egyptians followed them with 600 royal chariots while other lightly armed troops pursued them on foot. They understood that this misfortune bore down on them because of their deficiencies in Torah, which is called *zot* (*Avodah Zarah 2b*). Speaking to Moses, the Children of Israel said: If you had given us the Torah before our departure from Egypt, it would have protected us from the Egyptians. *Mah zot*: What have you done to us? You clearly see that we lack *zot* (the Torah). They added, “*Halo zeh hadavar* [Is this not the statement] that we made to you in Egypt” (*Exodus 14:12*). We know that the term *zeh* alludes to the Torah, as it is written: “Take this [*zeh*] book of the Torah” (*Deuteronomy 31:26*). The word *halo* also alludes to the Torah, as it is written, “And these [*Ve'eileh – eileh* being formed by the same letters as *halo*] are the ordinances that you shall place before them” (*Exodus 21:1*). If the Children of Israel had received the Torah and carried out the commandments while in Egypt, they would have been protected.

“It would have been even better had we remained as slaves until we learned the Torah,” they explained to Moses. “Through intensive study we could have broken the forces of evil, which would not have been able to pursue us, and why should we die in the desert without the Torah?”

Such was the greatness of the Children of Israel, which is why Moses was not upset at them, for he understood that their faith in G-d had not diminished. He also reassured them by saying, “*Hityatzvu* [Stand fast] and see the salvation of the L-RD,” embodying the concept of “*Vayityatzvu* [And they stood] at the bottom of the mountain” (*Exodus 19:17*). Moses explained to them: The Torah that you will soon receive on Mount Sinai will protect you. Therefore stay here, strengthen yourselves and calmly confront the evil inclination, the angel of the Egyptians that has come to weaken your faith. *Re'eu* [look]: Because of the godly fear [*yirah*, a term similar to *re'eu*] that fills your heart, deliverance will soon come.

We may now understand why Moses added the word *hayom* (“today”) in the verse, which otherwise seems unnecessary. Moses understood the despair of the Children of Israel, who had not yet received the Torah (in front of the mountain, despite their evil inclination that is compared to a mountain – *Sukkah 52a*). He invited them to actively prepare to receive it, explaining that they would attain it “today,” meaning the third day, the day on which “the L-RD shall descend in the sight of the entire people on Mount Sinai” (*Exodus 19:11*). It was the Torah that would protect them and enable them to witness Hashem’s salvation.

### *Each Moment In Life Counts*

The Children of Israel experienced 10 trials, one of them involving the manna, the bread that fell from Heaven. At that time the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: “I shall rain down for you bread from Heaven...to test them, whether they will follow My Torah or not” (*Exodus 16:4*).

This is difficult to understand at first. While in the desert, the Children of Israel were free from all work normally connected to earning a living. The manna descended every day near the entrance of their tents, and furthermore they tasted every flavor they desired – be it bread, meat, or fish – in the manna. Naturally, their minds were free to occupy themselves with Hashem’s Torah at all times, for they had no worries connected to finding food. That being the case, what exactly was the trial surrounding the manna? Where was the test in all this?

It is precisely for this reason that things are far from clear. With respect to the manna, the Sages have said that the Children of Israel ate the bread of the mighty, bread that was absorbed by the 248 members of their bodies (*Yoma 75b*). That being the case, it is obvious that this manna – this bread from Heaven – tasted sublime. Yet how did the people eat the manna? Did they eat it so that their limbs would absorb it, so that their minds could be free to serve G-d? Or did they eat it simply to enjoy its exquisite taste?

The manna represented a great test. The Children of Israel were free from concerns of sustenance while in the desert, therefore their minds and thoughts were obviously available to serve G-d. However it was precisely on that point that the Holy One, blessed be He, tested them. Did they truly devote their time to serving G-d or not? They had no need to work, nor to make an effort, so why not serve G-d in their free time? A Jew overcame this test if he devoted his time to serving G-d. Otherwise he did not.

If a person is rich and earns an easy living, then he will be tested through this to see if he uses his wealth to serve G-d. When someone is wealthy, this obligates him to give a part of his money to sacred causes, to give to tzeddakah, to support those who study Torah, and to build Torah institutions. If a wealthy person fails to do so, what purpose does his money serve?

Furthermore, there are some people who are extremely wealthy, yet remain unfulfilled. They continue to run after money, amassing ever more wealth, but for what? Will this money accompany them in the world of truth? It is only mitzvot and good deeds, Torah and prayer, that will accompany a person there. All wealth stays here, in this world. Such people should realize that it is only the mitzvot that they have accomplished with their great wealth that will earn them merit in the world above. These are the only things that make money valuable to the Celestial Court.

This is why each person should realize that if he is wealthy, he is in the same situation as those who ate the manna. Hashem is sending this person a great test to

see if he will sanctify his time by performing mitzvot and good deeds with his money, for these will be his only advocates. In addition, it is said that the manna was sent “to test them, whether they will follow My Torah or not.” This means that the test of the manna constitutes a lesson for all the generations. It comes to teach us how precious time is, what the value of each moment is. Because the Children of Israel ate the bread of Heaven in the desert, their minds were free to study and to serve G-d. This should be the attitude of anyone who merits being wealthy enough to have no material concerns. This attitude is also applicable for *avrechim* who study, for they are given their sustenance and their minds must be free from worry in order to study Torah.

It is said that one of the Tzaddikim of the generation devoted almost all his time to Torah study, and just a little time to the affairs of his business. As he was studying one day, someone came to him with a business offer that would have earned him several million dollars. The Tzaddik, however, refused to listen to the man, and he even sent him away. After he left, the Rebbetzin expressed her utter dismay: “Why did you send that man away? You could have earned millions of dollars and closed your shop for a long time, leaving you completely free to study Torah!” Her husband replied, “Do you know who that man was? He was the evil inclination.” Things are clear: If this had been someone sent by G-d, why did he arrive precisely at the time of the Tzaddik’s Torah study? Why did he not come when the Tzaddik was busy working? Did Hashem want the Tzaddik to forsake his studies? This was obviously the evil inclination, which wanted to disrupt his Torah study.

We may draw a lesson from this. Time is precious, and it is forbidden to waste even a single moment in life. Even someone who is not wealthy has the mitzvah to study all the time, even if he is sick, as the Rambam states. How much more does this apply to a wealthy man, who receives his sustenance in abundance and has no material concerns. Why does he not study at every available moment? In the outside world, there is an expression that states, “Too bad for time,” but perhaps with a different meaning. However this assertion stems from reality. Yes, too bad for time. Each instant counts. When we have no financial worries, each moment that passes is precious. Each instant should be used to perform mitzvot and good deeds. It is too bad for each moment of Torah lost. We must sanctify our time through Torah study, as the Creator commanded.

## *Parsha Yitro*

### *The Virtue of our Teacher Moses*

As opposed to every other human being, one may ask why it was Moses who actually “ascended to G-d” (*Ex 19:3*).

If he was able to come so close to the Eternal, it was because he “was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth” (*Num 12:3*). And so when he was accused of having behaved improperly with his wife, he kept quiet and did not at all respond to gossip (*Sanhedrin 110a; Shemot Rabba 1:32*). This king and chief of the prophets grieved over the assembly of the people of Israel, as it is written, “Moses grew up and went out to his brethren and observed their burdens” (*Ex 2:11*). He did everything to come to their aid, and, as we have seen, he even had pity for animals (*Shemot Rabba 2:2; Zohar II: 20b, 21a*).

Finally, we know that when Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp and predicted that Moses would die and that Joshua would replace him, he did not become jealous and did not get angry. On the contrary, he told his servant Joshua, “Would that the entire people of the L-RD could be prophets” (*Num 11:29*).

Even after his death, Moses demonstrated his humility, as it is written, “No one knows his burial place to this day” (*Deut 34:6*). There was neither Hilloula nor candles nor known locale. He didn’t even want that people should bother themselves to come and pray at his tomb.

If Moses held such importance in the eyes of the Eternal, why then – despite having prayed 515 prayers (the numerical value of *Va’etchanan* [*Devarim Rabba 11:6*]) and asking the heavens and the earth, the mountains and the hills, and even the great ocean to garner Divine mercy in his favor (*Tanhuma Va’etchanan 6*) – did he not have the merit to enter into Eretz Israel?

It seems to be because he became angry with the Children of Israel when they asked for water: “Listen now, you rebels ...” (*Num 20:10*). He certainly felt mercy towards them, and the Children of Israel no doubt pardoned him for his remarks, however a man of such great stature should not get upset; the Eternal is very strict with the Tzaddikim (*Yebamot 121b*).

Moreover, as we have seen, if Moses had entered into the Land of Israel, he would have built the holy Temple, and since the atmosphere of Eretz Israel makes a man wise (*Bava Batra 158b*), he would have built it in such a way that it would never have been destroyed. Since he never succeeded in entering Eretz Israel, no one knows where his gravesite is. With the Temple now destroyed, to merit the Final Redemption the Jews must now rely solely on the Holy One, blessed be He, and not on men (*cf. Lev Simcha of the Admor of Ger, section Pinchas, according to one interpretation of the Macharsha*).

After the death of Moses, the Children of Israel entered into the Holy Land, but they also began to worship idols and stopped studying Torah. Thus they arrived at speaking ill of and hating one another. They were neither accommodating nor easy to get along with, and they didn't want to comply with the strictures of Torah law concerning the welfare of others (*Bava Metzia 30b*).

If they had observed the Torah, the Temple would not have been destroyed and the Final Redemption would have occurred. May it happen swiftly in our days! Amen!

### ***Education: The Foundation of Humility***

“Where does Mount Sinai come from?” asks the Midrash (*Shochar Tov 68*). From Mount Moriah. It had been taken from there like Challah is taken from dough, from the spot where Isaac was to have been sacrificed. Thus G-d said, “Since Isaac was to have been sacrificed here, it is good that his children receive the Torah here.”

We may ask ourselves at least three questions concerning this passage.

1. If Mount Moriah is so important, why was the Torah not given on it (without having a portion taken from it and placed on Mount Sinai)?

2. What exactly does “It had been taken” mean? Why did our Sages add, “like Challah is taken from dough”?

3. What is the connection between the sacrifice of Isaac and the giving of the Torah? Did these two events have to occur in the same place?

The Torah commands: “Who is the man who has built a new house and has not inaugurated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war and another man will inaugurate it” (*Deuteronomy 20:5*). What exactly does “lest he die” signify? It means that all those who leave for war are exposed to danger.

What then does “who has built a new house and has not inaugurated it” mean? It is that even the construction of a house implies the performance of several mitzvot that are inseparable from one another, from the mitzvot connected to the house itself (such as the mezuzot [*Deuteronomy 6:9*] and the fence on the roof [*ibid. 22:8*]) to the mitzvot that one performs within its walls (such as the laws of kashrut, family purity, being fruitful and multiplying). The precepts carried out within the home, and the Divine Presence found therein, constitute the very foundation of the Torah. Concerning this, the Talmud teaches that if a man and his wife are worthy, the Divine Presence lives among them; if not, they are devoured by fire (*Sotah 17a*). A man performs mitzvot and good deeds in every corner of the house. He impregnates it throughout with holiness, and it is difficult to commit a sin there. The beams and the walls of the house will witness against him if he commits a sin within (*Taanith 11a*). In the same way that one educates one's children, one educates and impregnates one's house in the service of G-d.

If, as the Talmud relates (*Yoma 47a*), Kimchit had seven sons who all became High Priests, it was because the beams of her house never saw the braids of her hair. She

was careful to hide them even when she was alone in the house, doing so in order to impregnate it with holiness. Because of her modesty, she had the merit to give birth to seven High Priests.

Therefore if a person has built a house without having performed mitzvot in it that he had intended to carry out, he does not have the right to go to war. He will be judged for not having inaugurated it with mitzvot and good deeds. Moreover, Jonathan ben Uziel translated the verse in question into Aramaic as follows: “If someone has built a new house, and has not affixed a mezuzah to it...” For it is the mezuzah and other mitzvot that constitute the foundation of the Jewish home and generates humility in man, a guarantee that the Divine commandments will be carried out.

On Mount Moriah, our Patriarch Isaac was taught to fear the Eternal and to serve Him with the greatest of devotion. Our Sages teach that when the Jewish people finds itself in distress, the “ashes” of Isaac rise toward the Holy One, blessed be He, and his merit saves them. Where, in fact, do these “ashes” come from? Isaac was never sacrificed! The answer is that his modesty and humility allowed him to reach the level of dust and ashes, which are scattered by the wind to the four corners of the earth. It is similar to the Challah that we take from the dough: It is really bread, but when we burn it, it is literally transformed into ashes.

The Talmud teaches that from Mount Moriah, an instructional teaching was sent to the Jewish people – a teaching of modesty, submission, and the fear of Heaven. Just as Mount Moriah was uprooted, the Torah does not stay in one place; one finds it everywhere. We too should perform mitzvot everywhere, with the greatest humility – that is the essential thing. As we have seen, the Torah was given on Mount Sinai because it was the smallest of mountains, and it is part of Mount Moriah.

Desiring to impregnate the Torah and mitzvot within themselves in order to defeat the evil inclination, the Children of Israel therefore settled in the desert, where the forces of evil especially raged, close to Sinai. They wanted to attain very high levels of spirituality on this mountain, a mountain that *meromem Y-h* (“the Eternal uplifts”) Note that Moriah = *meromem Y-h*, as well as the similarity between the numerical values of *Y-h* (the Eternal) and *ga'avah* (pride): Both equal to 15. By the study of Torah, we only adorn ourselves in the Eternal’s majesty.

This Torah portion carries the name Yitro because he, fleeing all honors, went to the desert to impregnate himself with Divine worship and to fight the evil inclination.

This is also what the Children of Israel did. In fleeing from honors into the desert, they were then “pursued” by Mount Moriah, which elevated them and allowed them to reach sublime spiritual levels.

Commenting on the verse that states, “So shall you say [*ko tomar*] to the House of Jacob and relate [*veteigehd*] to the Children of Israel” (*Exodus 19:3*), the Talmud explains (*Shabbat 87a*) that the Eternal uses gentle language with the House of Jacob (that is, with the women), and rough language with the Children of Israel (that is, with the men).

Why two different manners of speaking? Why, moreover (and contrary to that which normally happens), does the verse mention the women before the men?

The answer is that a man learns the virtue of humility from a woman. If on Mount Sinai it was the Torah that reminded him to conduct himself in all humility, who would remind him to do so in his home, if not his wife? The Midrash teaches that all while being strong, a woman is born with a discreet, modest disposition (Bereshith Rabba 18:3). This is why, in order to learn humility (which is the very foundation of the entire Torah), a woman needs *ko tomar* (“thus shall you say”) and “I am the L-RD your G-d”.

### *Unity Brings About Torah Study*

Commenting on the verse that states, “And Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain” (*Exodus 19:2*), Rashi explains that the Children of Israel had gone to receive the Torah like a single man, with a single heart (*see Mechilta ibid.*).

Now this was precisely the very goal of their departure from Egypt, as it is written, “When you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve G-d on this mountain” (*Exodus 3:12*). What does this verse come to tell us?

It comes to teach us the importance of the unity of the Children of Israel. Due to the fact that the majority of mitzvot deal with relationships between man and his fellow, we can only accomplish them by impregnating ourselves with the virtues of peace, harmony, and love. Moreover, by revealing Himself to the Children of Israel to give them the Torah, the Eternal uses the singular: “I am the L-RD your G-d, Who has taken you [singular] out of the land of Egypt” (*Exodus 20:2*). He did not use the plural form of “you” in Hebrew. The most complete harmony was to reign among the Children of Israel when they were to receive the Torah. They were to be guarantors (*arevim*) one for the other (*zeh bazeh*). This has a numerical value of 26, that of the Name of G-d, which is to say that if harmony reigned among them, the Shechinah would reside in their midst (*see Sanhedrin 27b*).

Consequently, only perfect unity allows for the study of Torah and the acceptance of the yoke of the mitzvot. Neither the evil inclination nor foreign nations will then have any hold on the Jews, and they will refrain from committing sins (*Ketubot 66b*). For if the evil inclination finds the least fault (which is to say, the least bit of disagreement), the Shechinah will no longer abide with the Children of Israel, and the evil inclination can then present itself and destroy all traces of holiness. However if harmony reigns among them, they can very well find themselves “opposite the mountain” (an allusion to the evil inclination), all while triumphing over it.

Our Sages teach, furthermore, that at the moment the Torah was given, the evil inclination left the heart of the Children of Israel (*Song of Songs 1:15*). This was due to G-d’s Name being found in their heart because of their unity. They were then crowned with two crowns, one for having proclaimed, “we will do,” and the other for having

proclaimed, “we will listen” (*Shabbat 88a*). Rashi correctly advocates that the Children of Israel encamped before the mountain “with a single heart” since, even if the evil inclination resides between the two parts of the heart (*Berachot 61a*), because of the harmony that reigned among them and the fact that the evil inclination no longer existed, their heart was uniquely reserved for receiving the Torah.

Why then did G-d have to threaten them under these circumstances by lifting the mountain like a *gigit* [Rashi: “barrel”] over them so that they accept, under force, the Torah (*Shabbat 88a*)? Had they not proclaimed, “We will do and we will listen” (*Exodus 24:7*)? Did the Eternal have any doubts concerning their sincerity? The Satan was no longer present; he had left them from that point on.

Let us begin by recalling that the Greeks had forced the Jews to renounce the Eternal and His commandments, such as the observance of Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh, and circumcision. They didn’t want to exterminate them physically, but rather spiritually. This is why the Greeks defiled all the oil that was found in the Temple, for oil alludes to the soul (see *Zohar Chadash, Ruth 108a*). They prohibited the Jews from lighting the Menorah, which alludes to the body. Thus the Greeks were content with defiling all the oil (*Shabbat 21b*), without completely breaking the flasks in which the oil was kept, for they primarily sought to defile the oil (השמן), which has the same letters as the word soul (נשמה). They did not seek to destroy the flasks, which allude to the body.

A miracle nevertheless occurred, and there remained a small flask of pure oil, sealed with the stamp of the High Priest (*Shabbat 21a*). Why did there not remain two or three flasks, whose tiny amount of oil would have sufficed to light the Menorah for eight days? That too was a miracle.

The reason for this is that the flask alludes to the unity of the Creator, Who blesses abundantly starting from one. The Holy One, blessed be He, wanted the Jews to understand that by sacrificing body and soul in order not to be defiled by the Greeks, they took on the manner of Pinchas, son of Eliezer, the son of Aaron the High Priest. Pinchas “was jealous with My Jealousy in their midst” (*Numbers 25:11*). Numerous miracles were performed for him (*Tanhuma Balak 21*) because he wanted to annul the strict sentence pronounced against the Children of Israel.

Furthermore, the flask alludes to the unity that reigns among Jews, which allows for the performance of miracles. The Divine Presence resides among Jews only when they are united with the same heart (soul) as a single body. This is why the miracle occurred with a single flask.

G-d כפה (forced) the mountain on them to show them the importance of unity. The letters כפיה can be rearranged to form פך [י – ה]. In other words, the Eternal [י – ה] united the Children of Israel in a single פך (flask) that, as we saw above, alludes to the body. He showed them how the Satan, who alludes to the mountain, is like a *gigit* without end, from which we cannot flee. “If you accept the Torah as a single man,” He told them, “you will be happy. If not, this mountain will become your grave. You will not be able to escape from the evil inclination [the mountain] that lives with you.”

We therefore see the importance of unity in the eyes of the Holy One, blessed be He. Before the creation of the world, the Children of Israel were a uniform entity (*Bereshith Rabba* 1:5), and also in this world G-d greatly wishes that harmony reigns. Thus Hillel declared to a future convert: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man” (*Shabbat* 31a), and Rabbi Akiva added, “ ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ is a fundamental rule [כלל] of the Torah” (*Yerushalmi Nedarim* 9:4). It is only in this way that one can acquire Torah. The Divine commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) includes (כולל) the Torah in its entirety, and the one who distances himself from this commandment puts all the Jewish people at risk. The Eternal turned the mountain upside down and held it over the Children of Israel like a *gigit* to frighten and dissuade them from leaving the כלל, the entity of the people.

Concerning this the Gemara cites the case of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Meir, whom the evil inclination wanted to make sin. G-d, however, rebuked the Satan, who then left them. Yet Rabbi Yochanan, who was a High Priest for 80 years, became a Sadducee near the end of his life (*Berachot* 29a), and Elisha the son of Avuya, one of the Tannaim, became a heretic (*Hagigah* 14b). This shows us just how the evil inclination works hard at inciting sin. Only harmony allows a person to conquer the evil inclination and to get closer to the Holy One, blessed be He. May the Eternal help us to love one another! Amen!

### ***Modesty Brings About Unity***

The Torah commands us: “Three times a year all your males should appear before the L-RD your G-d in the place that He will choose, on the Festival of Matzot...” (*Deuteronomy* 16:16). The matzot remind us of the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate while in Egypt. They symbolize humility, the virtue that helps us unite with our fellowman and brings us closer to G-d, as it is written: “Anyone with whom his fellowmen are pleased, G-d is pleased with him” (*Perkei Avoth* 3:13[10]).

Our Sages teach that on one hand, the wars that occurred during King Saul’s reign produced many victims, even though his generation was upright. They explain this by the fact that the Children of Israel spoke ill of one another during his reign (*Devarim Rabba* 5:10). On the other hand, the Sages also teach that during the reign of Ahab, even though the Children of Israel worshipped idols, they were always victorious in battle because they did not speak ill of one another (*Vayikra Rabba* 26:2). Thus we see just how unity and harmony work to the Children of Israel’s advantage. Commenting on this, the Midrash explains that the passage, “Ephraim is attached to idols; let him be” (*Hosea* 4:17) means that when harmony reigns among Jews, no nation can conquer them, even if they worship idols (*Bereshith Rabba* 38:6). The pilgrimage to Jerusalem, “built like a city that is united together” (*Psalms* 122:3) – which unites all segments of the Jewish people and makes love reign among them (*Yerushalmi Hagigah* 3:6), and which unites their hearts together (*Mechilta, Yitro* 19) – brings this unity about.

In leaving Egypt, the Children of Israel started preparing for Shavuot, the first festival that they were to celebrate. It was this preparation that would help them during the year and throughout the generations whenever they had to ascend to Jerusalem for a pilgrimage. They were thus unanimously prepared to receive the Torah. The verse that states, “Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain” (*Exodus 19:2*), uses the singular form of the word “encamped,” meaning that they encamped there “as one person, with one heart” (*Rashi, ad loc.*). It denotes submission and obedience, thanks to which we can bind ourselves in friendship to our fellowman, return to Hashem through the performance of His mitzvot, and attain the Torah.

Several places in the Torah indicate the connection between unity and humility.

Before giving them the Torah, Hashem warned the Children of Israel to become guarantors for one another (*Sanhedrin 27b*). If a person does not take care of his fellowman or pay attention to what he lacks, but rather hates him, such a person defiles the Torah and does not merit receiving it [for each letter of the Torah is directly connected to a Jewish soul]. The commandments that a person performs connects to those that others perform, and what then occurs is that all Jews are considered as having performed all the mitzvot. For that matter, this is why we recite, “In a perfect union in the name of all Israel” before performing any mitzvah.

When harmony reigns among Jews, when *kol Israel arevim zeh bazeh* (“All Israel are guarantors for one another” – note that the numerical value of *zeh bazeh* is 26, corresponding to G-d’s Name), Hashem connects to them through their soul, which is a part of G-d (*Zohar III:29b*). Only a modest man can be a guarantor for his fellow, and only a modest man can honor and respect him. Proof for this is as follows: The numerical value of the initials of *kol Israel arevim* (כ ם ץ = 20+10+70 = 100) added to the numerical value of *zeh bazeh* (26) added to the number of words in the expression *kol Israel arevim zeh bazeh* (5) is equal to the numerical value (131) of *anavah* (“modesty” – the virtue that counters the Satan [*Samakel* = 131]).

To the verse that states, “You shall love your fellow as yourself” (*Leviticus 19:18*), the great Tanna Rabbi Akiva added: *Zeh Klal Gadol baTorah* (“This is a great principle of Torah” – *Yerushalmi Nedarim 9:4*). Normally he should have said: *Davar Gadol* (“It is a great...”). Nevertheless, if we love our fellowman as ourselves, we become a part of *Klal Israel*, and we perform all the mitzvot at the same time as they do. The commandment, “You shall love your fellow” *kollel* (includes) the Torah in its entirety, and the one who refrains from it distances himself from the Jewish people (G-d forbid).

Concerning this, let us recall the story of the gentile who came before Shammai and asked him to be converted on condition that he teach him the Torah while standing on one foot. When Shammai rejected this gentile, he went to Hillel and was told: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and study it” (*Shabbat 31a*). No doubt the gentile wanted to know which mitzvah all the others were founded upon, like a foot that supports the entire body.

It remains to be understood why Shammai rejected the gentile. Shammai was also aware of this principle, but he knew that the stranger before him, who wanted to learn but one Torah mitzvah, was very ignorant. He was incapable of understanding the essence of the Torah, which is to love one's fellow as oneself, to be sure to supply what he is missing, and to save his life as if it were one's very own. Only the diligent study of Torah allows a person to eliminate his negative traits and reach a level of genuine love for his fellowman.

The reason that Hillel did not reject him was because he knew that even a gentile could understand the negatively-phrased principle that he gave him to follow. If he were to make it a basic principle in his life, he would arrive at loving his fellowman and thus demonstrate his humility. He taught him this on one *regel* (foot), which alludes to the *regalim*, the three festivals during which time Jews were to ascend to Jerusalem as one.

The Midrash teaches, "The Holy One, blessed be He, said, 'I would have preferred that the Children of Israel forget Me rather than they forget My Torah, whose light brings a man to the right path' " (*Yerushalmi Hagigah 1:7*). The destruction of Jerusalem and the holy Temple were brought about by baseless hatred (*Yoma 9b*) and by the neglect of Torah study and its fundamental principle: "You shall love your fellow as yourself."

As we saw above, if Ahab's soldiers were victorious despite the fact that the entire generation worshipped idols, it was primarily because in his modesty, Ahab honored the Torah (*cf. Sanhedrin 102b*). Humility leads to unity and the study of Torah.

### ***The Importance of Faith at Mount Sinai***

Commenting on the verse, "The L-RD said to Moses, 'Behold! I come to you in the thickness of the cloud, so that the people will hear as I speak to you, and they will also believe in you *le'olam* [forever]' " (*Exodus 19:9*), the author or *Reshith Da'at* asks how that faith, brought about by the giving of the Torah, differed from the faith already shown by the Children of Israel during the exodus from Egypt and the passage through the Sea of Reeds. Concerning the latter it is said: "Israel saw the great hand that the L-RD inflicted upon Egypt; and the people revered the L-RD, and they had faith in the L-RD and in Moses His servant" (*Exodus 14:31*).

The difference lies in the fact that without Torah, we can witness all kinds of miracles without being influenced by them. This is what is happening in our generation: Divine wonders abound, yet people do not change their ways as they continually "dance between two opinions" (*I Kings 18:21*). They purchase the highest priced candles in memory of great Tzaddikim that they so revere, yet they commit sins in front of their very portraits! How can a person transgress G-d's commandments while "the whole world is filled with His glory" (*Isaiah 6:3*)? Does G-d not "fill the heaven and the earth" (*Jeremiah 23:24*)?

The study of Torah, which is eternal, instills the fear of G-d in a person and discourages him from sinning. It helps him fight the evil inclination and conquer it. Torah study also helps a person carry out all the mitzvot, as it is written: “If you follow My decrees” (*Leviticus 26:3*). In other words, “If you seriously engage in Torah study” (*Torat Kohanim Ibid.*), then you will “observe My commandments.” If we “taste and see that the L-RD is good” (*Psalms 34:9*), then we will see His providence everywhere and refrain from sinning. On the other hand, the one who does not engage in Torah study will not feel gratitude for G-d. Not tasting the flavor, he will forgo instilling himself with Divine love, and all the miracles that he witnesses will not affect him in the least. We may very well be believers, however if we do not diligently study Torah we will not sense G-d’s hand in any aspect of our lives, and we may easily come to sin.

All the misfortunes that come upon a person, even if he is honest and upright, stem exclusively from the fact that he neglects Torah study. We can save ourselves from these misfortunes by doing some soul-searching, particularly if we correct our negative traits. The evil inclination never lets go of a person for even a second; it constantly deceives him, and he must exert a tremendous effort to uproot it. This is possible through the regular and diligent study of Torah, as well as by rectifying negative character traits.

We personally know many people who did Teshuvah after having witnessed miracles. Nevertheless, some time afterwards they went back to their old ways. Why did this happen? It is because they did not correct their negative traits and engage in Torah study.

At their departure from Egypt, the Children of Israel surely believed in Hashem and Moses His servant. However since they had not yet received the Torah, their faith wavered despite all the miracles they had witnessed (*Mechilta Beshalach 2*). Nevertheless after the giving of the Torah, which confirmed the existence of the Creator as well as the prophesy of Moses, the Children of Israel *did* believe in Him and in His servant *le’olam* (forever).

Thus we see that as long as we do not study Torah, or if we study it with selfish intentions and not with a love for His Name (*Zohar III:85b*), we are likely to stray from the good path and ignore all the miracles we may witness. Only Torah study distances a person from evil and leads him to the good (*Psalms 34:15*), for idleness leads to foolishness (*Kelubot 59a*), which in turn brings about perversion and murder. The one who studies Torah for the love of G-d will quickly understand the meaning of everything that he has witnessed, and his faith in G-d will increase. The Torah is, in the final analysis, the most definitive proof of G-d’s existence and the righteousness of the Tzaddikim.

The Tablets of the Law are also called the Tablets of the Testimony (*Exodus 31:18*). The Torah is light and it revitalizes like water, as the Talmud teaches on the verse, “Ho, everyone who is thirsty, go to the water” (*Isaiah 55:1*): “Water refers to Torah” (*Bava Kama 17a*). The one who engages in Torah study thus rids himself of evil forces and senses a holy energy penetrating his body. This testifies to the complete truthfulness of the Holy One, blessed be He, and His Tzaddikim.

Thus the faith of the Children of Israel was unsteady before the giving of the Torah, but the Torah strengthened it to a tremendous degree. Torah study and the performance of mitzvot lead to the conclusion that Moses is truth and his Torah is truth (*Bava Batra 74a*).

### *Do Not Be Sure Of Yourself*

The Midrash teaches, “When Israel came out of Egypt, the vast majority of them were afflicted with some blemish. Why? Because they had been working in clay and bricks and climbing to the tops of buildings. Those who were engaged in building became maimed through climbing to the top of the layers of stone. Either a stone fell and cut off the worker’s hand, or a beam or some clay got into his eyes and he was blinded. When they came to the wilderness of Sinai, G-d said: ‘Is it consonant with the dignity of the Torah that I should give it to a generation of cripples? If, on the other hand, I wait until others take their place, I shall be delaying the Revelation.’ What, then, did G-d do? He commanded the angels to come down to Israel and heal them” (*Bamidbar Rabba 7:1*).

Concerning the verse, “Egypt enslaved the Children of Israel *bepharech* [with crushing hardness]” (*Exodus 1:13*), the Talmud explains this to mean “with a tender mouth [*peh rach*]” (*Sotah 11b*).

These two remarks seem contradictory at first, yet we shall demonstrate that they are closely related to one another.

Let us recall that when Moses saw two Hebrews quarreling with each other, he asked one of them, “Why would you strike your fellow?” (*Exodus 2:13*). The man replied, “Do you propose to murder me, as you murdered the Egyptian?” Thus Moses thought, “Indeed, the matter is known” (*v.14*). In other words, “Moses was mediating in his heart: ‘Wherein has Israel sinned that they should be enslaved more than all the nations?’ When he heard these words, he said: ‘Tale-bearing is rife among them, and how can they be ripe for salvation?’ ” (*Shemot Rabba 1:30*).

We may therefore say that it was this *peh rach* – the slandering and gossiping that the Children of Israel inherited from the Egyptians – that almost made them breach the fiftieth gate of impurity. Now we know that the Torah contains 613 mitzvot, of which 248 positive commandments correspond to the 248 limbs of the body, and 365 negative commandments correspond to the 365 sinews of the body and days of the year (*Makot 23b*). Each limb and sinew has a relationship with a particular mitzvah. Therefore when the Children of Israel speak “untruth to his neighbor. A lip of smooth talk, with an insincere heart do they speak” (*Psalms 12:3*), they affected their limbs and broke either a hand, a leg, or any other limb related to the mitzvah they had defiled.

They were healed of this sin when they stopped their slandering and began to love one another. Thus they imitated the angels, “all of them beloved, all are chosen, all are mighty, all are holy; who repeat in unison the words of the living G-d; who give each other permission to sanctify their Maker with joyous spirit, all exclaiming in unison,

with awe, and declaring in reverence: ‘He is holy in the lofty heights’ ” [Tur, Orach Chaim 132]. Addressing one another they exclaim, “Holy, holy, holy, is the L-RD of Hosts” (Isaiah 6:3).

Without a doubt, this is what our Sages alluded to when they said, “*Al ta’amin be’atzmach* [Do not be sure of yourself] until the day you die” (*Perkei Avoth 2:4*). Do not trust in *atzmautecha* (your body). Your limbs will be affected if you defile them with your sins, and you may fall ill “until the day you die.” On the other hand, if you take to the path of uprightness, your bones will be healed, your body will be in good physical health, and you will serve your Creator as should be.

The Midrash teaches, “The first Tablets of the Law, which were formally given to the Children of Israel, were broken because of the evil eye, whereas the second, which were given discreetly, remained intact” (*Tanhuma, Ki Tisa 31*). Several commentators have asked how the evil inclination managed to make the Children of Israel sin, for despite the number of miracles that the Children of Israel witnessed at the Sea of Reeds and at the giving of the Torah (the first Tablets of the Law), they made the golden calf. However at the giving of the second Tablets, the Children of Israel reached lofty levels in Torah study. They fasted for forty days, and on Yom Kippur their sin was forgiven (see *Numbers 14:20*). Why was the evil inclination incapable of making them sin at that time as well?

The answer is that, as we have seen, the angels healed the people of all their infirmities (*Yalkut Shimoni, Yitro 300*) and character faults before the Torah was given. However since they had not personally put an effort into achieving that end, only their external infirmities were healed. Their hearts were not completely pure, and they accepted the Torah under duress. This is why they committed the sin of the golden calf. However when they received the second Tablets of the Law, they deeply imbued themselves with Torah and reached sublime spiritual levels. It was then that they believed in themselves in a proper way.

Thus the first Tablets (denoting the external aspect of serving G-d) were broken, whereas the second Tablets (denoting the internal aspect) remained intact.

We may also say that the Children of Israel failed at the giving of the first Tablets because they believed themselves to be completely upright: “If we were not upright,” they said to themselves, “we would not have deserved to see the Shechinah, to witness so numerous miracles, to eat the manna – the food of angels [see *Yoma 75*] – and to live safe and sound in peace.” It was these thoughts that incited the evil inclination to attack them. At the time of the second Tablets, however, they understood that they should not smugly believe in themselves. They also understood that all the miracles that the Holy One, blessed be He, performed for them had been a free gift destined to make them take to the right path, and in no way did they feel that they were Tzaddikim. Hashem demonstrates patience, even with the wicked. Having made great efforts, the Children of Israel thus succeeded in conquering their evil inclination.

A person should therefore realize that it is precisely when he has no particular financial or health problems that he should be most vigilant. Leading a tranquil life is

likely to make him believe that his behavior is pleasing to G-d, and that he deserves the blessing that Heaven has lavished upon him in many areas. This is the occasion that the evil inclination waits for, and it is therefore appropriate to double our safeguards in order not to fall into its traps. A person should thus diligently engage in Torah study, correct his negative character traits – in depth, not just superficially – and repent each day (*Shabbat 153a*), for how can a person know that he has not sinned? It may very well be that he sinned but does not recall his offense. The very belief that we have not sinned is reprehensible. As Bilam said to the angel of Hashem, “I have sinned, for I did not know...” (*Numbers 23:34*). This ignorance in and of itself constitutes a sin, testifying to the pride inherent in an individual.

The Sages teach, “What is meant by, ‘Who is the wise man who will understand this? Who is he to whom the mouth of the L-RD speaks, that he may explain this? For what reason did the land perish?’ [*Jeremiah 9:11*]. This question was put by the Sages, but they could not answer it; by the prophets, but they [too] could not answer it, until the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself resolved it, as it is written: ‘But the L-RD has said: Because of their forsaking My Torah that I put before them’ [*v.12*]” (*Bava Metzia 85a-b*). How can we imagine that Jerusalem, the place where numerous miracles were performed (*Perkei Avoth 5:5*), could be destroyed? It is because the Children of Israel, who had become accustomed to miracles, believed that if they had not been truly worthy, they would not have had the privilege of witnessing them. Sure of themselves and their importance, they began to neglect Torah study and perform the mitzvot by rote, without any concentration. Their divine service then began to resemble a body without a soul, and their “uprightness” was only on the outside. This is because they had received everything as a gift, without exerting the least effort. A person must therefore never consider himself to be a Tzaddik. Instead, he must always engage in Torah study to spiritually elevate himself.

The Talmud asks, “Why was... Israel in that generation deserving of extermination? ...Because they partook of the feast of that wicked one [Achashverosh]” (*Megillah 12a*). Sure of themselves, the Jews of that generation voluntarily responded to the king’s invitation (*Esther Rabba 2:5*). Thus they witnessed abominable sins, which proves that their hearts were not pure. They desecrated G-d’s Name by their conduct, and instead of believing in G-d and doing everything to avoid participating in this feast, they believed in themselves too much and were convinced that they would not fall.

Nevertheless, after the miracles of Purim they again received the Torah, as it is written: “The Jews confirmed and took upon themselves and their posterity [the Torah]” (*Esther 9:27*). If they received the Torah on Mount Sinai under duress and, as it were, superficially, nevertheless on Purim they received it with love. The Talmud teaches that they performed above what they had received below. Their deed was accepted above because their new acceptance of the Torah was internal. Conforming to Mordechai’s instructions, they began to take to the godly path and did not consider themselves as being Tzaddikim. Instead, they relied solely on Hashem.

### *The Seventy Facets of Torah*

Let us revisit the concept of “As one person, with one heart” (*Rashi, Mechilta, Exodus 19:2*).

We may ask how the Children of Israel managed to come together and unanimously proclaim the oneness of G-d (*Minchat Eliezer*). As we have seen, they constituted what has been called the “Generation of Knowledge,” and each undoubtedly served G-d in different, individual ways. That being the case, can we truly speak of their accord and harmony?

The answer is that, as we know, what really causes strife is personal self-interest and pride, which are intrinsic to man. This is particularly true of a person who has already reached a certain degree of spirituality, and who, jealous of his fellow who serves Hashem even better than he does, opposes his ideas or favors his competition. This person creates a closed personal circle, and in it he suggests ideas that are diametrically opposed to those of his fellow. Such a person certainly does not act for the sake of Heaven, and he does not notice his own pride, for in the final analysis he only cares about his own personal interests.

As for the Children of Israel, they stood “before the mountain” (*Exodus 19:2*), meaning that they rid themselves of the evil inclination (*see Sukkah 52a*). No one wanted to compete with others; none selfishly sought his own interests. Therefore they all served Hashem with one heart.

The Talmud states that Hashem *kafah aleihem har kegugit* (“overturned the mountain on them like a barrel”) and threatened to bury them under it if they refused to accept the Torah (*Shabbat 88a*). Hashem therefore helped them to *lehitkofef* (“bend”, having the same root as *kafah*) and adopt the point of view of others. This is because discord does tremendous damage to the livelihood of the Jewish people, especially to their Torah study.

Hashem therefore placed all the Children of Israel under the same mountain so they would perform the mitzvot in the greatest possible harmony. The Mishnah teaches that this is because all discord stems from person self-interest; it is useless and leads nowhere (*Perkei Avoth 5:7; see also Zohar II:33a*). Moreover, according to the Midrash (*Bereshith Rabba 18:12*), the letters of the word *machloket* (discord) are formed from the first letters of *makkah* (smiting), *charon* (fury), *likui* (punishment), *kelalah* (curse), and *to'evah* (abomination). Let us therefore seek peace by all possible means, for wise and learned men increase peace in the world, as it is written: “Torah scholars increase peace in the world” (*Berachot 64a*). They are called *bannaim* (“builders”), for they are constantly engaged in building up the world (*Shabbat 114a*). This is what happens when everyone follows Hashem in his own individual way, yet acts solely for the sake of Heaven. Accord and harmony lead to success in every area.

Concerning this subject, we have already looked at the case of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who refused to stand in the Temple while Rehoboam, the king of Judah, would be seated there (*Sanhedrin 101b*). He wanted to ignore the teaching of the Sages, who said

that the Temple was reserved for the kings of the house of David (*Yoma 25a*). Jeroboam ended up becoming evil, and he established two golden calves to make Jews believe that it was unnecessary to go up to the Temple in Jerusalem. His pride and selfishness made him lose all reason. We have also seen how he refused to repent and enjoy G-d's presence in Gan Eden, for David, the son of Jesse, would have been at the head there. Jeroboam thus refused to honor King David, who considered himself more like a worm than a man (*see Psalms 22:7*). According to our Sages, this is why Jeroboam the son of Nebat and all his followers descended into hell, where they are punished for all generations (*Rosh Hashanah 17a*).

It is certainly difficult for a person to neglect his own interests. Yet as our Sages taught, a person is allowed to follow the path (good or evil) that he wishes to pursue (*Makkot 10b*).

We personally know people who, even in the realm of Torah, only take the opinion of their own rabbi into account, and everything that another Torah authority says has no value in their eyes. For the love of their own rabbi, they end up opposing and hating anyone who does not share their point of view. Such people are truly in the wrong, for even what the greatest Torah scholar is destined to reveal has already been said on Mount Sinai (*Vayikra Rabba 22:1*). Therefore whoever neglects the Torah of a rabbi (or of a student, or even of an ordinary person) renounces the Torah of our teacher Moses, which was transmitted to him on Mount Sinai.

I was once giving a speech somewhere, and while the audience was carefully listening to my words, a man sitting in the first row could not stop bursting with laughter. I understood that he was doing this because I wasn't saying anything new to him. What's more is that I was thinking the same thing myself, for everything was said to Moses on Mount Sinai, and "there is nothing new under the sun" (*Ecclesiastes 1:9*).

At the end of the speech I called him over and said, "Don't you know, my dear friend, that everything I said is what I heard from the rav of your yeshiva?" He then completely changed his attitude and admitted, "It was really an amazing speech. I knew that those words could only come from him." I then left him.

A few minutes later, he came back and said to me, "Rabbi, why didn't you mention that fact during your speech?"

"It was to punish you for having laughed at me during and after my speech," I explained to him.

G-d wants everyone to love his fellow, even if he does not share his point of view or that of his teacher. This is because the Holy One, blessed be He, hears the prayers of all the Jewish people, both Tzaddikim and ordinary people. He even makes a crown from the prayers of the wicked (*Zohar II:58b; 246a*).

Our Sages came to the conclusion that the viewpoints of the school of Hillel, as well as those of the school of Shammai (which are sometimes diametrically opposed) constitute the words of the Living G-d. The Halachah nevertheless goes according to

the school of Hillel (*Eruvin 13b*). This is because they were humble and willingly cited the viewpoints of their “opponents” before their own. Incidentally, this was not always the case, for the Halachah sometimes went according to the school of Shammai.

The Mishnah teaches that every controversy that is for the sake of Heaven leads to an abiding result; such were the controversies between Hillel and Shammai (*Perkei Avoth 5:17*; see also *Zohar I:17b*).

G-d threatened to bury the Children of Israel under the mountain so that everyone would acknowledge the validity of the other’s viewpoint. “If you accept My Torah in accord and harmony, without seeking your own selfish interests,” He told them, “Good. If not, *sham* [‘there’ – under the mountain] you will be buried.” The destiny of the person who only cares about his own reputation – one who only cares about his own *shem* (“name”) and thinks that he is important; one who rejects all other ways of serving G-d – will be bitter. *Yikaver*, he will be buried in his *shem*, as it is written: *Veshem reshaim yirkav* (“And the name of the wicked shall rot” – *Proverbs 10:7*). This is the fate of those who support discord and antagonism among the Jewish people. If we share our fellow’s point of view when we are *ke’ish* (an abbreviation of *kan eno yirkav, yikaver shemo*: “Here he will not rot, and his name will not be buried”), we will merit living a pleasant life both in this world and the World to Come.

These comments are valid in every era, especially in our generation, when the results of assimilation have been devastating. Hardships are extremely numerous and increasingly difficult in our time, when those who want to do Teshuvah are disrupted by the difficulties of life. The evil inclination is always present and on the lookout, not relaxing if it fails in its attempts. On the contrary, it constantly attempts new tricks, telling the Baal Teshuvah, “You did well to turn back to the good path. Be careful to pay attention only to the words of your own rabbi, since only his Torah is truth. All other rabbis are worthless; they don’t know how to serve G-d.” In this way a person transgresses the prohibition against slandering others and denigrating one’s fellow and his words, which is the cause of our long exile.

A person can study Torah, recite prayers, and perform mitzvot, yet he must be constantly careful to not feel superior to others in wisdom or knowledge. He must love his fellow, both internally (*belev echad*) and externally (*ke’ish echad*), and his heart should be in accord with his mouth concerning his sentiments for him (see *Pesachim 113b*).

One of the first questions that the Celestial Court asks a person after he dies is, “Did you hope for salvation?” (*Shabbat 31a*). Is this question put to the Tzaddikim? No doubt it is not, for they certainly believed during their entire lives in the coming of Mashiach and the approaching Final Redemption. This question is certainly not put to the wicked either, who completely disregarded the commandments. Who then is this question put to?

It is put to those who, on one hand, wait for Mashiach, and who on the other hand delay his coming. It is put to those who slander their fellowmen and hate them (*Yoma 9b*).

Moses wondered why the Children of Israel had to be enslaved more than any other nation (*Shemot Rabba 1:30*). However when he learned that they slandered one another, only seeking their own selfish interests, he said, “Certainly this thing is known” (*Exodus 2:14*). It is primarily these evil deeds that delay the Final Redemption.

Before the giving of the Torah, strife was dividing the Children of Israel, with each person thinking that he was in the right. Concerning this subject, the Midrash teaches that each time the verse states, “and they journeyed,” “and they encamped,” it is highlighting this strife (*Yalkut Shimoni, Exodus 275*). However after having received the Torah, each of them paid attention to the words of the other and no one sought his own selfish interests. The author of the book *HaMeir*, dedicated to the memory of Rabbi Meir Chadash *Zatzal*, nevertheless notes that both during times of strife and times of harmony, “The L-RD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them on the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel day and night” (*Exodus 13:21*). While the plural is used to describe their journeys in the desert, on Mount Sinai the singular is used, for at that point their unity was absolute.

Because of this unity, *all the people together* replied, “All that the L-RD has spoken, we will do” (*Exodus 19:8*). Rashi asks why Moses brought the people’s response back to Hashem (see *Mechilta*). Was G-d not already aware of it?

The answer is that Moses knew that their unity would find favor in Hashem’s eyes. He therefore brought their response to G-d to quiet the accusers who claimed that the Children of Israel did not merit receiving the Torah (*Shabbat 88b*). Moses explained to them that it was the Torah that contributed to their unity, and they expressed their desire to “see our King” (*Rashi on Exodus 19:9*).

We see from this that the study of Torah and the performance of the mitzvot aim primarily at unifying the Jewish people. According to Hashem’s words to Moses, He came to him “in a thick cloud, that the people *may hear* [Hebrew verb is singular] when I speak with you, and believe in you forever” (*Exodus 19:9*). It is only through unity, when people rid themselves of their own selfish interests, from pride and honor, that they achieve complete faith in G-d and the Tzaddikim of the generation. May G-d help us to humble ourselves as the dust of the earth before each Jew who is truly G-d-fearing, and particularly before the Tzaddikim of the generation, whose words are those of the Living G-d. We will only have the merit to witness the coming of Mashiach, our righteous redeemer, when we free ourselves from pride and when perfect love and harmony reign among us. We will then be free of our evil inclination, which constantly tries to make us stumble. Amen.

## *Parsha Mishpatim*

### *The Obligation to Learn the Reasons for Each of the Mitzvot*

Commenting on the verse that states, “And these are the ordinances that you shall place before them” (*Ex 21:1*), Rashi sites the Talmud as follows: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, ‘Don’t think for a moment that you’ll teach them a chapter or a Halachah just once or twice. Don’t withhold yourself from explaining the reasons for the mitzvot. You will clearly present the laws to them, as one sets a table’” (*Eruvin 54b; Mechilta 54b*).

Rabbi Yosef Haim, the famous author of *Ben Ish Hai*, explains the verse as follows: “You will therefore observe the law, the statutes, and the ordinances that I command you today” (*Deut 7:11*). The 613 commandments are divided into three categories: The *chukim* (statues) are those that we don’t understand the reasoning for and that the mind can’t comprehend; the *mitzvot* (laws) are those that are understandable but which we perform only because G-d told us to; and the *mishpatim* (ordinances) are those that are understandable and justifiable and which we would perform even if G-d hadn’t told us to.

Now this Parsha begins by this last category of commandments, and this raises a certain number of problems.

1. If the mishpatim are justifiable, why did G-d order Moses to present them to the Children of Israel as one sets a table? Since they could understand them through reasoning, they would perform them without being ordered to do so.

2. Why does this section of the Torah begin precisely with the laws concerning the Hebrew slave?

3. As we have explained on many occasions, the word תשיט (“place”, mentioned at the beginning of the Parsha) is formed from the first letters of the Hebrew words Tefillin, Shabbat, and *Milah* (circumcision). Yet we don’t see here what the connection is between these three precepts (included in the word תשיט) and the laws concerning the purchase of a Hebrew slave.

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra explains that Moses wanted to emphasize the difficulty of enslaving someone. For all men are free, and the Children of Israel are the sons of the King (*Shabbat 67a*). Who likes being enslaved and made to suffer?

G-d therefore ordered Moses to encourage the Children of Israel to behave with gentleness in regards to their slaves, not to consider them as personal possessions.

As for the Ramban, he explains that the Parsha begins with the laws concerning the Hebrew slave because it mentions the seventh year when they are to be liberated, which alludes to the departure from Egypt. As it is written, “And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that the L-RD your G-d redeemed you.

Therefore I command you regarding this matter today.” (*Deut 15:15*). In other words, when you will have acquired a slave, behave properly with him.

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra and the Ramban explain that a slave does indeed constitute a possession for his master, but it is proper to treat a slave with a maximum of tact. The Children of Israel – who had been deprived of their liberty in Egypt, where they had been subjected to the most terrible atrocities of slavery – should not treat their slaves as they themselves had been treated in Pharaoh’s country.

Even though all these ideas seem very clear, Moses had to present them “as one sets a table.” And if he hadn’t presented them to the Children of Israel, they would have definitely sinned. They perhaps didn’t understand the essence of their servitude in, and their liberation from, Egypt. The evil inclination tries to make men fail precisely in those areas that they think they’ve mastered.

The Parsha therefore starts with the laws concerning the Hebrew slave in order to show that “the Children of Israel are servants to Me” (*Lev 25:55*). It is to show that they are not the slaves of slaves (*Kiddushin 22b; Bava Metzia 10a*). These are certainly minor details, but it is proper that they should be explained to the Children of Israel so that they don’t weaken spiritually.

As we have seen, the Children of Israel were liberated from slavery because of the observance of Shabbat (*Yerushalmi Taanith 1:1*), their circumcision before leaving Egypt (*Tanhuma Beshalach 7*), and the mitzvah of Tefillin (*Ex 13:16*).

G-d thus recalls these three mitzvot. He presents (and asks them to place, תשיט) before them these signs in order to reconnect them to G-d and have them serve Him. For, as we know (*Menachot 36b*), the successive laws of Shabbat, circumcision, and Tefillin all carry the moniker *Oht* (a sign). The Torah only mentions the Parsha of the Hebrew slave afterwards so as to make the Israelites understand that it’s only through the observance of these three mitzvot that they went from slavery to freedom. The Hebrew who was sold as a slave must have defiled these three mitzvot.

Moses therefore explained to the Children of Israel that if they observed these three mitzvot, they wouldn’t become slaves nor enslaved to the evil inclination. Otherwise, they become defiled and defile the entire universe that was created in six days (“he shall work for six years” [*Ex 21:2*]). However, by the strict observance of Shabbat (which, as we saw above, alludes to the seventh year), they would be restored to freedom. This means that they would no longer be under the tutelage of the evil inclination, but rather under that of the Holy One, blessed be He.

### **“And These Are the Ordinances” – The Secret of Reincarnation**

Commenting on the verse that states, “And these are the ordinances that you shall place before them” (*Exodus 21:1*), the Zohar states: “These are the individual reincarnations of each of the souls that are judged” (*Zohar II:94a*).

The secrets of reincarnation are certainly very profound, yet we intend to discuss them here to some degree by introducing them into the subject of our parsha.

As we have seen, just like Adam, Moses embodied all the souls of the Jewish people (*Tikkun Zohar 56:90b*). Thus when we engage in the study of the “Torah of Moses,” we repair the sin of Adam and bring the Final Redemption closer. Let us examine how this happens.

We know that Moses was the reincarnation of Abel (*Tikkun Zohar 69:99b*). If Abel looked at the fire and got burned, “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to gaze toward G-d” (at the incident of the burning bush – *Exodus 3:6*). Despite his great spiritual level, he still demonstrated great modesty and never considered himself as worthy enough to look at the Shechinah. As the Arizal teaches, Mashiach will only come when the death of Abel will be rectified. In our opinion, this is what the prophet Malachi alludes to when he states, “Remember the Torah of Moses My servant ... Behold, I send you Elijah the prophet” (*Malachi 3:22-23*). We get closer to the Final Redemption by recalling the Torah of Moses, the spark and reincarnation of Abel.

As he welcomed guests, Abraham invited them to “recline beneath *ha’etz* [the tree]” (*Genesis 18:4*), which alludes to the Torah, as it is written: “It is a tree of life to those who grasp it” (*Proverbs 3:18*). All the mitzvot in the Torah carry the name *Etzot* (*Zohar II:82b*), words of wisdom that allow an individual to fight the evil inclination. When Adam sinned by eating of the Tree of Knowledge (which alludes to the wisdom that the Torah disseminates), he was condemned to death in order to repair everything that he had tainted. All the souls that were dependant upon him then dispersed (*Tikkun Zohar 69:102b*).

As for Adam, he was reincarnated in our holy Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (*ibid. 113a*). Enslaved in Egypt, the Children of Israel had to repair all the souls that had been dispersed following Adam’s sin (see *Ohr HaChayim on Genesis 49:9*). Moses was, as we saw above, the reincarnation of Abel. He was equal to all the souls of Israel, and he had to suffer with them and help them to escape from the *Kelipah* (impurity), as it is written: “Moses grew up and went out to his brethren” (*Exodus 2:11*). This is what constitutes *gilgul* (reincarnation), which has the same numerical value (72) as *chesed*, the loving kindness that he demonstrated towards them.

According to the Zohar, Pinchas the son of Elazar was the incarnation of our Patriarch Isaac (*Zohar III:236b, 237a*). For that matter, we may note that the numerical value of their names is the same (208). Esau was reincarnated into Zimri, the son of Salu. With regards to this, notice that the numerical value of the expression *zeh hu Esav* (added to the number of letters in *hu Esav* [6]) is equal to the numerical value (406) of the name *Zimri ben Salu*. Now as we know, Cain was reincarnated into Esau (*Tikkun Zohar 69:118b*). Together they constitute the origin of *Kelipah*, since Zimri sinned with the Midianite. Isaac (Pinchas) was to kill Esau (Zimri), but since Esau was not rectified by his incarnation as Zimri, it was Pinchas (the reincarnation of Isaac) who took charge of that task (by killing him) to demonstrate that there is a judgment and a judge.

Following that incident, Esau was reincarnated into Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair's donkey (*Chullin 7a*), and Pinchas into Rabbi Akiva. During the time of Pinchas, "Those who died in the plague were 24,000" (*Numbers 25:9*), and in parallel to that Rabbi Akiva lost 24,000 of his disciples because they did not show respect for one another (*Yebamot 62b*).

Having eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, Eve brought death into the world (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bereshith 32*). She was reincarnated as Batiah, the daughter of Pharaoh, thanks to whom the world would survive because she "drew him [Moses] from the water" (*Exodus 2:10*). Thus she had the merit of bearing the name "*bat Y-h*" ("daughter of Hashem"), the work of His hands, like Eve. Now according to the Zohar, Eve also brought about Abel's death (*Tikkun Zohar 69:118b*). Batiah, however, saved Moses. We may therefore say that it was by the merit of Batiah (the reincarnation of Eve) that Moses (the reincarnation of Abel) saved the Children of Israel from Egypt and gave them the Torah. Therefore Batiah completely atoned for the sin of Eve.

Commenting on the verse that states, "You shall observe the commandment ... that I command you today" (*Deuteronomy 7:11*), the Talmud explains: "We carry them out today, and we receive their reward tomorrow" (*Eruvin 22a*), meaning in the World to Come. A man does not receive the reward for his good deeds in this world lest he come back (in another incarnation) following his sins. His reward is given to him in the World to Come, at the resurrection of the dead. In the future the Holy One, blessed be He, will bring back to life the one who was but dust, and He will give him the reward he deserves. The expression "And these are the ordinances that you shall place before them" (*Exodus 21:1*) therefore denotes the secret of reincarnation, the means by which a man receives the reward for his good deeds.

Reincarnation also occurs in minor areas, such as food. A food that was defiled, or which did not attain the goal that G-d prescribed for it, must be rectified. Thus vegetable matter is transformed into animal matter, which in turn is transformed into a human being, who then enables it to attain its goal by eating it. Even the dried up bones in Ezekiel's vision (*Ezekiel 37:11*) – "dried" meaning devoid of all Torah, of mitzvot (*Sanhedrin 92b*), and of holiness – can be rectified by the process of reincarnation. How does this occur? We know that even the forces of evil have, deep down, a spark of holiness in them, like a fine thread (*Zohar II:201b*). Impurity sticks to a man's body by means of this spark, but in the agony of the grave, when bones become dried up and the body putrefies, this impurity becomes detached from it (*Zohar I:116*).

The rectification caused by reincarnation occurs primarily through Torah study, prayer, and the performance of mitzvot. Moreover, the numerical value of the expression *Ve'eileh hamishpatim asher tasim lifneichem* ("And these are the ordinances that you shall place before them" [*Exodus 21:1*]) is the same as the expression *Zeh razeh hagiglul: BaTorah, tefillah, u'mitzvot* ("This is the secret of reincarnation: With Torah [study], prayer, and mitzvot").

### *Enslavement to G-d – Complete Freedom*

It is written, “If you buy a Hebrew servant, six years he shall serve; and in the seventh he shall go out free” (*Exodus 21:2*).

The commentators (Rabbi Ibn Ezra and the Rambam in particular) have asked why, following the giving of the Torah, the Parsha speaks of the mitzvah of selling a Hebrew slave, rather than any other Divine precept.

The mitzvah in question deals with a Hebrew slave that is sold for having stolen, as it is stated further on: “If he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft” (*Exodus 22:2*; also see *Rashi*). It is therefore fitting to realize that if we sin (by stealing from G-d), we will be enslaved to the evil inclination, for we will have neither Torah, nor mitzvot, nor repentance to grant us freedom.

Nevertheless, *vashevi'it* (“in the seventh”) – which contains the letters of the word *teshuvah* – “he shall go out free.” This means that if a person repents of his sins and accepts the yoke of the Torah, he will be released from the yoke of other demands (*Perkei Avoth 3:5*). He will be rid of the evil inclination and free, for the only person who is truly free is the one who devotes himself to Torah study (*Perkei Avoth 6:2*; *Kallah 8*) and only serves G-d. This is because, as we have seen, the Torah protects a person; it saves him from all harm (*Sotah 21a*) and is the ideal remedy against the evil inclination (*Sukkah 52b*).

We can understand at this point why Parshiot Yitro, Mishpatim, and Terumah are together in the Torah.

Parsha Yitro speaks of hearing, as it is written: “Jethro...heard everything that G-d did” (*Exodus 18:1*); Parsha Mishpatim deals with enslavement; and finally Parsha Terumah deals with the Sanctuary, as it is written: “They shall make a Sanctuary for Me – so that I may dwell among them” (*Exodus 25:8*). In other words, only the one who listens to G-d’s voice is truly His servant (not the evil inclination’s) and attains the level of the Sanctuary. Even a non-Jew such as Jethro, who was content with hearing about G-d, can repent and convert. Just like us, the nations of the world recite prayers, but what separates us from them is Mishpatim – the study of Torah and the performance of the commandments. Only we have the merit of being G-d’s servants and building a Sanctuary for Him.

### The Time Known as *Shovavim*

The author of *Beer Hetev* cites the words of the Arizal concerning *Shovavim*, the period of time that extends from Parsha Shemot to Parsha Mishpatim: These are days favorable for Tikkun, spiritual awakening, repentance, and increasing our faith in G-d. (See also *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 685:2*).

We may in fact ask why these days carry such importance. The month of Elul is also quite favorable for Teshuvah, and the approach of Yom Kippur literally makes people quake. What do these days of *Shovavim* possess, days in which no one fasts or refrains from speaking, that does not exist during the month of Elul?

We must first of all praise G-d, Who filled the Sages and Prophets of Israel with wisdom, intelligence, and insight. They are the ones who marvelously divided the Torah into weekly sections. Moses transcribed the Torah from the mouth of G-d with such perfection that each of its letters can be interpreted in a thousand ways. The Talmud recounts that Rabbi Akiva suggested a multitude of Halachot for each of the *tagim* (“crowns”) over the letters (*Menachot 29b*). The Mishnah advocates that we repeatedly review the Torah, for everything is in it (*Perkei Avoth 5:21*). The Torah – the secret of secrets – alludes to everything. Happy is the one who can perceive this! Happy is the one who “does not deviate...right or left” (*Deuteronomy 17:11*) from the Torah.

Moses commanded us to read sections of the Torah on Saturdays and festivals (*Yerushalmi Megillah 4:1*), and Ezra commanded us to read them on Mondays and Thursdays, as well as on Saturday afternoon (*ibid.*, *Bava Kama 82a*). A difficult question arises: Are we not obligated to *constantly* study Torah, as it is written: “This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth; rather you should contemplate it day and night” (Joshua 1:8); “You shall teach them thoroughly to your children, and you shall speak of them while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way...” (*Deuteronomy 6:7*); “If not for My covenant [the Torah], I would not have appointed days and nights, the decrees of heaven and earth” (*Jeremiah 33:25*)? The verse, “If you follow My decrees” (*Leviticus 26:3*) means, “That you should labor in [studying] Torah” (*Torat Kohanim ibid.*).

Why should we not be content with reading the Torah, for example, only once per year? Why, moreover, must seven people ascend to the Torah on Shabbat (*Megillah 21a*)? Why not six or eight? Finally, why did the Holy One, blessed be He, command us to remember for our entire lives, both day and night, the exodus from Egypt (*Berachot 12b*)? Could we not simply recall this during the holiday of Passover, or once per month for example?

Before providing answers to all these questions, let us cite an important passage from the Zohar: “Woe to him who believes that the holy Torah recounts everyday stories. The entire Torah is an assembly of awesome secrets” (*Zohar I:10b; II:82b; III:152b*). Furthermore, “Each of its letters guides man in his life. They are pearls that illuminate his path” (*Zohar III:202a*). Thus the greater spiritual level we reach, the more sound advice we need, for each piece of advice given to man is only valid for the time it is given (not for the high level he has reached). It is therefore appropriate to diligently engage in Torah study in order to know what advice to accept.

If we refrain from studying Torah – if we do not serve G-d as we should – this signals that the advice we have received was not sound enough to wage war against the evil inclination, and that we are susceptible of being defeated by it. This is because the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) only aims at making a man sin, at weakening him, and at subjecting him to hardships in order to dissuade him from studying Torah, reciting prayers, and performing mitzvot. It is even capable of making him deny G-d.

It is therefore not enough to be filled with faith, to recite prayers, to give to charity, to listen to Torah lectures, and to perform good deeds. We are required to diligently

engage in Torah study. We will then receive heavenly assistance that will enable us to perform mitzvot with greater fervor and eliminate all traces of the evil inclination. Our victory in mastering ourselves will earn us reward both in this world and the World to Come.

Our Sages therefore commanded us to publicly read sections of the Torah because there are Jews who study Torah at home without understanding it, their only goal being to fulfill the mitzvah of Torah study. Now, as we have seen, it is only more than fitting that we propose original Torah ideas, that we learn why we perform a given mitzvah, and that we understand it to perfection. With respect to this, the Talmud advises us to constantly revise our studies (*Sanhedrin 99a*).

Torah study instills us with the character strength of our Patriarchs, who managed to eliminate their evil inclination to such a degree that they became “the Chariot of the Divine Presence” (*Zohar I:213b*). They reached such a level solely by their diligent study of Torah. When they desired to rest a little from their tasks, misfortunes came down upon them. Such was the case, for example, with our Patriarch Jacob (*Bereshith Rabba 84:3*). *Shalvah* (“rest”), which has the same numerical value (341) as *ashem* (“guilty”), leads the evil inclination to find a small opening through which to seep into a person’s heart and render him guilty.

The Sages therefore established the reading of the Torah sections on Mondays and Thursdays, as well as during Mincha of Shabbat, to order that we may be fully instilled with it and discover new Torah insights.

In this way we will reflect upon the miracles that Hashem performed for our Patriarchs. We will meditate upon Creation, the ten plagues of Egypt, and the death of four-fifths of the Children of Israel who refused to leave Egypt (*Tanhuma Beshalach 1*). We will also think about faith in G-d and in His servant Moses, the crossing of the Sea of Reeds and the miracles that occurred there (*Mechilta, Shemot 15b*), the war of Amalek that was caused by a decline in Torah study (*Bechorot 5b*), the giving of the Torah, and so on. From this we will draw the strength necessary to fight the evil inclination and defeat it.

If the Torah established the number of people who ascend to read it on Shabbat at seven, it was for us to draw strength and instill ourselves with divine assistance during the six days of the week, as well as to fight the evil inclination. The number seven represents Shabbat, a time when all the forces of evil flee and we can dominate the evil inclination. This is because Shabbat represents the summit of purity, holiness, and Torah study (*Tanna D'vei Elyahu Rabba 1*). Hence one who diligently engages in Torah study (just as one who simply listens to it or reads it without understanding) can achieve lofty spiritual levels. Such people will enjoy a foretaste of the World to Come, for as the Talmud teaches, “the awe of Torah seizes even ordinary individuals” (*Yerushalmi Demai 4:1*). The one who uses this holy day to deepen his Torah understanding will rejoice both in this world and the World to Come, and the effects of this study will protect him during the six days of the week.

The eighth person who ascends to the Torah (*maftir*) embodies extremely lofty spiritual levels (see *Kohelet Rabba 11:5*). As we have seen, the number eight is above the count of the weekly cycle, above nature. The one who has attained the perfection of Shabbat can merit the World to Come, and come Saturday night it is very difficult for him to part from the extra soul he received on Shabbat (*Betzah 16a*).

This period of time, called *Shovavim*, is thus very important because on it we read the weekly Torah sections that deal with the descent of the Children of Israel into Egypt, the decree against all the Hebrew male infants, the cries of the Children of Israel in their terrible servitude, the exceptional devotion of the wise women Shifrah and Puah (Jochebed and Miriam), as well as their reward: *Batim* (houses) of Priests, Levites, and royalty (*Solah 11b*). We also read of Batiah (“daughter of G-d”), who saved Moses from the waters of the Nile. The text mentions *batim* (in the plural), alluding to many Batiah (who saved Moses) – many *batim* because Moses was equal to the entirety (*batim*) of Israel (*Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:64*). Batiah is sent to save each individual Jew, and Moses (who was saved by her) saved the Jewish people with the Torah.

These weekly Torah sections also mention the sin of forbidden speech (which has so greatly prolonged our exile), the revelation of G-d amidst the burning bush (specifically there in order to demonstrate to the Children of Israel that G-d was “with him in distress” – *Psalms 91:15*), the exodus from Egypt after the ten plagues, the descent of the manna, the giving of the Torah, and the glorification of G-d’s Name among the nations.

The *Shovavim* appreciably strengthen our Torah study, our faith, and our confidence in G-d. They help us in reciting our prayers with a maximum of fervor and they hasten the redemption, instilling us with all kinds of virtues. The last parsha of this period, *Mishpatim*, teaches us that to attain these virtues and arrive at performing all the mitzvot and *mishpatim* (ordinances), it is necessary to diligently engage in Torah study (*Pasha Yitro*) in order to perform the divine precepts to perfection (*Parsha Mishpatim*).

It is not enough to be filled with sincere faith in G-d and perform good deeds. Of primary importance is the constant and regular study of Torah. Diligent Torah study enables us to carefully put G-d’s commandments into practice (*Deuteronomy 5:1*), for “not study but practice is the essential thing” (*Perkei Avoth 1:17*). The study of Torah and the performance of mitzvot finally enable us to triumph over the evil inclination at all times.

Other than these important subjects, the weekly Torah sections that we read during this period of *Shovavim* deal with all the holidays, as well as the mitzvah of Tefillin, Shabbat, and circumcision, which is equal to all the divine precepts (*Zohar II:89a*).

Amalek, who waged war against Israel, alludes to Haman (Purim) and the Greeks (Chanukah), who tried to spiritually exterminate the Jews. The exodus from Egypt alludes to Passover and also leads to it. The giving of the Torah (the Ten Commandments) alludes to Shavuot. The plague of darkness, during which time four-fifths of the Children of Israel perished, alludes to the destruction of the Temple, which was brought about by baseless hatred and forbidden speech (*Yoma 9b*).

There are 50 days of Teshuvah that separate the exodus from the giving of the Torah. This period aims at rectifying the 49 degrees of impurity into which the Children of Israel had sunk. They correspond to the 50 days that elapse from the first day of Elul until Shemini Atzeret, and they include Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Hashanah Rabba, and Simchat Torah. During these days we repent of our wicked deeds. Even Tu B'Shevat, which is a type of Rosh Hashanah, occurs during the time of *Shovavim*. Thus all the holidays are represented in it.

During these days we are given divine help for the rest of the year, and our faith in G-d and Torah study are strengthened. The recollection of the exodus from Egypt during this time of *Shovavim* sanctifies all the days of the year.

### ***The Fear of Heaven in Private and in Public***

One mitzvah given to us in Parsha Mishpatim (which is filled with mitzvot) is the prohibition against mixing meat and milk. The Torah states, "You shall not seethe a kid in its mother's milk" (*Exodus 23:19*). This mitzvah is given three times in the Torah, from which the Sages derived that "one is a prohibition against eating, one a prohibition against benefit [in general], and one a prohibition against seething" (*Kiddushin 57b*).

We may therefore ask the question: Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, forbid the Children of Israel from eating meat with milk? What is the reason behind this prohibition? What does meat represent, and what does milk represent, such that it is forbidden for them to come into contact with one another?

The Sages recount that the nations of the world will approach Hashem in the future and ask for a reward (*Avodah Zarah 2a*). He will say to them, "Let us consider the happenings of old...there are seven commandments which you did accept. Did you observe them?" (*ibid. 2b*). The nations will reply, "Offer us the Torah anew and we shall obey it" (*ibid. 3a*). What will Hashem do? He will give them the mitzvah of Sukkah, but at the same time "the Holy One, blessed be He, will cause the sun to blaze forth over them as at the summer solstice, and each of them will trample down his sukkah and go away" (*ibid.*). This is difficult to understand. If Hashem Himself will prevent them from accomplishing the mitzvah of Sukkah, how can they be blamed?

As we know, the mitzvah of Sukkah is one in which a person must participate with his entire body, meaning that he cannot perform it partially. He must carry it out with his entire body. This teaches us a lesson for all the mitzvot, namely that a person must perform them with all his 248 members and 365 sinews. Furthermore, he must accomplish the mitzvot even when they are difficult, when he has many reasons to think that he is exempt.

It is in this way that Hashem will put the nations of the world to the test. He will give them the mitzvah of Sukkah, which seems easy to perform, but at the same time He will stir up difficulties for them. He will bring the sun out of its sheath and see if the nations of the world will, despite such difficulty, accomplish the mitzvah by entering

the Sukkah with their entire bodies. Non-Jews will thus immediately demonstrate that this mitzvah (along with all the rest) does not belong to them. They will not be able to overcome the test, for they will not be able to fulfill a mitzvah when a small thing “goes wrong.” In this way Hashem will prove to them that the mitzvot belong solely to the Jewish people, both the mitzvot and their reward.

To what does this apply? Every Jew experiences numerous difficulties in life, trials that attempt to disrupt his performance of the mitzvot. However Hashem wants to teach us not to act as non-Jews, not to reject the mitzvot when they are difficult to perform. We are always to carry them out – despite difficulties and trials – because the greater the difficulty, the greater the reward. To our great regret, today there are many people who perform mitzvot only when it is convenient for them, refraining from observing them otherwise. For example, there are many people who are “Tzaddikim” outside their homes. They are careful to accomplish both easy and difficult mitzvot, and we may think that we can learn how to serve Hashem from them. However in their homes – where no one sees them – these very same people behave exactly like non-Jews. They conduct themselves with absolutely no modesty, holiness, or purity, not even performing a single mitzvah.

Concerning the Tzaddik and Kabbalist Rabbi Haim Pinto (may his merit protect us), it is said that he arrived in a town where a man was involved in a dispute with the local rav. Rabbi Haim reprimanded the man for his behavior, yet he was obstinate and even mocked what Rabbi Haim said to him. Rabbi Haim then called him to an isolated room and said, “Is it true that you are suffering from a headache?” The man was quite frightened by this question, and he responded: “How do you know this?” Rabbi Haim replied, “I will tell you how. During the Fast of Esther you were very hungry, and so you took some food and went to an isolated room. Since your wife couldn’t see you there, you ate the food without saying a blessing beforehand or afterwards. You’ve been suffering from a headache ever since.” The man was completely stunned, and from that point on he corrected his behavior.

This is truly amazing. Can a person really act like a Tzaddik outside his home, while inside he does whatever comes to mind? The Gemara states, “Whatever the Sages prohibited for appearances’ sake [*marit ha’ayin*], it is prohibited even in one’s innermost chambers” (*Shabbat 64b*). Let us think about the number of things that people do in their homes, things that they would be ashamed of doing in front of people. It is simply because they are afraid of what “others will say,” not about what Hashem will say. G-d will demand an accounting from us on the day of judgment, yet what will we say? What answer will we be able to give on the day of rebuke?

The Torah therefore prohibits us from mixing meat with milk, meaning that Hashem commands everyone to make a distinction between meat and milk in their homes. What is the objective of this? As we all know, meat is red, which alludes to impurity (forbidden things, which are red), to transgressions. Milk, however, is white, alluding to purity (mitzvot), to permitted and legitimate things. By this Hashem asks everyone

to make a distinction between holiness and impurity in their homes. If such is the case with this mitzvah, we must act in the same way for all the mitzvot. We must not mix things up. We must always act with holiness and purity, even inside the home, not just outside of it. We should have a fear of Heaven both in private and in public, even when it is difficult and even when we encounter trials. It is only in this way that we will merit all the good that is reserved for the Tzaddikim, Hashem's great reward.

## Parsha Terumah

### “That They Bring Me an Offering”

Commenting on the verse that states, “Speak to the Children of Israel, that they take for Me an offering” (*Ex 25:2*), Rashi explains that this means “for Me, for My Name” (*Mechilta ibid.*).

One may ask at least two questions concerning this brief explanation.

1. What does “for My Name” mean exactly?

2. Why does the Eternal ask the Children of Israel to bring Him an offering for the construction of the Sanctuary? Is it not written, “the whole world is filled with His glory” (*Isa 6:3*)? Since everything belongs to Him (*cf. I Ch 29:14*), does He need gold or silver? Instead of counting on the generosity of the Children of Israel, He could have revealed to Moses the location of one or many treasures in the desert.

The answer is because of the fact that a person who donates a certain amount to a Torah institute generally wants, even if it’s only deep down inside, to be praised for his deed. Who wouldn’t rejoice in this noteworthy honor? Consequently, the Torah emphasizes the fact that the one who gives an offering should be firmly convinced that he has in fact given nothing, since everything belongs to G-d. As soon as one gives a donation, one should completely give way before G-d, the source of all our income, as it is written, “Mine is the silver and mine is the gold” (*Hag 2:8*).

The donations that one makes to a yeshiva (which is really a miniature Sanctuary) or to the Sages of the Torah (who themselves are sanctuaries of G-d) should be made exclusively in the Name of G-d, meaning for His honor. “The L-RD bless you and guard you” (*Num 6:24*) means that He bless your possessions (*Bamidbar Rabba 11:13*). Know, therefore, that all comes from Him and all converges to Him. Knowing this leads to self-effacement before the Creator. Blessing and the Shechinah will accompany you in all your undertakings. “Your offering helps you to know *Shemi* [My Name].” In the final analysis, the *Terumah* (offering) made for the construction of the Sanctuary and its vessels serves those who have given it. The offering contributes *leromemam* (to spiritually uplift them – a word with the same root as *Terumah*). The offering uplifts them in such a way that the Eternal resides in them. In fact, the Children of Israel gave up all their silver and gold for the construction of the Sanctuary in order to find grace in the eyes of the Eternal. “The people are bringing more than enough for the labor of the work that the L-RD has commanded them” (*Ex 36:5*). Moses then made it known in the camp that no one, man or woman, should bring any more offerings for the Sanctuary (*v.6*). If Moses had not said this, the children of Israel could have offered all their goods, so great was their love for G-d.

Yeshivas don’t normally need outside help, for the Shechinah resides there permanently. However G-d especially chose us to bring an offering to the place where

His Holy Name is worshipped. The verse states, “in ever place where I cause My Name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you” (*Ex 20:21*). This means that G-d will bless your possessions (as we wrote earlier) so that you can contribute to the building of the Sanctuary and financially help yeshivas. You will thereby reach lofty spiritual heights. The Eternal did a great favor to the Children of Israel by giving them the Torah and numerous mitzvot, as it is written, “The L-RD desired, for the sake of *tzeedko* [His righteousness], to make the Torah great and glorious” (*Isa 42:21*). In other words, giving *tzeddakah* (charity) to yeshivas is equivalent to giving for the construction of the Sanctuary, for the institutes devoted to Talmudic studies, as well as synagogues, are sanctuaries in miniature (*Megillah 29a*). Charity and good deeds are the same as all the mitzvot (*Yerushalmi Peah 1:1*). G-d wants that the Children of Israel, just as they had generously helped to build the Sanctuary, should help in strengthening the study of Torah, which in itself is a compendium of the Names of the Holy One, blessed be He (*Zohar II:95a*). G-d told them, “Bring your money that I personally gave you and invest it in the construction of the Sanctuary. The earth is certainly filled with My glory, but I desire that you use your silver and gold for exceedingly lofty goals. In this way you will reach unlimited spiritual levels and the Shechinah will reside in you.” It is written, “And let them make Me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell in them” (*Ex 25:8*); it doesn’t say “in it” (the Sanctuary) but rather “in them”, which means individually, in every single person.

### *Offerings Bring One Closer to G-d*

The offerings presented by the Children of Israel for the construction of the Sanctuary present a certain number of questions. We have resolved a few of these in previous articles, but there still remain some that require explanation.

Does G-d lack silver or gold that He had to ask the Children of Israel to offer Him some? Silver and gold belong to G-d, and the whole world is filled with His glory (*Isaiah 6:3*). Certainly it was because He wanted to give the Children of Israel the opportunity to help cover the expenses incurred by the construction of the Sanctuary. But if so, why did G-d tell them, “Speak to the Children of Israel *ve’yikhu li* [and they shall take for Me] a portion. From every man whose heart motivates him, you shall take My portion” (*Exodus 25:2*)? All G-d had to do was to command the Children of Israel to bring Him an offering. After all, don’t we oblige the sick to take their medication? Why then does the verse not write *ve’yaviu li* (“and they shall bring to Me”) or *ve’yitnu li* (“and they shall give to Me”) instead of *ve’yikhu li*?

The answer is that a man should observe all the commandments ordained by G-d, putting them into practice and walking in His ways, and he should cleave to Him (*Deuteronomy 11:22*). In line with the given spiritual level that a man has attained, he should, as it were, offer himself to G-d (*ve’yikhu li*).

A man arrives at such a state by participating in the construction of the Sanctuary, or in other words by elevating himself in his Divine service. The Eternal will receive

the offering of each person according to the fervor with which that person gives it to Him. As it is written, “They shall make a Sanctuary for Me – so that I may dwell among them” (*Exodus 25:8*).

G-d asks us to “take ourselves,” in other words to attach ourselves to the Tzaddik in order to imbue ourselves with his spirit of holiness and reach ever-higher levels. We will then be like the crown placed on the head of the Holy One, blessed be He. G-d asks us to offer Him this portion, a portion that attached us to the Garden of Eden before our soul’s descent into this world. We will then, as it were, resemble Him. We will cleave to Him by the study of Torah and the performance of mitzvot and good deeds, instead of attaching this portion to the vain pursuits that the evil inclination encourages us to chase after. Let us emulate the righteous of the generation; let us push ourselves to behave like them and their students (*Vayikra Rabba 25:3*). We will then reach lofty spiritual levels and the Divine Presence will reside within us. Let us distance ourselves from the “pleasures” of this world. Above all, let us be sure to make the first step, and G-d will help us (*Pesikta Rabba 15:6*).

That which G-d asks a Jew is not to covet silver or gold, but to labor in the performance of the mitzvot. G-d desires that a person’s money helps those who study Torah, for “it is a tree of life to those who grasp it” (*Proverbs 3:18*). The Midrash teaches that the profits which Zubulun made with his commerce served to maintain the yeshivas of Issachar (*Zohar I:241b*), for it is the ones who study Torah that build the Temple (*see Megillah 29a*).

All money should go for Torah and mitzvot. A Jew who wants to attach himself to G-d should contribute financially to the construction of religious schools, yeshivas, mikvehs, etc. – the Sanctuary of our day. One should not rely on miracles. Generosity contributes to bringing down a spiritual bounty into this world. The Eternal certainly helps us in the material domain – with daily sustenance, health, etc. – but in the spiritual domain and the fear of Heaven, everything depends on man. This is why G-d did not obligate the Children of Israel to bring their offerings. He counted on the goodness of their heart, on their fear of Heaven, and on their desire to elevate themselves in the service of G-d. As it is written, “All those with generous hearts brought burnt-offerings [*ohlot* – from *aliah*: ‘elevation’]” (*II Chronicles 29:31*).

At this point we can understand the connection between the two weekly sections (Terumah and Tetzaveh).

The first Parsha teaches us to distance ourselves from the pleasures of this world (above all from greed), and to instead come closer to G-d. The Shechinah will then encourage us, in proportion to our fervor, to serve G-d. The Parsha also teaches us to contribute financially to the construction of places of worship and Torah establishments, and to attach ourselves to the Tzaddik of the generation, a person who himself is connected directly to the Eternal.

In the verse that states, “Now you shall command the Children of Israel that they shall take for you pure, pressed olive oil” (*Exodus 27:20*), G-d commands Moses – whose

soul is propagated and present in every generation (*Tikkun Zohar 69:112a*) – to impregnate the Children of Israel with his holiness. They would thereby get closer to him. He then commanded that they purify their body and soul and acquire virtues such as modesty. “You, the Tzaddik of the generation, bring your brothers closer to you in order to illuminate and purify their soul like oil.” We should note the similarity of the letters in the words *shemen* (“oil”) and *neshama* (“soul”). For the virtues that you will make them acquire, you will grind and completely subdue (*katit*) their body and soul to My service. Then “anyone with whom his fellowmen are pleased, G-d is pleased with him” (*Perkei Avoth 3:10[13]*). Thanks to the Torah, this light that makes men take to the right path (*Yerushalmi Hagigah 1:7*) will make them acquire good traits.

As we have seen, the *terumah* (offering) *meromemet* (elevates) man, as it is written: “Rabbi Meir said, ‘Whoever occupies himself with the [study of] Torah for its own sake merits many things. Furthermore, he is worthy that the whole world shall have been created because of him’ ” (*Perkei Avoth 6:1*). The term *li* (“for myself”), having the numerical value of 40, means that by the study of Torah, which was given after 40 days, one can connect oneself to the Name of G-d – *li lishmi*. Moreover, the number of beams in the Sanctuary alludes to the 48 virtues by which Torah is acquired (*Perkei Avoth 6:6*). What’s more, even the term *kerashim* alludes to the *kesharim* – to the interactions that the man who studies Torah has with G-d – and *shekarim* means that without Torah, the world is but a massive lie.

Nevertheless, before trying to get closer to G-d, a man should probe and better himself. “Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan... A fire came forth from before the L-RD and consumed them, and they died before the L-RD” (*Leviticus 10:1-2*). Why? They had most certainly acquired the 48 virtues by which the Torah is acquired. Otherwise, the passage would not have testified concerning them that “I will be sanctified through those who are nearest Me” and “the entire House of Israel shall bewail the conflagration that the L-RD ignited” (*Leviticus 10:3,6*).

They were certainly great people, but since they realized that the Sanctuary aimed at bringing Israel closer to its Creator, they wanted to connect themselves to the Holy One, blessed be He, even before the construction of the Sanctuary, as it is written, “They saw G-d, and they ate and they drank” (*Exodus 24:11*). The Midrash explains that they had delighted in the vision of the Divine Presence, just as one delights in food. However G-d, Who did not want to disturb the celebration, punished them when they offered a strange fire (*Vayikra Rabba 20:7*).

Nadav and Avihu perished because they wanted to see too much; they wanted to come too close to the Holy One, blessed be He. This was contrary to Moses, who hid his face before the Divine Presence (*Exodus 3:6*). However, since in the final analysis they only wanted to sanctify the Name of G-d, the place where they perished was also sanctified, and all the people understood the importance of it.

Woe to the person, therefore, who thinks he is perfect and who does not constantly watch to ensure that his mitzvot are performed in compliance with the Divine will and

only for the sake of Heaven. It is not proper that the servant should look directly into his master's face. Nadav and Avihu, who were fundamentally pure and holy, should have covered their faces instead of looking directly at the Divine Presence on the day when the Sanctuary was erected.

If we perform all our mitzvot solely for the sake of G-d's Name, the Eternal *yishkan* (will dwell in us). We will in this way come closer to Him, and He will be, as it were, our neighbor.

“And they shall make [*ve'assu*] for Me a Sanctuary” (*Exodus 25:8*). A man should essentially aim at rectifying this world of *Asiyah* (action) that was tarnished first by the sin of Adam and then by the sin of the golden calf. With regards to this, let us note the similarity between the numerical values of the terms *ve'assu* (along with its letters) and *Asiyah* (with the kollel – i.e., plus one). By the performance of the mitzvot and the diligent study of Torah, a man will succeed in transforming this world into a sanctuary for G-d.

“Just as I make my Divine Presence reign over the entirety of the Jewish people,” says the Eternal, “I can make it reign individually over each of My children, who are a world in miniature” (*Zohar III:257b*). In the same way, a man should not neglect the least of the mitzvot, since they make *shefa* (abundance) come down into this world.

G-d desires that we be sincerely connected to Him. Let us not act like those who try to deceive Him with their mouths and lie to Him with their tongues (*Psalms 78:36*). Their hearts are not whole with Him, they are not faithful to His covenant (*v.37*), and they transgress the Divine commandments. One cannot, however, approach or really know Him and become imbued with the Divine Presence unless one radically distances oneself from the vain pleasures of this world and believe simply in Him.

May G-d grant our hearts the necessary intelligence and wisdom to attach ourselves to Him forever. Amen!

### **“Everything Comes From You”**

Commenting on the verse in Parsha Terumah that states, “Let them take for Me a portion” (*Exodus 25:2*), the author of *Degel HaMussar*, Rabbi Gershon Libmann *Zatzal*, cites the Baal HaTurim as follows: “Hashem spoke to the hearts of the Children of Israel because the offering they made to Him cost them money.” The Yalkut Shimoni teaches, “Rabbi Avahu says, ‘The construction of the Sanctuary truly honored Israel and atoned for their sin.’ What would have happened to them if they had been stripped of their money? Is it not true that the Children of Israel were but the slaves and servants of the Egyptians, and that the Holy One, blessed be He, took them out by performing miracles for them? Did He not split the sea for them? Did He not enrich them with abundant spoils? Did He not give them the Torah and make the manna come down to them from Heaven? Obviously, they were ready to generously offer gifts for the construction of the Sanctuary, thus demonstrating their gratitude to Him. It was with

the greatest of joy that they prepared themselves to do this. Why then did He need to speak to their hearts?" (*Yalkut Shimoni 1:363*).

Citing the Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni, Terumah 363*), Rabbi Yoel of Satmar explains that the word *li* ("for Me") always connotes the idea of invariability, of permanence. He then raises the question: "These offerings were destined for the construction of the Sanctuary and the Temple, yet these were destroyed! What then of this idea of permanence?" We may also ask ourselves why the verse stipulates, "From every man whose heart motivates him shall you take My portion" (*Exodus 25:2*), rather than "From every one of the Children of Israel whose heart motivates him."

Moses addressed himself to G-d when he experienced difficulties making the Menorah, which was to be fashioned from one solid piece of gold. G-d then showed him a Menorah of fire, and in the end it was fashioned by itself (*Tanhuma, Beha'alotcha 3*). The question may therefore be raised: Why did Moses not experience difficulties in making the two Cherubim of gold, which also had to be fashioned from one piece (*Exodus 25:18*)? The Cherubim certainly did not hold fewer secrets than the Menorah, and they were the object of many miracles.

The reason is that G-d wanted to show the Children of Israel that it is He who possesses all the world's silver and gold (*Hagigah 2:8*). True, the whole world is filled with His glory, but He Who probes all hearts knows that the evil inclination is particularly strong when it comes to questions of money. It is written, "*Ki hadam* [For the blood], it is the life" (*Deuteronomy 12:23*), and *damim* (money) is also, so to speak, a part of a man's life. We can well be generous and extravagant, yet money constitutes a great test, especially for the Tzaddikim (*Sotah 12a*). Pious and upright people experience great difficulty in ridding themselves of all traces of *Kelipah* (impurity) when it comes to making expenses for performing mitzvot. It requires great faith in G-d to completely disregard money, even though in the final analysis such an attitude enables a man to survive. The Children of Israel had no expenses in the desert, and the manna descended to them from Heaven. The fact remains that G-d had to speak to their hearts in order to make them participate financially in the construction of the Sanctuary, for the evil inclination aims at tainting all mitzvot that involve expenditures of money. My very revered teacher, who instilled in me the very foundations of Torah and who spiritually enriched me for years, once came collecting funds for the yeshiva where I had studied, and thanks to which I managed to become what I am today, thank G-d. It goes without saying that I was very happy to see him, but I have to admit that it was not without a certain amount of hesitation that I gave him enough money to provide for the needs of his yeshiva. This is because when it comes to money, we do not remember our past, as glorious as it may have been. We think, rather, of our wallets and our current financial situation. My Rav understood everything that I was experiencing, and feeling that he had acted improperly with me, he began to speak to my heart. Our talk focused primarily on those happy days when I was a yeshiva student. My heart was then filled with joy, and I doubled the amount that he expected me to give.

The verse in question therefore states *ve'yikchu li* (“and let them take for Me”) rather than *ve'yitnu li* (“and let them give to Me”), for G-d promises the Children of Israel that if they bring their offering to Him, He will consider it as a loan (not as an offering), which He will repay them from Heaven. As it is written, “You will take My portion” (*Exodus 25:2*) by means of the Sanctuary, and *shefa* (abundance) will come down on them and strengthen their service of G-d.

It is essentially through unity and love for neighbor that we manage to observe the Torah. Hashem commands us, “You shall love your fellow as yourself” (*Leviticus 19:18*), which is a great principle of the Torah. In the final analysis, G-d is only seeking the good of the Children of Israel. The Sanctuary, which they were to build, was designed to strengthen their service of G-d. The fact remains that to make them participate in that mitzvah, He had to speak to their hearts. When it is our turn to do so, let us act as Hashem did: In asking for a loan or a gift from our fellow, let us speak gently to his heart, with the maximum of tact.

One who engages in Torah study is as if he “gave” something to G-d, Who has nothing in this world other than four cubits of Halachah (*Berachot 8a; Baal HaTurim ibid.*). The study of Torah must be for G-d’s sake only. The verse stipulates *mei'eit ish* (“from every man” – *Exodus 25:2*) because the offerings must reflect the aspect of Torah *emet* (which is formed from the same letters as the word *mei'eit*).

The Sanctuary and Temple were indeed destroyed, but the concept of the Sanctuary alludes to one who devotes his life to serving G-d. In the word *Mishkan* (Sanctuary), we find the letters that form the word *nimshach* (“following”), meaning that a man should be drawn toward G-d. He should serve Him with all the parts of his body. If a part of a lamb that is to be sacrificed falls off the altar, it is placed back on it. Similarly, a man who has sinned through one of his body parts should repent and correct his behavior. He should then put that part back on the altar and “sacrifice” it to Hashem.

G-d also needs to speak to the heart of the one who, despite all the enticements of the world, chooses to diligently engage in Torah study and make an offering to G-d. Hashem tells him, “Take *terumati* [‘My offering’ – the Torah]. You will then get your *temurati* [‘my equivalent’ – I will repay you].” In other words: The one who studies My Torah – instead of going to work to earn money – will be given a double reward.

Let us therefore refrain from harming the one who studies Torah to the detriment of his income, and let us help him with all our hearts. This is the reason why the verse states, “From every man whose heart motivates him,” rather than addressing itself collectively to the Children of Israel, for this is a mitzvah where a person must stand out.

The Talmud teaches that on the first of Adar an announcement is made regarding the Shekalim (*Shekalim 1:1*). Why do we not go from town to town, from district to district, collecting all the necessary funds? It is because we must first speak to the hearts of the people before coming to ask for their contribution. The word *shekalim* has the same letters as *mishkali* (“My balance”) meaning that charity makes G-d’s balance sway in

favor of a man's merits, for in giving charity a man masters his greed and gives his money to a good cause. The Shekalim also allude to unity and love for neighbor, for the half-Shekel offered by the one joins with the half-Shekel offered by the other, and together they form a whole. At Purim, we are enjoined to send gifts to one another (*Esther 9:19*). Why should we not give them to our friends and acquaintances instead? In our humble opinion, charity is certainly very precious in the eyes of Hashem, but it is much better to willingly send Tzeddakah *anonymously* to someone we know (or to send it to someone we *don't* know), so that the recipient does not find out who sent it and does not ask us about it. That is truly charity *par excellence*. Who do we call *ish* (a man)? The one who shares the pain of his fellow and helps him without having been expressly asked. This deed that we perform in the month of Adar should encourage us to continue acting in such a way throughout the year.

The Talmud states, "When Adar begins, we should double our joy" (*Taanith 26b*). When a person who feels ready to spend money for holy causes hears of the Shekalim (at the beginning of Adar), he becomes filled with joy.

### *Serving G-d Without Seeking Reward*

On the verse that states, "Speak to the Children of Israel and let them take for Me an offering [*terumah*]" (*Exodus 25:2*), the book *Ismach Moshe* (p.36) asks why the offering given by the Children of Israel is called a *terumah*.

We shall attempt to expand on the meaning of this concept, and in so doing we will deal with the following questions:

1. Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, reveal the secrets of Creation to the Children of Israel? Why did He give them the Torah that He so jealously kept in Heaven for 974 generations before Creation (*Shabbat 88b*), and which was "His delight every day" (*Proverbs 8:30; see Bereshith Rabba 1:1*)?

2. Why was G-d not content with giving us a smaller number of mitzvot that were meant to better us? Would not a more limited number of Divine precepts have been enough for us to recognize the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He? Why 613 commandments? Would the determined performance of mitzvot not have been enough to merit a reward in the World to Come? What interest would the Children of Israel have in knowing what happens in the upper and lower worlds? Do the weighty secrets of the Torah really interest them?

3. We know that Hashem is pleased when Jews carry out mitzvot, so we may ask just what pleasure G-d derives from our mitzvot, even when they are performed to perfection. On the contrary, since the performance of mitzvot prolongs a person's life and his principle reward is reserved for the World to Come (*Peah 1:1*), should he not take pleasure in conforming to his Master's will? G-d therefore demonstrates His favor to people by giving them the opportunity of filling their lives with mitzvot and good deeds. It is therefore people who should experience pleasure by carrying them out.

Antigonus of Socho, the disciple of Shimon HaTzaddik, said: “Do not be like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward, but rather be like servants who serve their master without the intent of receiving a reward” (*Perkei Avoth 1:3*). Contrary to a servant, the free Jew serves his Creator because he loves Him and derives pleasure in conforming to His will. G-d takes pleasure in seeing that we devote ourselves to Him and serve Him without awaiting reward. However if a person experiences suffering, he should not rebel against G-d, for he knows that “the L-RD punishes the one He loves” (*Proverbs 3:12*) and that “the L-RD desired to oppress him” (*Isaiah 53:10*).

As we saw, the *terumah* (offering) elevates man. The *terumah* (תרומה or תורה) embodies the Torah (תורה) that was given in 40 (מ) days (*Baal HaTurim, Menachot 99b*). The Torah distances a person from the evil inclination (*Perkei Avoth 6:2*) and enables him to serve G-d without seeking reward. The verse therefore states *vayikhu li* (“and let them take for Me”), to give Me pleasure. Through the Torah, a person sanctifies his 365 sinews and 248 limbs, which correspond to the 613 Divine commandments (see *Makot 23b*). If Hashem had given us a more limited number of mitzvot, only a portion of a person’s body could have been sanctified.

As we know, man was created on the sixth day in order that everything be ready for Shabbat (*Sanhedrin 38a*). To understand what is happening around him, he needs to understand the Torah that was conceived by the Holy One, blessed be He, before the creation of the world (see *Shabbat 88b*). Thus a person cannot exist without the 613 mitzvot that are connected to his body and soul, for as we saw (*Bereshith Rabba 1:8*), Hashem conceived of the creation of the Jewish people and the Torah before Creation. He created the world only for the Torah, “the first of His works” (*Proverbs 8:22*) as well as for the Jewish people, “the first fruit” of His crop (*Jeremiah 2:3*).

The Jewish people and the Torah thus embody the same concept. Jews are guarantors for one another (*zeh bazeh* – *Shavuot 39a*), connected to the Torah, and Hashem is found among them. As we have seen, *zeh bazeh* has same numerical value (26) as the Name of G-d. Therefore G-d gave the *entire* Torah to the Children of Israel in order that they might sanctify themselves and engage in its study – just as they had done before the creation of the world – for as long as they were solely connected to G-d’s thought.

As a result, the Children of Israel placed *na’aseh* (“we will do”) before *nishma* (“we will hear” – *i.e.*, “we will learn”), because they already knew the Torah before coming into this world. Since they wanted to vanquish the evil inclination, they said, “We will do and we will hear” the entire Torah to please our Creator. Rashi therefore wrote: “‘Let them take for Me a *terumah*’ – for the sake of My Name,” for man should engage in Torah study without awaiting reward. The *terumah* contributes to *leromem* (elevating) man, and the Torah enables him to serve Hashem for the sake of His Name only.

However if such is the case, why does the verse stipulate *vayikhu li* (“and let them take for Me”) rather than *veyitnu li* (“and let them give Me”)? It is because G-d asks man to “take” the mitzvot and to perform them exclusively for G-d’s sake, without awaiting reward. The Torah that a person diligently studies will find favor in His eyes. Man strives in certain ways, and his Torah strives for him in other ways (*Sanhedrin 99b*). He will come to studying *lishmah* (literally “for His Name”), without aiming at any personal gain.

The verse that follows, “And this is the *terumah* that you shall take of them” (*Exodus 25:3*) means that the mitzvot a person performs with devotion sanctifies and grants him favor in G-d’s eyes.

G-d revealed the secrets of Creation to the Children of Israel because, as we saw, Creation primarily depends on the Torah, as it is written: “If not for My covenant [the Torah], I would not have appointed days and nights, the decrees of heaven and earth” (*Jeremiah 33:25*). Therefore the world cannot survive without the Torah (*Pesachim 68b*). Only the Children of Israel can sustain the world by their diligent Torah study and the connection that they establish between the upper and lower worlds. Hashem will thus share the pleasure that they find in studying His Torah.

### ***The Goal of the Sanctuary: Elevating the Children of Israel***

The Sages teach, “Moses was greatly surprised when he heard, ‘They shall make a Sanctuary for Me – so that I may dwell among them’ [*Exodus 25:8*]. He asked Him, ‘You, concerning Whom the verse states, ‘The whole world is filled with His glory’ [*Isaiah 6:3*], will You contract Yourself into the 48 beams of the Sanctuary?’ ” (*Yalkut Shimoni, Terumah 365*). Is such a thing conceivable?

The answer is that everyone should learn how to conduct himself from the Sanctuary. In order to reside in this lower world, Hashem commanded Moses, already in the desert, to build a Sanctuary for Him. The question nevertheless remains: Why would He ask the Children of Israel to build Him a Sanctuary and a Temple? “Would G-d truly dwell on earth with man? Behold, the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain You” (*II Chronicles 6:18*). What does G-d need with a house? What does He need with our offerings?

We know that in general people are influenced by what they see, and the less integrity a person has, the more impressionable he is to what he sees.

Allow me to explain:

The Children of Israel observed Passover even after the second year of their departure from Egypt, as the Torah states (*Numbers 9:1*). Why? It is because those who lived through that event (and not only heard of it) had to relate it to their descendants through all the generations, which is the essence of the Passover holiday. Our Sages teach, “In every generation a man is bound to regard himself as though he personally had gone forth from Egypt” (*Pesachim 116b*). Moreover in the Torah we find, “Moses spoke

to the heads of the tribes” (*Numbers 30:2*), who were the leaders of Israel (Sifri *ibid.*), in order for everyone to see how great the reward is for one who bears the burdens of his fellow (*Perkei Avoth 6:6*).

Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, turned “leprous as snow” (*Numbers 12:10*) after she spoke ill of Moses. However the people did not travel until she could return to the camp (*v.15*). This is to remind everyone that she waited for Moses by the side of the river (*Sotah 13a*). She was nevertheless punished for having spoken ill of him (*see Shabbat 97a*).

The Torah constantly enjoins us to perform the mitzvot with the utmost devotion. It lavishes us with very sensible advice for our daily lives. For example it tells us of Nachshon, the son of Aminadav, who was the first person to jump into the sea (*Sotah 37a*). It commands us not to bow down to the idols of the nations, but rather to break apart their pillars, etc. (*Exodus 23:24*). Concerning this subject, we may ask ourselves how a person can bow down to statues if he knows that only Hashem our G-d is real. It is because he does not know the Torah. It testifies to G-d’s existence and warns Jews to refrain from idolatry. G-d jealously watches over them and does not want them to act like the other nations.

It is written, “G-d did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines” (*Exodus 13:17*). This is because He did not want the Children of Israel to imitate their ways, for “a man in general tends to imitate the conduct of his fellow” (*Hilchot Deot 6:1,2*). A man should therefore come closer to the Tzaddikim and distance himself from the wicked, who walk in darkness. A person must not stand in the path of sinners (*see Ketubot 111b*), nor live in a place where idols are worshiped. In short, if the Torah warns the Children of Israel not to act like the other peoples among whom they live, it is in order that they not be influenced by their wicked ways.

Likewise the Torah warns us, “When you build a new house, then you shall make a rail for your roof, that you not bring blood upon your house if any man fall from there” (*Deuteronomy 22:8*). If we must watch over our bodies, how much more should we watch over our souls? A person who regularly watches television literally puts his life in danger, for is the soul not tainted by what the eyes see?

The Sanctuary therefore teaches us to conduct ourselves in purity and holiness. It instills us with modesty, awakens us spiritually, and brings us closer to G-d. It gives us the feeling of being at home, at ease in the House of G-d. If we falter, our prayers and repentance go through the holy Temple, as it is written, “and [they] pray to You by way of their land” (*I Kings 8:48*). The Talmud states that one should pray in the direction of the Temple (*Berachot 30a*), from where all our prayers ascend to the Holy One, blessed be He.

It is written, “For the cloud of the L-RD would be on the Tabernacle by day” (*Exodus 40:38*), and the winds and rain had no affect [just as the rain did not extinguish the fire that burned on the Altar, nor did the wind prevail over the column of smoke that arose from the sacrifices (*Perkei Avoth 5:5*)]. This cloud allowed one to see rivers that were blue like the sky, as well as the sun (*Yalkut Shimoni, Pekudei 426-427*). Jews and gentiles flocked

there from all over to savor the experience up close. Now that the Temple has been destroyed, it is yeshivot and synagogues that serve as a “little sanctuary” (*Megillah 29a*).

A non-observant Jew wanted to convert to another religion. “Go to the yeshiva,” I suggested to him. “It’s there that you’ll understand your identity, that you’ll see the light – the light of the Torah and G-d’s commandments – as it is written, ‘For the commandment is a lamp and the Torah is light’ [*Proverbs 6:23*]. Try to understand who you are and what role you must play in life.”

The Sanctuary in particular brings out the virtue of modesty, self-effacement, and submission before the Holy One, blessed be He. On this topic we read in the Mishnah, “The *chalil* [flute] played before them. They even slept in the street” (*Yerushalmi Bichurim 3:4*). In other words, the entire *chalal*, the entire universe, belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He, Who fills it with His glory. That it “played before them” means that it taught them to submit to G-d. A man must rid himself of this cloud that hides him from the eyes of his Creator. He will then rediscover his identity and serve Him with greater enthusiasm.

“The people that dwell in the land are powerful!” (*Numbers 13:28*), the spies exclaimed. Having spoken ill of Eretz Israel, they were severely punished. What then of the person who speaks ill of his fellow, whose soul is divine? Daring to speak ill of the Sanctuary is a true indication of pride (see *Erchin 15b*). Slander is an extremely grave sin that brings about leprosy and diphtheria (*Shabbat 33b*).

In addition, the death of the young men of Israel is as serious as the destruction of the Temple, and even Hashem deplores it. They are destined “to emit a sweet fragrance like Lebanon” (*Berachot 43b*), meaning the holy Temple. From the Temple, *shefa* (abundance) descends upon the entire world, and its destruction is mourned to this very day. The death of the young men of Israel, who bring joy to their families and the entire world (see *Vayikra Rabba 20:7*), is like the destruction of the Temple, with similar consequences.

Let us therefore refrain from speaking ill of our fellowman. This extremely serious sin brought about the destruction of the Temple, whose primary goal was the spiritual elevation of the Children of Israel.

### ***By His Behavior, Man Builds A Sanctuary For G-d***

It is written, “They shall make a Sanctuary for Me, and I shall dwell among them” (*Exodus 25:8*). This command was given to Moses as soon as the Children of Israel began to bring their gifts to the Sanctuary. Yet why does the verse state “among them [literally ‘in them’]” rather than “in it”? Our Sages explain: “It is not written, ‘in it’ but ‘in them,’ which means that each Jew can be a sanctuary for G-d.”

Let us examine what all this implies. Can a mere mortal make his physical body a sanctuary in which the Shechinah can reside, since the Holy One, blessed be He, is a devouring fire? How can a mortal even approach such a fire, without even speaking

of making a sanctuary of himself for G-d? Did the Sages mean that each person must accomplish the mitzvot of the Torah, and by so doing his body will become a sanctuary? In that case, why would the Children of Israel have needed to build an actual Sanctuary? There is something else that we need to understand. Normally we start out by building a beautiful home, from the foundation to the walls, and only then do we begin plastering and painting. We finally bring in various pieces of furniture and objects that add to the charm and beauty of the home. In the verse before us, however, Hashem commanded the Children of Israel to start by bringing all the various materials needed to construct the Sanctuary, and only then did He command them to build it. He should have started by giving them the command to build the Sanctuary, and only then have told them to donate articles to beautify it, not the reverse!

As we know, everyone is composed of two elements. The first is materiality, the body. The second is spirituality, meaning the Torah, mitzvot, and proper conduct that one acquires during his life on earth. What is the connection between these two elements? The material side constantly draws man toward an immoral life of pleasure-seeking as it tries to distance him from G-d. The spiritual side – the Torah, mitzvot, and moral behavior – act in exactly the opposite way, attempting to bring him closer to G-d. When somebody wants to come closer to Hashem and change his physical body into a holy and spiritual thing, the evil inclination comes and tries to dissuade him in every possible way. It attracts man by all kinds of seductive things and pretexts, trying to convince him that he cannot come closer to G-d: “What do you and Hashem have in common? How can you possibly compare to Him?” Nevertheless, people do indeed want to come closer to G-d and make their bodies a sanctuary in which the Shechinah can reside. What should a person do in that case? This is why the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Children of Israel the following directives: It is true that you cannot instantly transform your physical bodies into a sanctuary for My Shechinah, but I will give you some advice. First, prepare the things necessary for building Me a Sanctuary. That is, before anything else, study the Torah and immerse yourselves in it. Perform a multitude of mitzvot, work on your character, and then automatically your body will become holy; it will become a sanctuary for the Shechinah. Yes, it is true that we first build a house and then fill it with beautiful objects. However here, when it comes to having the Shechinah reside among the Children of Israel, it is the reverse. Hashem asks us, before all else, to take the necessary steps. First we must elevate ourselves, carry out the mitzvot, conduct ourselves impeccably, and then automatically our bodies will become a sanctuary for G-d.

This parsha teaches us yet another lesson.

Gold, silver, and copper were the first things that the Children of Israel were asked to bring for the work of the Sanctuary. Reflecting upon this, we see that the first material thing that disrupts a person’s service of G-d is money! People are ready to devote their entire lives to amassing as much money as they can, and it is precisely this money that disrupts their service of G-d. It is known that one who enters into a financial

and material career finds it very difficult to later get out of it and come closer to G-d. Furthermore, money can drive a person mad and turn him away from his Creator. Money makes the heart of man cold and indifferent, and he thinks of nothing other than amassing material wealth, while completely forgetting about amassing spiritual wealth. This is quite obvious, for we can see with our own eyes that when people chase after money, their minds and hearts are completely absorbed by this pursuit, and they simply have no time to study, pray, and perform mitzvot. What becomes of their service to G-d in that case? This is why Hashem first commanded that money itself be brought as a contribution to the work of the Sanctuary, for it is in this way that we can channel the material side to serve G-d. Once we have done that, our entire body can be a sanctuary and an abode for the Shechinah, in which case “I shall dwell in them.”

## Tetzaveh

### *The Influence of Moses on Every Generation*

Commenting on the verse that states, “Now you shall command the Children of Israel that they shall take for you pure, pressed olive oil of illumination” (Ex 27:20), both the Midrash and the Zohar (III:246b) note that the name of Moses is not mentioned in this week’s Parsha because of the fact that Moses told the Holy One, blessed be He, “If not, erase me now from Your book that You have written” (Ex 32:32).

How can one imagine that the name of the man who devoted himself body and soul to the Children of Israel, who begged the Eternal not to wipe them out, is not mentioned in a Parsha? One could say that the Children of Israel are greater in His eyes than Moses, but in reality it is quite the opposite, for one sees that the Eternal wanted to wipe them out: “And now, desist from Me. Let My anger flare up against them and I shall annihilate them, and I shall make you a great nation” (Ex 32:10). Nevertheless, this was not what Moses had in mind. Rather, he preferred that his name be erased, provided that the Children remain alive. Moses was an exemplary figure *par excellence*! Why then this anger of G-d against him?

In addition, why does this week’s Parsha begin precisely with the mitzvah of the oil rather than another mitzvah? What connection could there be between the olive oil and the fact that Moses’ name is not mentioned in the Parsha?

It is because, as we read, all the souls of Israel were connected to Moses (Zohar III: 216b). In every Torah Sage there shines a spark of our teacher Moses, and very often one tells another, “You have answered well, Moses” (Shabbat 101b). Furthermore, Moses is equivalent to all the people of Israel (Zohar II:47a). Thus, even when the Children of Israel are seduced by the evil inclination and commit sins, they repent because of their connection to our teacher Moses, who tells them, “Whoever is for the L-RD, join me!” (Ex 32:26). Moses differentiates between those that don’t sin and are connected to his soul, and those who sin. The latter he reprimands in public, and so they confess their sin and attach themselves to his soul.

G-d told Moses: You know very well that the soul of the Children of Israel is connected to your own. How can I then erase you from the Book of Life? Who then will they attach themselves to? Erasing your name is the same as erasing the names of all the Children of Israel. It is in accordance with My will that you have access to the spiritual level of *Vayikhu Eilecha* (“that they take for you”). They are taken and attached to you. It is because of the mitzvah of the oil (*SheMeN* – pure olive oil) that their soul (*NeShaMah*) is connected to yours. How can I extinguish your light? I am resolute on keeping you alive in order to elevate the soul of the Children of Israel, which is connected to yours. Consequently, instead of asking Me to erase your name from My book, pray on their behalf. When they will have

repented, they will then be able to link up with your soul and spiritually uplift themselves without cease.

Thus Moses is well and truly mentioned in this week's Parsha.

### *The Torah is Acquired by Humility*

Commenting on the verse that states: “*Ve’ata* [And you] *tetzaveh* [you shall command] the Children of Israel that they shall take for you pure, pressed olive oil” (*Exodus 27:20*), the author of *Vayechi Yossef* asks why the verse employs both the word *Ve’ata* (“And you”) and the letter *tav* that prefixes the word *tetzaveh* (“you shall command”). Simply using one of these would have sufficed, and instead the verse could have stated *Ve’ata tzaveh* (“And you shall command”). The Ohr HaChayim explains that the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded Moses not to prescribe this mitzvah to the Children of Israel in His Name, for it is not becoming of G-d to order that the lamps in His House be lit. Hence for the sake of the dignity of G-d’s House, Moses prescribed this Divine precept in his own name. Yet if so, a question arises: Did the Children of Israel not know that everything Moses commanded them was but an expression of G-d’s will (see *Megillah 31b*)? In response, we may say that with respect to this particular mitzvah, the Shechinah did not speak “from the throat of Moses,” as the Zohar puts it (*Zohar III:232a*). What is the reason for this, and did Hashem really need this light (see *Shabbat 22b*)?

We may also ask why G-d did not tell Moses to transmit to the Children of Israel the mitzvah of building the Sanctuary in his (Moses’) name. Rather, G-d ordered that it be transmitted in His (G-d’s) Name. Was it ethically appropriate for G-d to ask them to build Him a Sanctuary with their contributions? Since everything belongs to G-d, what did He need with their money? Finally, concerning the mitzvah to provide oil for the Menorah, why did G-d order Moses to transmit it directly to the Children of Israel in his own name?

The reason is that, as we saw, the construction of the Sanctuary and the Temple shows the great modesty of the Holy One, blessed be He. Despite the fact that the whole world is filled with His glory, He desired to contract Himself into the Sanctuary, which alludes to the body of a Jew. G-d desires to dwell within each Jew, but only on condition that harmony reigns among us. Let us therefore act like G-d and embrace that prime virtue which is modesty.

The mitzvah of lighting the lamps also implies the attributes of humility, submission, and diminishing oneself. These can only reach a state of perfection, however, through the diligent study of Torah, which is compared to light, as it is written: “For a commandment is a lamp and the Torah is light” (*Proverbs 6:23*), “Practice is the essential thing” (*Perkei Avoth 1:17*), and “Great is Torah study that leads to deeds” (*Kiddushin 40b*). The Torah survives only with one who demonstrates humility (*Eruvin 54a*), and it is acquired only by a modest man (*Perkei Avoth 6:6*).

G-d said to Moses: “You alone, who ascended to the heavens and spoke to Me face to face [Numbers 12:8], all while remaining the most humble of men [v.3], truly understand the value of modesty. Therefore instill that virtue into the Children of Israel and teach them to study Torah with humility. From Me they will learn the attribute of diminishing oneself, as I demonstrated in general with respect to the Sanctuary. I require neither light nor lamps – not even the Sanctuary – for the whole world is filled with My glory and ‘The Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool’ [Isaiah 66:1].”

G-d therefore wanted to honor Moses by asking him to teach them to study Torah with the utmost enthusiasm and humility (*Katit lamaohr*: Crushed, humbled for the light of Torah). In fact the Children of Israel, as we saw above, knew very well that everything Moses said was but an expression of G-d’s will.

Rabbi Chanania ben Akashia said, “The Holy One, blessed be He, desired to grant merit to Israel. Therefore He gave them Torah and mitzvot in abundance” (*Makot 23b*). The Children of Israel would thus be entitled to two rewards: The first for having, in accordance with His will, studied Torah with enthusiasm and pleased their Creator, and the second because this Torah is as magnificent as the one that emanated from our holy forefathers. G-d said to Moses: “Because you were the only one to sense the sweetness of the Torah, I command you to transmit it to the Children of Israel. It is in no way proper for Me to do so, since it was for this purpose that they were created.” The first reward that they received was thus for having studied Torah. To that end, the Talmud teaches that one who studies Torah because he has been commanded to do so is more meritorious than one who studies it without having been so commanded. The second reward was for having had the merit to receive commandments directly from Moses.

### *The Soul of Moses Spreads To Every Jew*

The author of *Beth Israel* cites the Talmud as stating that Moses, who greatly loved his people and literally sacrificed himself for them, was born and died on the 7th of Adar (*Kiddushin 38a*). During that month a person can connect himself to the soul of Moses because, as we have seen on several occasions, his soul embodies that of all the Jewish people (*Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:64*). He explains that the Talmud does not state *mi sheva* (“as soon as [Adar] comes,” we must double our joy), but rather *mi shenichnas*, (“as soon as [Adar] enters”) to indicate that a person should push himself to enter this month in joy. He will then remain filled with joy.

We may say that *mi shenichnas*, or *Moshe nichnas*, the strength of Moses comes in Adar, and his great merit arouses a spiritual awakening in this world. As we have seen, the month of Adar is one of unity, embodied by Moses who was born and who died on the same day of the month. Haman claimed, “There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples” (*Esther 3:8*), and this heathen knew that the death of our faithful shepherd occurred in the month of Adar. He therefore believed that because the Jewish people were not united (but rather “scattered”), the strength of Moses was

not instilled in them. Furthermore, because they did not receive a spiritual awakening from on high, they could not serve Hashem by doubling their joy. However Haman had judged things incorrectly: The Jew who does Teshuvah is like a newborn baby that has never sinned (*Yoma 86b*). As soon as the Jews of that time repented, they were instilled with the power of Moses. Their spiritual awakening below generated one above, and they were able to double their joy, a joy that was granted to them from on high.

Moses did not experience any difficulties in the making of the two cherubim (both from a single piece), because the cherubim personify the love between man and his fellow, their faces being turned toward one another. Moses knew that the Torah only survives with a person when he builds a sanctuary for it and when he loves his fellow, just as the cherubim formed a single piece with the cover of the holy Ark. On the other hand, Moses experienced difficulties in the construction of the Menorah, which alludes to the spiritual abundance that comes from the Holy One, blessed be He. The cherubim were visible for the eyes of all to see, whereas the Tablets of the Law were hidden in the holy Ark. In other words, contrary to the knowledge of Torah that a person can hide, the love that he has for others should be visible and concrete. This is the only way to preserve the Torah that one studies.

As for the half-shekel of fire that G-d showed Moses (*Tanhuma, Ki Tisa 9*), we may ask why Moses experienced difficulties in picturing it. Who does not know what a coin looks like? The explanation is that Moses feared that the Children of Israel would have financial difficulties and not offer their gifts with a pure heart.

The Holy One, blessed be He, therefore showed him a coin of fire. As we know, fire is but Torah (*Mechilla, Yitro 19:18*), and when we engage in Torah study, “each man helps his fellow” (*Isaiah 41:6*). The two half-shekels form a whole, and if a half-shekel remains, G-d will personally complete it with His half-shekel of fire.

The term *matbea* (coin) indicates that it is *miteva* (in [man’s] nature) to jealously guard his money. However the study of Torah, which was given after *mem* (40) days, radically modifies his character and *teva* (nature), and he voluntarily devotes his silver and gold to the performance of mitzvot and good deeds.

As we have seen, the word *adar* has the same numerical value as the word *har* (mountain), which alludes to the evil inclination (*Sukkah 52a*), meaning that when we enter Adar to destroy the evil inclination, we are filled with joy. Furthermore, we know that the evil inclination is primarily *kesef* (money) and *safek* (doubt), whose numerical value (with the *kuf* replacing the *caf*) is equal to that of *Amalek* (240), which chills a person’s enthusiasm to serve his Creator. The *terumah* (offering) – which alludes to *Torah* and *mem* – enables a person to carry out the Divine precept of Tzeddakah to perfection. Tzeddakah and Torah study modifies man’s nature, and he is then capable of conquering the evil inclination (Amalek) by the merit of Moses, the servant of G-d.

### ***Material Garments for the Body, Spiritual Garments for the Soul***

In this week's parsha, we find that Hashem commanded Moses to prepare the priestly garments for Aaron and his sons the priests. The High Priest wore eight priestly garments, whereas an ordinary priest wore four.

We may all learn a moral lesson by examining the nature of these garments. We may also learn proper conduct, which consists of knowing how to dress, because the clothes make the man. To our great regret and shame, our generation has witnessed a vicious plague spreading in the streets, one that has even infiltrated our surroundings. This plague is commonly called "fashion," meaning that men and women are not ashamed of wearing clothes that only a generation ago they would have been too embarrassed to wear, even inside their homes. These relate to pants, shoes, and skirts or wigs for women.

Our holy Patriarchs and Matriarchs were especially careful to wear clothes that were modest and discreet, not ones with loud colors or which barely covered the body. Their clothes proved to the naked eye that the wearer was among the blessed progeny of G-d, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is not without reason that our Sages said, "The Children of Israel were delivered from Egypt because they did not change their style of dress." Today, however, everyone does what he wants, and each person has his own particular way of dressing. What's more is that each person thinks that the more outrageous his clothing is, the better things will go for him. Each person believes that the more he integrates into society, the greater his status will be wherever he finds himself.

In contrast, let us examine the garments worn by the High Priest. Over his heart he wore the breastplate. On his back he wore the *ephod*. On his forehead he wore the gold *tziz* (headplate), a mark of consecration. On his head he wore a miter, and over his entire body he wore a blue tunic, which was in addition to a mesh-pattern tunic that he wore beneath. His legs were covered by underpants that extended from his hips to his thighs, thereby covering his nakedness, and he was girded by a fabric belt that separated the upper and lower parts of his body.

This teaches us just how much the Torah insists on proper clothing. The High Priest was a symbol and an example for all the Children of Israel. Everyone could see the priest officiating, and what did they notice when he arrived at the Temple? Was he someone for whom fashion was a great concern? Was he a man who put an effort into dressing according to the latest trends? Definitely not. People saw a man whose entire body, *from top to bottom*, was fully covered, allowing none of his flesh to be seen. They saw a man dressed with extreme modesty, which is why they certainly learned a lesson from him and dressed appropriately.

Today, however, to our great regret there are many men and women who are insensitive to moral values. Modesty does not interest them, and therefore they are also incapable of demonstrating shame. What is the reason for this? If their material

garments are not appropriate, it follows that their spiritual garments are definitely not worthy of such a name, and therefore the *Shechinah* flees from them.

When we fail to pay attention to our material garments, we naturally do not pay attention to our spiritual garments either. In fact it is completely impossible to come closer to the King of the universe while wearing clothes that draw strange looks. Inappropriate material clothing leads a person to consider and even think that “the house of Israel is like all the other peoples,” like all the other nations of the world. How can he then study Torah, pray, perform *mitzvot*, and so on?

We find this principle at work during Purim, for one of the customs of Purim is to dress up in a disguise. Wherever Jews are found, they dress up on Purim in accordance with the words of the Megillah: “The Jews had gladness and joy, a feast and a holiday” (*Esther 8:17*). It is not only Jews who disguise themselves, for among the other peoples – even those who have no connection to the Torah and *mitzvot* – the custom of dressing up in a disguise at this time has spread. In reflecting upon this, however, we see that Jewish costumes in no way resemble the costumes of non-Jews. On Purim, Jews (especially the pious) dress up as *tzaddikim*, saintly figures from the Bible, or other such figures. Yet how do the people of the other nations disguise themselves? We cannot describe their costumes in words, for they disguise themselves as the worst possible things. What is the reason behind this?

A Jew should certainly realize that material garments for the body are really spiritual garments for the soul. If the material clothing of a person’s body is holy and modest, according to the norms of Jewish law, he also clothes his soul with a spiritual garment. This is the clothing that he will wear in the future, at the end of days, before the supreme King. However if a person wears inappropriate material clothing, how will his soul be able to wear their spiritual equivalent? What will he do in the future? He will truly stand naked!

This is why anyone who reflects a little and is G-d-fearing must draw a lesson from the priestly garments, as well as from the custom of dressing up on Purim. We must understand that it is only when a person wears proper material garments – clothing prescribed by the Torah and in accordance with G-d’s will – that the spiritual garments of his soul will also be fitting. Such a person will merit all good things from Hashem.

## Ki Tisa

### *The Sin of the Golden Calf and the Rut of Routine*

One can say that the sin of the golden calf was prompted by the rut of routine. If the Children of Israel had not performed the Divine commandments by habit – if they had been filled with wonder each time that the Eternal performed a miracle for them – they would have forced themselves to get even closer to G-d. They would certainly not have come to the point where they renounced His existence.

The Mishnah instructs us: “Do not be sure of yourself until the day you die” (*Perkei Avoth 2:4*). Any separation from our Creator, be it even the most minimal, is capable of making us fail. Examples are not lacking. We should be content to recall the case of Yochanan the High Priest, who became a Sadducee after serving as a priest for 80 years (*Berachot 29a*). It was, no doubt, because he wasn’t filled with awe regarding his priesthood for as long as he practiced it.

The strength of the evil inclination’s trick lies in trying to make a man perform as many mitzvot as possible, all while trying to make him lower, if not to completely freeze, his fervor.

Consequently, we should be careful to attach ourselves constantly to G-d. Let us apply ourselves to observe the least important precepts as well as the most important commandments, for we don’t know what is the recompense associated with each of them. In other words, we just don’t know if our attitude concerning accomplishing a mitzvah comes by way of Divine help or the evil inclination, the latter which wants us to fall into its trap (G-d forbid). If we reconnect ourselves to G-d, we will dispel all these worries and doubts. Let us be careful, above all, to perform those “easy” mitzvot with a maximum of concentration (*cf. Tanhuma, Eikev 1*).

Instead of being wonderstruck by the numerous miracles that each person saw before them – instead of strengthening themselves every day and getting closer and closer to the Eternal – the Children of Israel remained complacent. They were already so used to it! Even Mount Sinai, entirely engulfed in flames, didn’t overly impress them!

This indifference and complacency were also unfortunately introduced into the religious world. Torah scholars can engage themselves in long talks during prayer instead of responding “Amen” when they should. Have they forgotten that the one who responds *amen yehei shemei rabba* with all his strength annuls all strict sentences pronounced against him for 70 years (*Shabbat 119b*)? It is because the evil inclination has accustomed them to pray and study without concentration. Our Sages teach that the more one spiritually elevates oneself, the more the evil inclination attacks (*Sukkah 52a*). These people should not forget, even for an instant, before Whom they stand while

praying (*Berachot 28b*). They should be aware of the fact that the Holy One, blessed be He, studies with them when they study (*Tamid 32a*). When one studies and performs mitzvot, it is best to imagine oneself at Mount Sinai receiving the Torah and hearing the Children of Israel proclaiming in unison with all their heart, “We will do and we will hear” (*Ex 24:7*).

As we have seen, the evil inclination was removed from their hearts when they heard the words, “I am the L-RD your G-d. You shall have no other gods before Me” (*Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:15*). How did the evil inclination manage to get them into the rut of routine? The answer lies in the fact that they were, after all, only beings of flesh and blood. Adam, who was devoid of the slightest trace of the evil inclination, ended up sinning. The Zohar teaches that G-d showed Adam the paths of good and evil, and Adam chose the one of evil. He did this because the injunction against eating from the Tree of Knowledge (which he was in the habit of seeing all the time) was not firmly anchored in his heart, or Eve’s, and also because he had not taken to heart to listen to G-d’s commandment. If Adam and Eve had done these things, they would never have come into contact with the snake. Rather, they would have dismissed the snake without mercy, and it would not have had any influence on them at all. Yet the very fact that they began to speak with the snake shows that they had been dominated by the influence of routine. For if Adam had been refraining from eating of the tree up to that point, it was not because he wanted to comply with the Divine Will, but rather because he had gotten into the simple habit of doing so. This is exactly what happened to the generation in the desert was well. They were so used to miracles that they couldn’t even sense their presence anymore. In this way they reintroduced the evil inclination into their hearts.

The performance of mitzvot by simple rote can lead to disgust and even to exile. To this end the prophet declares, “For what reason did the land perish ... because of their forsaking My Torah” (*Jer 9:11,12*). The Sages explain that they didn’t recite the blessing of בתחילה (“at first”) on the Torah (*Nedarim 91a*). In other words, they didn’t concentrate on it enough, but rather did it by simple rote. What’s more, the numerical value of תחילה (“first”) is equal to that of בהרגל בעלמא (“the habit in the world”). It is precisely this sin that caused the destruction of the Temple. For the Divine Presence is made distant through routine, and the one who doesn’t make an effort to be affected by the Shechinah, the Shechinah assuredly moves away from him. In throwing the tablet on which was inscribed, “Rise, O Ox”, the *erev rav* (mixed multitude), obtained an עגל (calf), which alludes to the געל (disgust) with which they performed the mitzvot by rote, and by which they distanced themselves from G-d.

The sin of the עגל (ע: 70; גל: *galut* [exile]) drove them to galut, their dispersion and exile in the midst of the ע (70) nations. They finished by being mocked (לעג) and derided everywhere they went. If, therefore, the Children of Israel didn’t reprimand the mixed multitude for the sin of the golden calf, it was because at the beginning they themselves worshipped idols (*Shemot Rabba 16b*). In seeing the mixed multitude worshipping the golden calf, the Children of Israel kept quiet because they assumed that the mixed

multitude were just following the customs they had acquired in Egypt. Their silence, however, constituted a real sin, even if they felt contempt for the golden calf itself (*Yoma 87b*). In the final analysis, it was really the grind of normal routine that prevented the Children of Israel from rebuking the mixed multitude, for instead of the former being in awe each time they experienced a miracle, they instead became used to them.

All sin therefore originates, in the final analysis, from a life lived out of routine. Having refrained from reprimanding the mixed multitude for the sin of the golden calf, the Children of Israel have continued to pay for this over the span of the generations, as we have seen (*Sanhedrin 102a*).

It is therefore fitting that we study Torah and perform all the mitzvot with great fervor, doing so in such a way that, in the words of the author of *Sefat Emet*, the Torah enters into our heart and into our blood. We should completely run away from routine and reprimand those who perform mitzvot without any enthusiasm. In this way we will elevate and greatly strengthen them in their study of Torah.

### ***The Sin of the Golden Calf – “Rebuke Your Neighbor”***

It is written, “The people saw that Moses had delayed in descending the mountain, and the people gathered themselves together” (*Exodus 32:1*) and “The L-RD said to Moses, ‘Behold, I come to you in the thickness of the cloud so that the people will hear as I speak to you, and they will also believe in you forever’ ” (*ibid. 19:9*).

Rabbi ibn Ezra writes: “Just as Hindus and the Egyptians that descended from Ham did not believe that one can speak with G-d and remain alive, a certain number of the Children of Israel, enslaved in Egypt, believed the same. This is why it is written that ‘they had faith in the L-RD and in Moses His servant’ (*Exodus 14:31*). The verse does not say that they *all* had faith, but only a certain number of the Israelites. On the other hand, concerning the giving of the Torah, it is written, ‘and they will also believe in you forever’ (*Exodus 19:9*) and ‘this day we saw that the L-RD will speak to a person and he can live’ (*Deuteronomy 5:21*).”

However the Ramban explains that G-d said to Moses, “The Children of Israel will also reach the level of prophets and will hear My word directly.” They would thus understand that Moses is a prophet and that he is the faithful servant of G-d.

Concerning Rabbi ibn Ezra’s view, we may add that if the Children of Israel did not believe in the prophesy of Moses (who delayed in coming down from on high), why would they have waited 40 days to commit the sin of the golden calf? In actuality, they believed in Moses but had erred in calculating the number of days after which he was to come back to them, and in addition the Satan had shown them Moses’ coffin (*Shabbat 89a*). They believed that having reached the level of an angel, he was no longer to come back to them. Therefore they built a golden calf that was to serve as an intermediary between the Eternal and themselves. Yet when Moses descended from the mountain, they were seized with fright. Where then was their bravery and their insolence, they

who did not hesitate to kill Hur the son of Miriam (*Tanhuma Ki Tisa 24*)? They had also threatened to kill Aaron if he did not build the golden calf for them (*ibid*; see *Exodus 32:21*). So Moses descended from the mountain, broke the golden calf into pieces, reduced it to powder, made the sinners drink it with water, and broke the Tablets of the Law. And the Children of Israel kept quiet! It was because they completely believed in Moses after the giving of the Torah. After all, did they not see him speaking with G-d?

If we hold by the Ramban's opinion, how can it be imagined that they had committed the sin of the golden calf after having reached the level of prophets on Mount Sinai? Let us not forget that the Eternal had categorically ordered them not to make "a carved image nor any likeness" (*ibid. 20:4*). Even according to Rabbi ibn Ezra, how could they have the merit of holding the title of "the generation of knowledge" and to believe in Moses and his prophesy? How could they have made the 49 gates of impurity crumble, and how could they have passed through the 50<sup>th</sup> gate of holiness? How could they have eaten the Manna? How could they have seen Moses speaking face to face with G-d in the middle of the thick cloud, and how could they have believed in G-d and in Moses His servant? How could they have dared to kill Hur, the son of Miriam? And were they not afraid of Aaron, who himself was also a great prophet and leader, and who had performed great miracle, most notably the plagues of blood and frogs?

It was because, as we have seen, all the sins had been committed by the *erev rav*, the mixed multitude (*Tanhuma Ki Tisa 26*), who Moses wanted to shelter under the shadow of the Shechinah. It was they who could not understand that the one born of a woman could speak to G-d and remain alive (according to Rabbi ibn Ezra). They, who had not reached the level of faith and prophesy, believed that G-d had killed Moses when he dared to speak to Him face to face. Did the Satan not show them that Moses was dead? It was because of this that they killed Hur, threatened Aaron, and made the golden calf. This is why the Eternal told Moses, "Go, get down, for your people have become corrupt" (*Exodus 32:7* – according to Rashi, this consists of the *erev rav*). It is possible that a certain number of Israelites followed them, but they repented after having received the Torah.

Why then were the Children of Israel punished? Why were they deprived of the two crowns that had been placed on their head (Shabbat 88a), as it is written, "And now remove your jewelry from yourself" (*Exodus 33:5*)? If the tribe of Levi had, in accordance with Moses' order, killed the *erev rav*, why were the Children of Israel punished? G-d wanted to wipe them out, as He told Moses: "Let My anger flare up against them and I shall annihilate them" (*ibid. 32:10*) and "on the day that I make My account, I shall bring their sin to account against them" (v.34). Concerning this, our Sages teach that the sin of the golden calf permeates all other sins and all suffering over the course of the generations (*Sanhedrin 102a*). Let us recall, finally, that during the giving of the Torah, the evil inclination was removed from the heart of the Children of Israel, who from that point on rid themselves of the Angel of Death (*Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:15*). Yet because of the mixed multitude, the entire situation was then reversed. "If," as the Talmud explains,

“Tuvia sinned, why should Zigud be punished?” (see *Pesachim 113b*). Why did the Children of Israel pay for the sins committed by the mixed multitude?

We could criticize the Children of Israel, who represented the majority, for not having fought against the mixed multitude. If the Children of Israel had attacked them, they would have certainly won. Their silence makes them accomplices (*Bava Metzia 37b*), for G-d commands us, “You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him” (*Leviticus 19:17*), doing so until the other is ashamed or hurts us. Our Sages oblige us to reprimand the person whose behavior is inappropriate (*Erchin 16b*). Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you brought a grievous sin upon it?” (*Exodus 32:21*). In other words, “Why did you hesitate to rebuke them, even if it cost you your life? If you had rebuked the Children of Israel, they would have done nothing to you, and they would not have killed Hur.”

The Midrash teaches that someone who can reprimand his fellow, yet refrains from doing so, pays for the sin committed by him (*Shabbat 54b*). He as well as his descendants will be punished. As we saw above, up until this day we are being punished for the sin of the golden calf, a sin committed by our distant ancestors.

The mixed multitude said to Aaron, “Rise up, make for us gods that will go before us” (*Exodus 32:1*). Did idols have the ability to lead them? Had the Israelites forgotten all the miracles that G-d had performed for them? Did they not rid themselves, as we have seen, of idolatry?

The reason for this is that a person who repents through fear, not through love, sees his fear melting away in the end and goes back onto the bad path. Teshuvah done through love is thus more important than when done through the fear of G-d (*Yoma 86b*). This is what happened to the mixed multitude: They desired to reintroduce the idolatry of Egypt and act as they pleased without being punished.

The mixed multitude therefore said to the Children of Israel, “These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt” (*Exodus 32:4*). In other words, “These gods will not punish you if you sin; they don’t watch that you study Torah and perform mitzvot. Don’t you see that we have enriched ourselves? It is just like we did in Egypt, without being punished [*Shemot Rabba 16:2*]. Therefore come and join us, and together we will worship these idols.”

The Children of Israel should have attacked them head-on. Instead they refrained from defending the Eternal’s cause and were punished. They nevertheless finished by vanquishing the mixed multitude and serving the Eternal, not through fear but by love, as the Prophet recalls: “Thus says the L-RD, ‘I recall for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, your following Me into the Wilderness, into an unsown land’ ” (*Jeremiah 2:2*).

Let us not, therefore, behave like those people that wanted to be like the mixed multitude, seeking pleasures and benefits and going to the Tzaddikim without taking to the Divine path. In other words, they asked for Divine blessing without serving their

Creator; they asked that G-d send His abundance in the world yet refused to recognize Him. Moreover, we see that sometimes “the way of the wicked prosper[s]” (*Jeremiah 12: 1*). They mistakenly believe that the Eternal is on their side, and they themselves admit to not believing or relying on Him. “Their heart was not constant with Him, and they were not steadfast in His covenant” (*Psalms 78:37*). They fail to realize that all this is the work of the Satan, who aims only at deceiving them.

Let us therefore conduct ourselves like the Children of Israel, not like the mixed multitude. Let us believe in Him “with the mouth and the heart.” Let us rebuke our neighbor when we see him sinning. The sin of the golden calf will then be rectified, and we will reach the level of prophets, as did the Children of Israel after they left Egypt and received the Torah.

### “Go, Descend” – The Goal of all Descents is Ascension

In Parsha Ki Tisa we read, “Go, descend – for your people that you brought up from the land of Egypt has become corrupt” (*Exodus 32:7*). Most commentators have asked why the verse states both “Go” and “descend” at the same time. Would a single commandment not have been sufficient for Moses? As we have seen, Rashi cites the Talmud (*Berachot 32:22*) and explains as follows: “Descend from your exalted position. I did not give you your high position except for their sake.”

Despite this explanation, a certain number of questions remain:

1. As the head of the prophets (*Esther Rabba, Introduction 10*) and the undisputed leader of the Jewish people (whose outlook and state of mind he was perfectly familiar with), Moses knew very well that they would commit the sin of the golden calf. Yet if that were the case, why did he then descend from the mountain with the Tablets of the Law in his hands? Was he unaware that they were not ready to receive them, having been completely distanced from G-d by the sin of the golden calf?

2. Why did G-d make Moses descend from the mountain (i.e., from his greatness)? If the Children of Israel sinned, what wrong had Moses done?

3. Why did Moses break the Tablets? Although it is true that afterwards G-d told him, “You did well!” (*Shabbat 87a*), nevertheless He had not given him the order to break them.

King David said concerning Moses: “You ascended on high, you have taken captives” (*Psalms 68:19*). In other words, you triumphed over all the angels by your holiness and wisdom (see *Shemot Rabba 28:1*). He even succeeded in studying Torah with the Holy One, blessed be He (*Berachot 63b*) and took hold of the Celestial Throne to respond to the angels who opposed the giving of the Torah (*Shabbat 88b*). As a result, when G-d informed Moses that the Children of Israel had sinned, he found it difficult to leave the delights of the spiritual world that he was in. G-d therefore had to give him an express order to descend from there: “You only belong to the world below now. Therefore

descend and see what My children have done.”

However Moses was very apprehensive about this descent, for he feared the influence of the wrongdoers who had fashioned the golden calf. G-d then ordered him to descend from his greatness, for as He explained to him: “It was of your own free will – yours, not Mine – that you brought the mixed multitude out of Egypt, as it is written: ‘Your people [not ‘My people’] ... has become corrupt’ [Exodus 32:7]. Therefore descend and save the Children of Israel from this mixed multitude. All the honors that you enjoy are yours only because of the Children of Israel.”

As the Talmud teaches (*Makot 7b*), the goal of every descent is to elevate a man. Moses had certainly made it to such sublime spiritual levels that he was unaware of the Children of Israel’s sin. However G-d objected to his stay in the celestial heights and ordered him to descend (in order to better ascend the next time).

A man experiences many trials and failures in this lower world, but he can only lift himself back up by the diligent study of Torah.

The Tzaddik who departs from this world is completely unaware of trivial matters, for he enjoys the splendor of the Shechinah in the upper realms (*Berachot 17a*). How can we call upon the Tzaddik’s merit with G-d so as to help us in the material realm? Let us first light candles in his memory, then ask him to have pity on us, to intercede with G-d in our behalf to help us become greater in our Torah study. It is only after doing these things that we should ask G-d (by the merit of the Tzaddik) to help us gain our sustenance, to raise our children in the path of truth and righteousness, and so on. This is because the material realm constitutes the aspect of failure, of descent, yet since its only goal is a greater ascension in the spiritual realm, the Tzaddik will have our prayers answered by calling upon G-d’s mercy in our behalf.

It is forbidden for the Tzaddik to enclose himself at home, without watching over his fellow. It is vital that others benefit from his Torah and exemplary behavior. If he fails to do so, he brings about the deterioration of his generation, as was the case with King Saul (*see I Samuel 10:22*). G-d tells such a Tzaddik, “Come out from your hiding place and teach the Torah to the Children of Israel.”

The verse that states, “For it is a time to act for the L-RD. They have voided your Torah” (*Psalms 119:126*) can be interpreted in the following way: The Tzaddik/Moses wants to act in the Name of G-d, which is to say that he wants to study Torah. It follows that his brothers find nobody to teach them mitzvot, and so they transgress them. “Go, descend,” Hashem told Moses. “It is time that you make souls for the Holy One, blessed be He. Stop studying alone. Make your fellowman benefit from your knowledge. Be assured, you will not be abstaining from studying Torah by doing so. Know that you are elevated not only by Torah study, but also – and above all – by helping the Jewish people. The Mishnah teaches to this effect: ‘Prepare yourself for the study of Torah, for it does not come to you through inheritance’ [Perkei Avoth 2:12]. It is not only a heritage for you, but for all the Jewish people.” Furthermore it is written, “The Torah that Moses commanded us is the heritage of the Congregation of Jacob” (*Deuteronomy 33:4*), and “If you

have learned much Torah, do not claim special credit for yourself” (*Perkei Avoth 2:8*), so teach it to the Children of Israel. “Go, descend – for your people ... has become corrupt.” They are distancing themselves from the Torah. Therefore bring them back to it.

Thus the only goal of Moses’ descent was to elevate the souls of the Children of Israel, to bring them closer to G-d. If Moses descended from the mountain holding the two Tablets of the Law in his hands, it was in order to show them what they had lost, namely the “Tablets of the Testimony, stone tablets inscribed by the finger of G-d” (*Exodus 31:18*). Even though broken, they retained all their holiness. With respect to this, the Talmud teaches: “The Tablets and the fragments of the Tablets were placed in the Holy Ark” (*Bava Batra 14b*), and if the Children of Israel had not committed the sin of the golden calf, the Tablets would not have been broken and Israel’s strength would have been even greater.

Despite the fact that they were broken, the Tablets were “whole” because they served to bring about a spiritual elevation. Here too we see the concept of “a descent for an ascent.” According to the Talmud, sufferings purge a man of his sins, allowing him to spiritually elevate himself (*Berachot 5a*). Let us not act like those who stomp upon “easy” mitzvot with their heels and are only careful about major mitzvot, who neglect the fragments of the Tablets in order to seize the whole Tablets (*Tanhuma Eikev 1*). Commenting on the verse that states, “*Pesol lecha* [Carve for yourself] two stone Tablets like the first” (*Exodus 34:1*), our Sages explain this to mean: “Take possession of their fragments” (*Nedarim 38a*). What exactly did they mean by this? That even starting from “fragments” (i.e., minor mitzvot), we may elevate ourselves. This descent can elevate and help you to elevate others. Is that not, in the final analysis, the mission incumbent upon every Jew?

It is written, “Moses would take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp, far from the camp ... whoever sought the L-RD would go out to the Tent of Meeting, which was outside the camp” (*Exodus 33:7*). How is it possible that Moses, who was the most humble man on the face of the earth, did not strive to go and teach the Torah to the Children of Israel? Why did he wait for them to come to him? Why did he not follow the example of our Patriarch Abraham, who went throughout the land to teach G-d’s ways to all (see *Rambam, Hilchot Akum 1:3*)?

That was also what the prophet Samuel did, as it is written: “He would travel year after year, circling to Beth-el, Gilgal, and Mizpah, and judging Israel in all these places” (*I Samuel 7:16*). The Midrash states, “Consider the difference between Moses and Samuel: Moses would freely go in to see the Holy One, blessed be He, whereas it was the Holy One, blessed be He, Who appeared to Samuel, as it is written: ‘The L-RD came and appeared’ [*I Samuel 3:10*]” (*Shemot Rabba 16:4*). Why this difference? It is because, as our Sages explained, Moses waited for the Children of Israel to come and be judged before him, as it is written: “Moses sat to judge the people” (*Exodus 18:3*), whereas Samuel traveled throughout the land to judge the people. Hashem said, “Moses will therefore

present himself before Me in a regular way, but I Myself will go and see Samuel,” as it is written: “A scale and just balances are the L-RD’s” (*Proverbs 16:11*).

Why then did Moses not act like Samuel? It is because where we see Moses’ humility, there we also see his greatness. It was not because of laziness (G-d forbid) that he refrained from traveling to the people, but because he knew that the Shechinah was with the Children of Israel in the desert and that they lacked nothing. No enemy pursued them, and they were completely surrounded by the Cloud of Glory. Suddenly, following the sin of the golden calf, the defilement of the serpent came and took up residence within them and made them stumble spiritually, causing their Torah study to greatly diminish. If in the desert, where they had no worries, they acted in this way and ended up making a golden calf, what would happen to them when they would descend into exile and experience all sorts of difficulties?

Hence if Moses placed the Tent of Meeting outside the camp, it was to teach the Children of Israel that they must search for the Divine path rather than wait until someone comes and shows them it. In this way they would learn Torah with fervor, and in this sense it would be their efforts that would help them, as it is written: “Still, my wisdom stood with me” (*Ecclesiastes 2:9*) – it was the Torah that I learned in toil that supported me (*Kohelet Rabba 2:12*).

Nevertheless, in Samuel’s generation the situation was completely different, for at that time the Children of Israel lacked faith. The destruction of the Sanctuary at Shiloh was like that of the holy Temple. The Philistines captured the Ark of G-d (*I Samuel 5:1*), and so Samuel did not expect the Children of Israel to come to him. Rather, he went to the most remote villages to make them return to their Father in Heaven. If he had not acted in this way, the Jewish people would not have recovered. (*Yalkut Me’am Loez, ibid.*). Such is what our forefather Abraham did before him. He went to all those who denied G-d to show them the path to follow and to make His holy Name reign over them.

The people of the generation of knowledge, who witnessed so many miracles yet had nevertheless sinned, were to go to Moses, who would descend from his greatness to meet them. If he placed the Tent of Meeting outside the camp, it was in order to instill in them a love of Torah – his Torah – for which he had devoted himself entirely, as it is written: “Remember the Torah of Moses My servant” (*Malachi 3:22*). It was in order to lavish them with extremely sound advice. The Talmud teaches to this effect that the Holy One, blessed be He, told Moses: “Because you descended from your greatness, the Torah will carry your name” (*Shabbat 89a*). If Moses placed his tent outside the camp, it was to teach us that it is proper to seek out a place, even if it is distant, where G-d’s laws are taught (*Perkei Avoth 4:18[14]*). It teaches us to establish yeshivot outside a city and its commotion in order that we may better concentrate in our Torah study and come even closer to G-d.

May we have the merit to study Torah in tranquility and to elevate ourselves to lofty spiritual levels. This is what our Father in Heaven seeks, and it is the very goal of Jews in this world. Amen.

### *The Perfection of Man*

Commenting on the verse, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people” (*Exodus 32:9*), Rashi explains that the Children of Israel are described in this way “because they turn their stiff necks toward those who reprimand them and refuse to listen.” The Sforno concludes that there is no chance they will repent.

Does such behavior truly befit the generation of knowledge? Some commentators explain that the Children of Israel, having believed that they reached a state of perfection, felt that they had nothing more to learn. As we know, in such cases people become filled with arrogance and pay no attention to reprimands.

All the same, we are not dealing with ordinary individuals here, but with the generation of knowledge. How could they have reached such a state?

The Ohr HaChaim writes about this issue: “How can we imagine that people of such a level could have been so foolish as to say of an inanimate object, ‘These are your gods, O Israel’ [*Exodus 32:8*]?” For his part, the Rashbam adds: “Did they not know that his calf, born today, had not brought the Children of Israel out of Egypt?”

Because the Children of Israel witnessed so many miracles that even a servant girl at the Sea of Reeds saw what the Prophet Ezekiel never saw, and because they had completely rid themselves of their impurity (*Zohar I:63b; II:94a*) – as well as having been crowned by the angels for having stated, “we will do and we will hearken” (*Shabbat 88a*) – the Children of Israel became filled with pride. Now as we know, pride belongs to G-d alone, as it is written: “The L-RD has reigned, He has donned grandeur” (*Psalms 93:1*). The pride they felt consisted solely *besheker* (of falsehood), which has the same numerical value (602) as *boshesh*: “The people saw that Moses *boshesh* [delayed] in descending” (*Exodus 32:1*). This in turn led to a breakdown in their Torah study, which invariably causes a spiritual collapse that can produce irrational behavior. As we have seen, the Torah does not survive with those who are impudent, meaning with people who think that they know everything and have reached a state of perfection.

We can therefore understand the Mishnah that states, “One who walks on the road and studies [Torah], then interrupts his study and remarks, ‘How beautiful is this tree! How beautiful is this plowed field!’ Scripture considers it as if he were guilty of a mortal sin” (*Perkei Avoth 3:7*). Why such a strict sentence? It is because a person who is *shoneh* – who repeats his studies and feels that all he has to do is to continue repeating what he has learned, since he feels that he has already mastered it – and deludes himself into thinking that he can stop learning, such a person is liable to the penalty of death.

The manna that descended upon the desert was capable of making those who ate it distinguish between a Tzaddik, an average person, and a wicked one. This meticulous insight enabled the Children of Israel to realize that they had not yet reached a state of perfection and that they still had work for a *tikkun* (spiritual correction) through constant Torah study.

Thus if the Jewish people were about to be wiped out during the time of Achashverosh, it was because they had grown arrogant and allowed themselves to neglect the study of Torah and to participate in the banquet of the wicked Persian king. The Torah is also described as a banquet, for it is called “bread” (*Proverbs 9:5*). This is the reason why Mordechai had to assemble school children who studied Torah and prayed with them that the sin of pride and lack of Torah study be forgiven (*Esther Rabba 8:6*).

On the first day of Adar, we recall the mitzvah of giving *shekalim*. The mitzvah of giving half a shekel demonstrates that a man is only a half, not a whole, and that this world with all its pleasures is simply futile (see *Ecclesiastes 1:2*). G-d loves only the humble and hates those who are conceited. He appreciates one with a broken heart, who feels that he is but a half (see *Psalms 51:19*). This mitzvah occurs during the month of Adar in order to recall the sin of the Jewish people in the city of Shushan, where they felt that they had reached a state of perfection and believed that they could accept Achashverosh’s invitation without sinning.

This mitzvah also applies in our days, for it serves to remind us of Temple times and enjoins us to remember that we are not perfect, that we have to work a great deal on ourselves in order to achieve perfection.

At this point we understand why Parsha Ki Tisa deals with the offering of the *shekalim* for the construction of the Sanctuary. As we noted above, the sin of the golden calf was caused by the pride of the Children of Israel. Thus we can only correct this sin if we feel incomplete without one another. The offering of the half-shekel was given before the sin of the golden calf, for in the final analysis it was like a cure given before the illness (*Megillah 13b*).

Rabbi Akiva taught, “Beloved is man, for he was created in the image of [G-d]...as it is stated: ‘For in the image of G-d He made man’ [*Genesis 9:6*]” (*Perkei Avoth 3:18*). This is not an excuse, however, for a person to become haughty.

As we noted many times before, it was a belief in his own perfection that corrupted Elisha ben Avuya, the teacher of Rabbi Meir (*Hagigah 14b*).

Scripture relates that at Gibeon, Hashem appeared at night in a dream to Solomon and said to him, “Request what I should give to you” (*1 Kings 3:5*). Solomon replied, “May You grant Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people” (*v.9*). King Solomon’s request pleased G-d, and since he had not asked for a long life or wealth, G-d gave him these things as well. However we may raise a question concerning this subject: G-d surely knew what Solomon lacked, for He probes the heart of men. Yet in such a case, why did He ask him what he wanted?

Solomon in fact lacked nothing. He had inherited gold and silver from his father King David, and the kingdom was his. Solomon loved Hashem and followed the ways of his father. From his earliest years, he was gifted with wisdom, as it is written: “I *have given you* [past tense] a wise and understanding heart” (*1 Kings 3:12*). Therefore Solomon asked for wisdom because he already possessed a certain amount of it, for

the Holy One, blessed be He, does not give wisdom to those lacking it (*Berachot 55a*), as it is written: “He gives wisdom to the wise” (*Daniel 2:21*). Furthermore, “Wisdom will reside in an understanding heart” (*Proverbs 14:33*) and “A refining pot is for silver and a crucible for gold, but a man according to his praises” (*ibid. 27:21*). G-d therefore asked Solomon what he lacked in order to test him: If he told G-d that he lacked nothing, he would have been saying that he had already reached a state of perfection. Yet in his wisdom, Solomon replied that for his good, as well as the good of all Israel, he wanted even more wisdom. This is why Hashem replied, “Behold, I have acted in accordance with your words” (*1 Kings 3:12*), for He had created him with intelligence.

Nevertheless, Solomon understood that in spite of the extra wisdom that G-d gave him, he had still not reached the level of supreme wisdom, as it is written: “I said, ‘I will get wisdom,’ but it was far from me” (*Ecclesiastes 7:23*) and “Surely I am a boor of a man” (*Proverbs 30:2*).

Let us not be deluded, for we are all far from perfection. Therefore let us focus all our efforts into attaining it.

### ***The Virtues of Moses and Aaron in Light of the Evil Inclination’s Tricks***

Commenting on the verse, “He took it...and fashioned it into a molten calf” (*Exodus 32:4*), Rashi cites the Midrash (*Tanhuma, Ki Tisa 11*) and explains that the Egyptian magicians from the mixed multitude practiced their witchcraft to fashion the calf. Rashi continues and states: “Some say that Michah was there.... He had in his hand an amulet and a plate onto which Moses had written: ‘Arise ox! Arise ox!’ with which to bring up Joseph’s casket from the Nile, and he [Michah] threw it into the melting pot and out came the calf.”

We may raise three questions concerning this Midrash:

1. Why did Moses write, “Arise ox! Arise ox!” on the plate? He could have simply recited this phrase, which would have certainly prevented the sin of the golden calf. Why did he write that phrase – which relates to Joseph, as it is written: “His firstling ox, majesty is his” (*Deuteronomy 33:17*) – instead of “Arise Joseph”?

2. If it was the mixed multitude (or the gold plate) that fashioned the calf, why did Moses ask Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you brought a grievous sin upon it” (*Exodus 32:21*)? Furthermore, why did the Children of Israel ask Aaron to “make for us gods that will go before us” (*v.1*), since in any case it was the gold plate that was going to do everything?

3. Our Sages teach that the Satan had shown the Children of Israel the casket of Moses being carried in Heaven by the angels (*Shabbat 89a*). How could he deceive them in that way? The Children of Israel clearly knew how to distinguish the angels – those from Mount Sinai, who set crowns on their heads (*Shabbat 88a*) – from the Satan. We therefore return to our question: How can we imagine that they reached such a state, after having witnessed so many miracles in Egypt and by the sea?

Let us recall that Joseph had made the Children of Israel swear to “bring up my bones from here with you” (*Exodus 13:19*), and while they were occupied gathering the spoils of Egypt, Moses took responsibility for this mitzvah in order that their departure from Egypt not be delayed (*Shemot Rabba 20:19*). Now as we have seen, the Nile was worshipped by the Egyptians and Pharaoh (*ibid. 9:9*), and he “refused to allow the bones of Joseph to be pulled up from there, and he even claimed that the Children of Israel were not worthy of being delivered because they had already breached the forty-ninth gate of impurity” (*Zohar, Yitro 39a*).

Yet in his wisdom, Moses seized a plate of gold by which he could communicate directly with Joseph, informing him that serious accusations had been brought against Israel and that if they delayed in leaving Egypt because they could not find his remains, they were capable of breaching the fiftieth gate of impurity. Moses therefore asked Joseph to do everything for his remains to arise from the river before it was too late. The holiness of Joseph ended up conquering the Nile and the ministering angel of Egypt, for the holiness of a Tzaddik surpasses nature. As the Talmud teaches, “Tzaddikim are more powerful after death than in life” (*Chullin 7b*).

Because of Joseph’s casket, Moses was also going to vanquish the Sea of Reeds. Commenting on the verse, “What ails you, O sea, that you flee?” (*Psalms 114:5*), the Sages teach that when the Sea of Reeds saw the casket of Joseph, it allowed the Children of Israel to pass through. The Egyptian’s ministering angel had claimed before the Holy One, blessed be He, that just as the Egyptians were idolaters, so too were the Children of Israel (*Zohar II:170b*). It had therefore refused to allow the Children of Israel to cross the Sea of Reeds. However upon seeing the casket of Joseph, and remembering how it had arisen despite the opposition of the Nile, the sea turned back and split.

No doubt Moses knew that it was dangerous to write something on the plate, for someone was capable of using it improperly (which, as it turned out, is what exactly what happened). This is because the forces of evil draw their strength from holiness (*Zohar II:201b; III:119b*). Moses nevertheless had to write something on the plate, for time was pressing and he had to consider the spiritual future of the Jewish people. Otherwise, they risked breaching the fiftieth gate of impurity, from which there was no escape. He therefore wrote, “Arise ox” instead of “Arise Joseph” to lessen any potential damage. If he had inscribed Joseph’s name on the plate, it would have been the figure of a man that would have emerged from the melting pot, a figure that would have spoken the same language as the Children of Israel and shared the same traits as they, commanding them to kill Moses and Aaron. In such a case, the Children of Israel would have no doubt obeyed it, and their ensuing punishment would have been extremely grave, perhaps (G-d forbid) even fatal. However “the wise man has eyes in his head” (*Ecclesiastes 2:14*), and even at a time of intense pressure, Moses was perceptive enough to only inscribe, “Arise ox” (alluding to Joseph), to diminish any potential damage, as we noted earlier.

Thus if the mixed multitude asked Aaron to “make for us gods that will go before us” (*Exodus 32:1*), it was because they wanted him to use his holiness to make them a man, not an ox. They wanted Aaron to concentrate on the name of Joseph/ox, who governed the entire land of Egypt (*Genesis 42:6*) and the entire world. They wanted him to make a man emerge from the melting pot, a man devoid of mind and soul, capable of governing the world by the power of *kelipah* (impurity). At Aaron’s request, they removed the golden rings that hung from the ears of their wives (*Exodus 32:2*). The mixed multitude knew that with Aaron’s help and that of the plate, they could fashion an idol and rebel against G-d, winning the Children of Israel over to their side before Moses could descend from the mountain.

It is written, “For this man Moses, who brought us up from the land of Egypt – we do not know what [*mah*] became of him” (*v.1*). The mixed multitude claimed that because he was so humble, they did not know him. They said that in ascending to heaven, Moses turned into a god [recall that *mah* has the same numerical value as the Holy Name, the Tetragrammaton, with the addition of the *Alephines*]. They therefore claimed that they needed a god to lead them, even if it was inferior to him.

Upon seeing this catastrophe, however, Aaron begged G-d that they not obtain the figure of a man, nor that of an ox, but rather of a calf. Because of Aaron’s prayer, a different inscription was made on the plate. Thus in the final analysis, it was not Aaron who fashioned the golden calf. King David wrote, “They made a calf in Horeb...they exchanged their Glory for the likeness of a grass-eating ox” (*Psalms 106:19-20*). What did they end up making, a calf or an ox? The “mold” was that of an ox, but a small calf emerged from the fire to lessen the sin of those who fashioned it.

From here we see the holiness of Aaron, who despite the death of Hur – who was slaughtered before him (*Tanhuma, Ki Tisa 19*) – did not fear the crowd. Instead, Aaron implored G-d to make a calf emerge from the fire, not the figure of a man or an ox.

“What [*mah*] did this people do to you” (*Exodus 32:21*). The people wanted you to make them divine beings, gods (the numerical value of which is 92, twice that of *mah* [plus one for each *mah*]) in place of the Holy One, blessed be He, Who said: “I am the L-RD your G-d” (*Exodus 20:2*). What suffering did you endure to listen to this!

Aaron replied to Moses, “You know that the people is disposed toward evil” (*ibid. 32:22*). “You know this people through your spirit of holiness [see *Keli Yakar*]. You know that they are always thinking of evil.” In the end, however, it was Moses and Aaron who triumphed over the evil inclination, which had pushed the Children of Israel to commit the sin of the golden calf.

From here we see the power of the evil inclination, which is made of fire (*Zohar I:80a*) and lurks between the two entrances of man’s heart (*Berachot 61a*). It spares no effort in distancing a man from the path of righteousness and proving to him that it only wants the truth and what is best for him. As we saw earlier, the Children of Israel could easily identify the features of true angels, yet despite everything the evil inclination succeeded in persuading them that what they had seen in Heaven was actually Moses’ casket.

A fine thread separates truth from falsehood, and we must exert a tremendous effort to perceive it. It can completely cover itself with a cloak of falsehood, and only with G-d help can we distinguish between the two. If the Generation of Knowledge was deceived, what can we say?

All this was brought about by the Children of Israel's impatience. If they had not set a deadline for Moses to descend from Heaven, they would not have ended up sinning. Yet because they did not want to wait for even a day (*Shabbat 89a*), the evil inclination found a tiny opening and made its way into their hearts unimpeded. One sin brings about another (*Perkei Avoth 4:2*), and they ended up rebelling against G-d's commandment.

This beginning was thus already bad, as it is written: "Moses saw the people, that it was exposed, for Aaron *phera'o* [had exposed them] to disgrace among those who rise up against them" (*Exodus 32:25*). The faults of the people were predictably *lemaphrea*. As soon as Moses ascended to Heaven, they acted incorrectly by not waiting for him to descend.

Let us therefore not limit ourselves in our Torah study. Let us contemplate it day and night, speaking of it at home, while away, when going to sleep, and upon awaking. However let us also think of our daily bread, for "if there is no flour, there is no Torah" (*Perkei Avoth 3:17*). Nevertheless, the main thing is prayer and diligent Torah study, which will lead us to the highest levels.

### ***The Observance of Shabbat Atones For the Sin of the Golden Calf***

The commandment to observe Shabbat appears in this week's parsha, as it is written: "The Children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath" (*Exodus 31:16*). Immediately after this passage on the Sabbath, we have the account of the golden calf that was made by the Children of Israel. They no longer believed that Moses would again descend from the mountain, for the Satan had shown them his casket in the heavens. Thus they made a god of gold and said before it, "These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you out of the land of Egypt" (*ibid. 32:8*).

If we look around and observe how people live, we will notice that there are many (in fact thousands) who fashion idols for themselves on a daily basis and practically bow down to them. Some people love their houses or homes and serve them. Every so often they change another piece of furniture, or perhaps repaint their home, and there are even some people who move more than once a year. To them, their homes have already become too small and outdated, so they need something bigger. Hence they feel the need to move.

Some people are fixated on what they wear, buying new clothes almost every day. If it is a woman, she will change her dress, wig, and so on, because styles change each day, and a person obviously has to please his or her neighbors and the people in the street! Thus the fashion cult grows.

Other people are drawn to silver and gold, and here we can truly speak of golden idols. Such people work solely to earn money, being completely incapable of tolerating the sight of a wealthy person while they are sitting down and doing nothing. They rush after money, being able to crush the innocent in their path just to earn more, as it is written: “If he has a hundred, he wants to turn it into two hundred” (*Kohelet Rabba 1:13§1*). It gets to the point that a love for money completely overwhelms such people. These are truly idols of silver and gold.

This is what happened to the Children of Israel in the desert. They stopped believing in Moses, the man of G-d, and started to believe only in themselves. It was at that point that they committed the grievous sin of the golden calf. They threw all their silver and gold into the fire, and out came a golden calf. It was before this idol that they bowed down and prostrated themselves, saying: “These are your gods, O Israel.” Yet Moses in his great mercy could not tolerate this. As the shepherd of Israel, he refused to believe that the people could not elevate themselves after the sin of the golden calf, which is why he asked the Holy One, blessed be He, “How will the power of Israel be restored?” How will they rekindle their strength and elevate themselves once more? Hashem told him, “By *Ki Tisa*” (literally, “When you will lift up” their heads). We must understand the meaning of Hashem’s reply to Moses: “By *Ki Tisa*” – what is *Ki Tisa*? Here the Holy One, blessed be He, hinted to Moses that the observance of Shabbat would protect the Children of Israel, and it was this observance that would redeem them from this sin. As we know, the observance of Shabbat is worth as much as all the other *mitzvot* combined. Thus if a person denies all the *mitzvot* by making an idol, it can be atoned for if he carefully observes Shabbat. How is this possible?

The words *Ki Tisa* contain many allusions to Shabbat. The word *Tisa* has the name numerical value (including the word itself) as the word *Shabbat*. Moreover it is formed by the initials of *tishmor Shabbat achat* (“observe one Shabbat”), for in that case the glory of the Children of Israel would return. This is because if a person wants to observe one Shabbat, it is obvious that he will then want to observe others, and with even greater enthusiasm than the first. It is then that the words *Ki Tisa* will be fulfilled in him: He will lift himself up (*mitnase*) and come closer to Hashem.

This is a fitting place to cite what the *Chiddushei HaRim Zatzal* of Ger stated: Lifting the head (*nessiat rosh*), this is Shabbat, for each letter elevates itself to the following letter. The letters of the word *rosh* are followed in the alphabet by those letters that form the word *shabbat*. That is, the letter *shin* comes after the letter *resh*, the letter *beit* comes after the letter *aleph*, and the letter *tav* comes after the letter *shin*. This means that a person lifts his head by means of Shabbat, for it is Shabbat that elevates him. It is said concerning Rabbi Chaim of Chernovitz (the author of the Torah commentary *Be'er Mayim Chaim*) that on Shabbat he was actually taller than on the other days of the week, for on Shabbat a person can elevate himself. On Shabbat we can rectify our sins and come closer to Hashem.

As a result, it is not without reason that the passage on the observance of Shabbat comes immediately before the account of the golden calf. When we bow before a golden calf, or anything else foreign to the Torah, we descend spiritually. We show that we are too simple-minded, that we have no spiritual standing, and that we are content to bow before material things that fill our hearts and minds. Instead of elevating ourselves to spiritual heights, we replace spirituality with materiality, which we then worship. In addition, where does all this idol worship come from? It comes from the fire, from our innermost desires – material desires that are like an evil inclination whose *raison d'être* is to make a person sin and have him fall into its hands, that he may never again get up. However when a person is resolved to elevate himself, he decides in his heart to observe Shabbat and climb to the highest levels. He wants a direct connection to spirituality, thereby becoming capable of overcoming every idol and connecting to Hashem. Yes, if we know how to properly observe Shabbat, we can conquer the evil inclination and attain all that is good in both the material and spiritual realms.

## Vayakhel

### *Charity and Shabbat: The Remedy for the Sin of the Golden Calf*

“Moses assembled all the congregation of the Children of Israel and said to them, ‘These are the things that the L-RD commanded, to do them: On six days, work may be done, but the seventh day shall be holy for you, a day of complete rest for the L-RD; whoever does work on it shall be put to death. You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day.’” (*Ex 35:1-3*).

For what reason did Moses, after having summoned all the assembly of the Children of Israel, speak to them first of the mitzvot of Shabbat, rather than the other commandments? As we have seen, he spoke to them about this several times before. Since G-d first commanded them to construct the Tabernacle, why does Moses mention the laws of Shabbat before those concerning the construction of the Tabernacle?

The reason for this was because the sin of the golden calf affected the oneness of the Holy One, blessed be He. In proclaiming, “Here are your gods, O Israel,” the Children of Israel demonstrated that they believed in several divinities, even renouncing the entire Torah. To this effect, commenting on the verse that states, “If you err and do not perform all of these commandments” (*Num 15:22*), the Talmud explains that the person who renounces idolatry recognizes the entire Torah, and the person who recognizes idolatry acts as if he renounces the entire Torah.

Moses summoned the entire assembly of the Children of Israel in order to shelter them under the wings of the Divine Presence and to make them rediscover the faith that they had lost because of the sin of the golden calf. He immediately prescribed them to observe Shabbat, a day that had been blessed by G-d, as it is written, “G-d blessed the seventh day and sanctified it” (*Gen 2:3*), the observance of which even constitutes the foundation of our faith. For, as we have seen, the one who strictly observes Shabbat atones for his sins, even if he worshiped idols (as with the generation of Enoch).

Shabbat is equal to all the other mitzvot (*Yerushalmi Berachot 1:5*), and its observance corrects the sin of *Avodah Zarah* (idolatry; but literally “strange service”), for all service is forbidden on Shabbat.

Moses made the Children of Israel understand that the construction of the Tabernacle and the Sanctuary would spiritually elevate them, transform them into a miniature sanctuary, and imbue them with the Shechinah. He explained to them that the תרומה (offering) that they had made would rectify their renouncing of the Torah (מ תורה [40]) that had been given to them at the end of 40 days (*Menachot 99b*).

As we have seen (*Zohar 1:52b*), the evil inclination – the taint of the serpent – had abandoned them with the giving of the Torah, but had reintroduced itself to them after the sin of the golden calf. Moses therefore explained to them that they could only uplift

themselves through the mitzvah of Terumah, of charity, as it is written, “Charity will uplift a nation” (*Pr 14:34*). Only tzeddakah was able to repair the sparks of holiness that had been affected by the stain of the serpent. The offerings given for the construction of the holy Temple – the place where the Shechinah resides – wipes out the power of klipah and ends the effect that renouncing the entire Torah has, for charity is equal to all the mitzvot (*Bava Batra 9a*).

The charity that one gives therefore makes the Divine Presence reside in the midst of collective Israel and brings the Final Redemption closer (*ibid. 10a*), as it is written, “Zion will be redeemed through justice, and those who return to her through tzeddakah” (*Isha 1:27*).

Moses also prescribed the mitzvah of Shabbat before that of the construction of the Tabernacle to make us understand that, even if one has not earned anything, one must give charity. If the weekly Torah portion of Terumah follows immediately after the precepts concerning Shabbat, it is to encourage us to give charity as soon as Shabbat ends (or Sunday morning) without waiting longer. Each one will give what he can, according to the blessings that G-d has granted him (*cf. Deut 16:17*). As it is written, “You shall surely give him, and let your heart not feel bad when you give him” (*ibid. 15:10*).

After having answered the prayers of His children and acknowledged their sentiments of gratitude, G-d made them undergo the trial of money to see if their love for Him was truly unselfish (*see Perkei Avoth 5:19*), like the love of the Patriarchs. In regards to this, and concerning the verse that states, “You shall love the L-RD your G-d will all your heart ... and all your possessions,” the Talmud states, “even if He takes away your possessions” (*Yoma 82a*).

This is what happened during the sin of the golden calf. The Children of Israel took advantage of the riches that they had acquired. Moses therefore prescribed that they take from their riches an offering for the Eternal, encouraging them in this way to make use of their silver and their gold for the construction of the Tabernacle and for charity.

Finally, the sin of the golden calf creates a stain on the holy Covenant, namely sexual perversion (*cf. Tanhuma Ki Tisa 20 on Exodus 35:6*). As we know, the one who strictly observes the Brit is included in G-d’s holy assembly. The three first letters of the verse that states, “He devoured wealth, but will disgorge it” (*Job 20:15*) form the Holy Name *ChaBO* (not to be pronounced) that rectifies the sin of the Brit. Because of the *ו* and the *ו* of *ויקהל* (whose numerical value, 16, is thus equal to the Name of G-d, *יהוה* [with the *Kollel*]), one enters into the category of *קהל* (the holy assembly) and we rectify the Covenant.

Moses explained to the Children of Israel that one can, thought the observance of Shabbat and giving charity, repair the sign of the Covenant, for Shabbat also carries the name “Brit”, as it is written, “The Children of Israel shall observe the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath an eternal *Brit* [covenant] for their generations” (*Ex 31:16*). Shabbat and charity are equal to all the mitzvot (*Bava Kama 9a*), and it is the same with the Covenant,

as our Sages teach (*Nedarim 32a*). In regards to this, we can see the same lesson in the following note written by the Admor of Ger on the tractate of Nedarim: “All the Divine precepts [kol mitzvot Hashem] have the same numerical value as ‘Brit’ (612)”.

The essential is to fear G-d. In this way, one will look to continually correct oneself, to acquire virtues, and to assemble (*vayakhel*) every good trait.

### ***Shabbat: Foretaste of the World to Come***

The Talmud teaches, “The one who offers a gift to his friend should make him aware of it” (*Shabbat 10b*). This is what the Holy One, blessed be He, did when He said to Moses, “I have a good gift in My treasury ... Personally transmit this mitzvah to the Children of Israel. Do not follow the normal custom of first informing your brother Aaron, then his children, then the elders. Do not even employ a *meturgeman* [translator or spokesman]” (see *Eruvin 54b*). This is why the verse stipulates, “Moses assembled the entire assembly of the Children of Israel and said to them...” (*Exodus 35:1*).

With regards to this, we may ask the following question: Is the mitzvah of Shabbat so important that Moses had to transmit it to them directly, without any intermediary?

We may respond by saying that Moses took on the aspect of the Sanctuary, where the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) constantly resided (*Shemot Rabba 47:6*), as it is written: “Mouth to mouth do I speak to him, in a clear vision and not in riddles” (*Numbers 12:8*). Only a man of Moses’ caliber, who literally lived the holiness of Shabbat, could transmit it to the Children of Israel. And since Shabbat is equal to all the mitzvot (*Shabbat Rabba 25:16*), when he taught them the mitzvah of Shabbat, he also taught them all of G-d’s precepts and the entire Torah. As we read in the Amidah of Shabbat morning: “Moses rejoiced in the gift of his portion ... and he brought down two Tablets of stone in his hand, on which was inscribed the observance of Shabbat”. Only a faithful servant of this caliber, the most faithful in G-d’s entire house (*Numbers 12:7*), could be charged with such a holy and important mission.

Nevertheless, to instill in oneself the holiness of Shabbat and the delight of the World to Come – the *Shechinah* – a man must take on the aspect of the Sanctuary. To sense the holiness of Shabbat, he must make extensive preparations throughout the week, at which point he will feel the joy that Moses felt on Sinai when he received the Torah.

The observance of Shabbat procures power and strength for a man, which in turn allows him to serve G-d during the entire week that follows. This is because, as we have seen (*Zohar, Yitro 88a*), it is from Shabbat that the six following days of the week obtain their blessing. The new energy that a man acquires will sanctify the next Shabbat and give him a foretaste of the World to Come. In this way he will advance “from strength to strength” (*Psalms 84:8*) until the end of his days.

Consequently, it is incumbent on a man to diligently engage in the study of Torah so as to sense the holiness of Shabbat. With the goal of giving him “a beautiful crown for

his head” (that of Shabbat, see Amidah), he should overcome all obstacles that stand in his way. If he demonstrates endurance and does not fall into despair, he can reach the level of being G-d’s faithful servant. In our days, where the economic outlook has appreciably improved (which aids Shabbat), let us not act like those who believe that the main thing is the performance of all mitzvot except those concerning Shabbat, where one must relax and rest (even to work, if the need arises – G-d forbid). Only the strict observance of Shabbat sanctifies the days of the week and is closely connected to all other mitzvot.

The construction of the Sanctuary therefore did not push aside Shabbat, for as our Sages teach, Shabbat itself constitutes this building process (*Yebamot 6a*). It is Shabbat that contributes to spiritually elevating a man, who himself is a miniature Sanctuary, as we have seen.

“Contemplate and see that the L-RD is good. Happy is the man *yecheseh bo* [who takes refuge in Him]” (*Psalms 34:9*), exclaims King David, the sweet singer of Israel. The one who savors the taste of Shabbat will manage to accomplish all the mitzvot and diligently engage in the study of Torah, which is called *Tov* (*Berachot 5a*). The light of Torah and its divine precepts lead to complete faith in G-d (see *Psalm 34:9, above*). As a result, it was Moses who personally transmitted the mitzvah of Shabbat to the Children of Israel, since it constitutes the very foundation of faith in G-d as well as the foundation of the Torah and mitzvot.

Another reason why Moses personally transmitted the mitzvah of Shabbat is because, as we have seen, the Torah itself testifies to Moses’ humility, as it is written: “Now the man Moses was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth” (*Numbers 12:3*). It was he who performed wonders before the eyes of all Israel (*Deuteronomy 34:12*), meaning with the utmost humility, with completely unselfish motives. It is in this way that we should act as we prepare for Shabbat. We should ready ourselves for that holy day with the utmost modesty, not to show our neighbors and guests how much material wealth (beautiful clothes, sumptuous meals, etc.) or spiritual wealth we possess. Let us honor Shabbat with modesty and constantly submit ourselves to G-d.

If Shabbat – like the entire Torah, for that matter – was given to us as a precious gift by the Holy One, blessed be He (*Shemot Rabba 28:1*), Who shows us the love He has for us, we are beholden to truly honor Him and proudly wear this priceless gem (i.e., observe Shabbat) before everyone’s eyes. It is in this way that we will find favor in the eyes of our Creator.

If our Sages have recommended that we should permeate all of Shabbat with Torah (*Tanna D’vei Eliyahu Rabba 1*), it is because both Torah and Shabbat are precious gifts that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to us. In fact, if we were to observe but one Shabbat, no nation would be able to harm us, and if we observed two Shabbats, we would be immediately redeemed. If the Temple was destroyed, it was because the Children of Israel abandoned G-d’s Torah. Therefore to correct that state of affairs – to put an end

to our prolonged exile – we must display these two gems before the eyes of all the nations. It is then that we will be liberated.

As we have seen, if Moses personally transmitted the mitzvah of Shabbat to the Children of Israel, it was because he was the only man on earth to have understood its true meaning. Moses “remained on the mountain for forty days and forty nights; bread [he] did not eat, and water [he] did not drink” (*Deuteronomy 9:9*). He drew all his strength from G-d (see *Shemot Rabba 47:5, 7*) and could savor the taste of Gan Eden. The Talmud teaches that we learn of the 39 forms of forbidden work on Shabbat by the word *eileh* (“these [are]”), which is found in the verse, “*Eileh* [These are] the things...” (*Exodus 35: 1*), and whose Gematria is exactly 39 [the numerical value of each letter (1+30+5=36) plus the number of its letters (3) equals 39]. These were the number of divine precepts relating to Shabbat that Moses instructed the Children of Israel. Consequently, the one who observes Shabbat will enjoy the *tal* (39), the enlivening dew (*Isaiah 26:19*) that will resurrect the dead at the end of days (*Shabbat 88b*). He will be able to reach the level of Moses, whom even the Angel of Death could not conquer. In fact, the Angel of Death revealed to Moses the secret of the incense (*ibid. 89a*), which resurrects the dead. Furthermore Moses did not die a normal death, but was kissed by the Holy One, blessed be He (*Devarim Rabba 11:9*). This is what happens to every Tzaddik, to all men of Israel whose very essence is holy and who are constantly imbued with the Shechinah, observe Shabbat, and rejoice in its holiness.

### ***The Whole World was Created For This Goal Only***

It is written, “On six days, work may be done, but the seventh day shall be holy for you, a day of complete rest for the L-RD” (*Exodus 35:2*).

In his book *HaYad HaChazakah* (Hilchot Shabbat 30:15), the Rambam writes that one who publicly desecrates Shabbat is like an idolater who worships the stars and constellations, for Shabbat and idolatry are equivalent to all the mitzvot of the Torah (Horayot 8). Furthermore, the author of *Siftei Cohen* teaches that the one who strictly observes Shabbat will have his weekday work done by itself.

The Gemara teaches: “It is written, ‘You will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil’ [*Deuteronomy 11:14*]. On the other hand we are taught, ‘Contemplate it day and night’ [*Joshua 1:8*]. How can we reconcile these two verses? Rabbi Ishmael replies, ‘One must manage to combine work with Torah study.’ Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says, ‘If a man works during work time, and sows during sowing time...what will become of the Torah? Nevertheless, if the Children of Israel obey G-d’s will, others will do their work for them; if they do not obey, they will do it themselves. Furthermore, they will do the work of others, as it is written: “You will serve your enemies” [*Deuteronomy 28:48*].’ Abaye said, ‘Many are those who have adopted Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s concept, yet have not succeeded’ ” (*Berachot 35b*).

We see two opposing points of view here: Rabbi Ishmael advocates that we work on a daily basis while setting fixed times for Torah study (*Shabbat 31b*), and in this way

we will survive. According to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a person can engage in Torah study throughout his life and his work will be done by others. As for Abaye, he believes that not everyone is capable of rising to the level of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a man who studied Torah in a cave for 12 years while eating from a nearby carob tree and drinking from a spring (*Shabbat 33b*). Nevertheless, Halachah stipulates that whether a person is weak or strong, rich or poor, he must work during the week in order to earn a living, and he must fix times for Torah study both day and night, regardless of the circumstances (*Rambam, beginning of Hilchot Talmud Torah; Shulchan Aruch HaRav, ibid.*).

The following questions arise:

1. Why did G-d not arrange things such that when a person constantly engages in Torah study, his work would be done by others (angels)? He would thus be free from all material worries, which would constitute the ideal situation. Everyone would thus serve Hashem with all their heart, and “the earth will be as filled with knowledge of the L-RD as waters cover the sea” (*Isaiah 11:9*). A person would nevertheless continue to exercise his free will, as he would “choose life” (*Deuteronomy 30:19*). If he decides to follow the path of righteousness, his work will be done by others; in the opposite case (G-d forbid), he will be responsible for doing it himself and the angels will not come to his aid. Why did G-d not set things up like this, for in that case Torah study would have thoroughly spread among the Jewish people?

2. Why was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s concept not attained in the time of the judges or the prophets, or in any of the generations, and why does Halachah not follow it?

3. Finally, why did those who followed the path traced by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai not succeed in their endeavors, especially since they were great Tzaddikim, not simple people?

The Talmud teaches that Adam, comfortably settled in the Garden of Eden, had meat served to him by the angels (*Sanhedrin 59b*). Seeing the honors that were given to him, the serpent became jealous. What did it do? It drove him to commit the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, followed by which the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: “By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread” (*Genesis 3:19*). Adam lost his entire world, as well as all the honors that were given to him by the angels, because he transgressed a light mitzvah (Tanhuma, Shemini 8).

We find many examples of miracles performed for Tzaddikim, either by angels or by angels disguised as human beings:

After having killed the prophets of Baal, Eliyahu HaNavi took to flight: “The ravens would bring him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he would drink from the brook” (*I Kings 17:6*), and once after eating but a single meal, “He then walked on the strength of that meal for forty days and forty nights, until the Mountain of G-d, Horeb” (*ibid. 19:8*).

While he was in the kingdom of Cyrus, the beloved Daniel was aided by high figures (i.e., angels [*Daniel 10*]). Furthermore, when Daniel was thrown into the lions’ den, he came out unharmed (*Zohar II:125b*).

Midrash Avoth (109,117) recounts that while in Babylon, the prophet Habakkuk received a daily meal that was brought to him from Eretz Israel without any of his guards realizing it.

There are many examples of Tzaddikim (such as the Baal Shem Tov) who were helped by Eliyahu HaNavi and the angels.

In fact, G-d's angels always used to help the Children of Israel and performed their work. Until the sin of Adam, the angels mistook him for a god. Yet when they saw him eating and drinking, they understood that he was only a man – made of flesh and bone (*Bereshith Rabba* 8:9) – and so they asked Hashem, “What is man that You are mindful of him?” (*Psalms* 8:5). He who surpassed the angels, and for whom the test of the Tree of Knowledge was trivial, brought death into the world, and many other harsh decrees were pronounced against him and his wife (*Bereshith Rabba* 19:18). Therefore the angels stopped serving him.

Because of the fact that “there is no man so wholly righteous on earth that he [always] does good and never sins” (*Ecclesiastes* 7:20), and because the evil inclination “is lying at the door” (*Genesis* 4:7) and constantly lays traps for man, the angels cannot help a person who may sin at any moment. They only help the greatest of the Tzaddikim, even studying Torah with them, as was the case with Rabbi Yosef Caro, the author of *Beth Yosef*. As for my venerated grandfather, Rabbi Haim Pinto (may his memory protect us), he regularly welcomed Eliyahu HaNavi and the illustrious Rabbi Israel Nadjaria.

The angels cannot serve an ordinary individual because of his sins, since he is liable to die if he sees an angel. For example when Manoah, the father of Samson, saw an angel, he said to his wife: “We shall surely die, for we have seen a G-dly angel!” (*Judges* 13:22), and his wife then had to reassure him. Manoah had good reason to fear, for he was not a Tzaddik (nor was he a wicked man), but rather an ordinary individual who “went after his wife” (*v.11; Berachot* 61a). Consequently, those who have followed the path traced by Rabbi Ishmael – the path of daily work performed in faith and combined with regular Torah study – have been helped by G-d and succeeded. Their work was done by others, especially because of their strict observance of Shabbat (*see Sefat Emet*).

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was an exceptionally great Tzaddik. He proclaimed, “My son Elazar and I protect the world” and “I can personally save all of humanity from judgment” (*Sukkah* 45b). A rainbow never appeared during his lifetime (*Zohar* III:15a), and he asserted that he was able to bring the world back to its original state, the state that preceded Adam's sin. As a result, if everyone had repented and engaged in diligent Torah study, as he advocated, others would have done their work. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai primarily yearned to study and pray in order raise the Shechinah from the dust of Galut and to hasten the arrival of our righteous Messiah. Those who followed the path traced by Rabbi Ishmael do not need the constant help and protection of the angels. The one who aspires in complete sincerity to come closer to the Holy One, blessed be He, is similar to the Tzaddik who is arrayed in the holiness of Shabbat and

has his work done by Hashem. May we all reach the level of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the very foundation of the Jewish people, and especially the level of the one who strictly observes the seventh day of the week. Note that the letters of *shevi'i* (“seventh [day]”) are the initials of the expression *Shimon bar Yochai ikar Israel*, from now and for all time, until the arrival of the Messiah, speedily in our days, Amen!

### ***Man Becomes A Sanctuary Through The Study of Torah***

After the Holy One, blessed be He, gave His commandments to Moses regarding the construction of the Sanctuary and the making of the priestly garments for Aaron and his sons (which we learn of in parshiot Terumah and Tetzaveh), we begin to read in parshiot Vayakhel and Pekudei about the actual construction of the Sanctuary and its vessels, as well as the making of the priestly garments. Things take shape in these latter parshiot, where instruction becomes action.

However when we open up a Chumash, we see that at the very beginning of Parsha Vayakhel, even before work begins on the Sanctuary, its vessels, and the priestly garments, a commandment is given that apparently has nothing to do with the Sanctuary. Moses assembled the Children of Israel and gave them the *mitzvah* of Shabbat: “You shall not kindle a fire in any of your habitations on the Sabbath day” (*Exodus 35:3*). This is difficult to understand, for what connection is there between the observance of Shabbat and the construction of the Sanctuary? Furthermore, why does that passage appear before the Sanctuary’s construction? True, Rashi cites the Sages as saying that from here we learn that the construction of the Sanctuary did not override Shabbat. Yet we still have to understand why this commandment regarding Shabbat occurs *before* the subject of the Sanctuary! On the verse, “They shall make a Sanctuary for Me, and I will dwell in them” (*Exodus 25:8*), the commentators note that it states, “in them,” not “in it,” meaning that Hashem would dwell in each of them. This means that every Jew can, through his good deeds, become a sanctuary in which the *Shechinah* dwells. The body is the sanctuary, and all a person’s limbs are the vessels of that sanctuary. In addition, even the garments that a person wears can be considered as priestly garments, helping him to serve Hashem at each instant.

However it is not so easy to become a sanctuary suitable for the *Shechinah*, for that requires a great deal of work. What kind of work is this? It is the diligent study of Torah; it is when a person exerts himself to study Torah, carry out the mitzvot, and follow G-d’s ways, for then his body becomes elevated and sanctified. He can then become a sanctuary for the holy *Shechinah*, and Hashem will desire to reside in such a sanctified body. Yet before all else, a person must rid himself of the evil inclination, of all that disrupts his service of the Creator. It is only when his mind is free that he can serve G-d. The Creator will then make His *Shechinah* dwell in him.

As we know, everyone can testify to the fact that their minds are not always free to study. We know that in general, we experience all kinds of troubles and material

concerns during the week, and our minds are not always free enough to study. It is true that during the week we pray three times a day, set aside time for study, and push ourselves to perform *mitzvot*. However even as such, our minds are not always sufficiently free from worry. Thus when the mind is filled with material concerns, it is difficult to conquer the evil inclination and subjugate our 248 limbs and 365 sinews in order to serve G-d. What can we do in that case?

The best advice is to observe the holy Sabbath, for it is on this day that we free ourselves from all our concerns and material occupations, since it is forbidden to work during this time. On Shabbat it is “as if all your work has been done” (*Rashi on Exodus 20:9*), and then the mind is free to deal with spiritual realities. On Shabbat we can study better – calmly and with ease – and our minds are better able to clearly understand Torah.

On the verse, “You shall not kindle a fire in any of your habitations on the Sabbath day” (*Exodus 35:3*), the *Baal HaTurim* wrote: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said, ‘My fire [Gehinnom] stops for you. Let your fire stop as well.’” This means that on Shabbat, everyone should stop like the fire of Gehinnom. It is not without reason that the Sages said in one Shabbat *zemirah*: “On Shabbat we do not forget.” In fact we do not forget what we learn on Shabbat, for the six days of the week receive their blessing from Shabbat, as stated in the holy Zohar: “The six days receive their blessing from the seventh” (*Zohar I:75b*).

That being the case, a person can study Torah with ease on Shabbat, and his body can become a sanctuary in which the *Shechinah* resides. This is because there is nothing to impede him during that time. This is why Moses gave the Children of Israel the *mitzvah* of Shabbat before the construction of the Sanctuary, in order to teach them that a person can begin building his own sanctuary on Shabbat. On Shabbat, a person can transform his body into a sanctuary for Hashem, change all his limbs into sacred vessels, and turn his clothes into true priestly garments. Doing these things will then become easier during the rest of the week as well.

We learn all this from parshiot Vayakhel and Pekudei, for the word *pekudei* comes from the root *pekida*, which means “to remember.” In fact during Shabbat the remembrance of man ascends before G-d, and he can then free himself from the yoke of the evil inclination and become a sanctuary for Hashem. Even if someone has always found this difficult to do up to now, he can always begin from scratch from this point onwards, taking it upon himself to transform his body into a sanctuary. We see just how much the holy Sabbath gives us, since the six days of the week draw their blessing from Shabbat. If we conduct ourselves in this way, the blessings of the Sabbath queen will spread over us.

## *Parsha Pekudei*

### *The Tabernacle of Testimony: The Heart and Soul of Israel*

The Midrash teaches that after having received from the Children of Israel the silver and gold destined for the construction of the Tabernacle and its vessels, as well as for the making of the garments to be worn therein, Moses made a detailed inventory of all the expenses incurred, lest people suspect him of having enriched himself with the silver or gold that he had received (*Shemot Rabba 51:6*).

Elsewhere it is written, “It was in the first month of the second year, on the first of the month, that the Tabernacle was erected. Moses erected the Tabernacle; he put down its sockets and emplaced its planks and inserted its bars and erected its pillars” (*Exodus 40:17-18*). Concerning this, the Sages teach that Moses erected the entire Tabernacle alone, without any outside help, and that miracles were performed for him while he was building it (*Bamidbar Rabba 12:11; Nedarim 38a*). He even managed to lift extremely heavy planks. However when he became tired, G-d told him, “Grab hold of them, and they will lift themselves up,” as it is written, “the Tabernacle was erected [by itself]” (*Exodus 40:17*).

These Midrashim raise a certain number of questions, ones that we have answered in previous issues. However, since there is no Beit Midrash in which we do not learn something new, we propose suggesting some new ideas:

1. Why did Moses have to count all the silver and gold that he had received from the Children of Israel? Who could have suspected Moses (G-d forbid), the father of all the prophets of Israel (*Vayikra Rabba 1:15*), who spoke to the Eternal face to face (*Exodus 33:11*), of having stolen? This was especially so because Moses was very wealthy (he had, as we know, become rich with the remnants of the Tablets of the Law [*Exodus 34:1*]). As for the 1775 shekels of silver that were amassed (*Exodus 38:25*), from which hooks for the Tabernacle’s pillars were made (*v.28*), the Midrash teaches that Moses had forgotten them and that G-d had to remind him about them. How can we conceive of such a thing happening?

2. Why did Moses have to erect the Tabernacle all by himself? Why did G-d have to perform miracles for him? Why didn’t Moses ask the Children of Israel to help him? Was the Tabernacle not destined for them?

If our explanations have been mentioned elsewhere, we know that the words of Torah are poor in one place and rich in another.

We know very well that the Eternal needs neither the Tabernacle nor its vessels, and that “all the earth is filled with His glory” (*Isaiah 6:3*). We know that there is no place that is not covered by His Presence (*Shir Hashirim Rabba 3:16*), that despite our blemishes He resides in us (*see Yoma 56b*), and that He gives strength to the Kelipah, for “You made the heavens, the most exalted heavens and all that is in them, and You give them all

life; and the heavenly legion bows to You” (*Nehemiah 9:6*). We know that He created the evil inclination in order for man to untiringly fight, defend himself against, and finally triumph over it. Man will thus have reached a state of perfection, most notably by the diligent study of Torah, which is the remedy against the evil inclination.

However, as we have seen in preceding issues, man’s body alludes to the Sanctuary. A man should therefore examine his 365 tendons and 248 members. The Eternal will then reside in his midst if he really so desires, if he chooses the Torah, which is called “life” (*Avoth d’Rabbi Nathan 34:10*) and “good” (*Berachot 5a*).

In the opposite case, the Divine Presence distances itself from him. He will then understand that everything that has happened to him stems from the fact that he did not learn from the example of the Tabernacle. For one can only be imbued with the Shechinah but by the diligent study of Torah and the continual performance of mitzvot.

If a man sees himself afflicted with suffering, he should examine his ways. One thing is certain: His sufferings have been caused by the fact that he abstained from Torah study. We know that the Eternal punishes the one He loves (*Proverbs 3:12*). He only allows a man to suffer trials that he can overcome. The *Hidushei Harim* of Gur, commenting on the Sages’ instruction concerning this subject (*Kiddushin 69a*), according to which there were Jewish slaves only during the Jubilee), explains that through serious introspection and diligent Torah study, we can overcome trials, easily rise above obstacles placed before us by the evil inclination, triumph over the evil inclination itself, and get closer to the Holy One, blessed be He.

Consequently, if Moses had made a detailed inventory of all the silver and gold that the Children of Israel had given him for the construction of the Tabernacle, it was to teach them that a man should constantly examine his conduct lest he sin. If he is afflicted with suffering, it is because he blemished one or several of his members (which are compared to the Sanctuary), spoke bad words, or maintained bad thoughts. If he knows which of his members has been affected, he can return to G-d.

Thus even a great man such as Moses is capable of forgetting a small detail. Only the person who does everything for the love of Heaven finds his consciousness awakened because of G-d, and causes no harm either voluntarily or involuntarily. Just as the sage must measure his words and steps, so too must a teacher (*see Perkei Avoth 1:11*). In the opposite case, he is capable of succumbing to forgetfulness, as was the case with the generation of knowledge, who, having failed to acknowledge the miracles that G-d had performed for them, finished by committing the sin of the golden calf.

By the extensive study of Torah and serious introspection, one arrives at correcting all one’s sins. If G-d had threatened to bury the Children of Israel under Mount Sinai by obliging them to accept the Torah, even though they had proclaimed, “we will do and we will understand,” it was because He wanted that they should all teach the Torah to their neighbor. Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakai said, “If you have learned much Torah, do not claim special credit for yourself” (*Perkei Avoth 2:8[9]*), for one can find everything in

the Torah: “Learn it and learn it, for everything is in it” (*ibid.* 5:21). Therefore Moses made a detailed inventory of everything that the Children of Israel had brought to him in order to provide them with an example of proper conduct.

A man should nevertheless realize that he cannot do everything alone. Without G-d’s help, he cannot triumph over the evil inclination (*Kiddushin* 30b), which carries the name “old fool” (*Kohelet Rabba* 4:15), and which tries by all means possible to make a man sin, including the Tzaddik. This is why the Mishnah advises us to not vouch for our virtues before the day of our death (*Perkei Avoth* 2:4[5]). A man cannot claim that it is impossible for him to triumph over the evil inclination; all that G-d asks of him is that he takes the first step (*Shir Hashirim Rabba* 5:3). He will then most certainly help him and perform miracles in his favor. He did so for Moses, who experienced difficulties lifting the large beams of the Tabernacle, beams that in the end lifted themselves. As it is written, “He guards the steps of His devout ones” (*I Samuel* 2:9), meaning that He helps them to not commit sins, even involuntary ones.

If we take the first step, then help from Heaven will not delay in arriving and we will sanctify ourselves like the Tabernacle and the Temple. For even in our days, the Shechinah does not move from the Temple and the synagogue. May we be imbued with it all the days of our lives. Amen.

### ***G-d Saves us from the Evil Inclination***

Commenting on the verse that states, “Moses erected the Sanctuary; he put down its sockets” (*Exodus* 40:18), the Midrash teaches: “When they finished building the Sanctuary, they waited for the revelation of the Divine Presence ... They went to those who were skilled and said, ‘What are you doing here? You yourselves should erect the Sanctuary!’ The latter tried to erect it, but they could not; each time they thought that they were successful, it collapsed. They went to Betzalel and Oholiab and said to them, ‘Erect the Sanctuary that you yourselves built. Perhaps you will succeed.’ They immediately began to work on it, but failed in their efforts. All the Children of Israel then went to Moses, and the Holy One, blessed be He, finished by telling him, ‘They must understand that if you, personally, cannot erect it, it will never be erected.’ ‘Master of the universe, I am not capable!’ Moses replied to the Holy One, blessed be He. ‘Touch it with your hands,’ said Hashem. ‘Pretend to erect it, and it will erect itself. I will then write that you erected it.’ Thus it is written, ‘It was in the first month of the second year, on the first of the month, that the Sanctuary was erected’ [*Exodus* 40:17]. And by who was it erected? By Moses, as it is written: ‘Moses erected the Sanctuary’ [*v.18*]” (*Tanhuma, Pekudei* 11).

Citing the Admor of Betz, the author of *Midbar Kadesh* is of the opinion that the erection of the Sanctuary by Moses constituted a true miracle, for the Sanctuary consisted of 48 beams, each measuring ten cubits long, one and a half cubits in width, and a cubit in breadth. There were, in addition, sockets that each weighed a *kikar* [or

“talent” – roughly 70 pounds] of silver and measured one cubit high. The work was exhausting, and it was beyond Moses’ strength. Yet the beams erected themselves, for it was a true miracle!

Now as we know, it is forbidden to rely on miracles (*Pesachim 64b*). Why then did Moses not ask for outside help?

Commenting on the verse that states, “When you will go out to war against your enemies...” (*Deuteronomy 21:10*), most saintly writings explain that the verse is referring to the evil inclination, man’s permanent enemy, which is born with him (*Genesis 8:21; Bereshith Rabba 34:12*), and which pursues him throughout life. However Hashem promises man that He will “deliver him from its hands,” meaning that He will help him to fight and conquer the evil inclination (*see Sukkah 52a,b*). If the evil inclination is, as we already saw, an old and foolish king (*Ecclesiastes 4:13*), it nevertheless persists in lying in wait for a man, continuously trying to make him fall into its trap. It finishes him off by stripping him of his life, both materially and spiritually.

The evil inclination works in the following ways:

- Its occupation is to tell a man, “Do this today, and that tomorrow.” It finishes by having him worship idols (*Shabbat 105b*).
- It intensifies its attack on a man every day as it tries to completely destroy him. Without G-d’s help, a man cannot defeat it (*Kiddushin 30b*).
- It is so hard that even its Creator calls it “wicked” (*ibid.*).
- It intensifies its fight against a man even when he is in mourning (*ibid. 80b*).
- It has seven names: Wicked, uncircumcised, unclean, enemy, stumbling block, rock, and hidden (*Sukkah 52a*).
- At first, the evil inclination resembles a spider web, but in the end it is like a thick chariot rope. A man becomes solidly attached to it (*Sanhedrin 99b; Sukkah 52a*).
- It harms a man in this world and testifies against him in the World to Come. It first appears as a guest, then later as the master of the house (*Sukkah 52b*).

Happy are the Children of Israel, who defeat the evil inclination by engaging in Torah study and by helping their fellow, the Talmud finally teaches (*Avodah Zarah 5b*).

We see from here just how fierce the battle against the evil inclination is, for it tries by all possible means to make a man transgress, and it often changes its name [i.e., its tactics] to make him fall to the lowest depths of hell. It even attacks him when he is suffering, and finally it settles down within him.

However, by the grace of His kindness, the Holy One, blessed be He, has lavished us with sound advice that allows us to completely destroy the evil inclination: “If that scoundrel comes upon you, drag him to the house of study. If he is as hard as rock, he will shatter; if he is as strong as iron, he will melt” (*Sukkah 52b*). Only the diligent and in-depth study of Torah will destroy it, as it is written: “The one who slaughters his evil inclination [Rashi: Kills it and repents after it had incited him to sin] and confesses his

sins is as if he ‘sacrificed’ himself to the Holy One, blessed be He, and he will honor Him in this world and the World to Come” (*Sanhedrin 43b*).

As we have seen, the evil inclination constantly works against a man as it tries to kill him. Now the Talmud teaches that it ascends to Heaven, testifies against a man, and then comes back down to take his soul (*Bava Batra 16a*). How is it that the evil inclination tries to kill him if it only receives permission to harass and make him sin?

The reason is that the wicked are called “dead” even while they are still alive (*Berachot 18b*), for the sinner resembles an invalid, an unkosher animal (*Chullin 42a*). His heart becomes dulled following the sins he commits. Concerning this the Talmud teaches: “Do not read *venitmeitem* [and you become impure], read *venitamtem* [and you became dull-hearted]” (*Yoma 39a*). Because of the hardship that the evil inclination makes a man suffer, he is considered as being dead, even while alive. The evil inclination kills a man by means of the sins that it makes him commit.

To defend himself against this mortal attack, a man needs solid divine help and tremendous miracles. Let us therefore purify ourselves; let us study Torah diligently; let us continuously grow and acquire good character traits. The Holy One, blessed be He, will then help us with His miracles to completely triumph over the evil inclination.

By erecting the Sanctuary by himself, Moses wanted us to understand that G-d considers each of us to be a miniature Sanctuary. By spiritually building ourselves, we must realize that we have to fight the evil inclination on a daily basis, and that we need G-d’s urgent help to triumph over it. Even if we have attained all 48 virtues by which the Torah is acquired, we must not fool ourselves by relying on our own strength.

The 48 beams of the Sanctuary that Moses erected allude to these 48 virtues, and he refused any help from the Children of Israel in order to teach us that all help should come primarily from G-d. It is that help which allows a man to conquer his evil inclination. Without it, all accomplishments are in vain; all attempts to erect the sanctuary will result in a collapse.

The beams were erected by themselves, which alludes to the fact that man’s victory over the evil inclination is always temporary: He can conquer it today, yet be conquered tomorrow. Divine help is therefore indispensable in maintaining the sanctuary that we have erected. We lay the foundations – the 48 beams/virtues – yet we still need G-d’s help, not that of an intermediary (“the middle bar inside the beams shall extend from end to end” [*Exodus 26:28*]). For this, let us undertake to study Torah and even devote our lives to it. It will thus become ours and help us to become pure.

Moses did not rely on miracles, but he had to rely on G-d’s help. A man should strengthen himself each day against his evil inclination and grow in his devotion to and study of Torah, which is the only way to fight the evil inclination. With regards to this, the Midrash teaches: “Rabbi Chiya bar Yosef says, ‘During the seven days of *miluim* [inauguration ceremony of the Sanctuary], Moses set up and took down the Sanctuary twice each day.’ Rabbi Chanina says three times a day” (*Tanhuma, Pekudei 11*). Moses wanted

the Children of Israel to understand that at every hour of the day or night, the evil inclination strives to demolish the personal sanctuary that they erected, and so they must constantly fight against it (twice each day, morning and night; or three times by means of their daily prayers) to prevent this from happening. Let us therefore intensify our study of Torah, strengthen our fear of G-d, and devote ourselves completely to Him. We will then experience joy in this world and in the World to Come.

## Vayakhel-Pikudei

### *Shabbat Infuses Holiness Into All the Days of the Week*

At the beginning of Parsha Vayakhel we find the *mitzvah* of Shabbat, which Moses gave to the Children of Israel: “On six days work may be done, but the seventh day shall be holy for you” (*Exodus 35:2*). In Parsha Pekudei, after the completion of the Sanctuary and its vessels, we find the aspiration of all the Children of Israel being fulfilled: “The glory of the L-RD filled the Sanctuary” (*ibid. 40:34*). In reflecting upon this, we see that these things are directly related. The Gemara (Beitzah 16a) records a disagreement between Hillel and Shammai concerning whether a person should live from one Shabbat to the next, or whether he should say, “Blessed be the L-RD, day by day” (*Psalms 68:20*). In other words, should one begin preparing for Shabbat as early as the first day of the week, or should he rejoice each and every day, with Friday being the time to “bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil” (*Exodus 16:23*)? In any case, it is certain that whoever has G-d constantly in mind should always have Shabbat in mind as well. A person should prepare himself for the holy Sabbath at all times and at each instant, for the Sages have said that it is through Shabbat that all the days of the week are blessed. Shabbat has a beneficial effect on all the days of the weeks, in order for holiness to reside in those days as well.

Practically speaking, how is it possible to prepare for the holy Sabbath while the evil inclination surrounds us and constantly tries to seduce us, to make us say what we should not say and incite us to sin? In what manner can we arrive at Shabbat? With what attitude will we welcome Shabbat, which is like the King’s wife? How will we be able to perceive the taste of the World to Come in Shabbat?

It is in this regard that the verse tells us, “On six days work may be done.” This means that in all a person’s work, he must remember that each day of the week is a preparation for the holy Sabbath. We must infuse this thought in our minds, the thought that Shabbat will soon be here. We say this in the Friday night prayers by reciting the verse, “The Children of Israel shall observe the Sabbath...” (*Exodus 31:16-17*). This not only means observing Shabbat without transgressing it in any way, for we know that the word *shemira* (“to observe”) can also mean “to keep,” as we see concerning Jacob in Parsha Vayeishev: “His father *shamar* [kept] the matter [in mind]” (*Genesis 37:11*). Rashi explains that he waited and looked forward to its occurrence. This means that we also should wait at all times and hope for the coming of the Sabbath Queen, for if the Holy One, blessed be He, allows us to perceive the scent of *Gan Eden*, why would He not allow us to actually taste it? It is not without reason that each day during *Shacharit* we recite, just before the Song of the Day, “This is the [first, second, etc.] day of Shabbat,” not “of the week.” This is because we desire to evoke Shabbat on each day of the week. Each day we must desire, as well as take the decision to prepare ourselves for Shabbat.

If we conduct ourselves in this way, then even the days of the week will assume a different facet, for if we are constantly living in the atmosphere of Shabbat, our entire lives will unfold in a new way.

However before all else, Jews should be completely united. We see in our parsha that Moses assembled all the Children of Israel without exception, transmitting to them the *mitzvah* of observing Shabbat. Consequently, it is evident that it is solely through unity among the Jewish people that we will be able to taste the holy Sabbath, a foretaste of the World to Come. This is because it is only through unity that everyone can remind others of the *mitzvah* of Shabbat and lead them to partake of its holiness. Since we are speaking of Shabbat and awaiting it, we must also realize that one of the most beautiful *mitzvot* is to prepare ourselves materially for Shabbat. We see this in tractate Kiddushin, which mentions the Tannaim and Amoraim who made material preparations for Shabbat. There we read of Rabba, who salted his fish, and of Rav Safra, who personally roasted his food, even though others could have done it for them (*Kiddushin 41a*).

Consequently, if those great Tannaim and Amoraim were capable of personally preparing meals in honor of Shabbat, how much more does it apply to us? Obviously, we have to do the same. The Halachah, moreover, establishes what we must do to prepare for Shabbat. In fact some *tzaddikim* have said that by the merit of material preparations for Shabbat, by continuously elevating ourselves, we can also achieve spiritual preparedness. This is due to the fact that dealing with the material requirements of Shabbat leads to spiritual elevation.

The holiness of Shabbat is so great that the *gaon* of Chernovitz, Rabbi Chaim Zatzal (the author of the Torah commentary *Be'er Mayim Chaim*, as well as *Sidduro Shel Shabbat* on the greatness of Shabbat) was actually taller on Shabbat. In fact whenever he entered the Beit Midrash on Shabbat, he had to bend down in order not to hit his head when passing through a door. We say this about Shabbat not only because of Rabbi Chaim, for everyone can reach such a level, if only they would cherish Shabbat.

Reflecting on this, we understand that this is the connection between the beginning of Parsha Vayakhel and the end of Parsha Pekudei. It states at the end of the latter, “The glory of the L-RD filled the Sanctuary” (*Exodus 40:34*), which teaches us that a person who accomplishes all this, and who truly desires to welcome Shabbat in a state of purity and cleanliness, it is precisely in the home of such a person that the *Shechinah* resides, that “the glory of the L-RD” rests. The *Shechinah* fills the home of that individual, for the Holy One, blessed be He, also desires to come and dwell in the home of such a Jew.

### ***Devotion Leads to the Revelation of the Shechinah***

Parsha Vayakhel deals with the construction of the Sanctuary and the offerings, as it is written: “Take from yourselves a portion of the L-RD. Everyone...shall bring

it as the gift for the L-RD: Gold, silver, copper” (*Exodus 35:5*). Parsha Pekudei speaks of the gold, silver, and copper that were used to make the Sanctuary and its vessels (*ibid.* 38:24-29). It also mentions Moses’ sanctification of the Sanctuary and its vessels (*Exodus 40*), and finally of the cloud that covered the Tent of Meeting and the revelation of the Shechinah (*ibid.* 40:34).

These two parshiot teach us what is of primary importance, namely the revelation of the Shechinah. A man must infuse himself with it fervently, not simply by rote. Parsha Vayikra deals specifically with *korbanot* (sacrifices), of *hakravah*, of the Children of Israel’s devotion, thanks to which the Glory of G-d covered the Sanctuary. As an example, let us examine some reasons for why Jews purchase Tefillin. One Jew might do so simply because he gives in to peer pressure, whereas another Jew might do so because of his devotion to the mitzvah, even going in search of Tefillin if at first he cannot find them. They both accomplish the same mitzvah, yet the second Jew demonstrates exceptional devotion, acting for the sake of Heaven and conforming to G-d’s will (*see Torat Kohanim 1:58*).

As we have seen, it was due to the devotion and integrity of the Jewish women that the Children of Israel were liberated from Egypt (*Sotah 11b*). Even in our days, during Torah lectures or at the tombs of Tzaddikim, for example, we see more women than men. Women oversee the education of their children and enable their husbands to study Torah (*Berachot 17a*). This is why they are exempt from mitzvot that are time-dependent (*Berachot 20b; Kiddushin 29a*). Finally, let us recall that it was only by force that their gold rings were taken from them to make the golden calf (*Tanhuma, Ki Tisa 19; Exodus 32: 2*). To summarize, we may say that it was because of the women that the Glory of G-d covered the Sanctuary.

(On a personal note, I was once visited by a woman who refused to go to the hospital after suffering a heart attack, since she did not want to forego the mitzvah of searching for *chametz* on the eve of Passover).

When Moses assembled the Children of Israel, he gave them the mitzvot regarding Shabbat observance and the construction of the Sanctuary directly (*see Yalkut Shimoni, Vayakhel 408*). Normally, Moses first taught the mitzvot to his brother Aaron and the elders (*Eruvin 54b*), and only afterwards did he give them to the Children of Israel. Why did Moses teach these mitzvot to them directly? It was because through Shabbat, he wanted to give them a foretaste of the World to Come and infuse them with the Shechinah. As we have seen, man embodies the concept of the Sanctuary and its utensils, and only Moses – who was a “walking sanctuary,” a man to whom G-d spoke “mouth to mouth...in a clear vision and not in riddles; at the image of the L-RD does he gaze” (*Numbers 12:8*) – was able to speak to them of the Sanctuary and Shabbat.

Moses also wanted to make the Children of Israel realize that if they wanted to make an offering to G-d and receive His reward, they had to, above all, strictly observe Shabbat, which is equal to all the mitzvot of the Torah. [They were not to act like a person who once promised to donate a tenth of all his business revenues to charity – a

business that he left open on Shabbat – and asked me for a blessing that it should be successful]. Thus Moses first spoke to them of Shabbat, then of the offerings destined for the construction of the Sanctuary, and finally of their sacrifices and devotion, thanks to which we can infuse ourselves with the Shechinah. As we have seen, it is only through the study of Torah that we can infuse ourselves with it and accomplish all the mitzvot of the Torah. It is written, “And these are the ordinances that *tasim* [you shall place] before them” (*Exodus 21:1*), meaning that it is through the mitzvot of Tefillin, Shabbat, and Milah (whose initials form the word *tasim*) that a person can infuse himself with the Shechinah.

# LEVITICUS

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## *Parsha Vayikra*

### *Modesty and Humility Enables One to Acquire Torah and Attract the Shechinah*

“He called to Moses, and the L-RD spoke to him ... saying, ‘Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: When a man among you brings an offering to the L-RD ...’”  
(Lev 1:1-2).

Our Sages have spoken at length on the small-sized *aleph* in the word *vayikra*. For example, the Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni 427*) explains that Moses merited being summoned by G-d because he made himself small and ran away from honors. Moses did this when he said, “I am not a man of words” (*Ex 4:10*), meaning, “I am unworthy of the mission that You want to entrust me with.”

The Torah, which is the path of life, teaches us in this Parsha that one must serve G-d without any reservations, as we have explained with regards to the verse that states, “When a man among you [*mikem* – lit. “of you”] brings an offering to the L-RD.” One must observe the commandments of the Holy One, blessed be He, up to the granting of one’s very self – including even martyrdom for the Torah and the mitzvot – and to take nothing into account but G-d’s honor, without worrying at all about one’s personal interests. This is what is meant by offering a sacrifice to the Eternal “of oneself”, meaning to make a sacrifice of one’s self, and at that moment it will be considered as being “to the Eternal”.

This is why the Torah begins the book of Leviticus with the word *vayikra* written with a small-sized *aleph*, which in addition has the smallest numerical value of all the letters, meaning that a man should compare himself to it. He should, moreover, be conscious that the enthusiasm that reigns over the beginning of his task should be accompanied by great humility and self-effacement. The Torah also instructs us that it – the Torah, which is called *aleph* in the sense of the verse, “*Va-a’alephcha* [And I will teach you] wisdom” (*Job 33:33*) – can only survive and take root among one who makes himself small, for the Sages have said that the Torah only resides among the humble (*Taanith 7a*).

As for the word ויקרא, as a whole it evokes the same thought. The letter ו (*vav*) represents man who bends and humbles himself, for he was created but on the sixth day, at the end of the entire Creation. This is so that he may realize that everything already existed before him (*Sanhedrin 38a*), without mentioning that he is dust and ashes: “For you are dust, and to dust shall you return” (*Gen 3:19*). He must therefore work enormously hard to arrive at a state of true perfection.

The middle letters (יקר) of the word are the same that form the word ריק (“void”), which alludes to the realization that man should have of his emptiness. Even if he is great in Torah, it suits him, nevertheless, to have the sense of being completely empty,

as if he were at the very beginning. Finally, the small-sized *aleph*, as we mentioned, indicates the one who begins to study Torah, for it should always be in his eyes as new as on the day when it was given on Mount Sinai, as if he had just received it (*Tanhuma Ki Tavo 1 on verse 7*). At that very moment, he will have no reason to be proud of himself, since he will have started studying but on that very day. If he really behaves as such, he will merit that the Torah comes to live in his heart, as it is written, “Your Torah is in my innards” (*Ps 40:9*). Radak explains that “in my innards” means “the inside of my heart”, for the heart is part of the innards. All these considerations lead to modesty and humility.

Unfortunately, the Torah is not the only thing to be found in the heart of man. The evil inclination also aspires to enter into man and make its home within him. Furthermore, it is said that it rests in the heart, between the two openings therein (*Berachot 61b*). Man’s essential fight therefore lies with his evil inclination, and man’s greatest aim should be that his interior be similar to his exterior (*Berachot 28a*). In effect, we know that, vis-à-vis a person’s exterior, it is very easy to come off as virtuous, to do good deeds in public, and to therefore fool the entire world. It even happens that a man convinces himself that he is a Tzaddik, whereas in reality he has neither Torah, nor fear of G-d, nor love for people, nor love of G-d. He resembles an empty well, a well that the Torah says contains not a drop of water, but rather is packed with serpents and scorpions (*cf. Gen 37:24; Shabbat 22 and Rashi*). What does this mean? The Sages have said that water always represents Torah (*Bava Kama 17a*), as indicated by the verse that states, “Everyone who is thirsty, go to the water” (*Isa 55:1*). Now concerning the well that we are speaking of, not only does it not contain words of Torah comparable to water, but it is filled with evil forces, comparable to serpents and scorpions (*Perkei d’Rabbi Eliezer 13*). A man such as this can appear righteous from the outside, however to arrive at a level of true perfection that would prevent him from ever falling spiritually, he would require great help from Heaven as well as a tremendous amount of work on his part.

Indeed, he will have to put in unceasing effort to maintain within himself, both internally and externally, the Ark of the Covenant, which is in actuality the holy Torah. The fact that the Ark was inside the Temple, not outside of it, teaches us that the essential effects of study occur within a man; the Torah should truly become part of his body. And in the same way that the Ark was covered with gold both inside and out (*Ex 25:11*), the interior of a man should be as fine as his exterior (*Yoma 72b*). Even if he is extremely learned and great in Torah, this does not exempt him from watching over the internal aspects of his actions in such a way that his words actually reflect his thoughts (*Pesachim 113b*), and that his mouth and his heart be in accord with one other (*ibid. 63a*). In fact, the greater someone is, the more powerful the temptations he will experience. This is why the evil inclination tries Torah scholars more than all others, which obligates them to watch themselves without cease.

Now, this is what we call the presence of the Shechinah in man: The more a man conducts himself with modesty (feeling, as if were, empty, and conscious of being

but dust and ashes, nothing permanent and nothing to feel proud about), the more he merits, in the same way, that the Shechinah should reside in him. It could happen that at that moment, the evil inclination will look to discourage him by telling him as follows: “If you are as empty as that, how are you ever going to amount to anything?” A man should therefore know that even if he is at the very beginning, he is nevertheless very precious in the eyes of G-d (קִרְ), which brings to mind the middle letters of the word וַיִּקְרָא).

We will now be able to explain why our Parsha follows the one of Pekudei. The Book of Exodus ends with the verse that states, “For the cloud of the L-RD would be on the Tabernacle by day, and fire would be on it at night, before the eyes of all the House of Israel throughout their journeys” (*Ex 40:38*). The word “fire” alludes to the Torah, as it is written, “from His right hand He presented the fiery Torah to them” (*Deut 33:2*). The Sages have said that fire always designates the Torah (*Mechilta Ex 19:18*). The concept of travel also alludes to the Torah, which allows for an internal voyage “from strength to strength” (*Ps 84:8*). On the verse that states, “They journeyed from Rephidim” (*Ex 19:2*), the saintly Or HaChaim explains that the Children of Israel had considerably strengthened themselves in the study of Torah. This means that when a man dives into the Torah day and night and “journeys” in it “from strength to strength”, he merits that the Divine cloud comes and rests on the Tabernacle, which is to say that he will enjoy the presence of the Shechinah in himself as well as in all the House of Israel. All this is because of humility, evoked by the word *vayikra*. Certainly, this requires considerable personal work, however humility is one of the traits by which the Torah is acquired (*Taanith 7a*), and a man who practices it resembles the Temple.

### ***How Far Should Self-sacrifice Go in the Service of G-d?***

It is written, “And He called to Moses, and the L-RD spoke to him” (*Leviticus 1:1*). Why does the text use two terms (“called” and “spoke”), which apparently mean the same thing? If the passage begins with “He called”, why does it then use another word (“spoke”)? In addition, why is the word *vayikra* (“and He called”) written with a small *aleph*?

We will also try to explain what Rashi said in the name of the Sages (*Yerushalmi Taanith 3:4; Torah Kohanim on this verse*) concerning the fact that the word *leimor* (“saying”) means that G-d told Moses to say harsh words concerning himself (Moses) to Israel, meaning that Moses was to relate to them that G-d only spoke to him for the sake of the Jewish people. (Proof of this is that during the 38 years following the incident of the spies, He no longer addressed him). Why is this teaching found here?

We will also try to understand what lies behind the fact that when we teach Torah to very young children, we begin with Parsha Vayikra (*Tanhuma Tzav 14*) so that they be educated in holiness and purity, just like the sacrifices in question, which are holy and pure.

The theme of Parsha Vayikra is the unconditional devotion that man should demonstrate towards G-d, as is taught by the verse that states, “When a man among you [*mikem*: lit. “of you”] brings an offering to the L-RD” (*Leviticus 1:2*). This verse can also be read as “When a man makes of himself an offering to the L-RD.” In addition, the word *mikem* has a numerical value of 100, which alludes to the 100 blessings that one should say daily (*Menachot 43b*). This instruction is drawn from the verse that states, “And now, Israel, what [מה] does the L-RD your G-d require of you?” (*Deuteronomy 10:12*), the word מה being read as מאה (100). There it also consists of a complete commitment, without which it would be difficult to say 100 blessings every day, especially when one is confronted by the needs of the public or when one has to earn a living.

Yet there exist two types of commitment. The first is the one of a man that only seeks to get closer to G-d and spiritually elevate himself day after day to reach the Eternal, a movement evoked by the verse that states, “from strength to strength” (*Psalms 84:8*). All the desires of such a man are aimed at giving complete satisfaction to his Creator. Even when he is tired, he takes no account of his personal state. He only aspires to spiritually improve himself and to help the Shechinah that is in exile, lifting it out of the dust where it is found (*Zohar II:238a*). This consists of a coming together (התקרבות). One consistently feels that one is still very far away, and one fervently desires to come closer (קרב) to G-d and to arrive at the fiftieth gate of holiness, without needlessly worrying about oneself.

The second type of commitment is less intense than the first. It is the commitment belonging to a man who certainly devotes himself to prayer, the study of Torah, and charity and good deeds, but without these being exclusively for the love of Heaven. He also has in mind the honor or benefit that he could receive from his fellow. He observes the mitzvot with all his heart, but his intentions are not completely pure. He rises early to go to synagogue, but he chats during prayer or does not concentrate sufficiently. In such a case, what will all his devotion accomplish? We can describe it as rotteness (רקוב), like a piece of mildewy bread. Rearranged, the letters of רקוב are the same as those of קרוב (“near”).

This is what the Torah alludes to when it says, “When a man among you [*mikem*] brings an offering to the L-RD.” Man’s worship has the main goal of bringing himself (*mikem*) closer to the Eternal at every moment, by 100 blessings and the constant study of Torah. It is in order to arrive at the 50 gates of purity, for this is a true sacrifice (קרוב), which brings him closer (הקרבה). The word *korban* is in effect composed of the letters קרב (“near”) and ן (whose numerical value is 50). It consists of bringing oneself closer to the 50 gates of holiness and distancing oneself from a commitment that could be described as “rotteness” (רקב). The word “rotten” (רקבון) is formed from רקב (“rotteness”) and ן, for this incomplete commitment can lead a man to the 50 gates of impurity. In fact, the Sages warned us against using the Torah for personal reasons (*Nedarim 62a*).

To distance ourselves from this type of attitude, we must bring to mind the day of our death, particularly when faced with temptation (*Berachot 5a*). This is also alluded to in the word קָרְבַּן (sacrifice), formed by the letters קָרַב (*kever*, the grave) and ן. If we keep this in mind, we will only seek to devote ourselves entirely to G-d by disregarding all impure motives.

The sacrifice also teaches us humility, that of the animals which stretched out their necks to have their throats slit in honor of the Eternal. However, one should definitely not resemble them on the animalistic and material level. The Sages have said that the animal only dominates a man when it has an impression of being in the presence of another animal (*Shabbat 151b*), and it is written, “You save man and beast, O L-RD” (*Psalms 36:7*). All while being careful not to imitate a beast on its animalistic side, we must learn humility and self-effacement from it.

We have already said that humility leads to Torah, and the Sages teach that this is one of the characteristics by which it is acquired (*Perkei Avoth 6:6[5]*), and that we find it among the humble (*Taanith 7a*). The same idea emerges from the study of the sacrifices. In the past, the Children of Israel witnessed daily miracles within the boundaries of the Temple (*Perkei Avoth 5:5*), and therefore it was very easy for them to conquer their evil inclination, without mentioning the fact that when the sacrifices were offered, they perceived the truth, and thus all their sins were forgiven and they were purified. In addition, as they realized that everything that was done to the animal should have really been done to themselves (see *Ramban on Leviticus 1:9*), they immediately repented and came closer to G-d. Yet in our time, how can we conquer the evil inclination? If it was difficult during the time of the Temple, when everything was clear, what can we say of ourselves, who have neither Temple nor sacrifices? How then can we get closer to G-d?

It is precisely this lack that will help us, for we still have a primary weapon: Torah and prayer. As it is written, “Let our lips substitute for bulls” (*Hoshea 14:3*). This means that our prayers replace the sacrifices (*Berachot 26b*). As for the Torah, it also represents a sacrifice, for whoever studies the subject of burnt offerings is considered as having bought one (*Menachot 110a*). Consequently, we possess two forms of sacrifice! If we study Torah and devote all our energy to it, we offer ourselves to G-d by, as it were, killing ourselves for it (*Berachot 63b*). In fact when the verse states, “A man that dies in his tent” (*Numbers 19:14*), this can mean that he should “kill” himself in the tent of Torah, following in this way the steps of Jacob, “a wholesome man, abiding in tents” (*Genesis 25:27*). It is therefore obvious that even in our time, we can merit a considerable reward, for by the strength of the Torah, by prayer, and by the 100 blessings, we have the possibility of becoming a sacrifice totally devoted to G-d, even if we no longer see what happens to an animal when it is offered. If we manage to draw out the best part from our exile, we will be able to attain a spiritual level even greater than that reached by the generations living during the time of the Temple.

Let us return to the question of why we begin the Torah education of young children by this Parsha. Yes, it speaks essentially of commitment and fervor, that is clear, for children are able to devote themselves without any thought for those things which interest them (such as sweets, for example), and they have to be taught how to channel this energy towards holiness and purity. Not only do we learn from the sacrifices how to give ourselves over completely to holiness, but we also learn from children how to arrive at a complete commitment to G-d. We do this by observing the fervor that children put into attaining their own goals.

We will also be able to answer the difficulty that we brought up concerning the fact that G-d said to Moses to say to Israel harsh words concerning himself. What connection is there between this and what the text states, and from where did Rashi draw this interpretation? Let us recall that Moses wanted to enter into the Tent of Meeting, but could not because of the Divine cloud (*Exodus 40:35*). At that moment, he understood that he could only speak with the Eternal through the merit of Israel (*Berachot 32a*). Having thus understood the greatness of the Children of Israel in G-d's eyes, he immediately humbled himself and wrote the word *vayikra* with a small *aleph*. This teaches us that when the Eternal called him, it was uniquely because of the merit of the Children of Israel (the idea of being small refers back to them by allusion, since he was the teacher and they were the students). He noticed that all his strength came but by their merit, and this is what constitutes, "called ... spoke". The word "spoke" (דבר) suggests a leader, such as in the expression *dabar echad ledor* ("only one leader for a generation") Whether it be Moses' ability as a leader, or the fact that G-d had called him, both of these facets stem entirely from the merit of the Children of Israel, for by himself Moses could not enter into the Tent of Meeting.

A greatly important principle emerges from this analysis: Everything that a great Rav or scholar receives from G-d is only by the merit of his students, for it is thanks to them that he can spiritually elevate himself and continue to train other students. The Rav should learn from this how to teach his students, and also how to learn from them how to devote oneself entirely, as did Moses our teacher, who took note of the Children of Israel's devotion. In this spirit, the Sages have said, "When a student is exiled, his teacher is exiled with him" (*Makot 10a*). This is also why it is written, "Say to the Kohanim, the sons of Aaron, and tell them" (*Leviticus 21:1*), a repetition whose goal is to direct the great to watch over the small (*Yebamot 114a*). G-d puts the great on guard against pride, for it is but by the merit of the small that they become great. Consequently, it is proper to lower oneself before one's students and not to keep one's Torah for oneself, in the spirit of the Mishnah that states, "If you have learned much Torah, do not claim special credit for yourself" (*Perkei Avoth 2:8*). One should not allow oneself to become weary of teaching, as we have learned from Rav Pereda, who taught his student 400 times (*Eruvin 54b*). One should be self-effacing before a student and teach him the meaning of devotion, all while learning it from him. In this way, one can resemble a sacrifice offered to the Eternal.

### *Humility As Sacrifice*

The passage that states, “*Vayikra* [And He called] to Moses . . . When a man among you brings an offering to the L-RD” (*Leviticus 1:1-2*) contains several difficulties:

1. We know that the commentators have pondered the meaning of the small letter *aleph* in the word *vayikra*. Why did Moses use a small *aleph*? Their answer is that he did so because of his great modesty, which the Torah testifies to by stating: “Now the man Moses was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth” (*Numbers 12:3*). Since it is difficult to understand how Moses’ modesty could allow him to write such a passage, we must explain that G-d obliged him to write it (Yalkut Shimoni 839). Yet in that case, why didn’t G-d also oblige him to use a normal-sized *aleph* in the word *vayikra*, thus ignoring his desire to use a small one?

2. We must also ponder the connection that exists between the end of Pasha Pekudei and the beginning of Pasha Vayikra, as well as why the latter begins with the mitzvah of offerings.

3. The phrase “When a man among you brings an offering to the L-RD” needs to be clarified. Rashi explains that the word *adam* (man) calls to mind the first man (Adam), whose offering could in no way have been stolen. We are thus enjoined to refrain from offering anything that does not belong to us, for Hashem detests a burnt offering that stems from robbery (*Isaiah 61:8*). Yet in that case, it is difficult to understand why the Sages did not draw this lesson from Cain and Abel, who both offered a sacrifice to G-d, as it is written: “Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and from their choicest” (*Genesis 4:4*). They obviously did not offer products stemming from robbery, since the whole world belonged to them and they had divided it (*Bereshith Rabba 22:16*). It would have been more logical to draw the aforementioned lesson from here, for there is no verse that attests to Adam having offered a sacrifice. There is only a Midrash that describes Adam’s offering of a bull on the altar (*Vayikra Rabba 2:8*). Why then did the Sages try to find a proof with Adam rather than with Cain and Abel, given that Scripture explicitly states that they offered a sacrifice?

4. We also need to understand what could lead a person to offer a sacrifice that is the product of robbery, since he is only offering it because he regrets his sins and seeks to atone for them. By bringing a stolen sacrifice, he seriously aggravates his situation.

We will attempt to clarify these points by first citing the Ramban on the meaning of sacrifices in general. In his commentary to *Leviticus*, the Ramban writes: “All these acts [pertaining to a sacrifice] are performed in order that when they are done, a person should realize that he has sinned against his G-d with his body and his soul, and that his blood should really be spilled and his body burned, were it not for the loving-kindness of the Creator, Who took from him a substitute and a ransom, namely this offering, so that its blood should be in place of his blood, its life in place of his life” (*Ramban on Leviticus 1:9*). This means that when a man sees an animal being slaughtered, carved up, and its blood spread upon the altar, he should tell himself that all this should have been done

to him because of his sins, and that G-d in His mercy accepts an animal in his place. These thoughts should bring about his complete and wholehearted repentance.

Actually, a man who sins does so because of pride, since it would be impossible for him to sin if he recognized his true place. The Talmud states, “A man only sins if a spirit of folly seizes him” (*Sotah 3*). Thus when he offers a sacrifice and sees everything the Kohanim must do to the animal, he repents and submits himself to G-d.

Consequently, when a man is humble and performs the mitzvot without any boastful thoughts, Scripture considers him to be continuously offering his soul to G-d. This is the meaning of the expression, “When a man among you [*mikem*: Literally ‘of you’] brings an offering to the L-RD.” A man should arrive at a spiritual level whereby all his good deeds are done solely for the glory of G-d – without any ulterior motives – through submission. Thus a man who is tired because he did not sleep at night – who only slept a little in the morning – yet gathers all his strength to serve his Creator when he realizes that the time has arrived for reciting the morning *Shema* or morning prayers, such a man has offered himself entirely to G-d. The same goes for one who has fasted the entire day, since the loss of blood and fat resulting from his fast is considered as a sacrifice. In addition, the Sages have said that whoever manages to conquer his evil inclination is considered to have offered G-d a sacrifice. Such a person in fact offers himself entirely, for man’s evil inclination strengthens itself more each day and tries to kill him (*Sukkah 52a*), as it is written: “The wicked one watches for the righteous and seeks to kill him” (*Psalms 37:32*). When someone devotes all his energies to conquering it, at that point it is considered as if he had simultaneously sacrificed himself and his evil inclination to G-d. This is the meaning of the expression, “When a man among you [*mikem*] brings an offering to the L-RD.” If a man offers himself (*mikem*) as a sacrifice – himself along with his evil inclination (which is also part of the idea of *mikem*, since it is constantly within a man, well-established and hidden in his heart [*Sukkah 52a*]) – this represents a superior offering.

From everything that we have said, it follows that only a person who submits himself to G-d and behaves humbly is considered as having offered himself along with his evil inclination as a sacrifice. The actions of such an individual have the value of an offering, and this principle – that humility itself is considered as a sacrifice – remains valid in our day; and not only humility, but also prayer (*Berachot 26b*). Since the main element in repentance is confession (Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuvah 81*), admitting our sins when praying to G-d leads to the submission of all the Creator’s worlds and protects us from all sins.

If everything that we have said up to this point is accurate, the issues we raised at the beginning will now be perfectly clear.

We are familiar with the teaching that states, “Man is led by the way that he himself wants to take” (*Makot 10b*), which is illustrated by the passage: “Concerning scorners, He scorns them; but to the humble He gives favor” (*Proverbs 3:34*). For good or for evil, Divine Providence helps a man to follow the path that he desires. If a man yearns to constantly

submit himself to G-d – to behave in accordance with the verse that states, “I have set the L-RD before me always” (*Psalms 16:8*), and to conduct himself humbly, like a servant before his master – Providence helps him to fulfill this yearning and he encounters no obstacles in his path. It is written at the end of Parsha Pekudei, “Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, for the cloud rested upon it, and the glory of the L-RD filled the Sanctuary” (*Exodus 40:35*). He could only enter when Hashem called him (which answers our second question). It is plainly obvious that all the Children of Israel watched him up to the very point that he entered the tent to speak to G-d (*ibid. 31:8*), the result being that Moses garnered great honor at that point. He believed that Hashem spoke with him alone, to the exclusion of all other people, despite the extremely lofty spiritual level of the Children of Israel in the desert (they are called *Dor Deah*, a generation that conducts itself completely in accordance with its knowledge of G-d [*Vayikra Rabba 9:1*]). It is possible that in Moses’ immense humility, his heart broke within him, like a servant who yields to his master, and instead of writing *Vayeker* (“And He happened upon”), he wrote *Vayikra* (“And He called”). The former is the same term that the Torah uses concerning Balaam: *Vayeker E-l Bilam* (“And G-d happened upon Balaam” – *Numbers 23:4*). G-d appeared to Balaam at a moment of impurity and “by chance,” and Moses believed that G-d appeared to him also by chance, without this indicating his special choosing (see *Rashi on this verse*). Yet G-d did not go along with Moses’ reasoning, for it is not proper to make people believe that the leader of the Children of Israel received prophesy solely “by chance.” Such a demonstration of humility would have harmed the honor of the entire people.

Nevertheless, since Moses constantly behaved with humility and submissiveness (“Now the man Moses was exceedingly humble” – *Numbers 12:3*), he in fact wrote *Vayikra* (“And He called”). However Moses used a small *aleph* to underline that even though G-d demonstrated His favor by appearing to him (*Torat Kohanim 1:2-3*), he still did not feel worthy of this honor. Instead, Moses would have preferred for all the Children of Israel to hear everything that G-d said, since all of them were worthy. The small *aleph* signifies that every Jew, even if he is not great, can merit hearing Hashem’s voice. This is what is stated by the verse: “Was it only to Moses that the L-RD spoke? Did He not speak to us as well?” (*Numbers 12:2*) – G-d can speak to anyone! Hashem replied that this is true, and in his humility Moses understood this perfectly well. Therefore since G-d leads a man in the way that he wants to go, He allowed Moses to use a small *aleph*. Proof of this is that even when G-d told him to write, “Now the man Moses was exceedingly humble,” He agreed to let him omit the letter *yud* in the word *anav* (“humble”), which is what Moses desired because of his self-effacement. Furthermore, Moses wrote “the man Moses” instead of simply “Moses” so that we should be unaware that he was speaking of himself, and in order to make us believe that he was speaking of someone else called Moses. All this stemmed from Moses’ extreme modesty, aware as he was that G-d could speak to any Jew.

We now fully understand why Parsha Vayikra begins with the subject of sacrifices. It was in order to show the Children of Israel that in being submissive to G-d, a person

resembles one who offers himself as a sacrifice. In addition, watching an animal being slaughtered brings about humility, which in turn encourages a person to sacrifice himself – himself and his evil inclination – to Hashem in an act of absolute devotion and self-effacement.

Having said all this, we now understand why Rashi wrote that we should not bring a sacrifice that stems from robbery. We asked if one could conceive of bringing the product of robbery as an atonement sacrifice without making matters worse in the process. According to what we have seen, however, it is clear that when a man comes to the Temple with his sacrifice, he should do so in a spirit of submissiveness. He should prepare himself to repent in light of everything that occurs to the animal being slaughtered. Prayer, which stands in place of sacrifice (*Berachot 26b*), demands preparation. This was understood by men of earlier generations, who would spend an hour preparing themselves before prayer in order that it be favorably accepted (*ibid. 30b*). Similarly, in the time of the Temple it was necessary to prepare oneself before offering a sacrifice so that it could be favorably accepted, and the person who neglected this step seized and stole, as it were, the favorable view that Heaven could have of him. In such a case his sacrifice resembles the product of robbery, for by not coming to the Temple wholeheartedly, nothing in him would break when his sacrifice was being offered, this being so detrimental that he might stumble from one sin to the next. This could occur because he lacked the preparation that enabled him to repent beforehand so that his sacrifice would be pleasing to Hashem.

This is what the Torah alludes to by saying, “When a man among you brings an offering to the L-RD,” namely that he should not bring the product of robbery, which means that he should prepare himself beforehand and repent of his sins. This fully explains why Rashi finds his proof with Adam, who did not bring a product of robbery, even though we do not find any written evidence that he offered a sacrifice. Actually, the first man did not need to bring a sacrifice. When he sinned and was driven out of the Garden of Eden (*Sanhedrin 38b*), it was actually *himself* that he offered to G-d in an act of repentance, accompanied by extreme submissiveness on his part, this taking place on Shabbat (*Bereshith Rabba 22:28*). Adam then recited: “A psalm, a song for the Sabbath day” (*Psalms 92:1*) and confessed his sin. He even separated himself from his wife for 130 years (*Eruvin 18b*). He therefore did not need to offer a sacrifice, for he had found in himself the path of repentance, and he could not have brought anything that stemmed from robbery because everything in the world belonged to him (which means that his “sacrifice” carried no element of “robbery” since it contained humility and was carefully prepared). He yielded to Hashem without resorting to offering a sacrifice because he had accomplished in his own person the idea expressed by: “When a man among you [*mikem*: ‘of you’] brings an offering to the L-RD.”

*Every man should thus learn on his own to be humble and to take note of his infiniteness before Hashem, for humility and repentance stand in place of sacrifice, and through them it is as if a person offers his very life.*

### *A Few Remarks on Parsha Vayikra*

#### *Enthusiasm and Effort Lead to Holiness*

In the verse that states, “Vayikra [And He called] to Moses” (*Leviticus 1:1*), the word *vayikra* is written with a small *aleph*. For what reason is it written like this?

The Zohar teaches that when a man damages the holiness of the *brit*, he distances himself from G-d (*Zohar III:72b*). Incapable at that point from getting closer to the abode of His residence (*Eruvin 19a*), he stays outside the camp in which the Shechinah resides. To correct this sin and return to the camp, he must thoroughly purify his thoughts and arm himself with the authentic devotion of a person who offers himself as a sacrifice (*Leviticus 1:2*), ready without reserve to give his life in order to be entirely consecrated to G-d.

The reason for this is that by wasting his seed, he has, so to speak, offered a sacrifice to the *kelipah* [literally, the “husk” that comes to envelop holiness]. To regain his integrity, he must now extract from this *kelipah* what it took from him, a process suggested by the verse: “He devoured wealth, but will disgorge it” (*Job 20:15*). This enables a person to recreate himself.

We find this idea alluded to in the word *vayikra*. Without the *aleph*, it becomes *vayikar*, a word that evokes the impurity we are speaking of (*see Numbers 23:4*). Nevertheless, the presence of the *aleph* rectifies the situation. How does this occur? When we divide the word *vayikra* in two, we obtain *vayi kra*, and the numerical value of the word *kra* (by adding one for the word itself) is the same as that of *krav* (combat). This means that by waging war against the *kelipah*, we force it to return what it swallowed, and thus we rectify the situation. The initials of the aforementioned verse in Job are *heth*, *beit*, and *vav*, which together have the same numerical value as the word *vayi*. This indicates that if we adopt the behavior evoked by the verse in Job, we place ourselves under the sign of combat (*krav*), and therefore we come closer (*karov*) to G-d, holiness, and purity.

#### *“A Man that Dies in a Tent” – The Tent of Torah Study*

It is written, “And He called to Moses, and the L-RD spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting” (*Leviticus 1:1*). The “Tent” here alludes to the Torah, for concerning Jacob it is stated that he dwelled “in tents” (*Genesis 25:27*), meaning the tents of Shem and Ever (*Bereshith Rabba 63:10*). A tent represents the Torah, and the Gemara teaches that a man should “kill” himself in study (*Berachot 63b*), according to the verse: “a man that dies in a tent” (*Numbers 19:14*). Indeed, he should invest all his energies into Torah study (*Torah Kohanim 26:3*), and we know that this implies, among other things, studying while standing (as many people in fact do). The word *moed* (“[Tent of] Meeting”) is composed of the same letters as *omed* (“standing”), which can also be considered as alluding to a *shtender* (the stand on which books are placed during study), also called *amud* (composed of the same letters).

Concerning this subject, it is written that the Torah’s honor has disappeared since the death of Rabban Gamliel (*Sotah 49a*). Up to that time, people studied while standing,

which was an honor for the Torah because people would thus be bowing towards it. This honor disappeared when that custom was abandoned. In Hebrew the phrase *batel kvod haTorah* (“the honor of the Torah has disappeared”) has the same numerical value, according to certain a method of calculation (*minyan katan im hakolel*) as the phrase *shelo lamdu me’umad* (“they did not learn standing”).

### **“Our Lips will Substitute for Bulls”**

It is written, “When a man *mikem* [of you] brings an offering” (*Leviticus 1:2*). The word *mikem* has a numerical value of 100, alluding to the 100 blessings that a person should say each day (*Menachot 43b*). In fact since the Temple has been destroyed, this is what remains for us in our bitter exile, and it is in this manner that we offer our sacrifices to G-d (refer to the writings of Rav Lev Simcha of Ger on this topic).

This actually constitutes a way for a person to get closer to G-d, for even if our eyes no longer witness the miracles that once occurred in the Temple (*Perkei Avoth 5:5*), and although there are no longer Priests and Levites to carry out the Temple service, the fact remains that we perform Hashem’s will by reciting these blessings, which is a way of getting closer to Him. The era that we live in also has a positive aspect to it, insofar as we are obligated to invest great effort into performing mitzvot and studying Torah, which is extremely important in G-d’s eyes.

### ***Sacrificing Selfishness Through Humility Before Hashem***

It is stated at the beginning of this week’s parsha: “And He called to Moses, and the L-RD spoke to him... ‘When a man among you offers an offering to the L-RD from animals, from the herd or from the flock shall you offer your offering’ ” (*Leviticus 1: 1-2*). This is difficult to comprehend. First of all, we need to understand why the word *vayikra* (“and He called”) is written with an *aleph* that is smaller than the other letters. True, the commentators have already explained this to mean that Moses was very humble, as the Torah mentions, hence Moses described Hashem’s address to him by using a small *aleph*, thus diminishing himself. However what does that have to do with the context of the passage?

We find other surprising things when we look at this passage. In the expression, “When a man among you offers an offering,” the word *mikem* (“among you”) is superfluous, and it would have been sufficient to state, “When a man offers an offering.” Furthermore, concerning these verses the Sages have said, “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: ‘Let your offering be like the offering of Adam, who offered nothing acquired by robbery or violence because everything belonged to him. Thus you too must not offer anything acquired by robbery or violence. And if you act accordingly, “It shall please the L-RD more than a full-grown bull” [*Psalms 69:32*]’ ” (*Vayikra Rabba 2:7*). This is very difficult to understand, for who could possibly think of bringing an offering to Hashem that was acquired through theft? After all, the text in question is dealing with someone who has repented of his sins and wants to redeem himself by

bringing an offering. That being the case, why would he bring an offering that was acquired through theft? Does that not seem strange?

Here, however, the Torah is teaching us two principles that are extremely important for a person who wants to come closer to the Holy One, blessed be He. In fact the Hebrew word for “offering” (*korban*) comes from the same root as the word *karav* (“to come close”). To understand this more fully, we shall cite some remarks by the Ramban on the subject of offerings:

“All these acts are performed in order that when they are done, a person should realize that he has sinned against his G-d with his body and his soul, and that his blood should really be spilled and his body burned, were it not for the lovingkindness of the Creator, Who took from him a substitute and a ransom, namely this offering, so that its blood should be in place of his blood, its life in place of his life” (*Ramban on Leviticus 1: 9*). This means that everything that is done to the animal should really have been done to the body of the person who brought it as an offering, for he sinned against his G-d. However Hashem treats people with mercy, and He commanded man to bring an offering. Thus when all these things are done to the animal – not to the person – he will start thinking and engage in some soul-searching, completely repenting of all the sins he committed. He will then be pure and whole.

Yet how does a person end up sinning in the first place? What is it that leads him to sin? Our Sages have said, “A person does not commit a transgression unless a spirit of folly enters into him” (*Sotah 3a*). This means that all sins have their source in pride. When someone becomes proud, when he feels superior to those around him, it leads him to committing all kinds of sins. This is because he cannot tolerate the reprimands of others, and therefore he cannot change his errant ways. Consequently, he must start repenting by ridding himself of pride. In his mind he must decide that he does not want to be contemptible before Hashem. A person must decide that he wants to be closer to Hashem, for He cannot be close to one who is proud. It is only in this way that a person may approach G-d.

We learn this essential principle from the very first word of our parsha. The letter *aleph* is written smaller than normal on purpose, in order to teach us that if a Jew wants to bring an offering to Hashem – if he wants to come closer to Hashem – then he must first be humble and small in his own eyes. He must be just like the letter *aleph*, and it is only when he conducts himself accordingly, with humility, that he will truly be able to come closer to Hashem and please Him.

When we continue to look into this passage, however, we see that even this is not enough. We cannot content ourselves with always acting with humility; we must sometimes demonstrate pride. In fact the Torah states, “His heart was lifted up in the ways of the L-RD” (*II Chronicles 17:6*), for we must act with pride toward the wicked. Nevertheless, internally a Jew must always act with humility. Furthermore, everyone should transform his whole being and persona into a single entity of humility and self-annulment.

This is why the Torah continues by telling us, in the following verse, “When a man among you offers an offering.” When someone wants to come closer to G-d, when he wants to be like a whole burnt-offering before Hashem, he must arrive at *mikem*. He must reach the point that it is truly he – with all his 248 limbs and 365 sinews – who is being offered for the sake of his Creator. If he conducts himself with humility, Scripture considers it as if he had offered his own soul to Hashem.

This is similar to a man who goes sleepless through the night. During all that time he tosses and turns, unable to fall asleep. It is only towards morning that he manages to catch some shuteye. Yet if early in the morning he remembers that the time for reciting *Shema* has arrived, and if he controls his desire for sleep and gathers his strength like a lion in the service of his Creator, such a person can truly be said to have offered his soul to Hashem.

Yet even more than this, a person should prepare himself out of a love for G-d, for if he presents himself before the King dressed in rags, everything will be worthless. Despite his humility, if a person presents himself before G-d as if everything belonged to him, this resembles theft – like an offering that stems from theft – which Hashem abhors. This is what we learn from the first man, who never brought an offering stemming from theft.

Even more than all this, true humility leads a person to sacrifice his selfishness before Hashem. True humility has no right to be fake, containing even a tiny bit of pride. Only a person whose humility is real can come closer to G-d.

## *Parsha Tzav*

### *Humility Leads to Growth in the Service of G-d*

It is written, “Take Aaron and his sons with him, and the garments and the oil of anointment, and the bull of the sin-offering, and the two rams, and the basket of matzot. Gather the entire assembly to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.’ Moses did as the L-RD commanded him, and the assembly was gathered to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” (*Lev 8:2-4*).

With regards to this passage, the book *Shemen Rosh* asks the following questions:

1. Concerning the expression, “Take Aaron,” Rashi explains it to mean: “Take him with words and draw him” (*Torah Kohanim 8:165*). Now why would G-d need to tell Moses to take Aaron and draw him with words in order to convince him to serve in the Tabernacle? Is it possible to even think that Aaron would refuse such a task, a task that’s more honorable than any other?

2. Why did Aaron need to come to the Tent of Meeting with a bull, two rams, and a basket of matzot? And above all, why did the Children of Israel need to see how Moses was performing everything that he had been commanded regarding Aaron, in particular how he washed and dressed him?

Let us try to explain the situation. In the beginning, G-d gave orders to Moses for Aaron and his sons concerning the burnt offering, as Rashi writes concerning the verse, “Command [*tzav*: צו] Aaron and his sons, saying...” (*Lev 6:2*). The word *tzav* (צו) is a word that one uses to motivate the person being addressed, something that is particularly necessary in cases involving the possibility of loss (*Torat Kohanim 6:1*). This here represents such a case, since the burnt offering is entirely consumed for G-d. He also encouraged him to remove the ashes from the altar, as it is written, “He shall remove the ashes which the fire has made by consuming the burnt offering on the altar” (*Lev 6:3*). This is so that he doesn’t become proud of himself, referring to the fact that this work required that the Kohen remove his garments and put on other ones in order not to dirty the former (*Yoma 23b*), which in so doing spiritually elevates him.

It is precisely this danger of pride that Aaron dreaded, especially after having worn the eight splendid garments of the High Priest. Even the cleaning of the ashes with the simpler garments risked coming not from a true love of the mitzvah, and thus would be for him a type of humiliation that in reality would cover a feeling of superiority.

This is why G-d told Moses to draw Aaron with words by telling him, “This is the Torah [law] of the burnt offering,” for in zealously performing these mitzvot, one draws closer to G-d. In the same way, zeal encourages one to perform mitzvot as soon as possible (*Pesachim 4a*), and it is in this way that one arrives at purity, holiness, taking part in the resurrection of the dead, and Ruach Hakodesh (*Avodah Zarah 20b*). In

addition, the cleaning of the ashes, which comprises an element of debasement, brings one to humility, not to pride. In this context, there's no place to worry that you will swell with pride, for zeal brings one to self-effacement and great humility before G-d, and it's precisely in this way that one gets even closer to the Eternal and arrives at the ultimate goal.

We can now, therefore, better understand why G-d ordered that the assembly of the Children of Israel look at Aaron and his sons in their role as priests: It was to instruct them in humility and self-effacement. By the service of these priests, the people noticed that even after all the honors that G-d had bestowed upon Aaron, he didn't feel pride in himself, but rather in that he was playing a consecrated role and attributed all honor to G-d.

In reflecting on this, the same idea will help us to also understand other points in our Parsha. A great miracle was performed for Aaron in that he wasn't the cause of any incident, for Aaron's priestly anointing oil was to serve for all the generations. In effect, the Children of Israel were inspired by the humble and self-effacing manner of the priests, of which Aaron's holiness (which nothing tarnished), was a perfect example. This is why Moses anointed Aaron with the anointing oil, a reference to the fact that oil floats on water as well as on all other liquids (*Shemot Rabba* 36:1). Moreover, the anointing oil (*meshicha* - משיחה) alludes to G-d's anointed (*Mashiach* - משיח). In short, the priest's service should be performed swiftly, yet linger on (like the oil), which evokes Mashiach. Yet at the same time, Aaron brought a bull of atonement, which alludes to that fact that no one is free from sin ("For there is no man so wholly righteous on earth that he [always] does good and never sins" [*Ec* 7:20]), not even the priest, who is G-d's anointed one. When he sees the bull of atonement, the High Priest will not come to pride, and even if he has nothing to regret, it brings him to self-effacement and humility before G-d.

He brings, moreover, two rams and a basket of matzot. These show that, even though he is unique and there are no others like him (since only he enters into the Holy of Holies), nevertheless he needs an additional sacrifice because the evil inclination is very strong and tries to make him, the great Tzaddik, stumble. Our Sages teach us that "whoever is greater than his fellow has a greater evil inclination than him" (*Sukkah* 52a). It is actually possible that the two rams allude to the two Temples wherein the priests served. As well, the basket of matzot alludes to humility, for matzah is very thin and does not rise.

Therefore, it is to prevent Aaron from swelling with pride that the Torah provided this entire ritual, since a good start should assure a good continuation for all the generations to come. We see in this a great principle, namely that all depends on the start, in the same way that the body depends on the head (*Sotah* 48b). In the words of Rabbi Elazar Harokeach, "Fervor is never stronger than at the beginning," for when the righteous demonstrates, at the very outset, the right path to those who listen to his instruction, there is a solid continuation in all the coming generations.

This same Torah that was given to us at Sinai continues in all the generations, for Moses was the most humble of all men (*Num 12:3*), and he served G-d with alacrity, to the point that he didn't even have the time to become swollen with pride. He progressed without cease, and as we know, one mitzvah brings about another mitzvah (*Perkei Avoth 4:2*). He finished by meriting that the Torah truly became his heritage, as attested to by the verse that states, "Remember the Torah of Moses My servant" (*Mal 3:22*) and also by the Mishnah: "Moses received the Torah from Sinai" (*Perkei Avoth 1:1*). It was our revered teacher Moses that received it, and if we observe it as he did (for he had totally immersed himself in it), it will also endure with us and carry our name. As it is written, "In *His* Torah he meditates day and night" (*Ps 1:2*), and it is on this point that our Sages have said that when a man plunges into it, it becomes *his* Torah (*Kiddushin 32b*).

We should learn from our teacher Moses to conduct ourselves humbly, which will enable us to acquire the Torah. It is written: "This is the Torah: A man who dies in his tent" (*Num 19:14*), and concerning this verse our Sages have said, "The words of Torah endure only with the one who kills himself for them" (*Shabbat 83b*). This "killing" oneself consists of humbling oneself as much as possible. And in the same way that a dead man, even if he was once a great king, no longer inspires fear (*Shabbat 151b*) and is left to the mercy of each and everyone, the man who studies Torah should humble himself as if he were dead. He should not respond to insult (*Berachot 18a*), for Torah is acquired through humility (*Taanith 7a*). One can add to this by saying that the man (*in Num 19:14*) is only called humble (literally "dead") when he is actually found in a tent, in the study of Torah. This is like Moses our teacher, who conducted himself with humility; thus the Torah carries his name. In our time, it is the conduct of the righteous that can teach us something similar to the service of the priest in the Temple: They consecrated themselves entirely to the honor of G-d, and by their prayers they brought to light the ashes (i.e., the prayers of the Children of Israel) that were found at a lower level. By their service, they, the Tzaddikim, pick up and raise these ashes (prayers) towards the heavens with zeal and humility.

### ***The Importance of Fervor in the Service of G-d***

Concerning the verse that states, "Command Aaron and his sons, saying: 'This is the law of the burnt offering'" (*Leviticus 6:2*), Rashi says in the name of the Sages that *tzav* ("command") is a word that is used to encourage the one being addressed, a word that is particularly necessary when there exists the possibility of loss (*Torat Kohanim 6:1*).

This demands an explanation. How is it conceivable that the Kohen, in sacrificing a burnt offering that will be entirely consumed in honor of the Eternal, can demonstrate such negligence that the Torah is justified in encouraging him? Also, let us not forget that he knows perfectly well that he will receive the portions reserved for the Kohen (*Bava Kama 110b*). What's more is that the verse concerns Aaron, G-d's chosen one (*Bamidbar Rabba 3:2*)! It is conceivable that of all people, Aaron would demonstrate some slack

in his service in general, and in his sacrifice of the burnt offering in particular? It is unthinkable that a fear of loss is attributed to him.

We will attempt to clarify this point to our complete satisfaction. The evil inclination is accustomed to weakening the fervor of man, especially if he risks a financial loss. The Zohar (III:273b) makes it clear that this test is the most difficult of all, for a man has the status of a close relative in that which concerns him – him and his instincts (*Sanhedrin 10a*) – particularly when it comes to money, for money is what gives a man grounding in this world (*Pesachim 119a*). For example, when the hour draws near for Mincha and the store is filled with clients, a battle with the evil inclination begins, for the storekeeper risks losing money and will be tempted to ignore prayer and let the opportunity slip by.

As for a poor person who asks him for charity, he will not be too pleased either, for this implies a loss for him. It can also happen that after having gone to pray, he nevertheless looks at his watch every minute to see when it will end so that he can go and reopen his store and begin to make money again. The question being that of a financial loss, he has the greatest difficulty remembering that at such a moment he is standing before G-d and offering sacrifices to Him, since prayer takes the place of sacrifice (*Berachot 26b*). Furthermore it is Him, the Eternal, Who grants him money and sustenance.

This is what the Torah itself tells us: “This is the *torat* [law] of the burnt offering. It is the burnt offering” (*Leviticus 6:2*). The Torah itself is the burnt offering (*olah*), a word that indicates the way to elevate oneself (*aley*) in the service of G-d. In order for a man to elevate himself, he must go “up to the fire that is found on the altar.” He must serve G-d with fire, particularly in the study of Torah, which evokes the fire on the altar. In fact the Torah is compared to fire, given by fire and written with letters of fire – black fire on white fire (*Tanhuma Yitro 12*). In everything that concerns the study of Torah, which is a burnt offering, a man should literally resemble fire and burn with enthusiasm for the Eternal from morning to night, without paying attention to the loss that this may entail. In fact the evil inclination is extremely powerful in that which concerns the Torah, but we can conquer it by acting like a burnt offering destined to be entirely consumed, for the Zohar affirms that the forces of evil have no power on the sacrifice of the burnt offering and draws no benefit from it (*Zohar II:181b*).

How then can a man reach this maximum closeness, this enthusiasm without limit in the service of G-d? It is by the fervor that he invests in it. A man is comparable to Aaron. He must show himself eager in thought and in deed at all times that the temptation to neglect Torah presents itself, and he should realize that he is similar to one who offers a sacrifice to G-d. He will therefore gather together his strength, as if it consisted of an arrow which attacks the evil inclination. This idea is alluded to in the word *tzav* (“command”), for in counting the two letters that make up the word, along with the word’s numerical value, we come up with the same numerical value as the word *cheitz* (“arrow”). Consequently, in the same way that the evil inclination rushes

to make a man neglect Torah, a man should for his part counter the evil inclination with study, for study protects and saves him (*Sotah 21a*). The Torah is also called the “remedy against the evil inclination” (*Sukkah 52b*), especially when it consists of an eventual loss. When the archer launches his arrow, all will depend on his intensity and the energy that he puts into making the arrow fly even faster, even more powerfully. Similarly, everyone should put all their energy into aiming at the target in order to conquer the evil inclination.

This is the sense of the verse that states, “Command Aaron *and his sons*” (*Leviticus 6:2*), which designates all the generations that will come after him, and to which the Torah wishes to teach the way of elevating oneself. This consists of the burnt offering (meaning fervor), for here there is a risk of loss, hence a lack. This risk is present when dealing with the written and oral Torah, for without eagerness and diligence, there will be a lack in one’s knowledge of Torah. In fact, the Torah probed deeply into the motivations of the Kohen. It knows that if he is not encouraged in his service, there is reason to fear that he will not carry it out with all the necessary fervor. Even though it consists of a burnt offering entirely consumed for G-d, the Kohen needs encouragement because he is preoccupied with the financial loss implied by the offering. Now it is by means of the burnt offering that abundance descends into the world. In this it is similar to the Torah, for it is also through the Torah that abundance and dew come into the world, as it is written in the Midrash concerning Jacob (*Bereshith Rabba 66:1*). This is why the Kohen should purify his thoughts and perform his service with the greatest diligence.

In the same line of reasoning, the Kohen Gadol does not have the right to marry a widow (*Yebamot 59a*), as the verse says: “A widow, a divorcee, a desecrated woman, a harlot – he shall not marry these” (*Leviticus 21:14*). The commentators have explained the reason for this commandment. It is to prevent a situation in which he comes to covet another woman and then, finding himself in the Tent of Meeting, he prays to G-d that her husband die in order to marry her. Yet this is unconceivable, for how could such thoughts come to the Kohen Gadol when he is offering a sacrifice to G-d?

However the Torah understands men even in their most hidden recesses. Here it demonstrates the power of the evil inclination by asserting that even the Kohen Gadol can have the thought of cursing a man in order to marry his widow! This forbidden thought may even follow him into the Holy of Holies, so powerful is the evil inclination. This is why we must fight it with the greatest of diligence, as if we were arrows, and at that moment we will get ahead and conquer it.

This idea is alluded to in the verse that states, “The Kohen shall don his fitted linen tunic” (*Leviticus 6:3*). The word “shall don” evokes thoughts of holiness, that a man should don and envelope his entire body in order to serve the Eternal, for when he knows before Whom he stands (*Berachot 28b*), he will perform his Divine service with great attentiveness. These sacred thoughts help a man to remain attached to G-d and to elevate himself more and more. In fact, according to the ladder of Rabbi Pinchas ben

Yair (*Avodah Zarah 20b*), purity of thought leads to the highest levels and performs wonders for man in this world and the world to come.

It is not by chance that fire is mentioned three times in this passage: “The fire of the Altar should be kept aflame on it” (*Leviticus 6:2*); “The fire on the Altar shall be kept burning on it” (*v.5*); and “A permanent fire shall remain aflame on the Altar” (*v.6*). This repetition comes to teach us that only the purity of a man’s thoughts consumes all the thorns and thistles within him, and creates in him an absolute fervor for the service of the Eternal, to the point that even if he goes to impure places, the fire of the altar will nevertheless continue to burn in him without going out. A man can merit all this due to the enthusiasm that he succeeds in creating within himself.

### ***Fervor and Rebukes Open The Way to Teshuvah***

It is written, “*Tzav* [Command] Aaron and his sons, saying: ‘This is the law of the burnt-offering: It is a burnt-offering [that stays] on the flame, on the altar’” (*Leviticus 6:2*).

According to *Torat Kohanim*, the word *tzav* is meant to encourage fervor, both now and in every generation (*Torat Kohanim 6:1*). According to Rabbi Shimon, Scripture viewed this encouragement as necessary in cases whereby a loss or a lack occurs. In the case before us, the Kohen responsible for carrying out the burnt-offering is also the person who cleans the ashes, purifies the surroundings, and does all the work necessary for the offerings. He is therefore liable to develop great pride, especially in the case of Aaron, who also changed his priestly garments on Yom Kippur in order to enter the Holy of Holies. As a result, the Torah warns him not to let himself get enticed by any wrongful thoughts.

He can only avoid this trap and continue to elevate himself by demonstrating extreme fervor in serving G-d. This is why the Torah insists on stating, “the fire of the altar should be kept aflame on it” (*Leviticus 6:2*). To continue progressing, he should continuously invest all his fervor and enthusiasm (“the fire of the altar”) into serving G-d.

We find this characteristic with Joseph, who in the incident with Potiphar’s wife was preserved from sin by the merit of the enthusiasm that dwelled within him. This is confirmed by the passage, “He left his garment in her hand, and he fled” (*Genesis 39:12*). If he had not acted quickly, he would have been unable to conquer the power of his desire and may have sinned.

On the same subject, Jacob also hastened to send his son Judah to Egypt, as it is written: “He sent Judah before him ... to show the way before him to Goshen” (*Genesis 46:28*). Why did he do this? It was in order to set up a Beit Midrash from which Torah would be taught (*Bereshith Rabba 95:3*). This rapid action was due to the fact that Jacob and his entire family were accustomed to bathing in the holiness of Eretz Israel, and so the descent into Egypt risked creating a profound sense of lack in them, one that would result in a weakening of their service of G-d, for Egypt was the source *par*

*excellence* of impurity (Zohar I:81b). True, Hashem had promised our father Jacob, “I shall descend with you to Egypt, and I shall also surely bring you up” (*Genesis 46:4*), but Jacob wanted to take steps on his own without relying exclusively on this promise. Therefore he immediately sent Judah to prepare a place for Torah so that in Egypt, too, his descendants could breathe the essence of the holy Torah and feel a sense of holiness comparable to that of Eretz Israel.

This subject is also dealt with in the Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim 459:2*) concerning the cooking of matzah eaten at the Seder meal. Lest the matzah ferment, everything should be done with great haste, a teaching that we learn from the passage: “You shall safeguard the matzot” (*Exodus 12:17*). Now the words *mitzvot* and *matzot* are written in the same way, to the extent that matzah alludes to a mitzvah, as emerges from the Sages’ teaching on the verse in question: A mitzvah that comes within your reach, do not give it time to “ferment”; do not let it become ruined (see *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 1:1*). A man will in this way avoid developing pride when he accomplishes a mitzvah. However by itself, fervor is not enough to elevate a person and return him to G-d. From our original verse (“This is the law of the burnt-offering: It is a burnt-offering”), we also learn the importance of listening to rebukes and nullifying ourselves before Hashem when we want to come closer to Him.

The Gemara recounts the story of Elazar ben Durdaya, who had relations with every prostitute he could find. He finally traveled to one prostitute who lived beyond the seas, and afterwards she said to him, “In the same way that the breath never returns from where it came, Elazar ben Durdaya’s repentance will never be accepted.” Hearing this, he went to ask the mountains and hills to intercede on his behalf, but they told him, “Before interceding for you, we will first ask that mercy be granted to us, as it is written: ‘For the mountains may be moved and the hills may falter’ [*Isaiah 54:10*].” The heavens and the earth told him, “We will first ask that mercy be granted to us, as it is written: ‘The heavens will dissipate like smoke and the earth will wear out like a garment’ [*ibid. 51:6*].” The sun and the moon told him, “We will first ask that mercy be granted to us, as it is written: ‘The moon will be humiliated and the sun will be shamed’ [*ibid. 24:23*].” The stars and the planets told him, “We will first ask that mercy be granted to us, as it is written: ‘All the host of the heavens will dissolve’ [*Isaiah 34:4*].” He then thought to himself, “The matter depends on me alone.” He placed his head between his knees and began to weep so violently that his soul departed. A Heavenly voice was then heard exclaiming, “Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya is destined for life in the World to Come.”

This story is quite difficult to understand. We know very well that what comes from the heart of the speaker penetrates straight into the heart of the listener (see *Berachot 6b; Rav Moshe Ibn Ezra’s Shirat Israel, p.156*), and it is conceivable that repentance may follow because such words stem from a fire within. On the other hand, it is difficult to see how this prostitute, whose words certainly did not come “from the heart” could have succeeded in having such a profound effect on Elazar ben Durdaya.

It seems that there is another path that a man may pursue to transcend his nature and perform Teshuvah. It consists of self-effacement and humility in combination with heeding words of rebuke, even if they stem from the wicked. When we adopt this attitude, these words may have a beneficial effect on us. Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya teaches us a new path to Teshuvah by having paid heed to the rebuke of a woman of ill-repute, and it was he himself who used the immense energy within him (an energy that, up to that point, had filled him with impure desires) to transform her words into a blessing. He then completely nullified himself in the depths of his repentance. Every man can choose between good and evil, as it is written: “You shall choose life” (*Deuteronomy 30:19*), and he also has the power to change evil into good. If he pays heed to rebuke, even to that of an ungodly person, he has the power to transform himself, to make – through his very own effort – the words he has heard penetrate his heart and thus give new direction to his life. He should do this rather than waiting for these words to penetrate his heart on their own.

This is what happened to Nebuzaradan (*Gittin 57b*), the Babylonian general who conquered Jerusalem at the time of the destruction of the first Temple. He saw blood seething on the floor of the Temple, and the Children of Israel did not want to tell him whose blood it was. In the end they admitted that it was the blood of the prophet Zechariah, whom they killed for having rebuked them. Nebuzaradan then had all the members of the Great and Minor Sanhedrin killed, along with hordes of men, women, and children, more than 94,000 in all. However the blood did not stop seething, and Nebuzaradan said: “Zechariah, Zechariah, I have killed thousands of your people. Do you want me to kill them all?” Only then did the blood stop seething, and at that instant Nebuzaradan repented. He told himself that if the death of a single man was so difficult to atone for, how crushing would his own sin be after having killed so many people! Now his repentance and eventual conversion were due to the wickedness with which he killed such a great number of people. Similarly, Elazar ben Durdaya arrived at repentance through the rebuke of a woman of ill-repute from beyond the seas.

Everything that has been stated up to now allows us to understand the repetition of the verse: “This is the law of the burnt-offering: It is a burnt-offering.” There are two paths that enable a person to be awakened to Teshuvah (hence two instances of the word “burnt-offering”). In the first, a man hears the rebuke of a righteous person, which helps him to elevate himself (*oleh*, from the same root as the word *olah* [burnt-offering]). The second path is more difficult. It consists of paying heed to words of rebuke emanating from the wicked, words that should normally not penetrate the heart of the listener, but which the listener himself can penetrate into his heart. He does so by using his own free will to completely nullify himself before G-d. This is what constitutes “This is the law of the *olah* [burnt-offering]: It is a *olah* [a burnt-offering].” The word *olah* occurs twice: Ascending toward G-d by means of a Tzaddik’s rebuke, and ascending toward G-d by means of a rasha’s rebuke. This is why the word *mokdah* (“flame”) is written with a small *mem*, for it alludes to one’s complete submission to G-d.

The Midrash (*Mechilta Yitro*) recounts that Jethro practiced every possible form of idolatry, yet despite this he managed to awaken himself and say, “Now I know that the L-RD is greater than all the gods” (*Exodus 18:11*). He merited being called Reuel (“friend of G-d”), as well as receiving the name Yitro (“abundance”), a name that brings modesty and self-effacement to mind (*Shemot Rabba 27:8*). It was precisely through idolatry that he arrived at that point, which shows us that each and everyone can submit himself and grow spiritually by yielding to G-d and paying heed to rebuke, thus coming closer to Him in the process.

### *Devotion, Fervor, and Humility in The Torah and Mitzvot*

On the verse, “Command Aaron.... This is the law of the burnt-offering” (*Leviticus 6:2*), Rashi explains in the name of our Sages (*Torat Kohanim* *ibid.*) that the word *tzav* (“command”) always implies urging, at present and for future generations. Rashi also cites Rabbi Shimon as saying, “Scripture found it especially necessary to urge in cases where fulfillment of a *mitzvah* involves monetary loss” (*see also Kiddushin 29a*).

In his book *Divrei Yoel*, the Rebbe of Satmar *Zatzal* raised objections to the views of the first Tanna (whom Rashi cited for the meaning of the word *tzav*) and Rabbi Shimon. The Rebbe asked why Scripture has to use encouragement, both now and for all the generations, in connection with the *mitzvah* of the burnt-offering, since a monetary loss is involved in many *mitzvot*, as for example with the *etrog* (*see Sukkah 41b, Bava Kama 9b, Tosaphot on the passage beginning with aillima*). Since the word *tzav*, which indicates urging, is not used in connection with these other *mitzvot*, why was urging required precisely for the *mitzvah* of the burnt-offering? (*See also Ohr HaChaim* on this verse.)

In my humble opinion, there is another difficulty here. The monetary loss in question was actually incurred by the Children of Israel, since it was they who gave money for purchasing the offerings. Since this loss did not apply to the priests, why was Aaron being encouraged by means of the word *tzav*? The verse should instead have stated, “Command [*tzav*] the Children of Israel.”

To best answer these questions, we begin by noting the importance of self-annulment, the potential of which is made real by a person demonstrating that he has mastered his evil inclination. Now each *mitzvah* comprises a certain element of self-annulment, since the evil inclination tries to disturb a person so as to prevent him from fulfilling the *mitzvot* (*see Berachot 60b*), or at least to make him seek honor by drawing a personal benefit from performing them (rather than performing them for the sake of Heaven). We already find an allusion to this idea in the verse, “Yet for Your sake we are killed all day long” (*Psalms 44:23*), which means that personal devotion in fulfilling *mitzvot* recalls the fact that we kill ourselves each day for Hashem.

We are familiar with the teaching of the Sages which states, “The evil inclination of a man grows in strength from day to day and seeks to kill him, as it is said: ‘The wicked one watches for the righteous and seeks to kill him’ [*Psalms 37:32*]. Were it not

for the fact that the Holy One, blessed be He, was his help, he would not be able to withstand it, as it is said: ‘Yet the L-RD will not forsake him to his hand’ [v.33]” (*Sukkah 52b, Kiddushin 30b*). Thus in order to prevent a person from performing *mitzvot*, the evil inclination tries with every ounce of its strength to make him transgress. However one must courageously gather his own strength, and in this way he will merit Heavenly assistance. How can we attain such courage? It is through the attribute of fervor, as the *Tur* teaches: “Yehudah ben Tema said, ‘Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion to carry out the will of your Father in Heaven’ [*Perkei Avoth 5:20, Avoth D’Rabbi Nathan 41:10*]. A man must control himself like a lion and rise early to serve his Creator, and even if his evil inclination incites him in winter by saying, ‘How can you get up on such a cold morning?’ he must conquer it and get up to awaken the dawn without delay, as King David said: ‘Awake, my soul, awake. Awake, O lyre and harp, I shall awaken the dawn’ [*Psalms 57:9*] – I shall awaken the dawn; the dawn shall not awaken me [*Yerushalmi Berachot 1:1, Eichah Rabba 2:19§22*]” (*Tur on Orach Chaim, par. 1*).

From all this we see that in order to perform *mitzvot*, we need the attribute of fervor. If laziness is present, then enthusiasm is lacking, and this will be lacking when *mitzvot* are performed. A person should realize that he is obligated to perform *mitzvot* in any case. Therefore if he at least does so with energy and enthusiasm, with nothing lacking, he will be offering himself for the service of G-d.

Yet to arrive at this level of enthusiasm, a person must put an effort into Torah study. Without that, it will be impossible to perform *mitzvot* with fervor, as it is written: “If you will follow My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them” (*Leviticus 26:3*). This means that we must put an effort into studying Torah (*Torat Kohanim* *ibid.*), and that it is only when we have devoted ourselves to its study that we can correctly observe and fulfill *mitzvot*. Torah study also leads to fervor, and where there is fervor there is the opportunity of conquering the evil inclination and observing *mitzvot* to perfection. This is because the essential aspect of the offerings is enthusiasm – which applies to all the *mitzvot* – the main thing being to fulfill them with enthusiasm.

## *Parsha Shemini*

### *The Sin of Nadav and Avihu and their Infinite Greatness*

The Sages have spoken in several places concerning the nature of Nadav and Avihu's sin, which the Torah describes by stating, "The sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan ... and they brought before the L-RD an alien fire that He had not commanded them" (*Leviticus 10:1*). Among other things, the Sages have said that they walked behind Moses and Aaron and said, "When will these old men die so that you and I will lead the generation?" (*Sanhedrin 52a*). Furthermore, they were not married (*Zohar III:39a*) and they entered the Sanctuary in a state of drunkenness, which was the cause of their punishment.

All this is very surprising. How could Nadav and Avihu manage to feel greater than Moses and Aaron, to the point that they came to teach a Halachah before their teachers (*Eruvin 63a*)? Did they not understand that they deserved to be punished for this, just as if they had not performed the Eternal's mitzvot?

This can be entirely explained. Nadav and Avihu thought that Moses had attained his greatness because he had climbed to the heavens with G-d's permission, and it was there that he reached the fullness of his holiness. His brother Aaron had followed the same process in going up with Moses, as it is written, "Then you shall ascend, and Aaron with you" (*Exodus 19:24*). But they, Nadav and Avihu, had reached the level that they were at through their own efforts, without climbing to heaven and without any external help. Consequently, they felt greater than Moses and Aaron, and this is what made them believe that they were worthy of leading the Children of Israel. However, they were punished for what they did, for they should have known that Heaven doesn't bestow greatness to someone without reason, and that they were absolutely forbidden to question how Moses and Aaron governed the people. This blindness brought death upon them.

In reality, Moses and Aaron were greater than Nadav and Avihu. Actually, Moses never favorably compared himself with anyone, for he regarded everyone well. For example, when his son Gershom ran towards him to say, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp" (*Numbers 11:27*) and his servant Joshua added, "My lord Moses, incarcerate them!" (*v.28*), Moses responded, "Are you being zealous for my sake? Would that the entire people of the L-RD could be prophets, if the L-RD would but place His spirit upon them!" (*v.29*). Neither did his brother Aaron believe himself to be at an exceptional level. He considered himself as the least among the Children of Israel, to the point of stating, "What are we...?" (*Exodus 17:7*). They didn't attribute any importance to themselves, which is why G-d didn't accept Nadav and Avihu's claim. He preferred to name as a leader someone that had no pretensions and was humble and modest with the people. From this we should learn the proper way to conduct ourselves, as

well as the appropriate manner in which to lead the Children of Israel: We should not favorably compare ourselves to anybody, and we should not to look down on anyone. On the contrary, a leader should constantly be under the impression that he is dragging along impure insects with him, as our Sages have said, “A person is not named as a leader until he moves a box filled with impure insects” (*Yoma 22b*). In other words, he has something for which to be criticized, and this will prevent him from becoming boastful. As for the people, they have nothing for which to be blamed, permitting their leader to judge them with complete fairness.

Now Nadav and Avihu felt superior to Moses and Aaron, whereas the opposite was not true. Quite to the contrary, Moses and Aaron felt great respect for them, as for example when they applied G-d’s words to Nadav and Avihu: “I will be sanctified through those who are nearest Me” (*Leviticus 10:3*). And it is precisely by this that Moses is considered as being great.

For the moment, let us consider what G-d commanded: “The entire House of Israel shall bewail the conflagration that the L-RD ignited” (*v.6*). Can one even imagine that the Children of Israel would not bewail them, to the point that they had to be ordered to do so? In addition, it seems from this verse that G-d told the Children of Israel to hold a funeral service for Nadav and Avihu, which indicates that they otherwise would not have done so. Is this conceivable?

All this, in fact, is completely understandable. Nadav and Avihu wanted to be greater than Moses and Aaron, wishing that they die. They had not married because they thought that they were called to lead the Children of Israel according to the strict measure of justice, not mercy, and finally they entered into the Sanctuary in a state of drunkenness. They behaved strangely. In addition, they favorably compared themselves to Moses and Aaron. None of this pleased the Children of Israel very much, for the people saw with their own eyes that they despised Moses and Aaron, the greatest of their generation. One may therefore logically suppose that they wanted neither to bewail them nor to hold an appropriate funeral service.

This is why G-d, Who, as we know, is a fair judge that probes both heart and mind (*see Jeremiah 11:20*), ordered the Children of Israel to bewail Nadav and Avihu. G-d knew that Nadav and Avihu had acted only for the love of Heaven, for “Man sees what his eyes behold, but the L-RD sees into the heart” (*1 Samuel 16:7*). He therefore said, “The entire House of Israel shall bewail the conflagration that the L-RD ignited” so that the Children of Israel could at least learn from them how to devote oneself to others when serving G-d. This should not, however, be at the expense of one’s obedience to the great of the generation, for their directives should always be followed.

### ***Recognizing Truth is a Great Virtue***

It is written, “Moses inquired insistently about the he-goat of the sin-offering, for behold, it had been burned! And he was wrathful with Elazar and Ithamar. ... Moses heard and he approved” (*Leviticus 10:16,20*).

Concerning “he approved,” the Sages have said that instead of claiming that he did not hear what the law was, Moses was not ashamed to say that he had indeed heard, but had forgotten it (*Zebachim 101b*). This statement is extremely surprising. On one hand, it never would have entered our minds to suspect Moses our teacher of lying and imagining that he could have denied hearing that which he had in fact heard. On the other hand, how is it that Moses, whom G-d delegated to teach the entire Torah to the Children of Israel, could have forgotten a Halachah? Yet if we say that G-d had decided to make him forget it, how should we understand this decision, insofar as it risked being a stumbling block for the Children of Israel? The risk lay in the possibility of them telling themselves that if Moses had forgot this particular point, he could have also forgotten others, to the extent that they would no longer have any confidence in him, which would have created controversies.

To explain this, let us recall that the Torah is acquired through 48 qualities (*Perkei Avoth 6:5[6]*), the most difficult of which to attain is humility. This is particularly difficult for the great Rabbanim, for they generally tend to try and preserve their personal honor by hurrying to answer questions asked of them. Even those who are above the fear of losing their credibility in public worry about the honor of the Torah, for if they are recognized as having erred and people no longer listen to them (lest they commit another mistake), this would constitute a desecration of the Divine Name.

This is why the Torah testifies here that the greatest compliment to give someone is to say that he does not fear recognizing the truth. On the contrary, when someone says, “I’ve heard and I’ve forgotten,” it is this that constitutes true honor of Torah. Moses our teacher owed his intellectual honesty to his perfection in humility (see *Numbers 12:3*). His forgetfulness was destined to teach his sons and future teachers that in no case should we distance ourselves from the truth, and that greatness consists in recognizing this. That is why G-d did not help Moses in remembering.

There is a teaching which states that on three occasions Moses became angry and erred (*Sifri Matot 157*). It seems, therefore, that his error was only provoked by anger, which demonstrates to all generations that when a person loses his temper, even the greatest are deprived of G-d’s help. Before growing impatient, we must therefore carefully weigh whether such a reaction is truly necessary, or whether it is really the advice of the evil inclination, which tries to distance us from the knowledge of Torah. It is possible that Moses’ punishment was presented in the form of forgetting the Halachah (the law) precisely because anger represents a small defect in humility, one of the 48 qualities by which the Torah is acquired.

Yet it is precisely this that shows us his greatness, for he recognized that he had forgotten the Halachah because of his fit of anger, to the extent that G-d didn’t help him to remember. His humility pushed him to recognize his error in public as soon as he noticed it, and he even had it proclaimed in the camp that he had erred (*Vayikra Rabba 13: 1*), thus putting truth before everything.

From this we should draw the lesson that the leader of the generation shouldn't fear that, if he admits having made a mistake, people will think that this can happen to him again and so they will not trust his decisions. If everyone concludes that he has the necessary stature to value truth above his own honor, then they will have even more confidence in his Torah, for the Torah is called Truth (*Tikkunei Zohar 50*), as it is written, "Purchase the truth, do not sell it" (*Proverbs 23:23*). Moreover, whoever is sincere recognizes the truth immediately.

We know that statements which are true and well-founded enter the heart of the one who hears them, as it is written in the Gemara, "Whoever fears Heaven, his words are heard" (*Berachot 6b*). This is why, when the Torah was given, it is stated, "The entire people saw the thunder [Hebrew: voices]" (*Exodus 20:16*). They saw what we hear, which is impossible under other circumstances (*Mechilta d'Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai ibid.*), for the words of the Living G-d, having emanated directly from the mouth of the G-d of Truth, entered into the hearts of those who heard them, exactly as if they had seen them with their very eyes. This signifies a level of comprehension more profound than the simple act of hearing, and this is the same imagery as that of the letters of the Torah escaping into the air (*Avodah Zarah 18a*). The same thing applies to the righteous person who demonstrates his sincerity.

Nevertheless, It remains for us to understand how Moses, who had learned the entire Torah from the mouth of G-d on Mount Sinai (*Eruvin 54b*), managed to get angry, which then led him to forget the Halachah. In fact, Aaron had acted correctly and Moses still remembered the Halachah; it was only afterwards that he became angry, although we still don't understand why. In addition, when Elazar came to announce to the members of the army, "This is the decree of the Torah which the L-RD commanded" (*Numbers 31:21*), Moses again became angry (see *Sifri ibid. 48*). Why? He had, after all, known from his previous experience that this type of behavior puts him at risk of sinning, and furthermore this was indeed what happened!

Yet as we know, everything is alluded to in the Torah (*Taanith 9a*), hence Moses' forgetfulness is also included so as to teach us that if even the great of the generation become angry, they will end up committing an error in Halachah, for the Torah is not in Heaven (*Bava Metzia 59b*), and men are dealt with exactly as they themselves behave (*Megillah 12b*). The mitzvah that was related to Aaron ("You shall not drink wine or strong drink" – *Leviticus 10:9*) had already been given to Moses before on Mount Sinai, but in his great humility (which we also find alluded to by the small letter *aleph* of the word *vayikra*, as if he were saying, "Who am I that G-d should call me?") he did not remind him of it. And yet this same humility did not prevent him from suffering because his brother Aaron entered into the Holy of Holies. Regretting this fit of anger, he wanted that this parsha be told to Aaron directly by the Eternal, since it was he who was to be careful when entering into the Holy of Holies.

The same applies for Moses' anger towards Elazar and the people in the army. His anger was definitely not based on the fact that it was Elazar who spoke to the army and

not him, for it was certainly a great joy for Moses that Elazar, the son of Aaron, taught them the Halachah. However Moses became angry at that moment because he thought that the Halachah was different. His greatness consisted of recognizing that his anger had led him in error.

In reality, we have no idea what the meaning of Moses' anger was, for it was certainly motivated by the love of Heaven, not by jealousy or hatred. In fact the Torah testifies that he was the most humble man on earth (*Numbers 12:3*), and humility and anger do not go together. In reality, this happened to him so that all the generations could draw the lesson that even the greatest of men, if they become angry, are punished by forgetting Halachah. Nevertheless, if they don't fear acknowledging the truth, this sin becomes rectified, and not only do they find their honor once again, but they also become greater in G-d's eyes and in the eyes of the people. This was the greatness of Moses, and it evokes for us the passage in the Gemara that states, "Happy is the generation in which the great listen to the lesser" (*Rosh Hashanah 25b*). For when the great recognize the truth, they in turn are heard. This is what the honor of Torah consists of.

### *The Greatness of Kiddush Hashem*

Our parsha deals with the greatness of Aaron. After the death of Nadav and Avihu, it is written: "And Aaron was silent" (*Leviticus 10:3*). This means that by his silence he concurred with their sentence and demonstrated to everyone that G-d was justified in taking the lives of his two sons. This occurred on the very day that he was established as High Priest, the day of his heart's content, the day of Hashem's joy, and the day that he received 10 crowns (*Torat Kohanim 9:1*). This was the day that the entire world awaited since creation, the day when G-d would finally establish His dwelling place in this world.

Apparently, Aaron could have questioned G-d as to why He killed his two sons, for they were righteous men and they had only acted for the sake of Heaven and to get closer to G-d. And even if they had decided a Halachah before their teachers (*Eruvin 63a*), it was not really their goal to do so, therefore how did it matter? The Children of Israel could have also questioned G-d about this, but when they saw that Aaron was silent and had accepted His decree, they concluded that there was no reason to protest.

This is why silence was precisely the way in which G-d's Name was sanctified in public. It is written concerning Aaron's sons: "I will be sanctified through those who are nearest Me" (*Leviticus 10:3*), and this occurred when Aaron confirmed G-d's judgment, aware that everything the Merciful One does is for the good (*Berachot 60b*), and that G-d admonishes those He loves (*Proverbs 3:12*). Moses said to Aaron, "I thought that G-d would sanctify Himself through myself or you. Now I know that they [Nadav and Avihu] were greater and holier than you or I" (*Tanhuma Shemini 1*). Aaron's silence thus proved that his soul clung to G-d. When Aaron kept silent, he sanctified G-d's Name in the eyes of

all the Children of Israel, for everyone saw that he accepted His decision. If Aaron had protested, he would have brought about a desecration of G-d's Name, whereas on the contrary he actually sanctified it in public.

Aaron's two sons thus merited resembling Isaac: In the same way that G-d recalls the ashes of Isaac, which are before His eyes on Yom Kippur (*Vayikra Rabba 36:5*), He recalls the death of Aaron's two sons, through whom His Name was sanctified. [It is, moreover, thanks to them that the Children of Israel merited having Yom Kippur, as the Rebbe of Ger once said on Shabbat *Acharei Mot – Kedoshim* in 5753]. Actually, whoever sanctifies G-d's Name in public and confirms His decrees without protesting is worthy of having his merit protect his entire generation, as well as all the generations, both in this world and in the World to Come.

Consequently, the death of the righteous atones for the Children of Israel (*Moed Katan 28a*). This is because G-d sends them trials in life, ones they accept with love by acknowledging that they are just, and the resulting merit is such that G-d forgives the entire world because of them. In addition, they are even greater in death than during their lifetime (*Chullin 7b*), and they can atone for all Israel.

In writing these words, I am reminded of a visit that I once made to a young, G-d-fearing man who was ill. When I saw him, I spoke to my friend who was accompanying me and mentioned the terrible ordeal that the sick man's family had to go through. I told him that it was precisely now that his family must control themselves and accept this pain by realizing that it is brought about by G-d's love for them (*Berachot 5a*). This is a difficult thing to do, for the Satan accuses man in moments of danger (*Tanhuma Vayigash 1*), thus increasing the anguish in the heart of the sick man and his family. At that point they may ask themselves why he has to suffer so much, given that he observes Torah and mitzvot, and given that he is filled with faith and behaves with goodness toward others. Is this the reward of his Torah (*Berachot 61b*)?

They should realize that these trials are precisely trials of love – they do not come as a result of neglecting Torah study or prayer – and that G-d is fully aware of everything that is happening. As a result, it is precisely during these difficult times that the family, and especially the sick person, should overcome their doubts and accept this suffering with love. The sick person will then be happy to sanctify G-d's Name in public and defend what has happened to him, certain that “the L-RD admonishes the one He loves” (*Proverbs 3:12*) and that “the L-RD desired to oppress him and He afflicted him” (*Isaiah 53:10*). But unfortunately, woe to the one who profanes G-d's Name by protesting against His decrees and asking what has brought him such suffering. By this, he demonstrates that such suffering is unjust in his opinion. He should rather control himself and accept his pain with love.

We therefore see to what extent a man can help the whole world by a single instant of sanctifying G-d's Name in public, especially if he devotes his life to G-d, for then his reward will be utterly indescribable. Moreover, G-d is grateful to him and calls him “My son, the one who works for Me,” as it is said concerning the Children of Israel who

work for their Father in Heaven (*Zohar III:7b*). G-d adorns him with 10 robes (*Devarim Rabba 2:26*), or He delivers him from among the nations (*Berachot 8a*).

It is written, “Ascribe power to G-d; upon Israel is *ga’avato* [His pride]” (*Psalms 68:35*), which means that through the Children of Israel (who sanctify G-d), He is invincible and His grandeur exists not only in Heaven, but also on earth, as the verse testifies: “The L-RD has reigned, He has donned grandeur” (*ibid. 93:1*). Once this is accomplished, we also come to the point at which “His might is in the skies” (*ibid. 68:35*), above just as below. In fact, the one who sanctifies G-d’s Name is like his Master’s chariot, insofar as he carries and protects His honor. But woe to the one who profanes His Name, for he proves that for himself, there exists neither justice nor judge (*Yoma 72a*). If such a person profanes G-d’s Name, be it even in secret, he is punished in public (*Perkei Avoth 4:4*), for he deprives his Master of His power, and because of him it is not abundance, but only misfortune that will descend upon the world. As for the person who accepts a decree by silencing himself like Aaron, he elevates G-d’s Name. The word *vayidom* (“and he [Aaron] was silent”) has the same numerical value as the words *Y-H* (one of G-d’s Names) and *adam* (“man”) combined, and the name *Y-H* has the same numerical value as the word *ga’avah* (“pride”). This reminds us to “Ascribe power to G-d; upon Israel is *ga’avato* [His pride],” for all G-d’s pride only becomes evident when a man abstains from protesting against His actions and accepts His decrees with love.

We find an allusion to this concept when the Children of Israel complained against G-d by saying: “Is the L-RD among us or not?” (*Exodus 17:7*). They harmed His Name in so doing, for this demonstrated that they did not wholeheartedly accept what was happening to them. Immediately afterwards, “Amalek came and battled Israel” (*v.8*). Amalek, who had created an imperfection in the name *Y-H*, came to attack Israel with all its pride. This is why G-d said, “For the hand is on the throne of *Y-H*: The L-RD maintains a war against Amalek” (*v.16*), for the damage brought about by pride must be repaired by decreasing the numerical value of *Y-H* (15) by one and transforming it into *yad* (“hand” – Numerical value: 14). Actually, the forces of evil have an influence over the *Sephira* of *Hod* (Attribute of Glory), whose numerical value is 15, signifying *Y-H* (*Zohar III:282a*). This is the meaning of, “For the hand...”. As for the word *kess* (“throne”), there it also consists of giving it back an *aleph* to make *kissei* (the complete form of the word “throne”). Thus *Y-H* will be complete and once again have the value of 15, the throne will be complete, and the *Sephira* of *Hod* will be at full strength when the Kingdom of G-d reveals itself to the entire world. When will all this happen? When Amalek is defeated, for Amalek damaged all these concepts.

When Aaron kept silent and accepted what was decreed upon his sons, he annulled his very self before G-d. He also elevated the *Sephira* of *Hod* to its rightful place, for we know that this *Sephira* is represented by Aaron (*Zohar II:276b*). He too was elevated by the *Sephira* of *Hod*, for whoever flees from honor and greatness is pursued by them (*Eruvin 13b*). This is the meaning of “And Aaron was silent”: He brought everything

back to its source, and he restored G-d's grandeur back to Him, as in: "The L-RD has reigned, He has donned grandeur" (*Psalms 93:1*). Aaron restored G-d's Name and the Hod back to their original state.

Moreover, by Aaron's silence and his self-effacement before G-d, he brought peace to the whole world. This in fact was his primary character trait, for he loved and pursued peace (*Perkei Avoth 1:12*). When he saw that there was reason to accuse Israel of wrongdoing, he knew that it was because of baseless hatred, which is why he pursued peace. He did so in order to spread the Sefhira of Hod and to elevate it to its rightful place, so that it not fall under the power of *kelipah* (impurity). His silence is also the trait that allows a person to listen to insult without protesting, and this attitude brings about the restoration of the Sefhira and the Name of G-d.

Aaron's silence therefore had many positive effects: He sanctified G-d's Name, restored all its measure to Him, reinstated the Sefhira of Hod to its rightful place, brought peace to the world, and achieved the perfection of all Klal Israel. Thus his silence brought merit to his sons Nadav and Avihu, and without it the ensuing damage would have been extensive. Yet because he kept quiet, this virtue helped his sons and G-d's Name was sanctified through them. The accuser was also reduced to silence, and both the Sefhira of Hod (specific to Aaron) and G-d's Name were rectified. As for Nadav and Avihu, they spiritually elevated themselves and attained the place that was their due for having sanctified G-d's Name in public.

### ***Fervor and Joy are at the Center of Holiness and Serving G-d***

Concerning the verse, "It came to pass on the eighth day that Moses called Aaron" (*Leviticus 9:1*), the Zohar cites Rabbi Yitzchak's comments on a verse in the book of Job: "When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of G-d *ya'ri'u* [emitted a broken sound]" (*Job 38:7*). He explains that when all the righteous and the assembly of Israel sing together like the mornings stars and emit sounds of joy, something awakens (*hit'orirut*) and breaks (*teruah*: "broken sound"). This is because all harsh decrees, which are called "the sons of G-d," are broken with the arrival of morning, which awakens the world.

What connection does this verse have with Parsha Shemini?

To explain, we must recall that the plan to create the Children of Israel came prior to the creation of the world (*Bereshith Rabba 1:4*), and that it was to them that G-d gave the Torah, His daily delight (*see Proverbs 8:30*). Our Sages have said that it was also His working tool, the model that He looked at when He created the world (*Bereshith Rabba 1:1*). In addition, He engraved His Name in each letter of the Torah. It is therefore present in every created thing, and so if a person partakes of food without having recited a blessing on it, it is as if he had warped a sacred object, and he deserves to be called a thief (*Berachot 35b*). In fact G-d's Name is found in everything, and if a person benefits from that which he has not said a blessing on, it is as if he has stolen G-d's Name, for it

is engraved on every object. Thus if G-d gives “the earth to the children of men” (*Psalms 115:16*), it is only after they have recited the proper blessing (*Berachot 35b*).

Consequently, *all Israel should come closer to G-d* by realizing that His Name is present throughout Creation. How can we attain such a realization? It is by demonstrating our fervor, according to the directives of the Tur and the Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim 1*); it is by being as strong as a lion upon arising in the morning to serve our Creator. This is essential. True, the Torah completely purifies a person (*see Berachot 22a*), yet for his part he must demonstrate some enthusiasm, a characteristic that elevates him above nature, to the level of the eighth (*shemini*). Thus he will progress “from strength to strength” (*Psalms 84:8*), for in the morning, upon leaping from his bed, his enthusiasm will immediately bring him to the highest level, a leap that can reconnect him to the Shechinah for the entire day. In his writings, the Arizal states that in the morning a holy soul descends from the supernal world after having spent the entire night under the wings of the Shechinah in a state of spiritual elevation. The intelligences follow the same process, evoked by the verse, “They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness” (*Lamentations 3:23*). [Note: Concerning the intelligences, refer to what we have written in Parsha Bereshith: “The Renewal of the Work of Creation”].

However the morning (Hebrew: *boker*) can also be transformed into *kover* (“gravedigger”), an allusion to the slothful who deserve to be called “dead,” similar to the way that the wicked are called “dead” even during their lifetime (*Berachot 18b*). They cling to the *kelipah* (husk) of impurity named “death,” for everything depends on a person’s enthusiasm and the determination he shows in the morning. Either he elevates himself and destroys the *kelipah* of impurity by immediately leaping from his bed to thank G-d, in a state of mind that reflects the level of the eighth (*shemini*), or he fails and clings to the *kelipah*.

This is what Rabbi Yitzchak alluded to by evoking the verse, “When the morning stars sang together” (*Job 38:7*). It refers to those who occupy themselves with Torah during the whole night by connecting day and night in Torah study (*Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chaim 1, par. 2*). They vigorously arise in the morning to serve G-d, thus donning the aspect of the eighth (*shemini*), which is above nature, to the point that a thread of *chesed* (lovingkindness) extends over them during the day (*Hagigah 12b*). Furthermore, they annul severe decrees and weaken the power of the *kelipah*. Therein lies the connection between Parsha Shemini and the verse in the book of Job.

We can offer yet another explanation: “When the morning stars sang together” alludes to the seven planets (*Zohar I:24a, 188b*) that sing to Hashem in the morning when bowing before Him after having concluded their evening service. Immediately afterwards, “All the sons of G-d *shouted for joy*” (another possible translation of *ya’riu*), a reference to the righteous who leap from their beds in the morning and take the place of these seven planets to thank and praise G-d. The world exists by their merit, for they have arrived at the level of the eighth (*shemini*), above nature. In fact the world only exists by the merit of the Torah and serving G-d, as it is written: “If not

for My covenant, I would not have appointed days and nights, the decrees of heaven and earth” (*Jeremiah 33:25*). The Sages interpret this to mean: Without the Torah, heaven and earth could not endure (*Nedarim 32b*). Man’s actions are more important than the songs of the celestial bodies. It is written, “All the sons of G-d shouted for joy” – these are the Children of Israel, the sons of Hashem. [Let us recall that it is stated, “You are the children of the L-RD your G-d” (*Deuteronomy 14:1*)]. Through their prayers, they bring down an abundance of favor and kindness into the entire world, and they are at the level of the eighth, insofar as they maintain the existence of the entire world.

If our view is correct, this will allow us to understand the Midrash on the verse, “And Aaron was silent” (*Leviticus 10:3*): “What could he have said? There was reason to complain about circumcision” (*Midrash Pliah 70*). This requires an explanation. What connection is there between the mitzvah of circumcision and the death of Aaron’s two sons? After what we have just said, the answer becomes clear: Through circumcision, a baby achieves the holiness of the eighth (*shemini*), above the level of nature. This is what happened to Aaron’s two sons, who on the eighth day achieved a great degree of holiness, surpassing the norm. True, they sought to honor G-d by presenting an offering that they had not been commanded to make (*Leviticus 10:1*). However they did this only because they deeply yearned to come closer to G-d. It was concerning this that Aaron should have protested, arguing that his sons had achieved the level of holiness reached by a baby on its eighth day, when it is circumcised. Nevertheless, “Aaron was silent,” not protesting against G-d or His decrees.

In the final analysis, we see that the main thing in serving G-d is the enthusiasm that we put into accomplishing mitzvot and studying Torah. This idea allows us to better understand the verse, “This is the thing that the L-RD commanded you should do; and the glory of the L-RD shall appear to you” (*Leviticus 9:6*). Many commentators, in fact, have asked what exactly it was that Hashem commanded, something that the verse does not specify. Can we assume that Moses told the Children of Israel, “Why are you standing here and doing nothing? Since the giving of the Torah, when you said, ‘All that the L-RD has said, we will do and obey’ [*Exodus 24:7*], you have accomplished nothing of all you said or heard!” This was a kind of rebuke that he issued to them before the Shechinah rested on them on the eighth day (*Torat Kohanim, Seder Olam 7*). It was said in order to break their hearts and encourage them to quickly repent.

In the expression, “This is the thing that the L-RD commanded you should do” (*Leviticus 9:6*), what is stressed is that they should *do*, for “not study, but practice is the essential thing” (*Perkei Avoth 1:17*). Moreover, the word *tzivah* (“commanded”) also evokes diligence, since the Sages have said that the word *tzav* (“command”) is used to incite fervor (*Torat Kohanim, Tzav 6:2*). Consequently, a person must fight against the evil inclination in two areas: Action and enthusiasm. He should not be satisfied with remaining in his present spiritual state, and he must avoid being like those who listen to rebuke, yet fail to act on what they hear because they show no enthusiasm immediately after being reprimanded. As a result, the evil inclination already has time to seep into their hearts and disrupt them.

This is the meaning of Moses' statement, "This is the thing that the L-RD commanded you should do." It is not enough to be here without taking action, for "it is time to act for the L-RD; they have voided Your Torah" (*Psalms 119:126*). This means that we must act for Hashem, otherwise we will have desecrated His Torah because the evil inclination will come to disrupt a person in serving G-d. As a result, he should always hasten to act when serving Him.

If we manage to achieve this enthusiasm, we will have arrived at the level of the eighth, the level above nature. This will tremendously weaken the forces of darkness and evil. In the opposite case, this weakening will occur to a person himself. These ideas allow us to understand what is written at the beginning of the parsha: "*Vayehi* [And it came to pass] on the eighth day, that Moses called Aaron...and he said to Aaron: 'Take a young calf...'" (*Leviticus 9:1-2*). This requires an explanation, for we know that the word *vayehi* always indicates the approach of trouble (*Megillah 10b*), as emerges from the verses: "*Vayehi* [And it came to pass] in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land" (*Ruth 1:1*), and "*Vayehi* [And it came to pass] in the days of Ahasuerus" (*Esther 1:1*), which is followed by the story of Haman. Now here, when the Shechinah came to reside among the Children of Israel (*Torah Kohanim, Seder Olam 7*), this was an occasion for great joy. The verse should have therefore used the word *vehaya*, which indicates a joyous event. Instead, why does the verse use a word that evokes sorrow?

There is yet another difficulty: Why did Moses feel the need to summon together all of Aaron's sons, as well as all the elders of Israel, before telling Aaron to take a young calf, as the verse describes?

To explain this in a satisfactory way, we will see that the answer to one question is also the answer to the other. We know that Aaron sinned during the incident of the golden calf, as it is written: "And Aaron said to them, 'Take off the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives....' And he received them from their hand, and fashioned a molten calf with a graving tool" (*Exodus 32:2,4*). Consequently, Moses now told Aaron to take a young calf as an atoning sacrifice, in order to redeem the sin of the golden calf (*Tanhuma, Shemini 10*). Moses told him this in the presence of his sons and the elders of Israel, in order for all of them to witness the rectification of the sin. Even though Aaron had made the calf without the intention of idolatry, Moses commanded him to take a calf for atonement in order to erase any suspicion of sin on his part among the Children of Israel. From this we learn that a person should not be ashamed to rectify the harm he caused in public, just as his sin was committed in public.

We may therefore fully understand why the word *vayehi*, which expresses grief, is used in our verse. It is due to the grief incurred by the sin of the golden calf, a sin that had to be rectified. It is also because Aaron only achieved perfection after experiencing many hardships, as the Zohar states: "Rabbi Yehudah began his discourse by saying, '*Vayehi* [And it came to pass] on the eighth day' [*Leviticus 9:1*], once Aaron had achieved perfection during these seven days" (*Zohar Shemini 38a*). The rectification of all sin, in

fact, implies going through suffering in order to achieve integrity, even if a sin was committed involuntarily.

It is therefore perfectly clear that the expression “the eighth day” shows that the rectification was achieved during the first seven days, corresponding to the seven days of the week. It also shows that a person can become completely accomplished and called “perfect” only on the eighth day, which is above nature, along the lines of the verse: “Give a portion to seven, and also to eight” (*Ecclesiastes 11:2*).

We may also say that the suffering alluded to here [by the word *vayehi*] was that of the evil inclination, for it saw how a person rectified his sins, even his involuntary ones. In fact the evil inclination suffers when it sees a person elevating himself to the level of the eighth, above nature, in holiness and purity. Even more so, it despises a person bettering himself through the means of *tzav*, by showing extreme enthusiasm. Fervor is one of the rungs in the ladder of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair (Shekalim 9b), a rung that enables a person to achieve the level of the eighth through humility and self-effacement. The Shechinah rests upon a person at that point, which tremendously weakens the kelipah and brings great joy to G-d, Who rejoices in the holiness of His flock.

## *Parsha Tazria*

### *The Wisdom of Women Builds Their Homes in Holiness and Purity*

It is written, “When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male” (*Leviticus 12:2*), on which the Gemara comments: “If the woman emits seed first, she will beget a male” (*Berachot 60a*). Our parsha also says, “If a person will have on the skin of his flesh a swelling ... he shall be brought to Aaron the priest” (*Leviticus 13:2*), and also, “This shall be the law of the leper ... he shall be brought to the priest ... and the priest shall command” (*Leviticus 14:2,4*).

Let us try to understand why Parsha Tazria was not written after Parsha Metzora, since the former has only a few verses concerning the birth of a male or female child, whereas it deals in great part with the leper. Moreover, what connection is there between Parshiot Tazria and Metzora, which in general are read together? And why must the Kohen go out to see the leper or the affliction? Since he is the Tzaddik of the generation, it should be enough that he indicates the procedure to follow in order to rectify the sin committed, without actually having to see the person. Above all, why did the Sages say that if a woman emits seed first, she will produce a boy? On one hand, what does this come to teach us, and on the other hand, why is this the case? Furthermore, why does the leper bring his sacrifice only after his purification?

We will attempt to explain all this as best as possible. As we know, women are exempt from positive, time-based mitzvot (*Berachot 20b*). This is in order for them to devote themselves to their homes and the education of their children, for “all glorious is the king’s daughter within” (*Psalms 45:14*). And as we know, women earn great merit in the spiritual development of their husbands (see *Berachot 17a*), for they encourage them in their study of Torah and service of G-d, just as Rabbi Akiva said to his disciples concerning his wife: “Everything that is mine and yours belongs to her” (*Ketubot 63a*). In fact, it was his wife who pushed him to study, and in several places the Sages affirm that blessing is found in the home thanks to the merit of the wife, and that she protects a man from the council of the evil inclination (*Zohar 52a*).

In addition, the main reason for the resurrection of the dead will be due to the merit of women, who push their husbands to study Torah, and who liberate them from household work. Now we know that only the one who studies Torah will merit to live again, as it is stated concerning the resurrection: “For Your dew is as the dew of light” (*Isaiah 26:19*). On this verse, the Gemara says that whoever uses the light of Torah, the light of Torah will make him live (*Ketubot 111b*). Since it is by the merit of these women that their husbands have bathed in the light of Torah, it follows that they will also be resurrected by their merit.

The verse that states, “When a woman conceives” (*Leviticus 12:2*) speaks of a woman who aspires for her children and husband to study Torah, and who behaves like the daughter

of a king, whose entire honor is on the inside. The desire that she demonstrates allows her to merit “to beget a son” – to have a child that will be a זכר (male), meaning an everlasting remembrance (זכרון) for why the world was created. Moreover, the Torah is called זכרון (remembrance), as it is written: “Remember [זכרון] the Torah of Moses My servant” (*Malachi 3:22*). It follows that the Torah is the goal of Creation. This male child will also merit circumcision on the eighth day, the number eight alluding to the future resurrection of the dead, for as we know, the number eight is above nature and time. During the era of the eighth, the evil inclination will no longer exert any influence, and the reign of G-d will be universal in a world that will have reached perfection.

“This is the law of one who gives birth to a male or to a female” (*Leviticus 12:7*). When she gives birth, she will truly exercise a Torah influence, for her merit will earn her sons that will study, arriving at the “eight” and conquering the Kelipah, until arriving at the resurrection of the dead. Yet when the power of desire has less influence on sons who study Torah than on children that assure the continuity of the generations, this does not advance the world in any way. They only risk becoming gossipers, for if they don’t speak words of Torah they will only speak ill of others, like a child who goes and tells everyone what he has heard from his mother or father (*Sukkah 56b*). His life does not advance.

Thus we perfectly understand why Parsha Tazria (the birth of a boy and a girl) is written before Parsha Metzora, for if there exists an imperfection at the beginning of conception, the soul of the child will contain a great defect and he will speak ill of others and become leprous, as the Sages have said, “The word מצורע [leprous] sounds like מוציא רע [he who spreads evil]” (*Erchin 15b*). A man without Torah is arrogant and speaks ill of everyone. He has a “tongue that speaks boastfully” (*Psalms 12:4*), for he believes himself to be better than everyone and assumes the right to ridicule. He also doesn’t demonstrate any confidence in G-d, his pride making him think that he can do everything by himself without His help. This is why he is punished by the plague of שאת, a word whose root means “high” (*Shavuot 6b*) and by צרעת (leprosy). It is also why he must remain isolated outside the camp (*Leviticus 13:46*). There it will be easier for him to humble himself and to fix times for Torah study (which he had neglected). This constitutes another way of understanding צרעת, meaning that now that he is living cramped (צר), he fixes times (עת) for the study of Torah. From a gossiper, he becomes someone who studies regularly. And when he completely repents and follows the advice to “not be sure of yourself until the day you die” (*Perkei Avoth 2:4*) – a phrase whose numerical value is the same as that of צרעת (leprosy) – he arrives at the level evoked by the verse that states, “The wise of heart seizes *mitzvot*” (*Proverbs 10:8*), an expression that also has the same numerical value.

We now perfectly understand why the Kohen has to see the leper. The Kohen, whose inheritance is G-d Himself and who lives from the donations of others, trusts in G-d at all times. This is why it is he who can discern if the leper has humbled himself before G-d. The verse states, “This is the law of the leper on the day of his purification:

He shall be brought to the priest” (*Leviticus 14:2*) because the Kohen must sense if this man – from the wicked person that he was – has become good. He is also told that the leper fixes times for Torah study, demonstrates great humility before G-d, and has completely rid himself of pride. At that moment, the Kohen leaves the camp to verify the accuracy of all these claims, and checks to see if the lesions have healed.

There is yet another lesson to be learned by this. The Kohen monitors the progress of the leper, asks how he is in order to see if he is healed, and inquires about his spiritual well-being. He does all this in order for the leper not to fall into despair, for even if he has sinned, he should feel that G-d is with him and desires his repentances, as it is written, “For I do not desire the death of the one who should die. ... Turn back and live!” (*Ezekiel 18:32*). It is also in this way that we should conduct ourselves with those who return to Judaism. It is not enough to help them take this step; they must also be followed up and encouraged so that they don’t give up hope, until such time as we feel that they are sufficiently strong and dedicated enough to get along by themselves. Even afterwards we must act like the Kohen, who went out of the camp to see them. We must go to them and see where they stand and how they are conducting themselves.

When the leper is purified he must bring some cedar wood and hyssop, as it is written, “The priest shall command, and for the person being purified there shall be taken two live, clean birds, cedar wood, crimson thread, and hyssop” (*Leviticus 14:4*). This is an allusion to humility. He should bring cedar wood because his lesions stem from pride, and he should make amends by lowering himself like hyssop (*Erchin 16a*). Let us now ask ourselves why he brings his sacrifice only after being purified. The opposite procedure, in which a sacrifice helps a person to return to G-d, seems like the more logical approach. The reason why the sacrifice is brought afterwards is because it is not enough to be healed, abased and rid of pride, since this pride can potentially return. This is why one must come to the Temple and bring a sacrifice –one that alludes to humility – *after* being healed.

The affliction of a house also depends on a woman, for a house also needs to be educated. When its walls hear slander, they are punished in proportion to the severity of what they have heard, to the extent that it’s possible that the affliction will never heal. At that point, the Kohen gives the order to demolish the house. The house itself can thus be harmed and bring harm to others. But the opposite is even more true, meaning that it can gain merit and make others meritorious. It is solely man’s conduct that has an influence on the house, for better or for worse, and which in turn influences others. It is not for nothing that we inaugurate a house (*Chinuch*, which also means “education”), as we inaugurated the Temple (*Psalms 30:1*). In the same what that we educate our children regarding mitzvot, as it is written, “Train the youth according to his way” (*Proverbs 22: 6*), we “educate” the house so that only Torah, mitzvot and good deeds are performed inside. And then, when the opportunity to commit a sin presents itself, we don’t do it inside the house, for it reminds us to avoid sin. As the Gemara says, “The beams and the stones of the house bear witness against a man” (*Taanith 11a*). This is why we build a

railing on the top of the roof. It represents that which surrounds the house to prevent a man from falling. In effect it is surrounded by mitzvot, by the railing, by mezuzot, and by Torah. Concerning the mitzvah of the railing (Deuteronomy 22:7), the *Keli Yakar* asserts that it constitutes the foundation of faith and one's attachment to G-d.

We see from all this that leprosy basically depends on what happens in the home. Everything begins and ends there. If a woman aspires to sow Torah and give birth to male offspring for Torah, with the goal of rectifying the world and bringing about the Kingdom of G-d, her reward will be great. At the same time, she is of great value to the entire world and, so to speak, to G-d. In the opposite case, if she only wants a son for the pleasure of having a child, this constitutes a great misfortune, and she not only harms herself but also her descendants and the entire world. May G-d help us to truly merit repairing the world by bringing about the Kingdom of G-d, and may His Name and His throne be complete through the arrival of the redeemer, quickly in our days.

Amen, may it be so.

### ***Unity Rectifies Afflictions and Abolishes Suffering***

On the verse that states, "If a person will have on the skin of his flesh a *s'ait*, or a *sapachat*, or a *baheret*" (*Leviticus 13:2*), the Chochmat Hamatzpun writes as follows: "The Ramban said concerning the lesions in question that they were not at all natural and did not exist in the physical world. When the Children of Israel behave correctly with G-d, His spirit constantly protects them and maintains their bodies, their clothes, and their homes in good order. Yet if it happens that one of them sins, some unsightly thing appears in that person's flesh in order to show that G-d has distanced Himself from him. This only happens, however, in a place where G-d has chosen and where He resides. Consequently, these lesions, which are supernatural phenomenon, only appear if a man has great merit, since even the Children of Israel, the chosen people, are only afflicted by this in the chosen land. It is actually a place where they can calmly devote themselves to knowing G-d, and where the Shechinah can reside. All this comes out of what the Ramban wrote." [Editor's Note: When the Jewish people live in their own land, we know that the Shechinah actually rests upon them, as evidenced by the expressions: "Whoever lives in Eretz Israel is considered to have a G-d" (*Ketubot 110b*), and "G-d reigns in Eretz Israel" (*Zohar I:108b*)].

This appears very surprising. Why does *tzara'at* affliction only strike a person in Eretz Israel, to the exclusion of all other lands? Moreover, the Torah informs us that when G-d punishes, it is in order to lead a man on the right path after he has sinned. Why would G-d only do this in Eretz Israel? Finally, we note that in reality, even in other lands G-d sends calamities and lesions upon sinners. What does this mean?

We will attempt to explain this as best possible. Eretz Israel is a symbol of unity, for at the time of the world's creation, G-d formed the earth beginning from the Foundation Stone (which was later in the Temple – *Yoma 54b*), and it was from there that

the whole world was unified. Man is also a symbol of unity, for the dust with which he was created was collected from all corners of the world (*Sanhedrin 38a*), which is a mark of unity. Hence a man damages this unity when he speaks ill of his fellow, for in so doing he separates people, which is why his house, his body, and his possessions are struck first.

When troubles strike someone living outside of Eretz Israel, he should realize that he deserves them, for they come to him from Jerusalem, where one of the three gates of Gehinnom are found (*Eruvin 19a*). Why is it found there? It is in order to bring on trials that are destined for the entire world. Actually, every Jew has a profound connection with Eretz Israel, even if living elsewhere, as Adam did. Whoever attacks a man's integrity should realize that he harms the unity of Israel and that he will have to suffer the consequences. It is simply that outside of Israel, these afflictions take on a different form.

We have therefore answered our two questions. It is true that everything comes from Eretz Israel, which is essential to the whole world and the source of everything destined for it. It is equally true that there are tragedies and afflictions even outside of Eretz Israel, yet they are different. Why all this? As we know, the Holy Land, and Jerusalem even more, and the Holy of Holies even more still, are the holiest and most important places in the world. Of them it is written, "The eyes of the L-RD your G-d are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year's end" (*Deuteronomy 11:12*). Eretz Israel is the place of G-d's abode, and just as He is unique in the universe, the Children of Israel are unique in the world (see *Zohar II:16b*). They should therefore live in unity, without pride or pretension, in order for G-d to live among them. They should learn this from the fact that the unity of the world begins from Eretz Israel, even if men are not worthy of the land's holiness. Therefore the one who prides himself (*mitnase*) strikes at G-d's unity, the unity of Eretz Israel, and the unity of the Jewish people. Such a person is punished measure for measure by the affliction that is called *s'eit* (from the same root as the word *hitnassut* ["pride"]), as well as by other lesions (*sapachat* and *baheret*), for he has damaged the clarity (*behirut*) of unity and he did not achieve unity (*sapachat*).

We will now explain the different types of lesions and their causes. *Sapachat* is formed by the same letters as *sach taf*, where *sach* designates speech and alludes to gossip. *Taf* has the same numerical value as *Lilith* (one of the names of the forces of evil), meaning that in speaking ill of others, we strengthen *kelipah* (impurity) in the Holy Land so that it can settle there. Gossip brings about lesions and leprosy (*Erchin 16a*); hence we are struck by *sapachat*.

As for *baheret*, the letters of this word recall the expression *harat olam* ("the birth of the world"), for slander truly ruins all of creation, and therefore it is punishable by *baheret*. Finally, we have already explained that *s'eit* signifies pride, which damages the unity of G-d, the unity of Eretz Israel, and the unity of the Jewish people.

Having said that the one who sins though gossip affects the unity of all these things, we may now respond to the following objection that was once presented to me: Why

is a man rendered impure if a small portion of his body is afflicted with lesions, yet he is pure if his entire body is afflicted, as it is written: “[If] the affliction has covered his entire flesh, then he shall declare the affliction to be pure” (*Leviticus 13:13*)?

This is also a part of G-d’s goodness. It suggests that if a person sins a little, the lesions are minor, hence to prevent him from continuing in this path, he is warned by small lesions on his body or house so that he repents with the help of the priest. Nevertheless if he commits many sins, lesions attack his entire body, and then the Torah tells us that he is entirely pure because G-d in His goodness does not wish the death of the wicked, but rather that he repents and lives (*Ezekiel 33:11*). G-d does him the favor of rendering him pure so that he repents and does not give up all hope because of the gravity of his sins. This is comparable to the case of the red heifer: The one who burns it becomes impure, whereas the ashes of the cow purify the impure (*see Numbers 19: 8,19*). Thus was His wisdom decreed, and it is forbidden to contest His way of running the world or to object to the mitzvot that He gave us.

It is possible that this is the connection between Parsha Tazria-Metzora and Parsha Shemini, for in the latter it is stated that the Shechinah only descends upon the Sanctuary and the Children of Israel when they observe the laws of family purity (Tazria) as well as proper speech (Metzora), in default of which the Shechinah leaves them (*see Shabbat 33a*). In addition, the Gemara teaches that the Temple was destroyed because of gossip and baseless hatred (*Yoma 9b*).

The statement in Parsha Tazria-Metzora, “When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male” (*Leviticus 12:2*), speaks of a woman who obeys her husband, lives with him in peace and tranquility, and caters to his every need. The phrase “and gives birth to a male” means that she does his will (*see Rambam, Hilchot De’ot Sotah 12a*), for it is as if she had conceived her husband. To him, she is like a mother who takes care of her baby, hears his cries, and has pity on him. Thus if they are meritorious and live together in peace and holiness, the Shechinah resides among them. However in the opposite case, a fire devours them (*Sotah 17a*) and they become inflamed with forbidden desires, with fire being the only thing that remains (*Kallah Rabbati 1*). Therein lies the connection between the two parshiot. How can we arrive at complete unity and the rectification of all that had been damaged? It is by guarding our words and observing the laws of family purity.

### ***“Who Teaches Us More Than the Animals of the Earth And Makes Us Wiser Than the Birds of Heaven?”***

On the verse, “When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male” (*Leviticus 12:2*), Rashi brings the following Midrash: “Rabbi Simlai said: ‘Just as the creation of man [took place] after that of every animal, beast and bird in the work of Creation, so too are his laws specified after the laws of the animal, beast and bird’ ” (*Vayikra Rabba 14:1*). One may consult the book *Nitfei Maim* on this subject.

This demands an explanation. With respect to the work of Creation, we can understand why man was created on the sixth day, after the creation of land animals and bird. The Gemara explains that it was necessary that man find everything prepared so as to immediately observe the mitzvah of Shabbat (*Sanhedrin 38a*). It was also necessary that he could be told, in case he became arrogant, that even a flea was created before him. Finally, it was in order that man not claim that he had participated in the work of Creation [for it is only man who testifies to Creation by reciting, “The sixth day. And the heavens and the earth and all their hosts were completed,” thus becoming a partner with G-d in the work of Creation (*Shabbat 119b*)]. Man was created on the sixth day for all these reasons. Nevertheless, why are the laws that concern man here given after those concerning animals? What does the Torah teach us by this, and would that change if the subject of man and his leprosy were mentioned before the subject of animals?

The answer is that the Torah in this way enjoins us to learn a few basic principles from domestic and wild animals, as it is written: “Who teaches us more than the animals of the earth and makes us wiser than the birds of heaven?” (*Job 35:11*). I will elaborate on this idea point by point:

1. The simple fact that animals and birds exist proves G-d’s existence, Who gives each of them their nourishment, as it is written: “He gives to an animals its food, to young ravens that cry out” (*Psalms 147:9*). How much more does He nourish man, who is the work of His hands (*Kohelet Rabba 3:14*)? This is why we always find animals and birds near man: Their mission is to constantly remind him that if G-d sees to their needs, He will also sees to his.

2. We may also learn the importance of self-sacrifice from animals, for they demonstrate extraordinary loyalty. For example, the frogs in Egypt went into each nook and cranny, including burning stoves, to obey G-d’s command (*Pesachim 53b*). We find the same behavior with Hanania, Mishael, and Azaria, who in Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon gave their lives for the sanctification of G-d’s Name, for they reasoned *a fortiori* on the basis of the frogs’ behavior. The Torah also mentions dogs during the exodus from Egypt: “But against the Children of Israel, no dog shall whet its tongue” (*Exodus 11:7*). How is it possible for the Children of Israel to have entered and left the Egyptians’ homes without a dog even growling (*see Shemot Rabba 14:3*)? The answer is that the dogs clearly understood that such was G-d’s will, and they loyally obeyed Him. In addition, the Zohar asserts that when a serpent appears, it only does so at G-d’s command, for it too acts loyally (Zohar II:68b). When the prophet Elijah sacrificed one ox to G-d and a second to Baal on Mount Carmel (*I Kings 18:23*), the ox destined for Baal protested that it did not want to go (*Yalkut Shimoni ibid. 214*). Elijah then said to it, “In the same way that G-d’s Name will be sanctified by the other ox, it will also be sanctified by you,” and it unselfishly consented. All people can and must learn self-sacrifice from animals and birds in order to be inspired, and they must constantly strive to sanctify G-d’s Name.

3. There are also many traits to be learned from animals, as the Sages have said: “If the Torah had not been given, we would have learned modesty from the cat, honesty from the ant, chastity from the dove, and good manners from the rooster” (*Eruvin 100b*).

The lesson is clear: When a person becomes boastful, we may say to him: “Even a flea was created before you” (we don’t tell him this if we know beforehand that he won’t heed our words, for we only admonish those who listen). Similarly, from animals a person should learn to conduct himself with self-sacrifice, for an animal’s devotion goes to the point of accepting to be sacrificed for man. Otherwise, when a person commits a sin, why would an animal be sacrificed for him? It is only because of self-sacrifice.

Commenting on the meaning of the sacrifices, the Ramban writes on Leviticus 1:9 that when an animal is being slaughtered, a person should realize that everything being done to it should really have been done to him, for the entire aim of a sacrifice is for a person to examine his life. The Ramban, however, believes that sacrifices uniquely teach us not to behave as non-Jews (*Moreh Nevuchim 3:46*) who worship different kinds of animals. According to him, sacrifices exist only to teach man to not devote himself to materialism or desires.

Thus people learn from animals that G-d constantly watches over them, that there has no reason to be proud, and that one also must generously give of himself. Animals also teach us that there is no reason to sin, since they are carrying out Hashem’s will. This is why the laws dealing with animals are mentioned before those dealing with people (with respect to sacrifices), showing us just to what point animals give of themselves by allowing to be sacrificed in our place. It was also for this reason that they were created before man, namely to be ready to be sacrificed if man sins (so that he may continue to live), for the world was created primarily for man (*Shabbat 30b*). The Midrash also states that the word *bereshith* (normally translated as “in the beginning”) means, “for Israel, which is called *reshith* [first fruit],” hence the world was created for the Jewish people (*Bereshith Rabba 1:4*).

This is absolutely amazing. If there were no sacrifices, or if man had been created before animals and had sinned at that time, he would have incurred death. In reflecting upon this, we fully understand why man was not created before animals. It was necessary that he see all of Creation, so that by understanding that everything existed for him, he would not become filled with pride, which would show him the pathway to repentance.

G-d is obviously aware of man’s nature, which is to become filled with pride. This is what may happen to him if he sees all of Creation, for he will imagine himself to be of great importance. This is why he was created last. Thus if he boasts, he can be told that even a mosquito was created before him. Furthermore, he can learn self-sacrifice and good behavior from animals. Even though it is easier for animals to control themselves, since they have no evil inclination (contrary to man), this can also be the case in man, for the Torah was given to him in order that he fight the evil inclination.

In the words of the Gemara, “I created the evil inclination, and I created the Torah as its remedy” (*Kiddushin 30b*).

According to what we have said, we may understand the command that G-d gave to the Children of Israel at the time of the exodus from Egypt, namely: “On the tenth of this month they shall take for themselves – each man – a lamb for each father’s house” (*Exodus 12:3*). Furthermore, G-d commanded that they attach their lambs to their beds in view of the Egyptians, and then to slaughter the lambs before the eyes of the Egyptians, who witnessed all this yet did nothing (*Zohar 1:256a*). Now as we know, the lamb was an Egyptian god (*Shemot Rabba 11:4*), and the Sages considered this incident to be miraculous, which is one of reasons why this Shabbat is called *Shabbat Hagadol* (the Great Shabbat).

All this becomes clear in light of the Rambam and Ramban’s views on the reasons for sacrifices. According to the Rambam, G-d wanted the Children of Israel to discard their Egyptian concepts. We said that those idolaters took animals as their gods and worshipped them, thus when lambs were attached to the beds of the Children of Israel, the Egyptians were forced to conclude that lambs were simply animals that possessed no divinity whatsoever, and so only G-d is worthy of worship. Furthermore, when the Children of Israel slaughtered their lambs, they dealt a deathblow to the idea that an animal could be divine, for their hearts harbored none of the beliefs held by the Egyptians. This was also the reason why G-d commanded them to take the blood of a lamb and to put it on the doorposts and lintel of their homes (*Exodus 12:7*), signifying that they saw no importance in the lamb’s blood (which symbolized divine vitality to the Egyptians), and that they only believed in Hashem. This act of faith would earn them deliverance, for G-d would pass over their doors and not let the destroying angel strike them (*v.23*), for they proved that they did not believe in pagan divinities, but rather in G-d alone.

If we go according to the view of the Ramban, we may say that the goal of sacrifices is to restore the Children of Israel from impurity, meaning that the fact they attached lambs teaches that a person should always stay attached to the service of G-d by giving his best, just as the lamb that was to be slaughtered for G-d. This also demonstrated that lambs (which the Egyptians considered as gods) really only exist to heal and serve man (*Tanna D’vei Eliyahu Rabba 1*). Thus the Children of Israel merited deliverance, for they courageously attached lambs to their beds without fear of the Egyptians, to the point that the latter could do them no harm.

From all this emerges the idea that when a person performs a mitzvah without reservation, he will end up being saved and a miracle will be performed for him. However this is only on condition that his mitzvah performance is complete, without awaiting a miracle, for “Whoever gives his life believing that a miracle will be performed for him, that person will not see one” (*Sifra Vayikra 22:32*). A person must act solely to sanctify G-d’s Name, which is why G-d commanded that the blood be placed on the doorposts and lintel of their homes. The blood alludes to the warmth of the body

when a person unselfishly carries out a mitzvah, to the extent that this mitzvah taught the Children of Israel to behave valiantly, without fearing the Egyptians. We learn all this from the laws concerning animals.

### ***Renewal in the Service of G-d Leads to Holiness of the Home***

On the verse that states, “If a woman conceives [from the root ‘to sow’] and bears a male child” (*Leviticus 12:2*), the Zohar raises the following question: “Does she give birth once she conceives? It depends on pregnancy, and the verse should have said, ‘If a woman becomes pregnant and gives birth’ ” (*Zohar III:42b*). We must also ask why conception is mentioned here, rather than simply giving birth.

We shall try to explain this as best possible, which will require the following introduction:

A man must renew himself in his service of G-d each day by ridding himself of the effects of his negative past, doing so in order to not get worse. He must not wait until Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; he must renew himself each day, as in the verse: “They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness” (*Lamentations 3:23*). At that point one can become another person, even if his intentions are not perfect – and even more so if they are – for once a person serves G-d, even for egotistical reasons, he ends up serving Him for unselfish reasons (*Pesachim 50b*). This transformation can be extraordinary. For example, the Gemara recounts that when Resh Lakish saw Rabbi Yochanan from afar, he mistook him for a woman and jumped into the Jordan River after him. When he saw Rabbi Yochanan up close, he said to him, “Your beauty should be for women.” Rabbi Yochanan replied, “If you repent, I will give you my sister [in marriage], who is more beautiful than I.” Resh Lakish immediately accepted, and at that point “he wished to return and collect his weapons, but could not” (*Bava Metzia 84a*). Rabbi Yochanan explained to him that this was because he had accepted to study the Torah, and Torah study saps men’s strength.

This remarkable story shows just to what point a person can change. Rabbi Yochanan in fact gave his sister in marriage to Resh Lakish, who as we know was previously the leader of a band of armed robbers and a great sinner. Rabbi Yochanan did not follow the advice of always marrying one’s daughter to a Talmid Chacham (*Pesachim 49b*), but on the contrary he acted like one who marries his daughter to an ignoramus, of whom it is said: “Whoever marries his daughter to an ignoramus is as though he bound and laid her before a lion” (*ibid.*). Why did Rabbi Yochanan do this? It is because he knew that impurity can transform itself into holiness in a single instant, even if a person’s reasons are at first unworthy and everything he does is only for show. In fact we see that afterwards, Resh Lakish began to study Torah without delay.

When Resh Lakish saw that Rabbi Yochanan was giving his sister to him in marriage (and at great personal risk, since it was as if he was placing her before a lion), but only on condition that he take the yoke of Torah upon himself, he quickly understood that

the life he was leading was bringing him nowhere. Resh Lakish realized that it would only have meaning if he took to the path of Torah. It was clear to him that only under these conditions would Rabbi Yochanan agree to give him his sister in marriage. He thus changed from being a leader of a band of armed robbers to being a righteous man, to the point that he became the student and study partner of Rabbi Yochanan himself. For his part, Rabbi Yochanan did not make a mistake in trusting Resh Lakish, even if his motives were at first far from pure. This is because Rabbi Yochanan knew that a man can completely change his life and become conscious of his Creator's existence.

When we realize that a man should renew himself each day, we more clearly understand the statement, "Whoever has no wife has no joy" (*Zohar 182a*). Why is that the case? It is because the renewal of each day brings joy to a man's heart. For example, when we purchase new clothes and put them on, the joy we feel justifies us reciting the blessing *Shecheyanu* (*Berachot 60a*). One who constantly renews himself spends his entire life in joy, whereas routine brings about boredom. A man who has no wife has no source of renewal; he cannot accomplish the mitzvah of having children. He has no one to speak to, and many mitzvot that rejoice a man (as it is written, "The statutes of the L-RD are right, rejoicing the heart" [*Psalms 19:9*]) are absent from his life. This is especially true if his wife supports him in Torah study (as well as in everyday life), and guides their children in Torah (*Sotah 21a*). If a man is without a wife, he has neither renewal nor joy.

In addition, by nature a man seeks to dominate others, particularly his wife, as it is written: "He shall rule over you" (*Genesis 3:16*). However when he marries, he yearns for a tranquil family life and learns to yield to his wife and love her. This constitutes great progress in the service of G-d – modifying one's natural tendency to dominate – without mentioning the fact that his wife helps him to submit to G-d and others. For her part, a woman by nature does not like being told what to do, yet when she marries she obeys her husband and does what he wants, being an exemplary wife who does her husband's will (*Tanna D'vei Elyahu Rabba 9*), and she prefers her husband's opinion over her own. By progressing in this way, she also renews herself.

This subject of renewal is dealt with concerning the Jewish women at the exodus from Egypt. The Sages have said that the Children of Israel were delivered from Egypt due to the merit of that generation's righteous women (*Sotah 11b*). Furthermore, their refusal to give their earrings to make the golden calf earned them Rosh Chodesh (the first day of the month), which for them is like a holiday when they must not do heavy work (*Perkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 43*). Now we know that women are attached to their jewelry, which is why we might think that this was the reason for their refusal to part with it. This is why the Torah tells us that when it came to building the Sanctuary, the opposite occurred: The women brought more than was needed, as it is written: "The people bring much more than enough for the service of the work" (*Exodus 36:5*). The situation was such that Moses had to proclaim within the camp that they were to stop bringing things, as it is stated: "Let neither man nor woman do any more work for the offering of the Sanctuary" (*v.6*).

We therefore see that the women went completely against their nature by giving up their beloved jewelry for the Sanctuary (but not for the golden calf). Since this earned them Rosh Chodesh, when they must abstain from heavy work in order to rest and reflect, this gives them even more time to renew themselves, earning them a great reward for that day. Moreover, Rosh Chodesh atones for sins, as we say in the Musaf prayer: “You have given Rosh Chodesh days to Your people, a time of atonement for all their descendants.” We can therefore benefit from the holiness of this day to renew ourselves as well, as it is written: “Your youth is renewed like the eagle’s” (*Psalms 103:5*).

A man also renews himself on Shabbat, in the image of Creation, and it is from Shabbat that the six days receive their blessing (*Zohar I:75b; II:63b*). This is especially true when a man goes to the mikveh on Friday, for at that point he becomes someone else. I have already said that one who prepares for Shabbat solely to have a vacation in which to eat, drink, and rest has overlooked the main thing – the spice named Shabbat (*see Shabbat 119a*) – meaning the holiness of the day. When we neglect it, we see Shabbat exactly as the other days of the week, whereas we should sense the difference between sacred and profane, perceiving an opportunity for renewal. It is only then that we will experience it in pleasure and obtain an additional soul (*Beitzah 16a*). At that point, even the simple act of eating or drinking will be a foretaste of the World to Come, which is exactly like a renewal of body and soul, for even though we can actually renew ourselves each day, this is particularly true of Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh.

I believe that in the same way that the world is renewed each day, as we say in our prayers (“He renews each day, continuously, the work of Creation”), man – who is a microcosm of Creation (*Zohar I:90b*) – must do the same. Even if at first glance the universe seems to be getting older, in reality it does not stop renewing itself, just as everyone must do each day, even if he is no longer very young.

A good example of this can be found in the words that we speak on Shabbat. Concerning G-d it is stated: “By the word of the L-RD were the heavens made” (*Psalms 33:6*). This is because G-d created the world with words (*Perkei Avoth 5:1*), without having to resort to action. However with the arrival of Shabbat, it is nevertheless stated: “He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made” (*Genesis 2:2*), and “He rested the seventh day” (*Exodus 20:11*). The Zohar affirms that He rested even from speaking (*Zohar I:117b*). Therefore how much more should man – who is but flesh and blood, and who works during the week to earn a living – rest on Shabbat, including from speech. It is furthermore written, “[Cease] speaking of useless matters” (*Isaiah 58:13*), which means that the way we speak on Shabbat should not be the same as during the week (*Shabbat 113b*). Man is greatly renewed by not working or even uttering useless words on Shabbat. A person should use his mouth to speak words of Torah, following the injunction to make one’s Shabbat a day that is entirely Torah (*Tanna D’vei Elyahu Rabba 1*). Under such conditions, a person can resemble his Creator and bring about wonders

with his mouth and words, as at the time of Creation. This is because the Tzaddik has the power to annul Divine decrees (*Moed Katan 16b*). It is possible that this is the reason why many Tzaddikim refrain from speaking on Shabbat (for more on this subject, consult the book *Shabbat HaMalka*).

Everything that we have said up to now allows us to better understand our parsha. As we know, a woman helps her husband to renew himself each day, as well as during Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh, for these are times when she herself is particularly renewed. Furthermore, the success of the home lies mainly in the hands of the woman, as Rabbi Akiva said to his disciples: “Leave her alone, mine and yours are hers” (*Ketubot 63a*). Consequently, she is like one who “sows” a mitzvah, for education is an act of sowing. Sowing means the preparation of a mitzvah within the framework of family purity, by watching over children in purity (for if it was sufficient just to have children, there are many who do so). Renewing the holiness of the home on a daily basis constitutes her conception. This is why it is written, “If a woman conceives [‘sows’]” without pregnancy being mentioned. This is because it does not depend on pregnancy in any way, but on conception, on the renewal of a woman’s holiness. As a reward, G-d gives her a son, which represents both a change (since she did not bear a female, like herself) and a gift (since this son will learn Torah and wear Tefillin). In fact G-d grants a great reward to a Jewish home, a reward commensurate with our deeds of kindness and according to an overall scale, for as soon as we are married we experience daily change and renewal. A non-Jewish home functions solely in accordance with nature, without any renewal. The verses of our parsha all converge in this sense.

All this allows us to understand the connection between Parah Tazria and Parsha Metzora, which are found together in the Torah. Leprosy comes, as we know, as a punishment for slander and arrogance (*Arachin 15b*). Our Sages have said that the word *metzora* (“leper”) is like *motzi ra* (“who brings up evil” – *Arachin 15b, Vayikra Rabba 16:1*). A single word of slander can bring about thousands of evil words, since everyone tries to outdo the other in what he said. Thus the expression, “If a woman conceives [‘sows’]” refers back to the fact that by needlessly chatting, a woman sows the seeds of slander, and leprosy strikes both her and her husband, who let himself get ensnared into speaking as well. By slandering someone, she can turn him into a new person – since that person’s sins will be forgiven (*Chafetz Chaim 87*) – and he becomes like a newborn again. This is the meaning of, “and [she] bears a male child.” She then becomes impure for seven days, which signifies that she can ruin her entire life, for seven days represent the 70 different facets of person’s life (see *Psalms 90:10*). [Note: We find an allusion to this in the fact that the numerical value of *tazria* is the same as the expression *zeh hu be’lashon harah* (“it is by forbidden speech”). On the other hand, if a woman is careful about what she says, she will benefit the Jewish people, renewing herself in purity and holiness.

***How should we conduct ourselves?***

*The desire to renew ourselves in the service of G-d depends on the holiness and purity of the home. In effect a woman sows mitzvot, thus preparing the way for holiness. We achieve purity only through renewal and by refraining from speaking ill of others. If we keep away from all forbidden speech, we can achieve holiness for our entire lives.*

## *Parsha Metzora*

### *Humility and Submissiveness are a Heritage of the Children of Israel*

It is written, “This shall be [*zot*] the law [*torat*] of the leper on the day of his purification: He shall be brought to the priest” (*Leviticus 14:2*).

We may say by allusion that the Torah is called *zot* (Menachot 53b), as it is written: “And this is [*ve’zot*] the Torah” (Deuteronomy 4:44), which also applies to the verse in our parsha. It is only through Torah – which is called *zot* – that the leper can purify himself for having lost time by not studying Torah, and from the pride that is within him. However this purification is still not enough; it is only complete after he offers his sacrifice, when he submits before G-d.

This constitutes a response to a current opinion which states that there are also non-Jews who submit themselves to G-d and help their fellowman (*see Leviticus 19:18*) with great devotion and humility. This is simply not true. Even when we see a non-Jew who is considered to be righteous by his friends – one who loves peace and seeks it with everything he has – he is only acting with humility for everyone to honor him. G-d certainly does not deprive a person of his reward, even the reward for saying a good word (*Nazir 23b*), and even if he said this good word just to gain honor.

True humility is only found among those who study Torah and know how to appreciate it. By the fact that they are conscious of G-d’s greatness, their hearts break within them and they come to submitting themselves to Him, as the Rambam writes (*Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 4:12*). We also find manifestations of humility among non-Jews, for there is a concept of “the righteous of the nations.” G-d probes their hearts and minds, and He knows who are truly righteous. He gives them a full and complete reward in the form of wealth and honor in this world, unless they also have a part in the World to Come, as the Sages have said (*Tosefta Sanhedrin 13*). However it is obvious that their humility has no real depth.

So while Nadav and Avihu, who offered a strange fire, acted with great devotion – a characteristic that does not exist among non-Jews, for it serves them no immediate practical benefit – they did so only for a love of G-d and in order to elevate themselves in coming closer to Him (*see Leviticus 16:1*). As Moses said to his brother Aaron, “I know that they [Nadav and Avihu] are greater than myself or you” (*Vayikra Rabba 12:2; Rashi ibid.*). They simply wanted to bring the Children of Israel closer to G-d, which for them represented great devotion, as we explained in Parsha Shemini.

To explain the passage, “This shall be [*zot*] the law [*torat*] of the leper,” we may even say that the law of the Torah is humility. Even if this leper is great in Torah and filled with good deeds, he is brought to the priest because he should humble himself by going to someone who is greater than he in wisdom and Torah (*see Bava Batra 116a*) in order to learn Torah, wisdom, and proper conduct from him.

This is what we see with Naaman the leper, who went to find Elisha the prophet (*see II Kings 5*). The latter told him to go immerse in the Jordan River in order to purify himself of his leprosy, which is exactly what happened. Why did Elisha not instead give him a blessing or send him to the priest afterwards?

Elisha knew by Ruach Hakodesh that Naaman's leprosy originated only in his pride, as demonstrated by the fact that he became angry against the prophet before going to the threshold of his house with his battalion of soldiers. The only solution, as his servants tried to convince him, was to go and descend into the waters of the Jordan, thus abasing and humbling himself. It was only in this way that he would be purified. For the Children of Israel, water alludes to a descent into the depths of Torah, for "water always represents Torah" (*Bava Kama 17a*). The secret of the mikveh is that we abase ourselves in this water. This is why, in the case of Naaman, he needed to descend into the waters of the Jordan as a preparation for his conversion to Judaism, which would contribute to dissolving his pride.

The reparation of pride therefore consists of immersing oneself in Torah, and also to find the Tzaddikim of the generation to help conquer pride. This is equivalent to going to the Temple and offering a sacrifice there, which in fact is what a leper must do once he is purified: He brings a sacrifice in order not to fall back into pride. This is also what Naaman did after being cured and purified. He went back to Elisha to thank him for his help, as well as to receive instructions for the future, as it is written: "Now I know that there is no G-d in the whole world except in Israel" (*II Kings 5:15*). Afterwards, by his conversion to Judaism and acceptance of the Kingdom of Heaven's yoke, he achieved a more complete understanding of the Creator.

### ***Leprosy Rectifies Pride***

It is written, "If a person will have in the skin of his flesh a rising, or a scab or a bright spot, and it becomes a plague of leprosy in the skin of his flesh..." (*Leviticus 13:2*).

On the verse, "When...I will put the plague of leprosy in a house of the land of your possession" (*Leviticus 14:34*), the Sages have said that this constituted good tidings for the Children of Israel, for they would be forced to pull down their houses and thereby discover the treasures that the Canaanites had hidden there (*Vayikra Rabba 17:6; see also Horayot 10a*). Similarly, afflictions of the skin told a person that he must improve his ways. We already have the statement of the Gemara: "Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, 'Because of seven things the plague of leprosy is incurred: *Lashon Harah*, the shedding of blood, a vain oath, incest, pride, robbery and envy'" (*Arachin 16a*).

We therefore see that pride is among the things that can cause leprosy. This is indicated by the word *s'eit*, which designates not only a rising in the skin, but also excessive pride leading to arrogance. How does a person allow himself to become filled with pride? It is by not studying the Torah, which was given on *Atzeret*, a word

that indicates the festival as well as the concept of restraint. This is why a person is struck with *tzara'at* (leprosy), for the letters of *tzara'at* are the same those of *atzeret*. Thus when a person considers himself to be very important and wants to dominate G-d's people, he is afflicted with *tzara'at* (leprosy) in his skin, a punishment that is commensurate with the sin (see *Sanhedrin 90a, Shabbat 32a*). This is *atzeret*, in the sense of, "Women *atzurah* [have been restrained] from us" (*1 Samuel 21:6*) and, "A certain man of the servants of Saul was there on that day, *ne'etzar* [restrained] before the L-RD" (*v.8*). Rashi states, "He restrained himself before the Tent of Meeting in order to study Torah." If a person fails to do this, he will be struck with leprosy.

How do we heal him of it? We bring the leper to the priest (*Leviticus 13:2*), meaning that he must go to the *tzaddik*. He must then remain outside the camp, as it is written: "Alone shall he dwell; his dwelling shall be outside the camp" (*v.46*). Now this is difficult to understand, because if this man is a *talmid chacham* (knowing the laws of leprosy and realizing the situation he is in), why would the Torah order him to be brought – even against his will – to the priest? He himself understands the situation completely, thus why the need to bring him before the priest?

It seems that all this falls under the category of "measure for measure," for if a person is struck with leprosy due to pride, his punishment and rectification will be measure for measure. Thus even if he knows that he has been afflicted with leprosy, meaning that the priest does not need to confirm what he has, he must nevertheless submit himself to his authority and cast off his pride by going to see him. Even in the case that he, the *talmid chacham*, is more important than the priest – along the lines of the verse, "It is more precious than pearls, and all your desires cannot compare to it" (*Proverbs 3:15*), meaning that the Torah is more precious than the High Priest who enters the Holy of Holies, as the Sages have said: "The learned *mamzer* takes precedence over the ignorant High Priest" (*Horayot 13a*) – even then a person must yield to the priest. That is what will set him right, the fact that he lowered his pride before the priest.

As we have said, a person struck by leprosy has to remain outside the camp (*Leviticus 13:46*). What was the reason for this? The Sages have said that the Holy One, blessed be He, cannot live in the same world as a person who is haughty (*Sotah 5a*). Therefore the leper who acted with self-importance was not allowed to return to live in the camp, for the *Shechinah* was there. The leper had to leave the camp and remain outside until he was completely cleansed of his sin.

Along the same line of thought, we note that the passage dealing with the leper comes after the regulations governing childbirth, which themselves follow the passage dealing with animals. Commenting on this, the Sages have stated: "Rabbi Simlai said, 'Even as man's creation was after that of cattle, beasts, and birds, even so the law concerning him comes after that concerning cattle, beasts, and birds'" (*Vayikra Rabba 14:1*).

Consequently, we may say that this is why the Torah makes the connection between the passage dealing with the offerings and the one dealing with the leper. It is to teach man to guard himself from pride and not to swell with self-importance, but rather to

be exceedingly humble (*Perkei Avoth 4:4; Kallah, start of ch.3*). As opposed to himself, who was still swelling with pride, the leper was to learn from the animals, creatures whose creation preceded that of man and who always obeyed Hashem's commands with great humility. It is therefore not without reason that the leper had to remain outside the camp and go before the priest. Only the priest could examine the plague during the day (not at night), and only the priest could decide if the leper had already humbled himself. The priest, who is the *tzaddik*, can help a person to leave his pride (which resembles the night) and reach the day in a state of holiness and purity.

### ***The Seriousness of Gossip and its Purification***

The Sages affirm that whoever speaks ill of others is struck with leprosy (*Arachin 16a*), and that the word *metzora* suggests, phonetically, the words *motzi ra* ("bringing forth evil" – *Arachin 15a; Vayikra Rabba 15a*).

What does this consist of? When a man speaks ill of others, he resembles someone who sows seeds in the earth. After a certain time, the earth brings forth several dozen times more than what was sowed in it. The same goes for the person who speaks ill of others when recounting his stories, as well as for the one who thinks about what he has heard. And when the latter, on his part, begins to recount what he has heard, he adds a little to it. This is the reason why the Sages have said that gossip kills three people: The one who utters it, the one who hears it, and the one who is being spoken of (*Arachin 15b*). Each person who hears it amplifies the story when recounting it, until we arrive at "the tongue that speaks boastfully" (*Psalms 12:4*).

This is perhaps the connection between Parsha *Tazria* and Parsha *Metzora*. We know that women have a propensity for verbal expression, as the Sages mention several times. For example, they have said, "ten measures of speech came down into the world, and women took nine of them" (*Berachot 48b*). Consequently, in the same way that a woman conceives ("sows") and later gives birth, the one who speaks ill of others first *tazria* ("sows") and then brings great sins into the world, for as we just stated, lies eventually add themselves to malicious words. The one who does this deserves so great a punishment that he is struck with wounds and leprosy (*metzora*). One can therefore perfectly understand the connection between Parsha *Tazria* and Parsha *Metzora*.

And if we are correct, we may note that it is written, "Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and tell them..." (*Leviticus 21:1*). The words "speak" and "tell" are translations of the same basic Hebrew word, which give rise to the observation that this was stated in order to put the great on guard concerning the lesser (*Yebamot 114a*). This signifies that great men and Tzaddikim should put their generation on guard against the temptation to speak ill of others. Even when one recounts minor things – unimportant stories – that from the outside do not give the impression of being mean spirited, they should be avoided at all costs. Even if a matter consists of words that have the taint of gossip (technically called the "dust of evil speech"), it too is to be avoided at all costs, for

the Gemara affirms that everyone falls into this trap (*Bava Batra 165a*). This “dust” risks developing into “the tongue that speaks boastfully,” for the act of sowing implies birth and development.

What should someone do, therefore, who sincerely seeks to rectify this sin, like the leper on the day that he purifies himself? It is written, “*Zot* [This] shall be the *torah* [law] of the leper on the day of his purification” (*Leviticus 14:2*), meaning that he will be purified by means of *zot* (the Torah, which is called *zot* – *Menachot 53b*), and by the Shechinah (which is also called *zot* – *Zohar III:56b, 62a*). If he dedicates himself to the Torah, comes closer to G-d, and believes in Him, he will then be purified of all his wounds and leprosy both in this world and the world to come.

## *Parsha Acharei Mot*

### *Distance Yourself From Immorality*

It is written, “You shall not approach a woman in her time of unclean separation, to uncover her nakedness” (*Leviticus 18:19*). The gravity of the sin of approaching a woman in niddah emerges from its punishment: Excision! In addition, the Sages established other barriers to prevent the slightest contact with a woman during this time, besides not touching her (*Ketubot 4a*), in order to make it impossible to transgress serious prohibitions (*see Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah and Tur, 195*). If a person distances himself from her, he will always remain in holiness.

The Gemara teaches that a man should separate himself from his wife one day before she actually becomes niddah, otherwise he risks bringing death upon his children, G-d forbid. Furthermore, the children of the man who looks at her during those times will not behave well in life (*Nedarim 20a; see also Yoreh Deah 195*). Tractate Shabbat recounts the terrible story of a man who had greatly studied the written and oral Torah and had served Talmidei Chachamim, yet died prematurely. His wife took his Tefillin and went to the house of study to ask for the reason of his death, since it is said of the Torah, “[It] is your life and the length of your days” (*Deuteronomy 30:20*). She continually did this until finally Elijah the Prophet asked her, “My daughter, when you were in niddah, how did he behave with you?” She responded, “He was very careful not to touch me, even with his little finger.” Elijah then asked, “And while you were counting your clean days, how did he behave with you?” She replied, “He ate and drank with me, and slept with me without taking any particular precautions.” He then told her, “Blessed be G-d Who killed him, for he did not take heed of the Torah, which commands, ‘You shall not approach a woman in her time of unclean separation.’ ” Now this woman knew very well that he ate and drank with her without taking any precautions, which was forbidden. Given that he had transgressed a law, why was she so astonished at his death? It happened because, while knowing of the separation imposed by the Sages, her husband still believed that he had the strength to conquer his desires, and thus he was content with observing what is written in the Torah, meaning not to touch her, nothing else. He was nevertheless punished because he had infringed upon the words of the Sages (*Shabbat 13b*).

We should draw a lesson from this story. In effect, we who are ordinary individuals – attached to materiality, filled with desires and wicked thoughts – how much more should we flee from forbidden relationships, women who are niddah, and mixed dances! Because of our many sins, in our time we find families that have been struck by all sorts of misfortune because they have not observed the laws of family purity. Conversely, there are also many women who have had children because they correctly observed these laws, which are the very foundation of family purity. One of these laws

is that after her clean days, the woman should immerse herself in a mikveh (*Yebamot 47b*), yet unfortunately some women scoff at this law in derision. When they are told to go to the mikveh, they reply that it's primitive, and that they're satisfied with washing themselves in a bathtub. They should realize that even if they wash themselves with all the water in the world, this would not constitute a *tevilah* (ritual immersion), and that they cannot purify themselves other than by immersing into a kosher mikveh containing 40 *seahs* of water, in accordance with the Torah.

With regards to this, the nature of the immersion should be understood. We very well understand why a man and woman should separate themselves during the period of impurity, or why seven clean days must be counted, but why immerse oneself into water? And why is this immersion also prescribed for a man who has become impure?

Let's see how we can explain this. A man's sin stems from his pride, as well as from the spirit of folly that takes hold of him (*Sotah 3a*). Consequently, becoming purified takes place by a complete submission to Torah. Now we know that water always represents Torah (*Bava Kama 17a*), therefore a man or woman wanting to be cleansed of his or her impurity should descend into the water with submission and self-effacement. The Torah is in fact compared to water that flows from a higher place to a lower one (*Taanith 7a*), and in the same way that it is acquired by humility (*Perkei Avoth 6:5[6]*), one must descend into it to be purified. This is why it is forbidden for there to be the slightest bit of separation between one's body and the water (*Yore Deah 198*). To be truly purified of all that we have which is bad, total contact is required with a volume of water equal to 40 *seahs*. What is the significance of the number 40? It represents the 40 days of the embryo's development (*Niddah 30b*). If there is less than 40 *seahs*, the mikveh is not in accordance with the law, similar to the embryo, which has no form before 40 days. Moreover, in the mother's womb the embryo is in an aqueous environment and in a humbling position, being folded onto itself (see *Niddah 30b; 31a*). In the same way, a person must immerse into 40 *seahs* by descending into the water with humility, just as one demonstrates self-effacement towards Torah.

The purification and holiness of family life therefore occurs essentially by means of the Torah, which sanctifies and purifies man, and whose words therefore do not accept impurity (*Berachot 20b*). This concept is alluded to in the Torah itself. In fact, it begins with the word *bereshith* and it ends with the words "before the eyes of all Israel." Now the Sages have said that the entire world was created for the Torah and Israel, which is called *reshith*, which are the beginning and the goal of Creation.

In many ways, this evokes the holiness of the home through the intermediary of the Torah. The first letter of the Torah is *beit*, which suggests *bayit* (house), for the main thing is man's home. In addition, the last letter of the Torah is *lamed*, which together with the *beit* forms the word *lev* (heart) to indicate that one should not follow the desires of the heart. The importance of the holiness of the eyes is also alluded to at the end of the Torah. There it is written, "before the eyes of all Israel," for by purity

of eyes one arrives at purity of heart, and it is the eyes and heart that lead a man to sin. This happens because “The eye sees and the heart desires. The eye follows the heart. The eyes and the heart are the two agents of sin, and then the body carries out the sin” (*Bamidbar Rabba* 10:2). In addition, the letter *beit* alludes to the house of study (“Beit Midrash”), and the letters *beit* and *lamed* evoke the study (*limud*) that occurs therein, which is worth more than following the thoughts of the heart and the eyes.

All this shows us that at its beginning and end, the Torah teaches us purity and holiness by means of study and abstaining from sin. Torah study entails many benefits, as the Zohar states several times (*Zohar III:80b, 176a, 213a*). It makes man worthy of holiness, which reconnects him to the Tree of Life and opens the door to the world to come for him. This is particularly true when studying at night, for then we are bestowed particular favor (*Hagigah* 12b). In fact, this is the time when spirits of evil and impurity move about in the world to make man sin (*Zohar I:169b*), and if they find him deep in Torah study (which leads to holiness), he derives great benefit from that in this world and in the world to come.

In addition, for the person who does everything possible to devote himself to Torah, G-d helps him so that his union with his wife during the night is also holy and pure, as in the case of Rabbi Eliezer. Concerning him the Sages said that when he had relations with his wife, it was if he were being coerced by a demon (*Kallah Rabbati* 1). He achieved this by the power of Torah, which is the foundation of holiness and purity.

To return to the subject of our generation, we see that because of our many sins there are numerous people who disregard these laws, for they have studied neither the written Torah, nor the Mishnah, nor the Gemara. Now it’s not for nothing that the Gemara asserts, “Whoever has relations with a woman in a state of impurity is liable to excision” (*Keritot* 1:1). We know perfectly well that Eve, who put her hand to the Tree of Knowledge, received her impurity as a punishment (*Bereshith Rabba* 17). The atonement for her sin consists of observing the laws of family purity, then the seven days of purity, for this repairs the wrong inflicted upon the seven days of Creation. In fact, without her interference, all of Creation would have been a hymn extolling Shabbat, a world that is entirely Shabbat (*Talmid* 7:4). This world was cut down because of man’s sin, and all that remains is Shabbat. All this must therefore be rectified by means of holiness and purity.

From all this we understand the seriousness of sins of this type, as well as the importance of abasing ourselves before G-d in holiness and purity in order to rectify them. What is essential are purity of heart and sanctity of eyes, as well as the study of Torah that leads to these. We should make an effort to conduct ourselves in a way that leads to holiness and purity, for concerning the verse that states, “You shall be holy” (*Leviticus* 19:2), the Midrash says, “Distance yourselves from indecency and transgressions” (*Vayikra Rabba* 24:4-6). Whoever conducts himself in this way to demonstrate his love for the Eternal is holy in the way that He is holy. G-d then answers him measure for measure, for we know that when the world was created, He wanted to create it according to the

attribute of justice. However G-d knew that man could not survive in this way, for there are many that transgress His will. He therefore added mercy to justice (*Bereshith Rabba* 12: 15), and in His pity created the world for Israel and the Torah, despite the existence of the wicked. A man should therefore adopt the same behavior towards his Creator and elevate himself in holiness and purity by means of the Torah. The Sages have said that most of the fundamental principles of the Torah depend on Parsha Kedoshim (Torat Kohanim Kedoshim 1:1), for in it we are shown the way to holiness and purity. Following this path will create a great abundance of good for a man and his wife. It will result in blessing and success both materially and spiritually. Amen, may it be so.

***How should a person behave?***

*Be holy! Separate yourself from all indecency. Pay careful attention to the details of the laws concerning a woman in a state of impurity: Neither touch her, nor sleep with her, nor dance with her. If not, we end up committing grave sins. We achieve this only by means of Torah study, which leads to holiness, purity, and a desire to elevate oneself towards G-d. These laws (Yoreh Deah 11) have a great deal to teach us concerning proper behavior, as well as how to reach a greater level of holiness and an abundance of good stemming from G-d.*

***The Power of Habit in the Performance of Mitzvot***

Our parsha deals with, among other things, the placing of lots upon the two he-goats during Yom Kippur, as it is written: “Aaron shall place lots upon the two he-goats, one lot for the L-RD and one lot for Azazel” (*Leviticus* 16:8). How were these lots taken?

The two he-goats were placed on either side of the High Priest, one to his left and the other to his right. Two lots were then placed in a box, one labeled “for the L-RD” and the other “for Azazel”, and the High Priest took these into each of his hands. The lot drawn in his left hand was placed on the he-goat to his left, and the lot in his right hand was placed on the he-goat to his right (see Yoma 37a, 39a, which explain the process in detail).

This placing of lots is difficult to understand. Why did G-d command that the High Priest proceed in this way, rather than deciding for himself which he-goat he would take for Hashem or Azazel, with G-d’s Providence guiding him to make the right choice? In what way was the drawing of lots necessary?

We will also try to understand why the Torah commands that two he-goats be taken, rather than rams, turtledoves, or any other type of animal.

There is also another problem: According to the Sages, before the he-goat for Azazel even reached halfway to the bottom of the mountain (from the summit, off of which it was thrown), it was already crushed and mangled. We may ask why it was necessary to throw it off the top of the mountain, rather than to slaughter or strangle it, or to kill it by the sword, by fire, or stoning. What is the significance of throwing it off a mountain?

In my humble opinion, we must understand this passage as alluding to something else. By the drawing of lots, G-d is showing the Children of Israel the greatness of the mitzvot, for the performance of mitzvot comprises two elements, and for that matter the acknowledgment of a sin. The first is the habit that comprises the mitzvah or the sin. When someone is in the habit of only performing mitzvot, sin does not present itself to him, for one mitzvah brings about another (*Perkei Avoth 4:2; Avoth d'Rabbi Nathan 25:4*), without mentioning the fact that “great is a mitzvah, for it causes those who perform it to inherit this world and the World to Come” (*Midrash Gadol Ch. 6*). This greatness even covers a deed that was performed with ulterior motives (*Nazir 23b; Horayot 10b*). Alternatively, the force of habit can also bring about a sin, which in turn brings on others (*Perkei Avoth 4:2*). This is why G-d commanded that lots be drawn (*goral*), for the letters of this word form the word *hergel* (“habit”). This teaches the Children of Israel to perform mitzvot habitually, a habit that will help them to constantly place their prayers and mitzvot before G-d so that they will always be like a pleasing sacrifice to Him. This is the significance of the drawing of lots. The second element is the direct intent that we put into the performance of mitzvot (or sins) – the desire to perform the Creator’s will.

Nevertheless, if we commit sins to the point of getting into the habit of doing so, we fall into the realm of the evil inclination, which as we know is called a “mountain” (*Sukkah 52a*). We can then expect a bitter end, for when the Satan makes a man transgress, he will be punished like the he-goat that is sent to the mountain (which evokes the evil inclination) to be torn to bits and dismembered. Therein lies the allusion contained in the choice of the two he-goats, the mountain, and the dismemberment of the animal.

We can then understand why he-goats are required rather than other animals, for they belong to the same family as the *ez* (“goat”), which evokes *az* (“impudence”). Arrogance can easily lead to sin (“The *az* [impudent] is headed for Gehinnom” – *Perkei Avoth 5:20*). Thus the habit of committing sins will earn him the punishment of being torn to bits like the he-goat sent towards Azazel, which is an expiatory sacrifice alluding to sin.

Inversely, a person who has the habit of performing mitzvot and good deeds will succeed in everything he does. He will be “*az* [‘bold’] as a leopard ... to carry out the will of [his] Father in Heaven” (*Perkei Avoth 5:20*). Such a person will end up attaining holiness and be worthy of being sacrificed on the altar to atone for the sins of the Children of Israel. This is the second he-goat, which was drawn by lots for Hashem and sacrificed for the atonement of the Children of Israel’s sins.

We now understand why lots needed to be drawn, why he-goats were involved, and why everything was done to these two he-goats (which represented the upright and the sinners): It encourages us to resemble a sacrifice before Hashem, rather than an atonement sacrifice cut into pieces, and to invest all our *az* (“boldness”) into holiness.

Now a man possesses the necessary strength to leave the realm of the evil inclination (the mountain of Azazel) and to enter the realm of the good inclination (the sacrifice for Hashem), which we will better understand after a short introduction on the subject.

The Ramchal says that when a man sins, the evil inclination seizes him and he has neither the will nor the energy to escape. Even after repenting, it is difficult for him to break free of this hold, just as a prisoner cannot free himself from his own cell. The only way to break these fetters and liberate himself is to be reprimanded.

Let us explain what this consists of. It is actually a great mitzvah to reprimand one's fellow (*Leviticus 19:17*), yet it is difficult to see the connection between this mitzvah and the act of liberating oneself from the grip of the evil inclination.

What the Ramchal meant to say is that when nobody reprimands a man for the sins he has committed, and when nobody rattles him, he has no chance of liberating himself from the grip of the evil inclination. This is why he specifies "to be reprimanded," which means that a man should reprimand *himself*. He should reflect upon returning to G-d, and so his uncircumcised heart will be broken and little by little he will free himself from the power of evil.

It is written, "You shall surely rebuke your fellow" (*Leviticus 19:17*). If you are a prisoner of the evil inclination and there is nobody to reprimand you, it is the evil inclination that becomes your fellow. This means that you must reprimand yourself, and do the same to your fellow (none other than the evil inclination), until you dominate it and liberate yourself from its grip. In fact we know that to deceive a man, the evil inclination presents itself to him with love and tenderness. The Sages describe this process as follows: The evil inclination is at first like a passerby, then as a guest, until finally it becomes the master of the home (*Sukkah 52b; Bereshith Rabba 22:11*). This means that in the beginning it speaks a sweet talk, like someone who is concerned with his friend's well-being, yet "inside of him he lays his ambush" (*Jeremiah 9:7*), all while secretly scorning those who fall into its power, for it only *appears* to want their good. This is why a man should reprimand himself, for doing so will allow him to leave the realm of this arrogant one, from that high mountain (the evil inclination), and to arrive into the realm of the good inclination and become like a sacrifice before G-d, worthy of atoning for others by the holiness of his deeds.

This is not the case when a person is in the habit of performing *mitzvot* and good deeds. He then succeeds in everything he does, and he is "az [bold] as a leopard" to carry out the will of his Father in Heaven (*Perkei Avoth 5:20*). He will end up becoming holy, worthy of being offered on the Altar to redeem the Children of Israel. This is what is represented by the he-goat that was designated for Hashem, which was sacrificed to redeem the Children of Israel. We now understand the meaning of the drawing of lots, the two he-goats, and the entire procedure surrounding the he-goats selected for Hashem and Azazel, alluding to different types of people – *tzaddikim* and sinners. We must pay attention to our deeds in order to resemble an offering to Hashem, not a sin-offering destined to be torn apart. We must be as bold as lions, drawing our strength from the side of holiness.

## *Kedoshim*

### *The Holiness of Children Depends on that of their Parents*

It is written, “You shall be holy, for holy am I, the L-RD your G-d” (*Leviticus 19:2*), and right afterwards, “Every man: Your mother and father shall you revere” (*v.3*).

Several questions arise from these verses:

1. Is it possible to demand that a man, who is but flesh and blood, attain a level of holiness comparable to that of G-d?

2. What connection is there between the mitzvah of being holy and the mitzvah of revering one’s mother and father? Note: According to Rashi, the mitzvah of being holy means to distance oneself from impudence and sin (*see Vayikra Rabba 24:7*), and according to Ramban it means to sanctify oneself in permitted things (*see Yebamot 20a*).

Concerning the first question, my young son Moché Aharon Yéhochoua replied that even if it is inconceivable to attain G-d’s level of holiness (*Rambam, Yesodei Hatorah Chs.1-2*), a person must make a supreme effort to sanctify himself as much as possible. Concerning this, the Sages have said: “It is written, ‘You shall be holy.’ Does that mean that you can be like Me [G-d]? This is why it is written: ‘for holy am I, the L-RD your G-d’ – My holiness is greater than yours” (*Vayikra Rabba 24:9*). The passage continues: “I am the L-RD your G-d” (*Leviticus 19:3*), which brings to mind the idea contained in the Zohar: “He who exhales, exhales from within himself,” to teach us that all efforts in holiness, no matter how great, are but a wind compared to G-d.

Nevertheless, the Torah teaches us that holiness consists primarily of distancing oneself from impudence, and that a person must invest all his efforts into doing so. In what way can this be done? A person should meditate on the fact that even if he came into the world without clothing, when he leaves the world he is given a shroud to preserve his honor (*Ketubot 8b*), so that his body is not degraded after he dies. The same applies to the spiritual realm. A person comes into the world devoid of everything, and the best way to improve himself is to flee from impudence and always be covered. If he covers himself spiritually and guards himself from forbidden relations, he will also be covered when he leaves the world without sin (*Bava Metzia 107a*), so that he is not degraded in the World to Come.

Why, then, is it of capital importance to distance oneself from impudence? It seems to me that with respect to this subject, the power of instinct is such that even when a person conducts his married life in accordance with the laws of the Torah, he must constantly be vigilant, since from a permitted thing he risks ending up with a trivial attitude towards forbidden desires. All this is already present in embryonic form during marriage, which perfectly clarifies the connection between the mitzvah to be holy and that of revering one’s father and mother: The root of a child’s holiness is found in his

parents. If from the very beginning a child reveres his father and mother, this is a sign that the parents have invested greatly in the child's education, demonstrating their faith in the Creator Who directs the world and Who gave the Torah in which it is stated, "Every man: Your mother and father shall you revere." It is at that point that the child behaves like them, for "what the child says in the street is what he hears from his father or mother" (*Sukkah 56b; see Rashi*), and by his attitude he testifies to the holiness with which his parents conduct themselves in all aspects of their lives.

Consequently, a child who grows up in such a home possesses the strength necessary to attain the level of " 'You shall be holy' – distance yourself from impudence," and he merits arriving at the holiness of Shabbat (also cited in the same verse), the word "Shabbat" signifying cessation from all work. All depends on the education that the child receives from his parents. By adding the observance of Shabbat – by which he manifests his faith in G-d, the Creator of the world – he may attain holiness and honor, one being dependant on the other. Thus *Acharei Mot Kedoshim*, even after the death of his parents, he will continue to follow the path of holiness, for everything comes to him from their own holiness and the influence they had on him.

To support this idea, we may cite the Mishnah of the Tanna Akavia ben Mahalalel: "Reflect upon three things and you will not come to sin: ... 'From where you came' – from a putrid drop; 'and to where you are going' – to a place of dust, maggots and worms; 'and before Whom you are destined to give an accounting' – before the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He" (*Perkei Avoth 3:1*). To distance oneself from impudence and to be sanctified in permitted things, one must recall this drop that comes from one's father, evoking the verse: "Every man: Your mother and father shall you revere," as well as the end of all men, which is death (*Berachot 17a*). This leads a person to holiness, in passing "before Whom you are destined to give an accounting," which is equivalent to "My Sabbaths shall you observe" (*Leviticus 19:3*). This consists of observing everything in order to have an answer to give to G-d. Concerning this, Rabbi Avraham Azulai wrote that one must observe these three things simultaneously so as to be protected from sin, for if a person observes only one or two of them, he will not be able to conquer his instincts and will fall back into sin. However the three together can make us holy for our entire lives.

Along the same line of reasoning, we may explain the verse, "Every man: Your mother and father shall you revere" as applying to the parents themselves. When they unite in holiness and purity, they should be careful to revere their father and mother, meaning Hashem and the holy Torah (*Berachot 35b; Bamidbar Rabba 10:9*). In such a case, the body and soul of the baby is formed under the best conditions, and it may easily attain holiness and a love for G-d and Torah. In addition, even after the death of a person's father, he will continue to respect him, as it is said: "the son rises in the place of his father" (*see Eruvin 70b*). Not only does he recite Kaddish for the elevation of his father's soul, but through his every deed he sanctifies G-d's name in public.

Unfortunately, because of our many sins, today children have no respect for their parents, which was predicted for the period preceding the coming of Mashiach (*Sotah 49b*). In my humble opinion, this stems from the fact that parents themselves show no restraint, neither for conjugal relations nor for anything else that happens in the home, to the extent that their children revolt because they have neither admiration nor respect for them. Even after the death of their parents, such children continue to behave poorly and fail to show more respect for them than when they were alive, to the point that they end up revolting against G-d as well. All this holds true. At the beginning, one must accomplish “Every man: Your mother and father shall you revere,” and this leads to “My Sabbaths shall you observe,” which is as important as observing the entire Torah and all the mitzvot (*Shemot Rabba 25:16*), for being the foundation of faith in G-d, this mitzvah can lead to holiness. This is why the Torah in Parsha Kedoshim enjoins us to distance ourselves from impudence and tells us of the severe punishments incurred by those who give themselves over to it. Furthermore, the Torah warns us against the consumption of forbidden foods (in Parsha Shemini) as it is written: “Lest you become *nitmetem* [defiled] through them” (*Leviticus 11:43*). On this the Gemara states: “You will become *nitamtem* [insensitive]” (*Yoma 39a*), for these things obstruct the heart, being contrary to an acceptable level of holiness and purity. Each person should be careful not to be ensnared by it, otherwise he will behave like an animal. It is not by chance that all the nations which are devoid of Torah and fail to observe the seven Noachide laws (*Bava Kama 38a*) are considered as animals, or even worse, as it is written: “ ‘Stay here by yourselves with the donkey’ [*Genesis 22:5*] – meaning, ‘You are like the donkey’ ” (*Yebamot 62a*).

I saw this with my own eyes this week when taking a train with my assistant. In front of me were a father and his two sons, non-Jews, who began to spew forth the worst obscenities. The father was enjoying what his sons were saying, and for that matter all the other non-Jews in the cabin were enjoying it too, even though at first they were shocked by what they heard. After a certain time, they too began to laugh at this spectacle, while my assistant and I were in agony because we had nowhere to escape.

Despite all this, we managed to block our ears and not listen to them (see *Ketubot 5b*), and with some effort we were able to study Torah. It was really an act of the Satan that instead of spending two hours of study in peace, we were given two hours of study in suffering, as with the case of Jacob, who wanted to settle down in peace when the problems caused by Joseph’s disappearance began to assail him (*Bereshith Rabba 84:1*). At that point I thought to myself, “Now you should say the blessing, ‘Who did not make me a non-Jew’ without G-d’s Name, and tomorrow you’ll say it with concentration using G-d’s Name.” Everything that we saw and heard was truly appalling, and they will end up dying like animals. G-d will erase their memory, and their future punishment will be harsh.

Consequently, without Torah and holiness, it is impossible to dominate one’s sensual desires. Now since most of the Torah’s great principles depend on this parsha

of holiness (*Vayikra Rabba* 24:5), and since there can be no holiness without it, it was stated before the entire community. This was done so that all the Children of Israel could hear it, for the person who takes precautions even in what is permissible will end up becoming holy and pure. We already find this concept concerning Rabbeinu Hakadosh (*Shabbat* 118b), who was called *kadosh* (“holy”) because he never placed his hand below his waist. If he paid attention to such a thing, it is obvious that he was meticulously observant in all things. Despite his great wealth, when he was about die he raised his hands toward heaven and said to G-d, “You know very well that with these ten fingers I put all my effort into Torah, and I never rejoiced in this world even with my little finger” (*Ketubot* 104a). Thus we see how the attention that he put into distancing himself from sin at all times led him to not profit from anything, even from those things that were permitted, including food, for he only ate radishes and lettuce (*Avodah Zarah* 11a). In other words, he only consumed plain food that the poor ate, all because he was immersed in Torah, which led him to the summit of holiness.

The expression, “You shall be holy ... Every man: Your mother and father shall you revere,” has a double meaning. It refers to both one’s biological parents and spiritual parents, meaning Hashem and His Torah. A man should feel that his origins are holy and thus act accordingly. Now all this depends on the restraint and holiness of his biological parents.

It is not by chance that the verse states, “You have distinguished the L-RD ... and the L-RD has distinguished you today to be for Him” (*Deuteronomy* 26:17-18). Rashi explains this passage as follows: “It appears to me that the word denotes setting aside, distinguishing: You have distinguished Him, from the alien gods, to be your G-d, and He set you aside, for Himself, from the peoples of the earth, to be His treasured people,” as it is written: “You shall be to Me the most beloved treasure of all peoples” (*Exodus* 19:5). All this stems from the fact that the Children of Israel distanced themselves from impudence, not taking the example of the other nations, which is why G-d separated them to be a people of choice among all others. (Note that the word *segula* [“choice”] evokes the word *segol*, the Hebrew vowel formed by three points. It is possible that these three points teach us of the three who are involved in a person’s creation: G-d, father, and mother).

After having written all this, I found wonders written in the holy book *Chiddushei HaRim* by Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Ger on Parsha Bechukotai. He states, “Each person should strive to sanctify his house, as it is written, ‘If a man consecrates [“sanctifies”] his house’ (*Leviticus* 27:14). Only afterwards will he be able to arrive at holiness. In fact [in the blessing after meals] we recite, ‘for Your covenant that You sealed in our flesh,’ and only afterwards, ‘for Your Torah that You have taught us,’ for that is the main thing, the foundation.” This idea is in wonderful agreement with what we have said up to now, meaning that everything depends on the holiness of parents in the home, this being essential in Judaism.

### *Israel's Holiness and Its Consequences*

On the verse, “You shall be holy, for I the L-RD your G-d am holy” (*Leviticus 19:2*), Rashi writes in the name of the Sages: “My holiness is superior to yours” (*Vayikra Rabba 24:9*), which means: “You are not as holy as I.” The same source also states that this passage was said before the entire community, since most of the fundamental principles of the Torah depend on it (*ibid. 24:5*). This needs to be explained from several viewpoints.

1. How can a person, who is mortal and replete with sin, possibly think that he is as holy as G-d, to the extent that G-d has to say, “My holiness is superior to yours”? Can a person’s mind possibly think otherwise for even a single instant?

2. Rashi also gives the following explanation: “ ‘You shall be holy’ – Separate yourself from forbidden sexual relations and from sin” (*Vayikra Rabba 24:4,6*). Now if most of the fundamental principles of the Torah depend on this parsha, they should be explained *first*, and only afterwards should people be warned against forbidden sexual relations and sin. As long as these principles have not been stated, how can we observe them? Certainly if we agree with the Ramban and say that this means we should avoid all things that may lead to sin, in accordance with the concept of “Sanctify yourself in permitted things” (*Yebamot 20a*), it is clear that it a great principle. However according to Rashi’s view, the difficulty remains.

I believe it is possible to say that the directive to be holy is given at the outset of the parsha in order to make us understand how serious forbidden sexual relations are in Hashem’s eyes. At the giving of the Torah, He commanded the Children of Israel to separate themselves from their wives, as it is written: “Do not draw near a woman” (*Exodus 19:15*), and as we know, Moses added one day on his own initiative (*Shabbat 87a*), a decision that G-d agreed with. Therefore Moses demonstrated even more strictness, for it was impossible to receive the holy Torah in a state of impurity. It is still surprising, despite all this, that even though the mitzvah of having children is crucial for the world’s survival (“He did not create it for emptiness; He fashioned it to be inhabited” – *Isalah 45:18*), Moses nevertheless added an extra day of separation between man and wife. He did this because he feared that at the giving of the Torah, a licentious thought might give rise to impurity that was destructive both to body and soul, and G-d approved of it.

Moses no doubt felt that two days of separation were indeed enough to receive the Torah, it being understood that married life should be lived with the goal of assuring the world’s continuity and the desire to achieve purity. However Moses thought that it was better to establish an extra barrier to insure that the Torah was received in a state of complete readiness, without any trace of impurity. This teaches us just to what extent precautions should go, even with permitted things. Having children with one’s wife in complete purity also demands a special effort in sanctity, and if one wants to achieve an even greater level, he must separate himself still more and establish extra barriers. How much more is this true of things that are forbidden!

All this allows us to understand what Rashi said, namely that what the Torah means by holiness is a separation from forbidden sexual relations and sin, which represent the majority of, if not all, the Torah's principles. This is because without abstinence and purity, we risk transgressing all the mitzvot. Actually, not only do forbidden sexual relations cause great harm, but also the simple fact of not being careful with one's eyes, and speaking or thinking dangerous thoughts, for holiness is a preparation for all the mitzvot.

When we do everything to preserve our holiness – even if we have the misfortune of stumbling several times (by looking at indecent pictures, for example, which are the cause of many sins and are frequently displayed in public) – G-d in His great goodness protects us. It states, “The L-RD protects the simple” (*Psalms 116:6*), for a person is given help to follow the path that he truly desires to take (Makot 10b). G-d will protect him if he is careful, and even if he falls seven times, G-d will uplift him, as it is written: “Though the righteous one may fall seven times, he will arise” (*Proverbs 24:16*).

This is why G-d assembled the entire community and began with the words, “You shall be holy” – distance yourselves from forbidden sexual relations and from sin, and in this way you will be able to observe the entire Torah. The very fact of assembling everyone alludes to this idea, for when many people are gathered together (as during a family celebration), it is then that one must pay particular attention to keeping away from impurity and sin, and to behave with holiness.

A person should certainly not think that he is already so holy that he is incapable of transgressing a prohibition with his eyes, thoughts, or deeds, for this is the way that the evil inclination operates, leading a person to believe that he has already perfected himself. Now one should never forget that his end is “dust, maggots, and worms” (*Perkei Avoth 3:1*), and that death renders him impure. He therefore has no reason to boast about anything. Such was the strategy employed by the serpent, which said to Adam and Eve: “You shall be like G-d, knowing good and evil” (*Genesis 3:5*). By this the serpent meant, “G-d does not want you to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, lest you become like Him, for every artisan hates his fellow of the same craft” (*Zohar 1:36a*). The evil inclination therefore tries to instill in people the belief that they are at a semi-divine level, hence the reason why G-d said to the Children of Israel before the entire community: “My holiness is superior to yours” (*Vayikra Rabba 24:9*). It was meant to convey the idea that in every situation, even one of abstinence, there is someone greater still, and therefore there is no reason to fall into this trap of the evil inclination.

This may be illustrated by an example in daily life. When someone is asked if he prays or gives to charity, he may reply, “Of course I do!” However the question really means, “Have you prayed as you should have, from beginning to end? Have you given to charity with the intention of fulfilling a mitzvah, that of helping your fellow [‘You shall love your fellow as yourself’ – *Leviticus 19:18*],” otherwise the mitzvah is not done to perfection and this person has lied, for he did not pray or give to charity as he should

have. This all stems from the fact that the Satan accustoms people to believe that they are performing mitzvot, whereas in fact they are still far from doing so.

Likewise a boy who studies in yeshiva, yet wastes a great deal of his time, may say that he is in yeshiva, whereas this is but a lie and a plain illusion. It may be that he is *physically* in yeshiva, yet in losing time there – his time and that of others – he has, as the Mishnah puts it, “sinned and caused the many to sin” (*Perkei Avoth 5:18*). All this is the work of the Satan, which encourages people to lie by saying that they study in yeshiva when that is not at all the case. It is with respect to this that G-d enjoins us to flee from forbidden sexual relations and sin, holiness being the greatest mitzvah, for if we neglect it we damage all the others. At the same time, however, we should not lose sight of the fact that G-d’s holiness is greater than what we are even capable of imagining, for He has no need of us and possesses no body or corporal form (*Rambam, Yesodei HaTorah, 1:8*). This is what constitutes, “My holiness is superior to yours.”

The reason why “You shall be holy” comes before all the other mitzvot in the parsha is because all the others depend on it. Even for the Ramban, in each place that we find a barrier to forbidden sexual relations, we also find holiness, which comes back to the concept of “Sanctify yourself in permitted things” (*Yebamot 20a*), the basis of all things. The same applies to Rashi, for whom a person must distance himself from forbidden sexual relations by disregarding everything else, for this will lead him to carry out all the mitzvot, which also falls under the categories of holiness and distancing oneself from forbidden sexual relations. There is therefore no difference between the opinions of Rashi and Ramban.

Nevertheless, as we have already said, a person is helped to follow the path that he truly desires to take (*Makot 10b*), and if one sanctifies himself a little here below, he is sanctified above (*Yoma 38b*). This is due to the fact that there is no limit to the holiness that G-d may bestow upon a person, given that he doesn’t foolishly believe everything that the evil inclination whispers into his ear. With respect to this subject, the following incident once happened to me: Whenever I travel by airplane, whether alone or not, I always ask G-d that nothing unfortunate happens and that neither myself nor my companion be put to the test of immodesty by being seated next to a woman. This prayer is usually answered, yet one time I was traveling with Rav Shlomo Elmalem from France to New York, which is a fairly long trip, and although we prayed that the third seat in our row remain empty, a woman came and sat there. Since the airplane was full, there was nothing we could do but to hold fast in this trial, especially Rav Shlomo, who was seated next to the woman. Suddenly we witnessed a miracle: The woman was overtaken with tremendous anxiety and looked at us as if we were terrorists, begging someone to change seats with her. She was led away screaming to another part of the plane, and we thanked G-d for the kindness that He showed us, all because people are helped to follow that path that they truly want to take.

I will also recount under what circumstances I have always sensed this principle: Each time that I begin to speak in public, a certain someone – always the same

person – gets up and leaves, with a different excuse each time. He goes to chat about meaningless things instead of devoting his free time to listening to words of Torah and getting closer to G-d. This is surprising because the person in question is G-d-fearing, observes mitzvot, gives to Tzeddakah, believes in the Tzaddikim, and supports Torah study. Why then does he leave, especially since he listens to all other Rabbis no less than once a week? It is because that person is helped to follow the path that he truly desires to take, to the point that someone who has no desire to listen to words of Torah always finds a reason to leave at exactly the point that a lecture begins. Since the lecture really bothers him, from Heaven he is sent a reason to leave (for example, his son begins to cry). However all this is just pretext; the real reason is his indifference to words of Torah. Once he has left, the Satan then whispers into his ear that he should go rest, or that he should go visit his family, or simply that he should go and talk – everything except study!

Now people should apply this teaching to holiness: If one sanctifies himself here below, he is sanctified above. The majority of the Torah's fundamental principles depend on holiness, and if one sanctifies himself through chastity, he will be holy and pure in all mitzvot.

#### ***How Should a Person Conduct Himself?***

*The majority of the Torah's principles depend on the holiness of Israel, particularly when people are gathered together, as during a family celebration, when one must be careful about prohibitions concerning sexual misconduct, be it only in thought. If we are careful about this, we will be careful about all mitzvot, for a person is helped to follow the path that he truly desires to take. He will then fortify himself in holiness and conquer the evil inclination that tries to make him stumble. Furthermore, such a person will not lie concerning mitzvot, and he will have the desire to hear words of Torah without seeking excuses to evade them, for the Torah gladdens the heart of G-d and man.*

#### ***“You Shall Be Holy” In Joy and Righteousness***

Our parsha states, “You shall be holy, for I the L-RD your G-d am holy” (*Leviticus 19: 2*). Rashi says in the name of the Sages, “‘You shall be holy’ – abstain from forbidden sexual relationships and from [other] sin.” All the same, we must ask how a person can truly elevate himself and enter the realm of holiness. If he sanctifies himself by abstaining from sexual immorality, and if he also sanctifies himself in what is permitted, as the Sages have said (*Yebamot 20a*), how and when will he know that he has reached the level of a holy man?

We shall attempt to answer these questions. When a person wants to perform a *mitzvah*, he will encounter obstacles stemming from his instincts, obstacles that will discourage him from performing that *mitzvah*. As the Sages have said, “Man's evil inclination gathers strength against him daily and seeks to kill him” (*Kiddushin 30b*).

However when a person controls his instincts and actually performs the *mitzvah* despite such obstacles, he will experience joy and gladness in his heart, and at that point a feeling of relief and happiness will erupt within him, as if he found a great treasure.

As a result, it seems to me that the joy that erupts in a person's heart is the very proof that he is holy. In fact because he performs the Creator's will and has cleaved to Him by performing His *mitzvot*, he has merited to sanctify himself and be called a holy man.

This idea is alluded to in the verse, "You shall be holy, for I the L-RD your G-d am holy." In other words: When you accomplish Torah *mitzvot* and this gives you great, immense joy that springs from your heart, you will then know that you are holy and that you are attached to Me, "for I the L-RD your G-d am holy." The satisfaction that you feel in performing a *mitzvah* is what sanctifies your body to the point that joy erupts within you. Now we already know that the goal of serving Hashem must be joy and contentment, and in this way we will attain holiness. All the reprimands directed at the Jewish people are because "you did not serve the L-RD your G-d amid gladness and goodness of heart" (*Deuteronomy 28:47*).

Some may ask, "How can I truly attain holiness? How can I feel satisfaction in serving Hashem, to the point that I will know that I am actually holy?" The answer is that, insofar as sexual immorality is concerned, there is the deed and there is also the thought and imagination behind the deed. Consequently, when a person erases all harmful thoughts of sexual immorality from his heart, when he uproots them and repents completely, he will feel satisfaction, joy, and happiness in his heart. It is precisely there – in the place where those deeds or harmful thoughts could have dwelled – that holiness will come and reside.

We must realize, however, that everything relating to a person coming closer to G-d must come from the person himself. It is the individual who must find a way to approach G-d, at which point the Holy One, blessed be He, will help him to become holy, but solely where he has the right to approach. If someone tries to approach in areas that are not meant for him, areas not made for him, he is liable to pay dearly for it.

This idea is found in Parsha Acharei Mot: "After the death of Aaron's two sons, when they approached before the L-RD and they died" (*Leviticus 16:1*). Nadav and Avihu, Aaron's two sons, also wanted to add to the holiness of the Jewish people. They wanted to bring mundane fire to the altar, something they had not been commanded to do, which is why they died. From here we learn that every person should realize when he is to come closer and when he is to keep his distance, all to teach us the principle: "Seek not things that are above your strength" (*Hagigah 13a*).

However if someone refrains from seeking holiness, this will turn against him "after [his] death." After a person dies, he will see how he distanced holiness from himself, bringing him tremendous shame, for there he will be, sitting apart with

neither Torah nor holiness. The Sages have said with regards to this, “Woe to us in the Day of Judgment, and woe to us in the day of rebuke” (*Bereshith Rabba* 93:11). In fact even a person who learned a great deal of Torah in this world – yet did not conduct himself with holiness and has nobody to reprimand him in the World to Come – should still reprimand himself when he sees the truth revealing itself to him. He will then understand everything that he lost, for he could have acquired more, much more merit, in this world while he was still alive.

From all this, a person should learn to strengthen himself in holiness, for holiness leads to joy. As for one who lacks holiness, he goes around looking distraught, depressed, and sad all day long, for he is still far from the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

This is what our Sages said concerning Nadav and Avihu, Aaron’s two sons (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemini* 524). According to one opinion, their sin lay in the fact that they did not marry. Hence Hashem punished them and they died.

This is something that needs to be explained. Joseph merited royalty because he controlled his instincts and did not yield to them, to the point that he was called “the righteous one, the everlasting foundation” (*Zohar* 1:186a). That being the case, why were Nadav and Avihu punished because they did not marry? On the contrary, they should have been considered great *tzaddikim*, since they controlled their instincts and conquered their desires!

The only problem is, not getting married is considered a sin. In fact for a man to arrive at perfection and holiness, he is obligated to unite with his wife to become a single body. By marrying a woman he completes G-d’s Name within himself, since the letter *yud* in the word *ish* (“man”) and the letter *hei* in the word *isha* (“woman”) unite to form the Name *Y-H*, which helps a person feel holiness within the union of marriage. Yet Nadav and Avihu did not want to arrive at this level of holiness, for they apparently thought that they had already attained perfection. Hence they sought nothing more in this world.

It is of paramount importance for a person to work on himself in order to achieve holiness. The initials of the expression *kedoshim tehiyu ki kadosh* (“You shall be holy, for holy [am I]”) have the same numerical value as the word *keter* (“crown”). This means that when a person controls himself through holiness, he is considered as a king with a crown on his head, and he will merit arriving at perfection and royalty. This is because a king lacking a crown is not really a king. If he is crowned with one, his holiness hovers above him, and such a man is called holy, “the righteous one, the everlasting foundation.”

## *Parsha Acharei Mot-Kedoshim*

### *The Death of the Righteous*

Parsha *Acharei Mot* and Parsha *Kedoshim* are normally read together. To explain the connection between the two, one would have to say that a person only considers examining his spiritual state and repenting after the righteous die, telling himself that if such Tzaddikim (who were upright and perfect, and thus whose merit benefited everyone – see Perkei Avoth 5:18) have left this world, what could we expect, we who are nothing? They, at least, had properly prepared themselves for eternal life, but as for us, pity us, especially now that we have lost the leaders of the generation. What will we be able to say before G-d?

*Acharei Mot* and *Kedoshim* teach us that after the death of Tsaddikim, their holiness allows us to elevate ourselves spiritually and to examine our actions, particularly this year (5758), where because of our many sins, many of the righteous who were among the great of Israel have left us. It is obvious that we have much to learn from them and their way of life, and “we bewail those who have left and cannot be forgotten” (*Sanhedrin 111a*).

Our sins plainly provoked their departure, which is why we should do some soul-searching. We should ask ourselves what happened that caused our great Rabbanim to pass away one after the other, without even bringing us the Final Redemption. Naturally, the Satan manages to give a person neither the time nor the opportunity to reflect upon these things, but rather keeps him in a state of perpetual unrest by telling him to “do this” one day and to “do that” on the next (*Shabbat 105a; Pesikta Zulah Nitzavim*). This happens to the point that a person comes to actually forget what he is doing in this world, to neglect Torah, and to sin and make others sin as well (*Avoth d'Rabbi Eliezer 40:3*). This is why G-d removes a righteous individual from us, then another, with the world being left in the dark. It is at that moment that a person awakens slightly from his numbness and begins to reflect on things. “The righteous one perishes, and no man takes it to heart” (*Isaiah 57:1*), writes the prophet, which is why after the death of the righteous – *acharei mot kedoshim* (lit. “after the death of the holy ones”) – a slight awakening occurs and a person begins to question himself a little.

One can say, as well, that as long as the righteous live in this world, the evil inclination certainly doesn't leave them at peace, and even makes them suffer. Yet these troubles mean that they arrive at a higher level of holiness after their death, so much so, in fact, that even while dead they are called alive (*Berachot 18a*). This is what it means to “behold the sweetness of the L-RD and to contemplate in His Sanctuary” (*Psalms 27:4*), and this is the significance of the idea that after their death (*acharei mot*), they become holy (*kedoshim*).

It can emphatically be said that many of the righteous desire to literally attach themselves to G-d (in accordance with the verse that states, “cleave to Him” [Deuteronomy 30:20]), with complete devotion, almost to the point of putting their lives in danger. This is why Scripture warns us: “He shall not come at all times into the Sanctuary” (Leviticus 16:2). This means that despite the intense desire of the righteous to die for the sanctification of the Divine Name in accomplishing their service, they should all the same know that they do not have the right to act this way whenever they want, and that the prospect of attaining a state of holiness after their death should suffice them. This is what one can read in the words themselves: It is after death (*acharei mot*) that one becomes holy (*kedoshim*).

Nevertheless, the righteous that have left us this year served G-d with literally all their strength. They devoted themselves completely to the community, and we bewail their passing. In addition, they began by giving everything to others and put themselves last. They killed themselves for Torah study (*Berachot 63b; Shabbat 83b*), and this devotion combined with their humility gained them a considerable level of holiness. This is *acharei mot kedoshim*: The last (*acharonim*) that killed themselves (*mot*) for the Torah thus became holy (*kedoshim*). May it be G-d’s will that their merit protect us, as well as all of the Children of Israel, and that G-d hastens the Final Redemption to our exile and sends the Messiah quickly, in our days. May it be so, Amen.

## *Parsha Emor*

### *Strengthening the World by the Study of Torah*

Our Sages speculate as to the reason why the Torah seems to repeat itself in the following passage: “*Emor* [say] to the priests, the sons of Aaron, *ve’amarta* [and tell them] ...” (*Leviticus 21:1*). Our Sages have already explained at length that when the Holy One, blessed be He, addresses the angels, He never has to repeat Himself. In fact, since the angels lack a *Yetzer Hara* (evil inclination), they know only how to serve Hashem. On the contrary, when G-d addresses men, He is often obliged to insist in order to tear away the veil that the *Yetzer Hara* has put up in front of them.

The other explanation that our Sages give for this repetition is that in this way, Hashem wanted to be insistent with the elders in order that they watch over the young.

In this we see expressed one of the essential goals of existence, namely to continue inculcating faith in G-d in the coming generations, and to do so in order that the Torah should never be forgotten.

In bringing the young closer, our own faith is strengthened because we learn the quality of innocence from them, an utterly simple faith and love of the wondrous.

In addition, in teaching the very young, one finds the opportunity to repeat what one has learned. By this, one accomplishes (*vis-à-vis* one’s self) the mitzvah of “*Emor ... ve’amarta*”. By doing this, one becomes accustomed to seeing oneself as “small” in one’s own eyes, which leaves no room for pride. The person who considers himself as knowledgeable enough not to need to review the Torah will be considered by G-d as arrogant, and all his understand won’t hesitate to leave him.

We notice, moreover, that the numerical value of the first letters of “*Emor ... ve’amarta*” (*aleph* and *vav*) add up to seven. This seems like an invitation for us to consider Shabbat (which is the seventh day) as the day that is particularly well-suited for the study of Torah. It is a day when we can spiritually elevate ourselves ever higher in purity and holiness, and where we find, concentrated, the light of the seven days of the week.

It is written, “...all His work which G-d created to make” (*Genesis 2:3*). This was in order that, as our Sages say, “man could continue to create the world.” As for G-d, He truly had finished the work, to which He had nothing more to add. However it is Shabbat that the time begins in which man can realize why he was created, namely to strengthen creation by the study of Torah.

In addition, on Shabbat we should not be satisfied with studying alone, but rather we should take advantage of the holiness of this day to inculcate the fear of G-d into our sons and the entire family.

Our Sages tell us that at the time of the giving of the Torah, G-d did not accept anything for a guarantee other than the little children. This is why the Torah particularly invites us to watch over our children, the guarantors of Klal Israel, in order that they not go astray or cling to impure values that risk (G-d forbid) to distance them from their Creator.

Our Sages say: *Ben mezakei abba* (“the son gives merit to the father”). Even if the father is a Tzaddik, the son continues despite everything to spiritually elevate himself from one level to another. Knowing that our sons are our ultimate guarantee, we will have it at heart to properly educate them in the path of Torah and mitzvot. Thus the Torah will continue to exist, for finally that is the goal of this reciprocal guarantee. In this way we learn that thanks to the *ahdut* (unifying) Torah – the Torah that unites the fathers and the sons one another and together joins them to their Father in Heaven – peace will soon come to the world and the Geula will arrive shortly, for unity is the key to deliverance.

### *Pride: the Source of all Sins*

It is written, “Say to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and tell them: Each of you shall not contaminate himself to a soul among his people” (*Leviticus 21:1*). What is the meaning of “soul”? We may understand it as referring to the body of a dead person, to his 248 members and 365 tendons, which are called the “people” of his body (see *Nedarim 32b*). A man should not make this “people” impure through pride.

The Zohar has questions about the proximity of Parsha Kedoshim to Parsha Emor (*Zohar III:68a*). At the beginning of Kedoshim (*Leviticus 19:2*), the verse enjoins the entire community of Israel to sanctify itself, which is why in Parsha Emor the Kohanim are commanded to be holy as well. The members of the tribe of Levi are also warned about this in the verse that states, “To the Levites shall you speak and you shall say to them...” (*Numbers 18:26*). This is in order that everyone be holy and pure, even the great, and that they guard their 248 members that correspond to the positive mitzvot (*Makot 23b*) and sanctify themselves with a great level of holiness.

We must also explain why the Kohanim and the Levites are addressed separately here in Parsha Emor, since in Parsha Kedoshim the Torah warns all the Jewish people (which includes the Kohanim and Levites) concerning holiness.

The reason for this apparent redundancy is that without the specific warning to the Kohanim and Levites in Parsha Emor, we could have erroneously thought that since they are more holy than the rest of the Children of Israel, they don't need extra safeguards for holiness, and so we can put our trust in them. A special warning is therefore addressed to them. Precisely because they are the holiest ones, they should consecrate themselves lest they arrive at pride, which resembles indecency (see below). And it is precisely they, who are found in the Tent of Meeting, who need extra sanctification, in the spirit of what the Sages have said: “The greater the man, the

greater his evil inclination” (*Sukkah 52a*). This is the explanation given by the Gemara for the repetition “Say to the priests . . . and tell them” (*Leviticus 21:1*). It is in order to warn both the great and the lesser (*Yebamot 114a*). This means that the Torah, having warned the lesser (the entire community of Israel) in Parsha Kedoshim, now also warns the great (the Kohanim and Levites) so that they too should guard themselves from the sin of pride.

In Parsha Pinchas we find the following words: “Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the priest” (*Numbers 25:11*). The Sages explain that the tribes were scorning him and saying, “Have you seen that son of Puti, whose mother’s father [Jethro] fattened [*pitem*] calves for idol worship, and he went and killed a prince of a tribe of Israel?” This is why the verse in Numbers states that Pinchas descended from Aaron (*Sotah 43a; Rashi ibid.*).

The following requires an explanation:

1. Why did the tribes scorn Pinchas? He had killed Zimri ben Salu, prince of the tribe of Shimon (*Numbers 25:14*), since he was liable for death, and furthermore Pinchas had killed him with Moses’ permission! Was this a reason to scorn him?

2. Why did they make Pinchas recall the sins of his maternal grandfather Jethro, since he had repented, converted, and become righteous (Mechilta Jethro)? In fact, Jethro became so righteous that he merited adding a parsha bearing his name to the Torah (*Shemot Rabba 27:7*). Was it necessary to associate Jethro’s previous way of life to his grandson Pinchas?

3. If Pinchas was reminded of his grandfather’s sins, why was this done precisely in connection with the incident of Zimri? Why was this not done in another situation?

That which awakened the anger of the tribes against Pinchas was that he was a Kohen, and that by killing Zimri he put himself in danger of becoming impure by a corpse if the guilty party died by his hand (without mentioning the fact that Pinchas himself could have died in the fight). This is why he was not given the benefit of the doubt, and why his jealousy was not attributed to a love of Heaven. Actually, his actions must have been for Heaven’s sake, otherwise he would not have thought that he had to act before men greater and better than himself in carrying out G-d’s vengeance. And even if this was done with Moses’ permission, as the Sages have said (*Sanhedrin 82a*), the tribes believed that despite everything, killing a prince from one of the tribes of Israel was an act of pride. The simple fact that he entered the tent and saw the heinousness of their sin was for them proof that he was motivated by pride. Now we know that pride contains an aspect of idolatry, indecency, and murder. Pinchas therefore put himself in danger by a pride that resembles idolatry, and he also experienced seeing a shameless spectacle. Why then did he enter the tent, since he risked undergoing all these things?

The tribes then asked themselves from where this pride came, and concluded that it had its root with his grandfather Jethro, who was an idolater before having repented (*Shemot Rabba 1:38*). This trait had been transmitted to his descendants, and even though later on he became righteous, this root had remained bad. It was in this way that they

explained why Pinchas failed to comply with Scripture's warning to the Kohanim to protect themselves from pride, as we have explained on the verse that states, "Say to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and tell them: Each of you shall not contaminate himself to a soul among his people" (*Leviticus 21:1*).

Because of all of this, the verse mentions the fact that he descended from Aaron, which means that even though he also descended from Jethro, his actions had their source in Aaron, who along with Moses said, "What are we?" (*Exodus 16:7*). In Pinchas there was nothing but humility, which is why many miracles were performed for him on that occasion and why he was saved from all harm (*Sanhedrin 82b*).

All this occurred because of Aaron's merit. It is true that a man who demonstrates pride has certainly inherited a portion of his ancestor's faults. Yet but because Pinchas carried within himself the virtues of Aaron, who was humble and never acted other than for the love of Heaven, the ancestry of Jethro did not manifest itself in him, to the point that the Torah testifies concerning Pinchas: "He jealously avenged Me among them" (*Numbers 25:11*). He did so without any ulterior motives, but rather solely for the love of Heaven.

### ***"Say and You Shall Say" – Correcting the Damage Done Through Speech***

On the verse that states, "Say to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and you shall say to them" (*Leviticus 21:1*), Rashi explains in the name of the Sages: " 'Say and you shall say' – to warn the adults regarding the minors" (*Yebamot 114a*). We see a great principle here: The Torah warns the adults, the Talmidei Chachamim, and enjoins them to watch their words so that they penetrate the hearts of the minors, for a Rav should speak pleasantly and behave correctly (*Hagigah 14b*). Not only that, but he should speak from the depths of his heart so that his words enter the hearts of others (see *Berachot 6b*), for if he addresses his students with love and brotherhood, they will accept what he says. His words will penetrate their hearts and they will elevate themselves.

This is the meaning of the remainder of the verse, namely: "Each of you shall not contaminate himself to a [dead] person among his people" (*Leviticus 21:1*), for if an adult is not careful about his speech, he will make himself impure by his words among his people. A Rav should also be careful that his students not become impure among their people, all this by means of "say and you shall say," i.e., he should reprimand them, as the Torah commands: "You shall surely rebuke your fellow" (*ibid. 19:17*).

On the same subject, let us add that a person's words should be imprinted with holiness and purity, which will enable them to enter the hearts of listeners. It may be that this is the connection between Parshiot Kedoshim and Emor. In addition, a person must speak with humility, which brings to mind the connection with Parsha Behar that follows, for there Mount Sinai is mentioned, the mountain that abased itself to such a degree that the Torah was given upon it (*Sotah 5a*). Without humility, one's words will contain sin, for the word *anavah* ("humility") has the same numerical value, counting

the word itself, as *avon* (“sin”). By “say and you shall say,” the Torah warns us to speak with holiness and purity, and also with humility and submissiveness.

We may yet raise another point. By the words “say and you shall say,” the Torah teaches us not to say anything but constructive words in the home. This is so as not to provoke any regrettable incident, for “the Holy One, blessed be He, does not send any regrettable incident through the righteous” (*Yebamot 28b*), a subject that the Gemara discusses at length (*Gittin 7a*). A man should also demonstrate virtues in his behavior and not say anything but positive things to his students, for in this way they will be able to learn from him. We can actually observe how what we hear at home (for better or for worse) deeply affects us.

The end of our parsha applies this idea to the verse that states, “The son of an Israelite woman went out – and he was the son of an Egyptian man” (*Leviticus 24:10*), after which he blasphemed. In what way did this happen? It was by the Tetragrammaton (*Vayikra Rabba 32:4*), which he had heard on Mount Sinai. The Torah tells us, “The name of his mother was Shelomit *bat Divri*, of the tribe of Dan” (*Leviticus 24:11*). Why are we given the name of his mother? Rashi explains that *she* had committed a sin (see *Vayikra Rabba 32:5*). We call her *bat Divri* (literally, “daughter of my words”) because she was a chatterbox who spoke with everyone, which brought on this sin. It is difficult to understand how someone who had heard what was spoken on Mount Sinai could end up blaspheming!

The reason for this lies in the fact that everyone is endowed with free will, as it is written: “choose life” (*Deuteronomy 30:19*). He is the one who should make what he saw penetrate his heart; the Holy One, blessed be He, never forces him to accept it. At home, the son of the Israelite woman heard his mother speaking the forbidden, and he reasoned that what he had heard was acceptable to say, for “what the child says in the street is what he hears at home from either his father or mother” (*Sukkah 56b*). That is why he blasphemed. He had probably heard it at home, and he was a chatterbox like his mother.

To explain the expression “say and you shall say,” we may also see it as an allusion to the counting of the Omer. In fact we read this parsha during the counting of the Omer, which is a favorable time to perfect oneself in the area of inter-personal relationships. This introspection constitutes a preparation for receiving the Torah, with the 48 traits by which the Torah is acquired (*Perkei Avoth 6:5[6]*) corresponding to the 48 days of the counting, the last day comprising all the traits. True, in Egypt the Children of Israel had repaired the sin of gossip, as the Sages explained with respect to the passage, “Moses was frightened and said, ‘Indeed, the matter is known!’” (*Exodus 2:14*), meaning that he perceived that their slavery was due to gossip and treachery (*Shemot Rabba 1:30*). In addition our Sages have said (a teaching that Rashi brings up [v.28]) that the Children of Israel were delivered from Egypt by the merit of four things, one being that they did not change their language. This means that they abstained from all forms of gossip. However the essential element of preparing to receive the Torah remained the

acquisition of the 48 traits, and 48 days were required before the sin of gossip could be completely repaired, for its trace lingered and required a long time to be erased. On the other hand, if a person is content to stop slandering, yet he does not work on his other imperfections, he has achieved nothing.

This idea is alluded to in the fact that during the counting of the Omer, we celebrate two Hilloulot, those of Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Now Rabbi Meir represents the written Torah, and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (who spoke of rectifying the sin of gossip) the oral Torah (guarding one's tongue). This is essential in preparing to receive the Torah.

This is the message that the Torah conveys in “say and you shall say.” It consists of teaching a person to practice the written and oral Torah. This is what constitutes *emor* (“say”): Rectify your language and abstain from speaking evil, followed by *ve’amarta* (“and you shall say”): Develop the 48 traits by which the Torah is acquired. This idea is alluded to in the word *ve’amarta*, for the letter *taf* represents the Torah, the letter *mem* (numerical value: 40) also represents the Torah, which was given in 40 days (Menachot 29b), and the letters *vav*, *aleph*, and *resh* have a numerical value (according to the method by which tens and hundreds are counted as ones; i.e., the *resh* is counted as 2 instead of 200) of 9. This combined with the numerical value of *mem* adds up to 49 – the 49 days of the Omer, in which we prepare for the 48 traits that enable us to acquire the Torah, the last day encompassing the whole. Actually, we damage all these traits when we slander, and they must all be repaired for us to merit arriving at the giving of the Torah in holiness and purity.

### ***“Say...and You Shall Say” – Adults Must Care For The Young***

It is written, “Say to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and you shall say to them” (*Leviticus 21:1*).

The Sages have pondered over the reason for this repetition (“Say...and you shall say”), stating that it directs adults to care for the young (*Yebamot 114a*). This means that Moses was commanded to warn adults concerning the observance of Torah and mitzvot so that they in turn would warn the young. With regards to this, the Sages have also said that the repetition highlights the difference that exists between angels and men, the angels receiving their orders straight from G-d's mouth and not needing to hear an injunction more than once, for they have no evil inclination to prevent them from accomplishing the Creator's will (*Shabbat 89a*). However when G-d gives a commandment to people, He repeats it to them so that they duly note it, for the inclinations hidden in the heart of an ordinary individual are opposed to it (*see Sukkah 52b*), and they hide in order to confuse it (*Berachot 61a*). This leads people to block their ears so as not to hear G-d's message, and thus to them He gives His commandments twice, so that they listen to and carry out His will.

From the first explanation given for the repetition (that it directs adults to care for the young), we learn a number of important principles:

Faith and confidence in G-d should be instilled not only in adults, but also in little children, otherwise the Torah will be forgotten. It is not without reason that children constitute the vital part of a generation, and also that their Torah is of superior quality. As the Sages put it, “He who studies Torah as a child, to what can he be compared? To ink written on fresh paper” (*Perkei Avoth 4:20*). Thus children can be taught without impediment.

Along the same line of thought, when an adult fortifies children by teaching them Torah, he simultaneously fortifies his own faith, a process evoked by the verse: “Each man would help his fellow, and to his brother he would say, ‘Be strong!’ ” (*Isaiah 41:6*). In fact small children teach us innocent faith, for they believe everything they are told. They especially love stories of the righteous, those through whom G-d performed miracles for the Jewish people, and in this way they grow and come closer to G-d.

Another thing we learn is that when an adult teaches youngsters, to do so he must review his own studies, thereby fulfilling (with respect to himself) the command, “Say...and you shall say.” This goes without mentioning the fact that he thus becomes accustomed to being small in his own eyes, which prevents him from having negative ideas such as, “Why do I have to constantly review my studies? I’m an adult, and I already know Torah!” In fact a person must constantly review his studies, even a hundred times (*Sanhedrin 99a*), without paying attention to his ego.

Finally, when an adult learns with youngsters, they ask all sorts of questions that require answering, thus enabling the adult to deepen his understanding. As one Sage put it, “From my students I learned the most of all” (*Makot 10a*).

To explain this repetition, I also believe that we may say that the initials of the expression *emor...ve'amarta* (“say...and you shall say”), *aleph* and *vav*, have the numerical value of seven, which evokes the seventh day of the week, Shabbat. This is the day when we can especially elevate ourselves in holiness and purity, drawing upon ourselves the light of the seven days of Creation, but only on condition that we carry out *emor*, meaning Torah study. This is because Shabbat will be entirely for Torah (*Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Rabba 1*), a day that we devote to Torah instead of spending it simply eating, drinking, and sleeping. Actually, the word *shabbat* is composed of the same letters as the word “to sit,” which evokes the concept of sitting in the tent of Torah study, for that is the goal of Creation, as it is written: “If not for My covenant, I would not have appointed days and nights, the decrees of heaven and earth” (*Jeremiah 33:25*). The Sages have interpreted this verse to mean that without the Torah, neither heaven nor earth would exist (*Nedarim 32a*).

Let us attempt to explain this point. Concerning Shabbat it is written, “And G-d blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, for in it He rested from all His work which G-d created to make” (*Genesis 2:3*), which means that Hashem had just finished the work of Creation, and as far as He was concerned everything was perfect and there was nothing to add to it. Yet man’s duties began from that point on, and he must carry them out, thus prolonging the work of Creation without end or limit. How can a person

accomplish this task? Solely by the diligent study of Torah during Shabbat, which strengthens him to the point that the holiness of Shabbat is instilled in him during the remaining days of the week, in the spirit of what the Sages have said: “The six days receive their blessing from Shabbat” (*Zohar II:63b*).

Nevertheless, during Shabbat a person must pay special attention to not studying alone, but instead to profit from the holiness and nature of this day to instill the Torah and fear of Heaven into his children and entire family. In this way he will fulfill “say... and you shall say” on Shabbat for adults and the young: For himself, his children, his family, and his students.

We may even add that “say...and you shall say” is a reminder to the Jewish people that children are guarantors for adults with regards to the Torah. At the giving of the Torah, G-d asked the Children of Israel for a guarantee that they would observe it, and in the end they gave their children as such, which G-d accepted (*Shir Hashirim Rabba 1: 24*). Therefore if they fail to observe the Torah, it would be their children that would be punished, as it is written: “Who visits the sin of fathers upon children” (*Exodus 20:5*), children being their father’s guarantors. This is why the Torah underlines “say...and you shall say”: Say to the adults that they should watch over the children, for if the adults study Torah, punishment will not come upon the children – they who should remain like Aaron’s sons, of whom it is written: “For a [dead] person, none shall defile himself” (*Leviticus 21:1*). This means that they should not let themselves be defiled or contaminated by negative outside influences that may distance them from Judaism. On the contrary, they should elevate themselves in Torah, holiness, and purity.

## Parsha Behar

### *The Torah is Acquired By Humility*

Appearing at the beginning of Parsha Behar (*Leviticus ch. 25*) are the laws concerning the *Shmita* year. We are commanded to observe the *Shmita* after having worked the land for six years. For one who observes it, the Holy One, blessed be He, promises that blessings will rest upon the work of his hands during all those years, as it is written: “Then I will command My blessing for you” (*ibid. 25:21*). On the other hand, we read at the beginning of Parsha Bechukotai: “If you walk in My statutes and you will keep My commandments...then I will give your rains in their time” (*ibid. 26:3-4*). What is the meaning of, “If you walk in My statutes”? Rashi cites the Midrash in explaining this to mean: “That you should labor in [studying] Torah” (*Torat Kohanim, Bechukotai*).

This means that when a person puts an effort into studying Torah, he merits all the blessings mentioned in the Torah. From this we may draw two lessons: When someone observes the *Shmita* year according to Halachah – this applying not only to a farmer in the fields, but to each and every person who has to observe the laws regarding the *Shmita* year – he then merits all the blessings mentioned in the Torah. Similarly, when someone studies Torah with fervor and puts an effort into it, he also merits all the blessings mentioned in the Torah, and furthermore he receives rain at the proper time to water the earth.

It would therefore seem that these two things – the observance of the *Shmita* year and the diligent study of the Torah – are linked by a powerful bond.

What is the *mitzvah* of the *Shmita* year? A farmer is the master of his fields for a period of six years. His fields are off-limits to the public, and he works, sows and reaps, collects and stores up his harvest and his fruits. Yet come the seventh year, he has nothing to do! He is in no way the master of his possessions in that year, and his fields are open to everyone. Whoever wants to can walk into his fields and take anything that falls into his hand. During the *Shmita* year, the farmer cannot feel proud. He cannot say, “Everything belongs to me, and I’m the master of my fields.” It’s out of the question! He is not the master during the *Shmita* year, and during that time he must conduct himself with modesty and humility, yielding before everyone, for each and every person is as much the master of his fields as he is, and perhaps even more.

As for the study of Torah, what does it consist of? The Sages have explicitly said that the words of the Torah resemble water (*Taanith 7a*), and furthermore that “water signifies the Torah” (*Bava Kama 17a*). Just as water moves from a higher elevation to a lower one, words of Torah move from a higher place to a lower one. This means that words of Torah cannot entrench themselves, nor even penetrate, the heart of the proud. The Holy One, blessed be He, says of a proud person: “I and he cannot both dwell in the world”

(*Sotah 5a*). A person who is proud cannot study Torah or learn it from someone else, for he feels greater than him and thinks, “How can this unimportant person explain the Torah to me?” This is why the Torah can only penetrate the heart of a person who is humble.

From this we see that humility is the principle means of acquiring the values of the Torah. It is only when a person conducts himself with humility and modesty that he can study Torah. It is only in this way that he may learn it from someone else, and it is only in this way that he can elevate himself in learning.

Consequently, we see that everything mentioned with regards to the *mitzvot* of the *Shmita* year and Torah study are related. The central component of the *mitzvah* of *Shmita* is humility – to be self-effacing before each and every person – and the central component of diligent Torah study lies in humility. What moral lesson can we draw from this?

When someone acts with humility, he merits the Torah. He also merits performing the *mitzvah* of the *Shmita* year according to the Halachah, in the minutest detail, and by all this he merits every blessing mentioned in the Torah. The painstaking study of Torah also provides a person with all his material needs, without interruptions or the need for calculations, because he conducts himself modestly, as he should.

If unfortunately we do not conduct ourselves properly, then we will be punished for not having observed the *Shmita* year, as well as for not having studied Torah, and it will be the same punishment for both! Our Sages say, “By the sin of not observing the *Shmita* year, the Children of Israel are exiled from their land, the Temple is destroyed, and the land becomes a desert” (*Tanhuma Behar 1*). In the Gemara (*Nedarim 81a*), the Sages give a lengthy explanation for a verse in the book of Jeremiah: “Who is the wise man who will understand this...for what reason did the land perish...? Because of their forsaking My Torah” (*Jeremiah 9:11-12*).

From this we notice something amazing. Be it by not observing the *Shmita* year, or by not studying Torah, in either case the Temple is destroyed and the Children of Israel are exiled from their country to lands unknown. That being said, we must ask the following question: In every generation there are people who observe the *Shmita* year but do not study Torah, and conversely there are people who study Torah but do not observe the *mitzvot* of the *Shmita* year. How is it possible to sort things out? The answer is very simple, and it is given by the verse: “If you walk in My statutes” (*Leviticus 26:3*). That is, we must put an effort into studying Torah. It is true that anyone can study it, yet if he fails to put an effort into learning, his Torah will have little value, and punishments will start to bear down on him. We must therefore acquire humility, put an effort into studying Torah, and observe the *Shmita* year. In this way we will merit all the blessings mentioned by the Creator of the world in His Torah.

### ***Lending Money with Interest Delays the Final Redemption***

It is written, “Do not take from him interest and increase ... I am the L-RD your G-d Who took you out of the land of Egypt” (*Leviticus 25:36,38*). From this passage, we see that there is a connection between charging interest and the exodus from Egypt. Rashi gives an explanation on the verse in question, and we may also consult the book *Mitzvat Habitachon* (p.130).

We shall attempt to give our own explanation as to the relationship between these two concepts. When the Children of Israel were in Egypt, they never stopped believing that in spite of their harsh enslavement, the Holy One, blessed be He, would save them. They held this belief because they received an assurance from Jacob and Joseph that they would be saved by means of the expression “G-d will surely remember you” [*Genesis 50:24*] (*Shemot Rabba 5:13*), and that they would leave the crucible in which they had stayed for 210 years (*Bereshith Rabba 91b*). This in fact is what happened: When Moses came to announce the news of their liberation with the words “I have surely remembered you” (*Exodus 3:16*), the Children of Israel believed him and “bowed their heads and prostrated themselves” (*ibid. 12:27*). They prostrated themselves to give thanks for the announcement of their deliverance, their entry into Eretz Israel, and the foretelling of their having children (*Mechilta Shemot 12:27*). It was therefore by the merit of their faith that the Children of Israel were freed from slavery and left Egypt.

In addition, while in Egypt the Children of Israel had already taken upon themselves some mitzvot to reinforce their faith and facilitate their deliverance, mitzvot such as Passover, Shabbat, and Tefillin. They also accepted to circumcise themselves (*Pesikta Zutah 6:6*) with joy and love for G-d. [Note: Since the Midrash actually says that they were not circumcised (*Pesikta Zutah Bo 12:6*), this issue remains open]. The Sages have said that the blood of the Passover sacrifice and that of their circumcision became mixed, as it is written: “Then I passed you and saw you wallowing in your blood, and I said to you, ‘In your blood you shall live’; I said to you, ‘In your blood you shall live’ ” (*Ezekiel 16:6*). G-d said it twice, signifying the Passover sacrifice and circumcision (*Perkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 29*). Why were they circumcised? It is because concerning the Passover sacrifice, “No uncircumcised male may eat of it” (*Exodus 12:48*). Hence they would not have been able to eat of it if they had remained uncircumcised. Besides that, it is obvious that they must have circumcised themselves to have been able to escape the 49 gates of impurity (*Zohar Chadash Yitro 39a*) and reach the 49 gates of holiness and be delivered from Egypt.

Above all, the Children of Israel believed in G-d, as it is written: “They had faith in the L-RD and in Moses His servant” (*Exodus 14:31*). It was only through the merit of their faith that the Shechinah rested upon them as they sang praises when crossing the Sea of Reeds (*Shemot Rabba 23:2*). In addition, they were united together in harmony, according to the principle by which “all the Children of Israel are responsible for one another” (*Sanhedrin 27b*). This principle enabled them to leave Egypt, for they could only have been saved when they truly supported one another. (*Tanhuma Nitzavim 1*). Moreover, it was the Holy One, blessed be He, Who Himself delivered them, without using the

intermediary of an angel or a seraph, for these could have accused the Children of Israel, whereas with Hashem's personal involvement, no one could have accused them. Hence the Children of Israel had only merits.

All this allows us to understand the connection between charging interest on loans and the exodus from Egypt. In fact, when a Jew lends another money with interest, he acts contrary to having faith in G-d by showing that he feels forced to take interest because Hashem is not powerful enough to make him profit from His generosity. He also harms the unity of the Jewish people, for shared responsibility for one another implies helping the other, whereas by taking excessive money (the interest) when lending, a person aggravates his situation. This goes without mentioning the fact that by charging interest, he harms the sanctity of circumcision, for the word *ribit* ("interest") is composed of the same letters as the word *brit* ("circumcision"). Now the merit of circumcision was one of the reasons for which the Children of Israel were delivered from Egypt. Therefore the one who lends money with interest harms the Jewish faith, the unity of the Jewish people, and the concept of circumcision, and by consequence the exodus from Egypt. That is the connection between the prohibition against charging interest and the exodus from Egypt.

We may also say that when the Children of Israel left Egypt, G-d revealed to them that they would receive the Torah on Mount Sinai (*Shemot Rabba* 3:4), as it is written: "When you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve G-d on this mountain" (*Exodus* 3:12). They would receive the 613 mitzvot, and as a result the person who lends his money with interest renounces G-d and the exodus from Egypt (*Bava Metzia* 75b), for he renounces the Torah. In addition, the numerical value of *ribit* (counting the word itself) is 613, which clearly indicates the connection between the exodus from Egypt and lending money with interest, the latter which delays the Final Redemption.

We recite Psalm 145 ("A psalm of praise by David: I will exalt You, my G-d the King, and I will bless Your Name forever and ever...") three times each day in the daily prayers (*Berachot* 4b). By way of allusion, one of the reasons that we recite this Psalm is because the word *tehillah* ("psalm") has the same numerical value as the word *tam* (innocent, wholehearted), as it is written: "You shall be wholehearted with the L-RD your G-d" (*Deuteronomy* 18:13). How can we conduct ourselves with G-d honestly and with integrity? By placing all our confidence in Him without trying to complicate matters or be insincere. Three times a day corresponds to a person's three daily meals, and if such a person lends his money with interest, it is because he is not wholehearted with G-d nor does he trust Him. Far from behaving in this manner, a person should demonstrate absolute confidence in Him, and in so doing he will bring the Final Redemption closer, speedily in our days. Amen.

## *Parsha Bechukotai*

### *The Need for Effort in Torah Study*

Why does the verse that states, “If you walk in My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them” (*Leviticus 26:3*) seem to be redundant? The decrees are themselves commandments that we are held to observe and practice! Consequently, why does the Torah state, “walk in My decrees and observe My commandments,” as if they consisted of two different things? To this question Rashi answers as follows: “‘If you walk in My decrees.’ This means, ‘If you *put effort* into studying My Torah.’”

What we have here, therefore, is a law. It is a commandment that differs from commandments that involve practice, for to arrive at practicing the mitzvot (that is, to observe them properly), one must first put in the effort to study Torah without cease or limit. We see here, therefore, two important yet distinct principles:

1. The obligation to put great effort into Torah study.
2. The obligation to observe the commandments, which brings a man to perfection.

Of course, the performance of the commandments can only be perfected if a man studies Torah and understands these commandments and their value.

For this reason, the verse begins by commanding a man to put effort into the study of Torah by telling him, “If you walk in My decrees.” Only afterwards does the verse state, “observe My commandments,” inviting a man to graduate to a second level (that is, the performance of the mitzvot) by saying, “and you will perform My commandments.”

In addition, we note that the verse uses the expression, “If you *walk in* My decrees.” The verse does not say, “If you *observe* My decrees,” as it says further on: “*observe* My commandments.”

Why does the verse use an expression that signifies walking, advancing?

I reflected upon the words of the prophet who states, “Everyone who is thirsty, go to the water” (*Isaiah 55:1*), and I found myself in somewhat of a bind concerning this verse. In effect, what does the prophet teach us that is new? Is it not obvious that the one who is in dire need of water should go and drink? Will he not *run* to a source of water? Will he put his life in danger by waiting to drink?

It seems to me that the prophet alludes to those people who occupy themselves solely with earning money and amassing wealth. Having enough for today, these people feel that they need twice as much for tomorrow. A man with this mindset will seek to increase his wealth to the point that he abandons family life, and even personal life, solely for material gain. And yet he does this knowing full well that, in the end, he will die and leave all his wealth here in this world.

This man demonstrates a great ability to toil for futility and momentary gain. Water, as we know, alludes to the Torah, and this is the reason why the prophet said, “go to the water”. The prophet is saying: “Woe to all those thirsting after money. Stop right now and put your efforts into the study of Torah, which is your life, your true future.”

We see here, therefore, something that is extremely important, namely that to study Torah, one must put great effort into doing so because the evil inclination is powerful. Hence when a man decides to go and study Torah, the evil inclination is always ready to tell him: “But you already observe the mitzvot! Why do you need to go and study?”

This is why one must answer him that the study of Torah is a *Chuk Veloya'avor* (a decree that one cannot transgress, and for which no reason has been given). One must devote oneself to the study of Torah with all one's strength, for if a man doesn't devote himself to the study of Torah as he devotes himself to work – to a material undertaking for which he will earn much – he will have much to lose by it.

What will he lose if he neglects the study of Torah?

He begins, first of all, by performing the Divine commandments in an erroneous manner, and from one error to the next he will end up succumbing to the evil inclination.

This is why the Torah insists, and tells us, that study alone will not allow a man to escape the evil inclination, but rather that one must constantly improve one's ways by daily progress. Concerning the study of Torah, this must be done with effort, not done simply so as to be clear of one's obligation to study. Imagine that someone were to tell a man that in a few days he would become a millionaire if he worked day and night to perform a certain task. It is obvious that the prospect of earning so much money would give that man the ability to work without cease, removing fatigue and hunger from him both day and night, and thereby allowing him to accomplish an enormous amount of work.

Certainly, this man would find the strength to work beyond his normal abilities. The work that he is not used to doing in a week, he would do in a day, and he would be prepared to work even more for a few days. And all this for money! Yet it is like this that a man should study Torah. He should conduct his life as if it completely depended on the effort that he put into the study of Torah. We must fight against our own nature with all our might and apply ourselves to Torah study. It is not enough to observe the commandments. One must study Torah with great effort in order to merit understanding the mitzvot; we will thereby perform them with love and without reservation. From all that we have just said, we therefore see that the second level of obedience to G-d, (the level of mitzvot performance) is not possible except through the knowledge of Torah and the words of our Sages. This is because it is only after having graduated from the first level of obedience (that is, the fervent study of Torah) that one is prepared to accomplish the mitzvot in the proper way.

When Hashem was preparing to give the Torah to the Children of Israel, He gave them three extra days in order to prepare themselves to receive it. One must understand

what this means. Here the Children of Israel found themselves ready to receive the Torah in front of Mount Sinai. This was an event for which they had come from Egypt, and for which they had prepared themselves, day by day, for the last 50 days, until finally they were ready to receive it. Did they therefore need to prepare themselves for three more days before the Torah could be given to them? Were all the preparations that they underwent not sufficient for them to receive the Torah? Did they need still further preparations?

Obviously, however, when it comes to Torah study, the evil inclination is so powerful that all the preparations that a man does in lieu of this study can always be defeated. These extra three days that G-d ordered at the foot of Mount Sinai allude to the fact that everything that one can add as preparation for the moment of Torah study and mitzvot performance is always counted as gain. Also, the blessing (the gain) is greater for the man who foresees all the ways necessary to resist the evil inclination. Between the moment that a man decides to accomplish a mitzvah, or to study Torah, and the moment when he puts this decision into practice, the evil inclination is particularly strong, as it does everything it can to make a man go back on his decision. This is why the Torah alludes to the fact that when one undertakes to study Torah, or to perform a mitzvah, one should not hesitate to perform all the necessary preparations. For example, one should reduce the amount of pleasures that one partakes of in this world and in its vanities, for otherwise it is certain that the study of Torah will be difficult – perhaps even painful – because it will bring a person to tear himself away from the material world in order to bring him closer to the spiritual one.

### ***The Greatness of Mitzvot and Steadfastness in Times of Trial***

On the verse that states, “If you walk in My decrees and observe My commandments” (*Leviticus 26:3*), Rashi explains in the name of the Sages that this refers to Torah study, for the observance of mitzvot is mentioned elsewhere. Further on in the parsha it is written, “But if you will not listen to Me” (*v.14*), and there as well Rashi explains it to mean, “If you do not study Torah.” The text cited in v.14 cannot refer to the observance of mitzvot, for mitzvot are mentioned immediately afterwards: “and [if you] will not perform all *hamitzvot*.” Consequently, since mitzvot are specifically singled out, the text in question must refer to Torah study.

Now we know that someone who does not study cannot properly observe mitzvot, for they must be carried out with the intention of performing a mitzvah (*Berachot 13a*). As well, Rambam says that this intention consists of understanding the nature and essence of the mitzvah. Without this understanding, there cannot be any intention, and a mitzvah without intent has no great value.

Some of the questions that we may ask ourselves concerning this subject are as follows:

1. Why does the Torah express itself in the plural (“If you walk [plural] in My

decrees”) rather than in the singular, since we often find the singular used in such a context?

2. Why is the study of Torah called a “decree” and not a “mitzvah”? Moreover, the exact nature of a mitzvah must be understood.

We will now attempt to answer these questions. Regarding the verse that states, “As for G-d, His way is perfect; the word of the L-RD is tried. He is a shield for all who take refuge in Him” (*Psalms 18:31*), Rav said, “The mitzvot were given only to perfect created beings, for what does it matter to the Holy One, blessed be He, if a beast is slaughtered on the neck of the nape?” (*Bereshith Rabba 44:1*). The mitzvot were thus given only to refine us, a concept that must be understood.

In addition, the performance of the mitzvot leads man to recognize G-d, which leads to the fear of Heaven. How does this happen? When someone meticulously observes the mitzvot, this is a sign that they are important to him. But if he treats them lightly – in the spirit of the interpretation given by the Midrash (*Tanhuma, beginning of Eikev*) on the verse, “And it shall come to pass, *eikev* [because] you will hearken” (*Deuteronomy 7:12*), namely that it refers to the mitzvot that man tramples underfoot (under his *eikev*, heel) – this is a sign that they hold no importance in his eyes, and that he even tries to find loopholes for not doing them. Needless to say, he is far from a fear of Heaven.

A man should realize that a mitzvah is like a decree, which does not require an explanation and cannot be modified. And not only is a mitzvah compared to a decree, the study of Torah is also compared to one, as it is written, “This is the decree of the Torah” (*Numbers 19:2*). This, as well as the following, refer to Torah study: “This is the *torah* [law]: A man that dies in a tent...” (*v.14*). The study of Torah is an immutable decree, a task for which one must die in this world, as the Sages explain: “The words of Torah endure only among those who die for them” (*Berachot 63b*). In addition, in performing mitzvot, a man demonstrates that he is G-d’s servant. We find a similar idea concerning Adam. At the moment he was created by the Holy One, blessed be He, the angels thought that he was divine (*Bereshith Rabba 8:9*), up until G-d gave him a single mitzvah to observe (which he transgressed). It was at that moment that the angels realized that he was but a servant of his Lord and not divine.

This teaches us that when we observe mitzvot, we must do so in accordance with our abilities and nearness to G-d, for the Holy One, blessed be He, does not make unfair demands of His creations (*Avodah Zarah 3a*). He also never loads them beyond their abilities (*Shemot Rabba 34:1*). He is cognizant of human abilities, for when He gave the Torah to Israel, if He had done so with respect to His own power, no one could have born it, as it is written, “If we continue to hear the voice of the L-RD our G-d any longer, we will die” (*Deuteronomy 5:22*). He spoke to the Children of Israel in relation to their own power, as testified to by the verse that states, “The voice of the L-RD [is] in power” (*Psalms 29:4*). It is not written, “In His power” but rather, “in power,” which means the power of each and every person. A certain power, or ability, is thus given to everyone to serve G-d and perform His mitzvot.

Yet in this performance of mitzvot, a person must understand which mitzvah he must give priority to, which one will help him in relation to the root of his soul. We find support for this concept with the Sages concerning Moses (*Sotah 13a*), since when all the Children of Israel were busy despoiling Egypt, he hurried about looking for Joseph's casket, and concerning him it is written, "The wise of heart seizes good deeds" (*Proverbs 10:8*). Now despoiling Egypt was also a mitzvah, and "The one who is busy with one mitzvah is exempt from another mitzvah" (*Sukkah 25a*). Yet if so, why did Moses forsake the mitzvah of despoiling Egypt to go and perform another mitzvah?

We see from this that when two mitzvot present themselves at the same time, one must ask which of the two will be of greater benefit to one's soul, and which will be of greater benefit to one's body. And if it is impossible to perform both at the same time, one must choose the mitzvah that will be of greater benefit to the soul, and only then the second. It was in this way that Moses acted, for he began by occupying himself with Joseph's casket, which was of benefit to his soul, since it was by means of Joseph's casket that the sea split before the Children of Israel, as it is written, "The sea saw and fled" (*Psalms 114:3*). As well, the Sages have said, "What did it see? It saw Joseph's casket" (*Midrash Shochar Tov 114:9*). Thus it was because of him that the Children of Israel left Egypt, and they finished by arriving at the giving of the Torah.

Yet at the same time we note the greatness of the mitzvot, for it is written that Esau respected his father Isaac more than Jacob did, which is why Isaac wanted to bless him (*Zohar I:146b*). A man should realize that the performance of mitzvot alone is not enough. Someone can be known for his generosity (as Esau, who was known for his way of honoring his father), but without Torah nothing prevents him from being completely wicked! Thus Balaam, who was a great prophet – to the extent that concerning him the Sages said that a prophet like Moses had arisen among the nations (*Zohar II:21a*), a man who knew the exact instant when the Holy One, blessed be He, becomes angry (*Berachot 7a*) – was despite everything a great scoundrel. He was so wicked that he advised Balak to make the Children of Israel fall into licentiousness (*Sanhedrin 93a*). Why did this happen? Because he had no Torah at all! And without Torah, one has nothing.

Despite everything, one must think clearly, for there exists another way to elevate oneself, independent of the Torah and mitzvot. This is the path of steadfastness in times of trial. When a man overcomes a trial, he elevates himself even more. We find this concept with Jacob, who "departed from Beersheba and went towards Haran" (*Genesis 28:10*). Why did he go there? He could have sent a messenger to take a wife for him, since it is possible to marry a woman through the intermediary of a third party (*Kiddushin 41a*). However, because of the imperfections that he sensed within himself, he desired to go to the place of wrath in order to be subjected to hardship. Why did he want to do this? It was because he knew that Esau wasn't wicked enough to enable himself to grow, for Esau also studied and observed mitzvot, particularly the mitzvah of honoring one's father. Laban was more wicked; he was the father of deceivers (*Tanhuma Vayishlach 1*). Jacob therefore decided to go to Haran to be tested and emerge victorious from his trial. But

those who heard that he had gone to Haran believed that he too became wicked like Laban. Consequently, even Esau did not pursue Jacob to kill him, for Esau believed that he taken to a bad path and had become truly wicked. Now the wicked are called dead even during their lifetime (*Berachot 18b*), and he therefore considered Jacob as being dead, without any merit, and thought it useless to fight him.

However when Jacob returned from being with Laban, he sent messengers to his brother Esau (Genesis 32:4) and said, “I have sojourned [גִּרְתִּי] with Laban, all while observing 613 [תְּרַיָּג] mitzvot, and I have not learned from his behavior” (Midrash Aggadah on beginning of Vayishlach). Jacob desired to observe the mitzvah to be “guiltless towards the L-RD and towards Israel” (*Numbers 32:22*), and so he made it known to Esau that even though he didn’t perform the mitzvah of honoring his father during that time, he had nevertheless learned a great amount of Torah, as it is written, “The study of Torah is worth more than all other mitzvot” (*Peah 1:10*). This is an indication that he held steadfast during his trial.

We can draw a lesson and a rule for life from this. Whoever leaves his parent’s home and continues to serve G-d in his new dwelling demonstrates that the nature of his character has not changed. He shows that in every circumstance he will occupy himself with Torah, just as was the case with Jacob, who settled in the tents of Shem to study (*Megillah 17a*). Even when Jacob came to Beersheba after leaving Laban, it is written, “And Jacob settled” (*Genesis 37:1*), meaning that he continued to study.

We find an allusion to this idea in Parshiot Vayeitzei, Vayishlach, and Vayeishev, which all begin with the letters *vav* and *yud*. Now three times *vav* and *yud* is numerically equal to 48 (מח), which tells us that Jacob was not at all influenced by his wicked entourage, and that his heart always remained hot (מח) in the service of his Creator. For only a man with a heart that is hot can study Torah and observe mitzvot in every circumstance. Little does this matter to the one whose heart is cold with regards to observing mitzvot or studying Torah. Even if he finds himself in a yeshiva or an observant home, the warm environment will have no influence on him, for inside his heart is cold. Thus the wicked Esau, even though he lived with two Tzaddikim, did not learn from their good deeds (*Yoma 38b*), and so he left the straight path. On the other hand, someone whose heart burns for Torah and mitzvot never changes, even if he lives among the wicked, for within him his heart is always hot for the service of the Creator, and it is *Vayeitzei*, *Vayishlach*, and *Vayeishev*. Even when we leave a place of Torah and are sent away from home, despite everything there remains *Vayeishev*, and we continue to be occupied with Torah.

### ***How should one behave?***

*It is written, “My heart grew hot within me, in my contemplations a fire blazed” (Psalms 39:4), for only one who has a heart that is hot for the service of G-d can continue to observe mitzvot and study Torah in all circumstances and in every place, even outside of the yeshiva or the home. It is always for this that one should strive, for it is in this way that one can overcome all trials.*

***By the Merit of Torah, the Jewish People are Above Nature***

It is written, “Five of you will pursue a hundred, and a hundred of you will pursue ten thousand; and your enemies will fall before you by the sword” (*Leviticus 26:8*). We learn from this passage that when the Children of Israel are connected to Torah and mitzvot, they are conferred supernatural power, to the point that five of them can pursue a hundred, and a hundred of them ten thousand. However when they are far from Torah and mitzvot, a single non-Jew can pursue a hundred Jews. Because of our many sins, we saw this occur in Nazi Germany and Poland, when a single German guarded a hundred Jews without any fear, and when only two Germans guarded an entire camp of Jews, who were paralyzed and had no strength to even raise their heads.

When Jews follow G-d’s ways, the nations of the world view them with appropriate respect and esteem, which brings about a sanctification of G-d’s Name. The nations of the world recognize that it is by the merit of Israel that the world survives and receives abundance (*Yerushalmi Gittin, end of ch.5*). Yet when Jews leave the straight path, the nations suddenly get the impression that they are numerous. As a result, when Jews attach themselves to G-d and His mitzvot, they are above nature and no one can harm them. One Jew can then pursue a thousand non-Jews, and a hundred of them ten thousand.

If our understanding of this is correct, we may add that when the Jewish people pursue the straight path, G-d introduces a supernatural element into nature and raises Jews above it. In fact it is written, “For even a thousand years in Your eyes are but a bygone yesterday” (*Psalms 90:4*), a verse that the Sages interpret as meaning that one of G-d’s days is equal to a thousand years (*Sanhedrin 97a*). This should surprise us for two reasons: (1) How do things change if G-d’s day is equal to one thousand years or more, be it for Him or for us? (2) If such indeed is the case, why does G-d’s day have to be so long? And if it does have to be so long, why is it limited to a thousand years?

This is what we can say on the subject: The Holy One, blessed be He, divided Creation into six days, and each day He manifested Himself as ruler of the world (*Otiyot d’Rabbi Akiva 1*). G-d revealed himself to all of Creation to show that He is One and that there is no other. He demanded that every creature recognize Him as the ruler and sovereign of the world, and each day He derived great satisfaction and pleasure from His work. However G-d foresaw that Adam would sin before Shabbat, which in fact was the case (*Sanhedrin 38b*), and that he would incur the penalty of death. How then was G-d going to destroy the world that He had created, and to which He had given the Torah, the goal of all Creation (*Pesachim 68b*)? What would become of the world and the Torah? Who was going to study it?

Under such circumstances, Hashem thought it good to lengthen His day to one thousand years. In reality, time has no meaning for G-d. Hence when we speak of one of His days, this means that the immense pleasure He had from Creation was equal to what a man would experience if he could live a thousand years with all his days being filled with pleasure. It is in that sense that G-d’s day is like a thousand years to man, for

the expression conveys the magnitude of the pleasure that G-d received from Creation (and particularly from the Torah it contained). Even if a person sins, repentance will earn him pleasure equal to a thousand years.

The Gemara evokes this very same idea concerning the verse, “I am the L-RD your G-d” (*Exodus 20:2*): Every word that came from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, split into 70 languages, an unattainable feat for a mere mortal and only possible with G-d (*Shabbat 68b*). It goes the same for the day of the Holy One, blessed be He, which although unique, is comparable to a thousand years of a person’s life spent in happiness brought about by Torah study and the performance of mitzvot.

To explain this in a more detailed way, we know that there are two mitzvot in the Torah (honoring one’s parents and sending a mother bird off before taking her young) about which it is said, “So that it will be good for you and will prolong your days” (*Deuteronomy 22:7*). On this verse the Sages have stated, “So that you be happy in the world that is entirely good and that your days be prolonged in the world that is entirely long” (*Kiddushin 39b*). This is not the case with life in this world, which is short and filled with suffering, and in which neither days nor years are prolonged.

What does a prolonging of days in the World to Come mean? If a righteous person departs from this world and two days later Mashiach arrives, his time in the World to Come will have lasted just two days. Is that what is meant by “prolonging”? Where is the reward, therefore, that G-d has promised a righteous person regarding prolonging his days in the World to Come?

According to the preceding, we understand that the day of the Holy One, blessed be He, is like a thousand years of experiencing infinite pleasure, like a day that will be extremely long, without limit. Consequently, when a person is in the World to Come for two days, even if Mashiach comes almost immediately afterwards, he will have enjoyed pleasure in the World to Come tantamount to having spent two thousand years enjoying infinite pleasure, analogous to: “No eye has seen it, G-d, if not You.” And even if he spends only a few hours in the World of Truth, that will also be satisfying to him and a source of pleasure equal to many years, for in that world the sense of the Holy One’s majesty and holiness is so enduring and substantial that a person has the impression he is experiencing a pleasure that is absolutely infinite.

In addition, a person’s reward in the World to Come is proportional to his work in this world multiplied a hundred fold and more, so that it be as great as possible. For example, when someone lives 60 or 70 years in this world while studying Torah and performing mitzvot, it is as if he studied 60 or 70 *thousand* years, of which the Holy One, blessed be He, rewards him for every instant. Concerning such a reward, it is said, “*Mah rav tuvecha* [How abundant is Your goodness] that You have stored away for those who fear You” (*Psalms 31:20*).

We may explain that man is of the aspect of *mah* (the word *adam* [“man”] has the same numerical value as *mah* [“what”]), and the Tetragrammaton also has that same numerical value when written with *alephs* – *Zohar Ruth 102b*). The Holy One, blessed be

He, has reserved a reward for man that can be designated by *mah*, a reward that he can neither imagine nor describe. If he studies Torah, G-d greatly multiplies his reward, and since the day is divided into hours, minutes, and seconds, how many millions and indeed billions of seconds of infinite pleasure will a man thus receive in the World to Come! The Sages have clearly said, “There is no reward for a mitzvah in this world” (*Kiddushin 39b*), for the Holy One, blessed be He, multiplies the reward for performing a mitzvah in the World to Come.

Reward is therefore above nature and logic, for the Children of Israel are also above nature when they occupy themselves with Torah and mitzvot and walk in the straight path. They are then stronger than the nations of the world, and abundance also comes into the world by their merit.

### ***Learning as a Preparation for the Performance of Mitzvot***

On the verse, “If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments” (Leviticus 26:3), Rashi explains in the name of the Sages that “If you walk in My statutes” refers to Torah study (*Torat Kohanim ibid.*). In connection with this, we may say that Rashi is trying to explain the apparent redundancy in the verse, since *chukim* (“statutes”) are also *mitzvot* (“commandments”). That being the case, why does the Torah state the same thing twice? Evidently it is because two different subjects are being dealt with: (1) Torah study and (2) mitzvah observance, for in order to perfectly observe mitzvot, one must begin by investing himself completely in Torah study. Only afterwards does one come to the desired goal, namely the wholehearted observance of mitzvot in all their detail.

There remain certain points, however, that need to be clarified. With regards to statutes, why does the text speak of *walking*, whereas with commandments the text speaks of *keeping*? How does the concept of walking apply to statutes (which allude to Torah study) and that of keeping apply to commandments?

To better explain this, let us examine what the prophet Isaiah said: “Everyone who is thirsty, go to the water” (*Isaiah 55:1*). It is difficult to see what message he meant to convey by this, since it is clear that one who is thirsty should go and drink water! I believe that it alludes to a profound truth, namely that there are people in this world whose entire life consists of quenching their desires and earning money, and the more they have, the more they want. This is because “The lover of money will never be satisfied with money” (*Ecclesiastes 5:9*) and “One who has 100 desires 200” (*Kohelet Rabba 1:34*). This is so pronounced for some people that they even neglect their own family life for money, all while realizing that everyone must die and leave their money behind, as it is written: “For upon his death he will not take anything” (Psalms 49:18). With respect to this, the Sages have said: “At a time of a man’s passing from this world, neither silver, nor gold, nor precious stones, nor pearls accompany him, but only Torah [study] and good deeds” (*Perkei Avoth 6:9*). Yet despite this, these people put tremendous, mindless effort into a fleeting life by turning completely to the pursuit of money.

It is in connection to this that the prophet tells us, “Everyone who is thirsty, go to the water.” It is a message addressed to those who thirst after money and the pleasures of this fleeting life: You – go to the water! One who is thirsty is capable of drinking briny seawater, but afterwards thirst will gnaw at him and he will desire pure water even more. Similarly, one who works solely for money will thirst after it even more, yet he will never be satisfied. This is why one must put all his efforts into earning eternal life, into Torah, and if at that point he works for money within the framework of the Torah (*Bava Kama 17a*), he will profit both in this world and in the World to Come, for by the merit of the Torah he will arise at the resurrection of the dead. This is what constitutes “go to the water” – to the Torah – and invest the bulk of your energy and your thirst into it, for it is essential to a person’s life in this world and in the World to Come. Compare the word *telechu* (“you walk” – *Leviticus 26:3*) with *lechu* (“go” [literally “walk”]) – *Isaiah 55:1*).

Nevertheless, a person should realize that when he takes it upon himself to study Torah, he must gather all his strength against the evil inclination, which begins to fight within him by saying, “You already observe many mitzvot and are an honest man, so why start studying Torah?” To this a person must reply, “Torah study is like a statute [an incomprehensible law], and even if we don’t see the reason for it, we must still study.” This effort in study will lead to the performance of mitzvot, whereas if we fail to study, our mitzvot will not be carried out to perfection and our situation will not stop deteriorating until we end up completely falling into the evil inclination’s grasp. This is why the Torah warns us that it is not enough to study Torah without putting an effort into it. Rather, we must work hard in order to elevate ourselves, and in this way we will successfully create a positive change in our lives. This is similar to telling a person, “If you work hard during a certain period, both day and night, you will become immensely rich,” for he will completely change in such a case. He will neither eat nor sleep as much, and the vast majority of his time will be spent working, for he will go well beyond his normal capabilities. That which seemed strange to him yesterday will seem normal to him today, and even more so tomorrow, as if he were following an immutable law. It is the same thing with respect to toiling in Torah study, for each day we feel different than the day before, and we elevate ourselves more and more. We *walk* counter to our nature and bad habits, which is what constitutes, “If you *walk* in My statutes,” and which consists of progressing, elevating ourselves, and investing everything into Torah. We will then receive the bliss that awaits man in the World to Come, as it is written: “How abundant is Your goodness that You have stored away for those who fear You” (*Psalms 31:20*). Now there is nothing “good” other than the Torah (*Perkei Avoth 6:3*), and thus we will merit the reward described by the Sages: “In the World to Come, the righteous will be seated with crowns on their heads, rejoicing in the brilliance of the Shechinah” (*Berachot 17a*). If we have practiced mitzvot with the utmost love, we will also merit the light of understanding them.

From this we see that the second part of the verse, “and keep My commandments” (which signifies the daily observance of mitzvot), only occurs once we have performed the first part, “If you walk in My statutes.” This refers to the effort we put into Torah study, for this learning is a preparation for the performance of mitzvot.

Torah study and the performance of mitzvot require great preparation, and a person must therefore be ready to fight against the evil inclination. Before the giving of the Torah, the Children of Israel prepared themselves for 46 days in order to receive it, and they elevated themselves from the 49 gates of impurity towards purity (*Zohar Yitro 39a*). Yet if that were the case, why did they need three extra days of preparation, in accordance with G-d’s directives: “You shall set boundaries for the people roundabout” (*Exodus 19: 12*) and “Be ready after a three-day period” (*v.15*)? Had they not, at that point, already been prepared for a long time? The answer is that the evil inclination is very powerful when it comes to receiving the Torah. Thus for a person to actually receive it, he must prepare as much as possible and as best he can. This is especially true when the time or hour draws near for Torah study, since the evil inclination is even more insistent at that point, whispering doubts into a person’s ears and placing hardships before him. One must therefore *constantly* prepare himself.

This is why the verse states, “If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments,” for we must always be prepared, walking against our inclinations, to elevate ourselves and continue on. In what way must we do this? By diminishing our pleasures in this world, an idea alluded to by the word *im* (“if”). This word has a numerical value of 41, which means that we must add a little to the 40 days of the giving of the Torah (Menachot 29b) and to the Children of Israel’s preparation in the desert. This is what *walking* means – ceaselessly progressing “from strength to strength” (*Psalms 84:8*) – thus enabling us to “keep My commandments,” for we must keep, not abandon, the mitzvot.

Thus we fully understand the difference between walking and keeping, for rigorous learning is a preparation for the performance of mitzvot, bringing with it a great elevation.

### ***Hashem’s Blessing to Israel – Measure for Measure***

The expression, “I will command My blessing to you in the sixth year” (*Leviticus 25:21*) raises some questions. It is difficult to understanding the meaning of this verse, for a person normally does not express himself in such a way when giving a blessing. One would normally say, ‘I will bless you’ or ‘I will give you my blessing.’ However the expression “I will command” seems to have no meaning whatsoever.

This can best be explained in the following way: The Holy One, blessed be He, definitely does not want a person to live a life of suffering in this world. As a result, it is certain that before bringing him into the world, He has already prepared “provisions,” which are bundles of blessings that are ready to be sent to a person if he shows himself

worthy of them. When a person arrives in this world, he therefore has a choice. If he does G-d's will and prays as he should, the Holy One, blessed be He, will command His blessings to apply to him as he asks for them each day. However if a person does not follow the right path, if he does not study and pray, and if he does not perform the *mitzvot* as he should, then even if he is overwhelmed with pain and suffering, he is solely to blame for not having received the blessings that were prepared for him. In fact he alone is the one who prevented such blessings from coming into effect.

In reflecting upon this, we see that this concept is found in Parsha Bechukotai, as the verse states: "If you walk in My statutes and you will keep My commandments... then I will give your rains in their time" (*Leviticus 26:3-4*). This means that if we walk in Hashem's ways, if we put an effort into studying Torah and practicing *mitzvot*, then we will receive what we deserve – namely our "rains." Rain will fall as a blessing to give us the strength that has been reserved for us. In other words, it is through our deeds that we bring blessings upon ourselves, for if we conduct ourselves properly, they will come upon us in the best possible way. In the opposite case, things will unfortunately happen in reverse, meaning *not* for the best. Hence this is the meaning of the expression, "I will command My blessing." When we observe Hashem's *mitzvot*, He too will command His blessings, which have been kept in reserve, to come upon us according to our needs. People therefore have no reason to complain to G-d, such as complaining that they lack a livelihood, or asking why someone was struck with misfortune. In fact the Holy One, blessed be He, does not prevent blessings from descending upon anyone. Instead it is the person himself who, by his actions, prevent blessings from coming to him. We must understand this clearly. Some people might ask, "There are some *tzaddikim* and *bnei Torah* who are poor, who suffer from hunger and want. How can we say that the Holy One, blessed be He, has commanded that they receive the blessings reserved for them?"

This question has a simple answer, namely that everything stems from the fact that these *tzaddikim* desire nothing from the material realm. All they desire is to have what they need in order to serve Hashem; all they want is not to be forced to neglect their Torah study. All their happiness consists of being able to remain studying Torah and performing its *mitzvot* in poverty, as the Sages have said: "Eat bread with salt, drink water in small measure, sleep on the ground, live a life of deprivation, and toil in the Torah" (*Perkei Avoth 6:4*). Their sole yearning consists of finding new Torah insights and understanding its secrets. As a result, they have no deep connection to the material realm; it does not interest them. Such people find Hashem's blessings, which He prepared for them, in their Torah learning, which is the greatest of all blessings. In fact when the Holy One, blessed be He, sees that someone has no desire for materiality, and instead tends toward "his right hand, a fiery law" (*Deuteronomy 33:2*) – one who inclines to the Torah – He also commands that person's blessings to come from the spiritual side. Hashem sends blessings for that person's eyes to become even more open to Torah and a knowledge of His Name.

With regards to Moses it is said, “Moses descended from the mountain to the people” (*Exodus 19:14*). Rashi explains this according to the view of the Sages (*Mechilta D'Rabbi Yishmael, D'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*): “This teaches that Moshe did not turn his attention to his private affairs, but [that he went directly] ‘from the mountain to the people.’ ” In other words, Moses did not tend to his material concerns, nor did he have any need for material blessings. Instead he went directly to the people in order to teach them Torah, for all Moses wanted was spiritual blessings. This is why the Torah truly carries Moses’ name, as it is written: “Remember the Torah of Moses My servant” (*Malachi 3: 22*). When a person truly becomes aware of his responsibility in this world and infuses this realization into his being, he will no longer have any material desires among his personal concerns. Instead he will desire to remain studying Torah and to become meritorious and make others meritorious, as our teacher Moses did, and it is there that he will find Hashem’s blessings. At the same time, however, a person should be a fitting vessel to contain these blessings. In order for Hashem’s blessings to be fulfilled in him, he must prepare himself to receive them. How should he do this? The Sages show us another way by which blessings come to man: By the poles of the Ark. Of them it is said, “The poles shall remain in the rings of the Ark. They may not be removed from it” (*Exodus 25:15*). What do these poles signify?

The Ark, in which the Torah was placed, was transported by means of these poles, and they allude to man himself. Everyone should become like these poles; they should carry the Torah and support it. This means that we must be the hands of the Torah; we must attach ourselves to it. We must also be careful that the poles never leave the rings, meaning that we should never separate ourselves from the Torah. If we do separate ourselves, then Heaven’s blessings and influence will no longer have an effect in our lives. To receive the blessings that have been reserved for us, we must always be attached to the Torah, without yielding to our natural tendencies to part from it and thereby prevent blessings and Heavenly abundance from descending upon us. In this way, we will always be vessels that contain blessings.



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## *Parsha Bamidbar*

### *How to Prepare Ourselves to Receive the Torah*

As we know, the book of Numbers is called *Chumash HaPekudim*, for it deals with the census of the Children of Israel. In fact from the beginning of our parsha, the book describes the numbering of the Children of Israel, the way they were counted by tribe and family, each tribe with its standard and the entire camp according to its families. Counted were men aged twenty years and older, all who could go into the army of Israel.

There is, however, something very interesting that we see in the very first verse of our parsha. There it is written, “The L-RD spoke to Moses in the desert of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their departure from the land of Egypt” (*Numbers 1:1*). This verse gives us all the details pertaining to *where* Hashem told Moses to perform the census. Furthermore, we are also given precise details as to *when* he was told to perform this census. This is difficult to understand, for of the 613 *mitzvos* that were given on Mount Sinai, almost none of them mention the fact that they were given to Moses there, nor the date on which they were given. Yet here, the text specifically mentions these things in detail. Why such an abundance of information?

As we know, the days in which we find ourselves are called the three days of *hagbalah* (“restriction”), commemorating the time when the Children of Israel were forbidden to approach Mount Sinai. Hashem commanded Moses to tell them to sanctify and purify themselves, and to change their clothing and guard themselves from all sin, for in three days Hashem would descend upon Mount Sinai to give them the holy Torah.

What meaning do these three days of “restriction” hold for us? What is the significance of these days, which took place long ago, for us living today? Granted, the Sages have said, “In every generation a man is bound to regard himself as though he personally had gone forth from Egypt” (*Pesachim 116b*). This means that they instituted the concept of “in those days, at this time” (as at Chanukah, Purim, etc.), meaning that in every generation a person must sense what transpired at that time, what happened to the Jewish people, for such things recur in every generation. If a person does not think about what happened in the past, in the present he will be unable to receive the light that comes to us from those sacred days.

If we do not fully realize that today there is also a concept of three days of *hagbalah* – days when we must sanctify ourselves and be prepared to receive the Torah – it will be impossible to receive it! Today, too, we must all make spiritual preparations to merit the Torah, which is why today there also exists a concept of three days of *hagbalah*.

This concept is not only to be understood in a spiritual sense. We are aware of our Sages' teaching that all the souls of the Jewish people stood on Mount Sinai, and like a single person they all heard: "I am the L-RD your G-d." Consequently, the first verse in the book of Numbers brings us into a fitting frame of mind to receive the Torah. It makes us understand that things were said "in the second year." Why this specific detail? Everyone knows that the Torah had, at that point, already been given to the Children of Israel (having been given within the first year of their departure from Egypt). However to our great regret, as early as that first year the Children of Israel sinned and made a golden calf, spurning the holy Torah that had been given to them from Mount Sinai and looking for a substitute.

This is why the first verse of our parsha comes to tell us: If you are truly the Children of Israel and want to again receive the Torah – not like in the "first" year, when the Children of Israel made a golden calf and exchanged the Torah for nothing – then you must prepare yourselves to receive it in several ways. Exactly which ways?

Before all else, you must receive it "in the desert of Sinai." That is, you must conduct yourselves with humility and be self-effacing, like the desert. As the Sages have said, "When one makes himself like the desert, which is free to all, the Torah is presented to him as a gift" (*Nedarim 55a*). This means that a person must annul himself – meaning his ego, his feelings of pride – and yield before others, conducting himself with humility before every Jew. Thus he will arrive at the gift of the Torah, as he should.

Next we must receive it "in the Tent of Meeting." We simply must enter the tent of Torah study and sit down to learn, working in the Torah without having any frivolous conversations or interruptions, for the very fact that we study the Torah constitutes the best way to prepare ourselves to receive it. However for this to happen, it must also be the first of the "second" month. We must have the mindset of the "second" – not the first – devoid of pride, for "words of Torah endure only with he who is humble" (*Taanith 7a*), never with the proud.

Above all else, we must reflect upon the fact that the second month, which as we know is the month of Iyar, is also called "Ziv." Now the word *ziv* indicates vision, the act of seeing. This refers to seeing the reality of Hashem, how today He is also before us and giving us the holy Torah. If we act in this way, with humility and by putting an effort into studying Torah, we will also arrive at an unselfish vision of the giving of the Torah, and we will receive it all the days of our lives.

### ***Our Children Are Our Guarantors***

Our Sages say, "When the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to give the Torah to the Children of Israel on Mount Sinai, He asked them to present Him with guarantors. They presented different guarantors, such as the Patriarchs, but the Holy One, blessed be He, refused until such time as the Children of Israel proposed their own children." Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian asks the following question: Why did Hashem ask for guarantors? Had

the Children of Israel not already proclaimed *na'aseh ve'nishma* (“we will do and we will hear”)?

Furthermore, Hashem – Who examines the depths of our being and the hearts of all – knew very well just how great the sincerity of the Children of Israel actually was, especially after what He had done for them at the crossing of the Red Sea and even more so during the war with Amalek. Why, therefore, did He agree to give the Torah only after having obtained the offspring of the Children of Israel in guarantee?

It seems to me, if I may humbly suggest, that this can be explained as follows: Unfortunately, we see that despite the guarantee given at Mount Sinai, it often happens that fathers, as well as children, fall prey to the sin of *Bitul Torah* (negligence of Torah study). How much more so would this have been true if children had not been given in guarantee! Hashem knew that the *Yetzer Hara* (evil inclination) is very strong and would cause the Jews to stumble in the sin of Bitul Torah. In fact, it matters little to the Satan if we, the Children of Israel, perform numerous mitzvot. However if we devote ourselves to Torah study, this really upsets him. We know that the entire world exists only by the study of Torah, but the Satan, on the contrary, exists only by the abandonment of this study.

Hashem Himself said, “If they only abandoned Me, yet observed My Torah – for it is certain that the Torah will bring them back to Me!” This is why Hashem asked for guarantors; it was in order to give the Torah to the Children of Israel, since only the Torah is capable of defeating the Yetzer Hara. In Gemara Kiddushin, our Sages say: “Do you want to defeat him? Bring him to the Beit Hamidrash. If he is made of stone, he will shatter; if he is made of metal, he will melt.” Only Torah is the sword, the elixir of life that is capable of conquering the Yetzer Hara, that force which seeks to make us fall.

It is precisely this that our teachers tell us in Gemara Berachot: “A man who sees that troubles come upon him should examine his actions. If he examined his actions and has not found fault, he should attribute these troubles to negligence in Torah study.” Why? Because the Holy One, blessed be He, should have first punished that man’s sons, since they are the guarantors of the one who neglects Torah study. Hashem in His great goodness, however, warns that man by means of various troubles that come upon him, not upon his children. A man should therefore begin by examining his actions and asking: “Why have all these problems come upon me?”

Has he examined his actions and found nothing to feel guilty about? He should then attribute his problems to negligence in Torah study, for this sin is extremely grave and the punishment (G-d forbid) can strike one’s children if one continues to neglect *limud* (Torah learning). It is necessary, therefore, for a person to undertake a suitable introspective examination. How could a father not be seized with fright when recalling that his own children are guarantors? Is there a greater suffering than the anguish that one feels for one’s children?

Our Sages say that the sin of Bitul Torah is so grave that it puts our children's lives at stake. We are seized with horror when thinking about the words of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai when he recalled that there is no greater sorrow than to see (G-d forbid) our children leaving the ways of Torah to turn towards a deceitful education and culture, for they are already considered as dead (G-d forbid). And all this because of the sin of the fathers, who have neglected Torah study.

According to this, we see that Hashem in fact believed the Children of Israel when they stated *na'aseh ve'nishma* ("we will do and we will hear [the Torah]"), yet He also knew that the power of the Yetzer Hara would be so great that when it sees us studying Torah, it would try by all possible means to disrupt us in order to diminish our study. This is why G-d demanded a guarantee from us that could truly save us from Bitul Torah, a guarantee that would remind us that our entire being – our very soul – is entirely involved in this.

The Second Book of Kings recounts the story of King Zedekiah, whose sons were slaughtered before his very eyes. In Yalkut Shimoni, our Sages tell us that the Babylonians attempted to blind Zedekiah by piercing his eyes with hot pokers. Despite doing so, however, he still managed to see, yet when they slaughtered his sons in his very presence, his eyes were so drenched with tears that he lost his sight.

Each man is thus capable of withstanding the worst suffering imaginable, given that his children are not harmed. When Hashem strikes a man through his children, our Sages call this suffering *Yissurim Shel Ahava* (Afflictions of Love) and consider that G-d sends these as proof of His love.

If we could only realize what awaits our children when we stumble in our Torah study, we would tremble with fear, and no doubt this fear would help us to overcome the trials that the Yetzer Hara puts before us.

The fact that children can act as guarantors for their parents results in the parents being themselves guarantors for one another, which is the sense of the following phrase in Gemara Sanhedrin: *Kol Israel arevim zeh lazeh* ("All Israel are guarantors for one another"). If such solidarity among the Children of Israel had not existed, Hashem would not have accepted the children as guarantors for the fathers. In fact, this whole reciprocal guarantee was a preparation for the giving of the Torah. Love was needed in order for solidarity to exist between individuals, and if there had been no love between the fathers, how could there have been love between the fathers and the sons?

The Jew who remains single commits a sin that is even graver. Remaining without a wife, he cannot have children and has no guarantors for himself. He thereby rejects the condition imposed by Hashem for giving the Torah and takes upon himself a very grave responsibility.

In Gemara Pesachim, it is written that a man that has no wife is comparable to someone who was rejected by Heaven.

The story of Ben Azzai provides an instructive example. Ben Azzai was one of the four Sages that had managed to enter into Paradise, and yet he died when he entered.

He was one of the giants of Torah, and as Midrash Bereshith Rabba says, “His soul yearned entirely for Torah.” It was also said that next to him, all the Sages of Israel were considered as the skin that covers a clove of garlic. Ben Azzai was so great that Rava said of him, “Here I am in the streets of Tiberius like Ben Azzai in the paths of Torah.” And yet Ben Azzai perished because he had no child as his guarantor!

In the same way, King Hezekiah risked his own life by refusing to take a wife (because he knew by Ruach Hakodesh that his sons would be wrongdoers). In not taking a wife, he desecrated the very first mitzvah, the mitzvah of multiplying. He eventually did take a wife and had a son, but our Sages have said, “If Hezekiah had not taken a wife, he would have been punished even in the next world.” In fact, the concept of children as guarantors applies just as much in the next world as in this one.

Our Sages say: *Ben metzakei abba* (“the son gives merit to the father”). Even if the father is a Tzaddik, the son nevertheless continues to spiritually uplift the father from one level to the next.

If we truly understood that our sons are our ultimate guarantors, we would have it at heart to properly educate them in the path of Torah and mitzvot. In this way the Torah would continue to exist, for ultimately that is the goal of this reciprocal guarantee. Thus we learn that thanks to the Torah – which is *ahbut* (unifying), and which unites the fathers with the sons and together unites them to their Father in Heaven – peace in the world will soon arrive and the long-awaited Geula will occur, for unity is the key to deliverance.

### ***The Jewish People Cannot be Counted***

In the Haftorah of our Parsha, it is written, “Yet the number of the Children of Israel will be like the sand of the sea, which can neither be measured nor counted” (*Hosea 2: 1*), a verse that is difficult to understand. Today we can certainly count the Children of Israel, and besides, what is the meaning of the expression “like the sand of the sea,” which cannot be taken literally? In addition, in the desert the Children of Israel from 20 to 60 years of age were counted, which, moreover, leads us to ask why they were only counted starting from the age of 20 (*Numbers 1:3*) and only up to the age of 60, omitting the children, women, and elderly.

There is another teaching that we need to understand. The Sages have said that Moses was equal to 600,000 of the Children of Israel (*Zohar III:282b*). Why was he not equal to all of the Children of Israel (who numbered more than 600,000 at the beginning of the book of Numbers), rather than to exactly that round number? (Concerning the number of the Children of Israel, consult the book *Pituchei Chotam* on Parsha Bamidbar).

We learn from this that the principle number of the Children of Israel is 600,000, those in addition to this number being reincarnations or sparks of holiness belonging to the 600,000. As the Rashash wrote, a man should repent even of the sins that he

hasn't committed, for it's possible that his soul is connected to someone who has in fact committed them. Consequently, Moses was equal to 600,000 of the Children of Israel, who are in fact the indispensable portion of them. The totality of the Jewish community (including the reincarnations and the sparks) is including in that number, as well as the women, children, and elderly. This is because Eve was the mother of all the living (*Genesis 3:10*) and she herself was part of Adam. Now the descendants of Adam are the principle element, and the souls of the Children of Israel are completely a part of it (see *Zohar Chadash Shir Hashirim 82b*).

This is why the Children of Israel were compared to “the sand of the sea, which can neither be measured nor counted,” for each time that they will number 600,000, there will also be among them reincarnated souls and sparks that are impossible to count, and consequently the evil eye will have no power over them. In fact, when the Satan will want to number them in order to make them vulnerable to the evil eye, he will stop at 600,000 and be unable to continue, not knowing to whom the rest belong and who the reincarnated souls and sparks are connected to. He will therefore be incapable of striking Israel with the evil eye. This is the reason why G-d commanded that only 600,000 be counted, not more. The Satan would thus be unable to go beyond this, and there would be no evil eye in Israel. It is like this in every generation: The Children of Israel are not counted lest an epidemic strikes them (*Yoma 22b*), and so that the evil eye has no power over them.

We already find this idea concerning Balaam the son of Beor, who wanted to curse the Children of Israel but did not receive permission to do so. His intention was to make them susceptible to the evil eye, as the Ohr HaHaim says on the verse that states, “Who has counted the dust of Jacob or numbered a quarter of Israel?” (*Numbers 23:10*), and as the Zohar explains at length (*Zohar III:147b*). However Moses, having sensed this beforehand, beat him to it by counting the Children of Israel (which is recorded in our parsha). Furthermore, Aaron the Kohen gave them the priestly blessing (*Numbers 6: 23*) in order that they be protected from the evil eye and all harm, for nothing is worse than the evil eye. This is why it is said concerning Balaam, “And he took up [*vayisa*] his parable” (*Numbers 23:7*), an expression which uses the same term as in the passage, “When you take [*tisa*] the sum of the Children of Israel” (*Exodus 30:12*). This is a word that designates counting, his intention being to strike them with the evil eye, something extremely harmful, since it has already been said that the evil eye is the cause of 99 deaths out of 100 (*Bava Metzia 107b*). But G-d closed his eye and he didn't see the Children of Israel well enough to strike them with it, as it is written, “And thus says the man whose eye is closed” (*Numbers 24:3*).

We can also add that the wicked Balaam was a great prophet of the nations (*Sifri Deuteronomy 34:10*) and that he was mistaken. He thought that there were only 600,000 Children of Israel, corresponding to the number of shining stars, and he wanted to put the evil eye on them at the exact instant of G-d's wrath (*Berachot 7a*), for he was deprived of the power of cursing. Yet when he saw that they were several times more numerous

than 600,000, he didn't know from where to begin counting, nor to whom the others were connected. This pertained to hidden matters, for even Moses was not included, following G-d's orders, in the count of the Children of Israel. This was a very good thing, meant to protect us from the curse of the wicked Balaam and from his evil eye (see the Zohar on this). And this is the meaning of the verse that states, "Behold, the eye of the L-RD is on those who fear Him, upon those who await His kindness" (*Psalms 33:18*).

According to this, we perfectly understand the two different interpretations of the expression *shetum ha'ayin* (*Numbers 24:3*: "closed eye" or "seeing eye"). For Rashi, it refers to an eye that has been removed and can no longer see, whereas for Onkelos it refers to vision that is exceptionally clear. [Editor's note: Certain commentators say that one eye is wide open while the other is shut, an opinion also found in the Gemara (*Sanhedrin 105a*). There is thus no contradiction between the two opinions]. On one hand, Balaam could see perfectly and wanted to count and to curse the Children of Israel in order that they be subject to the evil eye, but on the other hand he was confused when he saw more than 600,000, and he didn't understand that they were sparks and reincarnations. His ability to see was therefore useless, for it is impossible to know the number of the Children of Israel, which can neither be measured nor counted.

### ***Battling the Evil Inclination: The Census of the Children of Israel***

The fourth book of the Torah recounts the life of the Children of Israel from the second year of their departure from Egypt until the fortieth year of their travels in the desert. It mentions their journeys and encampments, and particularly the times when they angered the Holy One, blessed be He. It also deals with the subject of the spies who slandered the Holy Land, and on the rebellion of Korach and his followers against Moses.

This book is called *Bamidbar* ("In the Desert") because the Children of Israel did not take on the characteristics of the desert. On this subject the Baal HaTurim writes: Why is the verse, "These are the commandments that the L-RD commanded Moses" (*Leviticus 27:34*) followed by, "The L-RD spoke to Moses in the desert of Sinai" (*Numbers 1:1*)? It is to teach us that one who does not consider himself like a desert, which is open to all – like the Torah, which is available to everyone (*Tanhuma, Vayakhel 8*) – cannot comprehend the Torah and G-d's precepts. The Children of Israel, who were known as a generation of knowledge (*Vayikra Rabba 9:1*), did not learn the virtues of the desert while they lived there. That is why the book carries this name.

At the beginning of this book, Hashem commands that a tally of the entire congregation of the Children of Israel be made (*Numbers 1:2*). Each tribe was to be counted, as Rashi explains.

Three questions arise concerning this subject:

1. Why does the Torah go into such detail concerning the numbering of the Children of Israel?

2. The book of Numbers counts the tribe of Levi, yet stops at the offspring of Kohath. It only begins to count the offspring of Gershon in the following section, Parsha Nasso. Why this interruption and separation?

3. Why does the Torah repeatedly mention the age of the tribal members that were counted, since it states at the outset that the census consisted of those aged 20 years and up (*Numbers 1:3*)?

The saintly Ohr HaChaim explains that the Holy One, blessed be He, desired to highlight the greatness of the offspring of Gershon over the offspring of Kohath, who were charged with the holy task of transporting the Ark (*Numbers 4:15*). As for the offspring of Merari, the text only concerns itself with their number; it does not state that they were superior to others.

The Rambam and the Zohar (*II:82a*) teach that the goal of the mitzvot is to teach man how to battle the evil inclination. They show man the path to follow and the actions that one must take in that regard. What was G-d's goal, therefore, when He commanded that a tally be taken of the Children of Israel? We know very well that the Holy One, blessed be He, fixed the number of stars and assigned a name to each of them (*Psalms 147:4*), and "He gives to the beast his food, and to the young ravens that cry out" (*v.9*). Therefore how can He not be interested in the Children of Israel? How can He not observe them at each instant to see who has stumbled, who is missing, and so on? The Midrash compares the Holy One, blessed be He, to a shepherd who counts his flock after they have been attacked by a wolf (*Bamidbar Rabba 21:7*). Hashem regularly takes a census of the Children of Israel to know who among them has succumbed to the forces of evil (G-d forbid) and who has remained holy.

The Holy One, blessed be He, demonstrated His interest in the offspring of Gershon, and He encouraged them to *legaresh* (expel) the evil inclination from their hearts. The text repeatedly mentions their age (20 years and up) in order to apply the phrase, "At twenty – *lirdof* [pursue]" (*Perkei Avoth 5:22*): Pursue the evil inclination and seek to eliminate it. It is in this way that we manage to elevate ourselves and cling to G-d. If the Children of Israel would consider themselves to be a desert, they would construct a sanctuary for G-d and He would dwell among them (*see Exodus 25:8*).

## *Parsha Nasso*

### *Great is Teshuvah, Which Ascends unto the Throne of Glory*

Concerning Resh Lakish, the Gemara (*Bava Metzia 84a*) recounts that when he saw Rabbi Yochanan bathing in the Jordan River, he dived into the water and swam after him. Rabbi Yochanan then said to him, “Your strength should be used for the Torah” (that is, he had the strength necessary to support the yolk of Torah). He added, “If you repent [for he was the head of a group of armed robbers] I will give you my sister in marriage.” Resh Lakish accepted to repent, and from that moment on, he found it impossible to swim in the Jordan River against the current. Later, he began to study with Rabbi Yochanan. One day, they came upon a question concerning when, in the manufacturing process, swords and knives become susceptible to impurity. Needless to say, they disagreed on the answer. Contrary to Rabbi Yochanan, Resh Lakish believed it to be from the point at which “they have been dipped in water.” Rabbi Yochanan told him, “It is true that you were a robber, You should therefore be familiar with all the instruments of robbery!” To this Resh Lakish replied, “How have you benefited me? There I was called ‘Master’ and here I am called ‘Master’!” Rabbi Yochanan responded: “What good have I done you? I have brought you under the wings of the Shechinah!”

I read a book that asked many questions on this passage, ones that were in fact very surprising and difficult to understand. At first glance, it is impossible to conceive that a tongue as holy as the one of Resh Lakish could utter the words, “There I was called ‘Master’ and here I am called ‘Master’,” exactly as if there was no difference between the two situations! Rashi’s explanation (in which he states that “I was called ‘Master’” refers to when Resh Lakish was a leader of armed robbers) does not diminish our astonishment. Is there no difference between being the leader of armed robbers and a Rav in Israel? This question concerns not only the word “Master” by itself, but by what it refers to: First of all, he was a murderer, then he became a great Rav! Rabbeinu Tam explains that beforehand, Resh Lakish knew a great many things, but that he had rejected the yolk of mitzvot to the point that he stopped studying anything and eventually devoted himself to crime. From this perspective, “There I was called ‘Master’” refers to the time *before* he became a criminal, to when he had diligently studied. Yet the difficulty of the story remains. The Maharsha explains that Resh Lakish’s response to Rabbi Yochanan indicates that the latter had offended him by saying that he (Resh Lakish) should know about the weapons that armed robbers use, and Resh Lakish responded by saying that even before he was a criminal, he knew that dipping swords or knives in water completed their manufacturing process (hence rendering them susceptible to impurity from that point on). Rashi also believes that Resh Lakish was hurt by Rabbi Yochanan referring to him as an armed robber.

Consequently, even according to the opinion of Tosaphot, we find this difficult to understand. For in admitting that Resh Lakish had known many things before becoming an armed robber, it still remains that he had abandoned everything and that Rabbi Yochanan had brought him back to Torah and placed him under the wings of the Shechinah, which indeed greatly benefited him. What, therefore, does “there I was called ‘Master’” mean?

In my humble opinion, we can explain this by the following. We begin by examining the verse that states, “And a man’s holy things shall be his. What a man gives to the priest shall be his” (*Numbers 5:10*). We know that man was created with great strength in order to serve his Creator, for he possesses 248 members and 365 tendons that together correspond to the 613 mitzvot (*Makkot 23a*). The more a person invests himself in Torah, the more light he merits, which allows him to conquer his desires. However, if he unfortunately transgresses and falls into sin, this causes a Kelipah to come and envelope his body, surrounding him in great darkness (*Zohar II:243a*). Therefore, if he completely returns to G-d with all his heart and takes upon himself the yolk of Torah and the kingdom of Heaven, he will rid himself of the Kelipah that envelopes his 248 members and 365 tendons.

Since, in fact, it is written, “And a man’s holy things shall be his,” and not simply “A man’s holy things shall be his,” the letter ו (“and”, having a numerical value of 6) teaches us that we are speaking of the type of man created on the sixth day (*Genesis 1:27*), a man in a state of holiness and purity, like fine flour, whom G-d touched with His mouth, as it is written, “And he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (*Genesis 2:7*). And since “the breath of a person comes from his innermost being,” G-d breathed into man His own breath in order to make him holy and pure so that all his 248 members and 365 tendons spiritually correspond to the 613 mitzvot. In this situation, those holy things which a man possesses belong to himself. However if he lowers himself to the level of a man, simply, and he sins, he can thereafter give all this holiness over to the priest, who symbolizes G-d (meaning that after the man sinned, he completely repented), and it henceforth belongs to the priest. G-d gives it back to him, accepts his repentance, and erases all sins, a process that calls to mind the verse that states, “If your sins are like scarlet, they will become white as snow” (*Isaiah 1:18*).

We see from here the power of Teshuvah, which stems from the effort that we put into studying Torah and into purifying and sanctifying our entire body. It is as if there had been a rebirth, as if we had never sinned. Resh Lakish said, “Great is Teshuvah, thanks to which deliberate sins become merits” (*Yoma 86b*). Thus the body returns to the initial state of holiness that it possessed when it was created on the sixth day.

All this will allow us to perfectly understand the discussion between Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan. When the former saw the latter in the river, he mistook him for a woman and immediately jumped into the water. Yet when he noticed that it was really a man, he then had the opportunity to rob him, for Resh Lakish was a leader of thieves. Instead of this, he preferred to begin a conversation with him, which means that,

having recognized his sin, Resh Lakish understood just to what levels he had stooped in chasing after a man that he had mistaken for a woman, which led him to consider repentance. Perceiving his thoughts, Rabbi Yochanan took advantage of the situation to bring him back to Torah study and repentance. This is what the discussion between them was about.

Resh Lakish believed that the thoughts he had of doing Teshuvah – in noting just how low he had sunk – had emanated from him, even before Rabbi Yochanan had spoken to him. Proof of them stems from the fact that no one has ever seen a leader of armed robbers radically change his life after just a single conversation. This is why he told Rabbi Yochanan, “There I was called ‘Master’ and here I am called ‘Master’,” meaning that even if he was the leader of a band of armed robbers when he met him, from the moment he considered repenting, *Heaven* called him “Master”. This is because it is possible to acquire the world to come in an instant (*Avodah Zarah 10b*). Consequently, when he took upon himself the yolk of the Torah and repentance, and had also sanctified himself, he was no longer able to swim in the Jordan River against the current, for Torah exhausts the strength of a man (*Sanhedrin 26b*). From Heaven he was called “Master” even when he was still a thief, because he had taken upon himself to study Torah without any self-interest involved. However when Rabbi Yochanan proposed that he marry his sister as a reward for studying, this constituted a great test for him, that of studying Torah out of self-interest! What service, then, did Rabbi Yochanan do for him? How was that useful for him? It wasn’t because of Rabbi Yochanan that Resh Lakish had returned to G-d. Therefore he owed him absolutely nothing.

However, Rabbi Yochanan believed that Resh Lakish had repented because of him, since Rabbi Yochanan was the reason that he chased after him (since Resh Lakish thought he was a woman), and it was that event which led him to consider Teshuvah. Consequently, this changed nothing if he had been called “Master”, since in the end it was Rabbi Yochanan who was the source of Resh Lakish’s about-face. And as Rabbi Yochanan had, for the remainder of his life, believed that he was the one responsible for bringing Resh Lakish back to Torah, when he later heard in the course of their discussion that it wasn’t because of him that Resh Lakish had repented – that Resh Lakish had taken this step beforehand – he also understood that Resh Lakish was angry that he (Rabbi Yochanan) had introduced into his Teshuvah an element of self-interest, and he bore a grudge at Resh Lakish because the latter was angry at him. And it was this grudge that led to Resh Lakish’s death.

Actually, the Gemara says that at the moment when Resh Lakish fell ill, his wife (Rabbi Yochanan’s sister) came to find him in order to ask that he have pity on her husband. Rabbi Yochanan responded to her by quoting the verse that states, “Leave your orphans; I will sustain [them]” (*Jeremiah 49:11*), thus refusing to intercede on behalf of his brother-in-law (Bava Metzia 84a). In effect, the wife of Resh Lakish also thought that he had repented and taken upon himself to study Torah in a selfless way, and not because he wanted marry her, for she knew that he exemplified the verse that teaches,

“And a man’s holy things shall be his,” meaning that his entire Teshuvah was done solely with the goal of sanctifying his 248 members and 365 tendons, and to become pleasing to his Creator (“What a man gives to the priest shall be his”).

It is also told that Rabbi Yochanan greatly suffered after Resh Lakish’s death, for he could find no disciple that was like him. He was sent Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedat, and whatever Rabbi Yochanan told him, he would bring a proof to support that view. Rabbi Yochanan told him, “Do you want to be like [Resh] Lakish? He would ask me 24 questions and I would give him 24 answers, but not you.” In the end, Rabbi Yochanan lost his mind, and so the Sages implored G-d for mercy on his behalf and he left this world. He had thus suffered enormously for the loss of Resh Lakish, for he had understood that his entire Teshuvah had been done without any ulterior motive, not because he had wanted to marry Rabbi Yochanan’s sister. Rabbi Yochanan knew that Resh Lakish was the living embodiment of the principle: “And a man’s holy things shall be his,” in purity and holiness. (Incidentally, this alludes to the fact that, on the numerical level, the value of the words in “And a man’s holy things shall be his,” added to the number of words in that expression, is equal to the numerical value of “Rabban Shimon ben Lakish”). Great is Teshuvah, for it ascends unto the Throne of Glory.

### ***The Gates of Torah and Repentance are Never Closed***

It is written, “Take a census of the sons of Gershon as well” (*Numbers 4:22*). The great commentators and Kabbalists have explained this verse in various ways, and I will also add my contribution.

We must be cognizant of the great power of Torah. In an awe-inspiring way, the work entitled *Noam Elimelech* speaks of this concerning the fact that the Children of Israel breached the forty-nine gates of impurity while in Egypt (*Zohar Yitro 39a*). That was the reason why G-d made them leave Egypt immediately, lest they attain the fiftieth gate. In such a case, since they had not yet received the Torah, they would have lost all rights to their existence. This is why it is said, “and they were not able to tarry, *ve’gam* [and also] they had not made provisions for themselves” (*Exodus 12:39*), the word *ve’gam* having a numerical value of 49. However, once they received the holy Torah, even if they had breached the fiftieth gate of impurity, the Torah would have had the power to purify them. This is because “the words of Torah are not susceptible to impurity” (*Berachot 22a*), and the Torah would have brought them back from the gates of impurity towards those of purity.

In examining these holy words, the idea came to me to point out that we find an allusion to this in the passage, “Take a census [*nasso*] of the sons of Gershon,” for the word *nasso* can be decomposed into the letter *nun* (having a numerical value of 50) and the word *aiash* (“fire”), an indication that even if a man breaches the fifty gates of impurity, he can rise upwards like fire by means of the holy Torah, which is called “fire” (*Mechilta Yitro 19:18*), as it is said, “at His right hand, a fiery law for them” (*Deuteronomy 33:2*).

We may even add to this that the word *nasso* (literally “count”, but also “elevate”) is made up of the same letters as *shoneh* (which evokes *shinun*, the study of Torah through repetition). This means that when a man studies the laws of the Torah and repeats them throughout the day (*Niddah 73a*), it makes him great and elevates him in all his actions (*Perkei Avoth 6:1*), which is the idea contained in the word *nasso*. He thereby no longer has any connection to the evil inclination, which tries without cease to chase after him (*legaresh*, which evokes Gershon) in order that he should have no part in the heritage of the Eternal.

In addition, the word *nasso* is made up of the same letters as *soneh* (the root of *sina*, “hate”), for a man should hate the honors afforded by an official position (*Perkei Avoth 1:10*), which buries those who assume it (*Pesachim 87b*), and he should love work, meaning that he should act solely for the love of Heaven, not for honor. This will make him merit long life, during which time he will never forget that he is attached to “Gershon,” a stranger (*ger*) in this world, all this by the power of the holy Torah.

This is what a man’s work in life on earth should be like: He should realize that as soon as he takes his first steps in the service of G-d, the evil inclination will immediately try and instill an icy attitude and despair in him. The evil inclination does this in order to provoke a man to take a big fall, for when we feel that things are hopeless, it is very easy for our instincts to convince us that repentance and Torah study are useless. Our instincts tell us that our sin is too great to bear, and that any repentance on our part will be of no use whatsoever. This is what happened to Elisha (Acher), who heard a Heavenly voice say, “Return, rebellious children, except for Acher” (*Hagigah 15a*). He concluded that he had been chased away from the world to come, to the extent that he decided to at least enjoy this world, and so he abandoned everything. This was a grave mistake, for he quickly lost all hope by thinking that there was no way for him to rectify his sins. Yet he was completely mistaken. He should have told himself that if his repentance was really not wanted, he would not have been told this by means of a Heavenly voice, a voice whose very goal was obviously to awaken repentance within him and help him return to G-d!

We may compare this situation to that of a rebellious child whose father, in order to educate him, tells him that all his children except for him will receive gifts. Obviously, all that the father wants is to arouse remorse in the child, that he asks himself why he is being treated differently than his brothers, and that he arrives at the conclusion that his father wants him to improve. He surely doesn’t intend to discourage his son, for that wouldn’t be of any use because it would only lead the boy to continue in his errant ways.

And in fact the disciple of Acher, Rabbi Meir, who also heard the Heavenly voice, concluded that its goal was to lead Acher to repent, otherwise there would have been no need for it. He therefore told him to repent and tried to convince him to return to G-d. Moreover, he knew that the doors of Teshuvah were always open (*Eicha Rabba 3:35*) and that everything depended on Acher. This is why Rabbi Meir continued to study Torah with

him, all while still sorting the good from the bad by “eating the inside while rejecting the peel” (*Hagigah 15b*). This would have been impossible if the doors of Teshuvah had been closed. We learn from here the certainty that by means of the holy Torah, it is possible to elevate ourselves once again, as if a light was returning us along the right path (*Yerushalmi Hagigah 1:7*). Yet if we now find ourselves in a very low state, G-d never chases after us, for His arm is outstretched to receive all who return to Him (*Pesachim 119a*) and He awaits a man’s repentance, as it is written, “Do I desire at all the death of the wicked man ... not rather his return from his ways, that he might live?” (*Ezekiel 18:23*). G-d doesn’t want to make anyone give up hope. He respects the honor and property of each and everyone and waits for a person to return to Him by elevating himself. The Torah also respects the honor and the individuality of the Children of Israel (*Rabbeinu Ovadia Bartanura, Keritut 6:3*), even if they have acted very badly. In fact it is written, “The son of an Israelite woman went out, and he was the son of an Egyptian man” (*Leviticus 24:10*). The holy Ohr HaHaim asks why the Torah does not mention his name, since it was because of him that a harsh decree was pronounced, and harm only occurs through someone who is already guilty (*Sanhedrin 8a*). He replies that the Holy One, blessed be He, has no desire to shame anyone, hence for all the more reason is the offender’s name not written in the Torah, where his shame would remain forever.

From everything that has been said, we note that there is no place for despair in a person’s heart. On the contrary, he should recognize and appreciate his situation if he is a Ben Torah, for he receives the Torah anew each day, as it is written, “That it should be new in your eyes each day” (*Pesikta Zutah Va’etchanan 6:6*). In fact, when a person sleeps, his soul leaves him and he is considered as dead (*Berachot 57b*). The soul rises toward the Heavens (*Zohar 1:92a, 121b*), and when he awakes in the morning he is considered as a new being, as in the verse that states: “They are new every morning, great is Your faithfulness” (*Lamentations 3:23*). He should therefore purify himself because he was considered as dead. This is why, after we have recited the blessings for the Torah as well as the morning blessings, we immediately begin to study it, for we owe our entire existence in this world to the Torah. Now if we want to be able to study immediately upon rising in the morning, we should also go to sleep after having studied Torah, not after having occupied ourselves with trivialities, as it is written, “And you shall speak of them ... when you lie down and when you arise” (*Deuteronomy 6:7*). At that moment we will be connected to Torah, whether it be in lying down or arising.

Since Parsha Nasso comes right after the holiday of Shavuot, a time when a man finds himself at the height of his greatness, we have the statement, “Take a census of [or “elevate”] the sons of Gershon as well” (*Numbers 4:22*). He becomes the leader of all the sons of Gershon by dominating the Kelipah and the forces of darkness, which are driven away (*megurashim*) by G-d after the giving of the Torah. A person must therefore prepare himself before and during the holiday, because for all Jews it is a day whose influence extends throughout the whole of the year, a day in which a Jew truly receives the Torah as it was given on Mount Sinai. In itself, it purifies matter to

the extent that he is transformed into a spiritual being. The Jew becomes master of the Kelipah, which then falls into his hands and between his ten fingers, but only if he takes upon himself the yoke of Torah. Now the doors of Torah and repentance are never closed, and this is the moment to return to G-d and to elevate oneself in wisdom and the fear of Heaven.

### *Prepare Yourself in the Corridor in Order To Enter the Palace*

Concerning the verse that states, “A man’s holies shall be his” (*Numbers 5:10*), the book *Imrei Shammai* asks a question in the name of *Tosaphot Rabbi Nathan*, a question whose response we may consult in that book as well. Yet according to what it says, we may also fully explain the teaching of the Sages concerning Jacob and Esau, who had divided this world and the World to Come among themselves while in their mother’s womb (*Tanna D’vei Eliyahu Zutah 19*). Jacob chose the World to Come, while Esau chose this world.

All this seems completely unintelligible, and for the following reasons:

1. We can only perform mitzvot in this world, for in the World to Come it is completely impossible to carry them out. As a result, why did Jacob agree to let Esau have this world? What place would remain for him to carry out mitzvot?

2. Furthermore, this world is a preparation for the World to Come, since it is through this world that we can merit the World to Come, as the Sages have said: “This world is like a corridor before the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the corridor so that you may enter the palace” (*Perkei Avoth 4:16*). That being the case, why did Jacob give this world to Esau, thereby leaving himself without an adequate means to prepare for the World to Come?

3. We must also ask ourselves why the Sages said that before the giving of the Torah, G-d came to the descendants of Esau and Ishmael and asked them if they wanted the Torah (*Yalkut Shimoni Yitro 20, par. 286*). Now we know that the whole world was created for the Torah and for Israel to carry it out (*Bereshith Rabba 1:4*). Concerning this subject, it is written: “If not for My covenant [the Torah], I would not have appointed days and nights, the decrees of heaven and earth” (*Jeremiah 33:25*), meaning that without the Torah, heaven and earth would not exist (*Pesachim 68b*). Consequently, what connection do the other peoples have with the Torah? This is particularly difficult to understand with regards to the descendants of Esau, for Jacob and Esau had already decided to divide the two worlds between them and assign the World to Come to Jacob, since that is where the Torah is found. Why then did the Holy One, blessed be He, go to Esau and offer to give him the Torah, since he did not want the World to Come in which it is found?

We shall attempt to explain this as best possible. We know that our father Jacob purchased the birthright from Esau, and he therefore was considered to be the firstborn. He thus automatically acquired both this world and the World to Come, and as a result nothing – neither this world nor the next – remained for Esau. What the latter received

was solely gifts, as the verse states concerning the children of Keturah: “To the concubine children who were Abraham’s, Abraham gave gifts” (*Genesis 25:6*). In addition, Esau receives this only when Jacob’s voice is not heard in synagogues and houses of study (*ibid. 27:22*), at which point Esau is stronger than Jacob (*Bereshith Rabba 65:16*). In fact, as long as the voice of Jacob is being heard, Esau cannot dominate him.

Thus after the death of Isaac, when Jacob and Esau came to divide the heritage of both worlds, Jacob said to Esau, “In reality everything belongs to me, and what you’ll receive is nothing but a gift.” In fact, he would only receive gifts when the voice of Jacob is not heard, for at that time Esau “may cast off his yoke from upon [Esau’s] neck” (*Genesis 27:40*). If the Children of Israel do not observe the Torah, the part that relates to the field (as the author of *Tosaphot Rabbi Nathan* explains) will then belong to Esau, which means that when Israel does not perform mitzvot or tithe the produce of the field, the nations will be stronger than them and will take nine parts out of every ten.

From everything that we have said up to now, it emerges that Esau takes as his portion that which belongs to those who do not observe mitzvot, all the rest remaining the portion of the Children of Israel. Now Jacob knew very well that even when the Children of Israel would descend into exile, they would carefully observe mitzvot and Esau would not be able to take anything from them (unless he steals it, for which he would be severely punished). Thus we now understand what portion of this world Jacob gave to Esau, and also why he gave it to him: It is a gift that is only valuable when the Children of Israel slacken in their observance of the Torah and mitzvot. This answers our first two questions.

This idea also allows us to understand why G-d offered the Torah to the descendants of Esau. It is because He wanted to remind them of the agreement that their father had with Jacob, meaning that in reality everything belonged to Jacob – both this world and the World to Come – since he possessed the birthright, and that Esau only receives something when the Children of Israel do not observe the Torah and mitzvot. G-d asked the descendants of Esau if they wanted to accept the Torah in which this agreement is recorded, to which they replied: “What is written in it? What is this pact?” G-d replied, “You shall not murder. You shall not steal,” which meant that when the voice of Jacob made itself heard, it was forbidden for the Edomites to murder and steal from Jacob’s portion, for everything belongs to him. It is only when the Children of Israel fail to study that the Edomites are permitted to take their land. They replied that this agreement was not acceptable to them, since whether or not Jacob observed the Torah and mitzvot, they lived by their sword, for that was what their forefather was promised: “By your sword you shall live” (*Genesis 24:40*). Following the Edomites’ response, G-d said to them: “If such is the case, ‘Saviors will ascend Mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau’ [*Obadiah 1:21*].” What mount is that? The Holy One, blessed be He, will remind them of Mount Sinai – the mountain where the descendants of Esau did not consent to this pact.

We can actually see this concerning the war with Amalek (Esau's grandson), who came to fight against the Children of Israel even without realizing that they had weakened in their Torah study (*Berachot 5a*). Amalek attacked them to show that he had violated the pact and wanted to fight against Israel, but he did not succeed in conquering them. In addition, if the Children of Israel assembled at the base of Mount Sinai like a single man with a single heart – completely unified – they would conquer the nations and no people would be able to subjugate or mistreat them, be it in the land of Israel or in exile, for Esau violated the pact.

It states in our parsha, “A man's holies shall be his” (*Numbers 5:10*). When the Children of Israel are holy and pure, when they observe the commandments of the Torah (among them being the removal of tithes), and when everyone gives what is due to the Priest and Levite, it “shall be his”. Their land and country becomes theirs, and other nations cannot take it from them because they annulled the pact. By way of allusion, the words *ve'ish et kodashav lo yihyu* (“a man's holies shall be his”) have the same numerical value as the expression *ha'olam hazeh vеха'olam habah shel Israel* (“this world and the World to Come belong to Israel”).

We may also answer this question to complete satisfaction in another way. When Jacob and Esau divided both worlds and Esau took this one, Jacob knew that he had to come into it to carry out the Torah and mitzvot, thus preparing himself in the corridor in order to enter the palace of the World to Come. However Jacob gave Esau everything in this world except the land of Israel, which is an inalienable possession of the Holy One, blessed be He, and where He alone reigns (*Zohar I:108b*). The land of Israel was not part of the pact, and no other people have a part in it. Now all the abundance in the world comes through the land of Israel, from where it spreads to other lands (*Taanith 10a*), such that all nations benefit from the Holy Land. Nevertheless, this is only on condition that they welcome Jews in their lands when they are in exile, and when they refrain from persecuting them. Otherwise, these nations do not receive the abundance stemming from the land of Israel, nor do they profit from this world, for all abundance comes through the intermediary of the Holy Land. This is why Esau agreed to not persecute the Children of Israel in exile, and not to fight them in the land of Israel, to the extent that the Children of Israel themselves benefit from this world.

The Holy One, blessed be He, therefore reminded the descendants of Esau of this agreement before giving the Torah, but they transgressed it and wanted to fight for the Holy Land and persecute the Children of Israel in exile. This is why G-d told the Children of Israel that they could only rely on their Father in Heaven (*Sotah 49b*) by observing the Torah and mitzvot, and in particular by carrying out the mitzvot that relate to the land of Israel. Otherwise, they would be exiled from their land because of the sin of failing to observing the Shmita year (*Tanhuma Behar 1*), for we see that the descendants of Esau and Ishmael try even today to harm us, to fight against the land of Israel, and to persecute us while in exile. Now the Sages have said that if the Children of Israel weaken in their religious observance, the nations arise to fight and kill them.

When the Children of Israel observe the Torah and mitzvot – of which the mitzvah of Shabbat is equal in importance to all the others (*Yerushalmi Berachot 1:5*) – no people can dominate them (*see Shabbat 118b*), and the nations cannot conquer the land of Israel. This is because it “shall be his” – everything will belong to us by virtue of the fact that we carry out the Torah, and abundance will spread to the entire world by the merit of the land of Israel, which belongs to the Children of Israel. The nations, which also understand the nature of the land’s holiness, want to conquer it in order to diminish its holiness, but G-d does not allow them to do so. He gives everything to us – to us, the Children of Israel – so that we may prepare ourselves in the corridor of this world to enter the palace that is the World to Come, without mentioning the fact that the land of Israel and its holiness constitute a palace compared to the other countries of the world.

### *The Virtue of Repentance and Affliction*

How can verbal confession erase the sins of the past? Sins only bring joy for an instant, as for example in the case of stealing money. When a person begins to spend this illicitly gotten gain, he immediately starts to regret his transgression, and the sin itself has a serious effect on him, as it is written: “My sin is before me always” (*Psalms 51:5*). As long as a person has not done Teshuvah, he expresses remorse. Therefore such remorse, such pain, can certainly erase his transgression.

This allows us to better understand the following verse: “A man’s holies shall be his, and what a man gives to the Cohen shall be his” (*Numbers 5:10*). Holiness permeates our 365 sinews and 248 limbs, corresponding to the 613 mitzvot of the Torah (*Makot 23b*). When a person commits a sin, a husk (*kelipah*) covers them, and he can only rid himself of it by returning to his initial state. In other words, he must do Teshuvah that is complete and sincere. This is the meaning of, “A man’s holies shall be his.” Through repentance, everything returns to the Cohen, meaning to the Holy One, blessed be He, Whose Name is thus exalted by the one who has repented. We must therefore not get discouraged after having committed a sin, nor should we ask ourselves how G-d can accept our repentance. Instead, we should realize that the pain we feel after having sinned contributes to erasing it.

With respect to this subject, our Sages teach: “In the place where the Baal Teshuvah stands, even great Tzaddikim cannot stand” (*Berachot 34b*). In fact if suffering comes upon a Tzaddik, he will begin to examine his ways. If he finds no fault in his conduct, he will come to the conclusion that his suffering is due to negligence in Torah study (*see Berachot 5a*). If even there he finds no fault, then he can rest assured that the suffering he endures is a result of G-d’s love for him. On the other hand, the Baal Teshuvah is constantly put to the test, and as soon as he decides to improve his behavior, he already begins to think of partaking in the delights of the World to Come. However when he sees that such is not the case, he experiences great suffering in recalling the sins that he committed in the past. His pain is thus much greater than that which the Tzaddik

experiences, and since the evil inclination does not stop putting him to the test, we may say that he is greater than the Tzaddik.

The Tanach (*II Chronicles 33:1-13*) relates the story of King Manasseh, who did increasingly evil things in the eyes of Hashem – even placing a graven image in the Temple – and steadfastly refused to repent. The army leaders of the Assyrian king then seized him and put him in a copper cauldron, kindling a fire under it and burning him within. He begged all his gods to save him, but it was useless. He then implored Hashem, Who answered his supplications and accepted his Teshuvah – breaking through the firmament beneath His Throne of Glory to receive it – and returned King Manasseh to his kingdom in Jerusalem (*Devarim Rabba 2:20*). Thus in the end, it was because of the suffering he experienced that he returned to the right path. It is certain that he experienced even more suffering after he repented.

The Rambam and the Ramban view the concept of sacrifices differently. In his *Moreh HaNevuchim* (Guide to the Perplexed), the Rambam explains that just as the nations worshipped sheep and lambs in Egypt, the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded the Children of Israel to sacrifice these animals to Him in order that they remember the pain they experienced when they did the same (*see Shemot Rabba 15:2*). It is this pain that encourages people to return to the right path.

As for the Ramban, he considers that the one who brings a sacrifice should feel that everything done to the animal should really be done to himself (*see Berachot 17a*). He will then bitterly regret not having conformed to G-d's will, and this sacrifice will atone for his sins. Thus both the Rambam and the Ramban stress that suffering atones for sin.

Actually, an individual always wants to carry out G-d's will, but what prevents him from doing so is the yeast in the dough (the evil inclination) and subjugation to foreign regimes (*Berachot 17a*). Suffering therefore helps to atone for sin. Once we have rid ourselves of the yeast (the evil inclination, the sin according to the Ramban) and from being subjugated to foreign regimes (the idolatry of Egypt according to the Rambam), we may erase our sins and return to G-d with every member of our being.

### ***Elevating Oneself Through the Study of Torah and Mussar***

The Holy Zohar notes the fact that Parsha Nasso is the longest in the Torah. It comprises 176 verses, longer than any other parsha. Why is that the case?

The *sefarim* provide an explanation. This parsha always falls around the holiday of Shavuot, either before or after, although generally after. Since we received the Torah on Shavuot, this is a way of telling us: It is very good to have received the Torah, but now we must seriously study it.

What does someone do if he becomes a doctor? He opens up a medial office. If someone becomes a lawyer? After he receives his diploma, he opens up a lawyer's office. It is the same here. After receiving the Torah on Shavuot, it is time for everyone to study *even more* Torah.

This is why Parsha Nasso is so long. It is to teach us that if we devote ourselves to the Torah, *we must not choose the shortest path, but on the contrary, the longest.* When we speak of a long path, this means devoting more time to Torah study. It does not mean that we always look at the clock, hoping that our learning will soon end! We draw this lesson from Parsha Nasso, which, as we mentioned, is the longest parsha in the entire Torah.

Our parsha is called *Nasso*, from a Hebrew root that means “elevation,” because the goal of Torah is to teach a person how to elevate himself. To our great regret we saw how Hitler, *yimach shemo*, sent his generals a famous letter when he decided to wipe out the Jewish people. In that letter, which people have actually seen, he gives his reason for wiping out the Jews: The Jewish people cling to their morality, and if Jews are ethical, they have a different goal than we do in the world. Consequently, they represent an obstacle in our path, which is why they must be wiped out.

Unfortunately, that was one of the reasons that motivated Hitler. He did not succeed, however, because we maintained our morality. We have always been here, and we will always remain, whether Hitler wants it or not.

This is why the Torah wants us to study it and perform mitzvot, which is what will enable us to elevate ourselves. There is one thing that we should realize, however, which is that when people see a kippah-wearing Jew spitting or screaming in the street, their first reaction is, “Look at that Jew!” They do not have a similar reaction when seeing other people doing the same. If others do something similar and people see it, nobody looks at them in the wrong way or criticizes them. However for Jews, the reaction of others is automatically negative, since it is a desecration of Hashem’s Name, for which there is no forgiveness.

When someone smokes on Shabbat, Hashem may forgive him. When someone eats something non-Kosher, Hashem may forgive him. However when someone causes Hashem’s Name to be desecrated by doing certain things, such as disturbing his neighbors, there is no forgiveness for this because it is not ethical at all.

It is this type of morality that we learn from Parsha Nasso. This morality states that we must not pride ourselves over other people, feeling superior to them. Rather, we must elevate ourselves and become ethical people, people who are courteous. We must work on ourselves in order to improve our service of G-d.

We may add that this is the connection between Parsha Nasso and Parsha Beha’alotcha. At the beginning of Parsha Nasso it is written, “Raise [*i.e.*, count] the *head* of the children of Gershon” (*Numbers 4:22*). Why does it say the “head,” rather than the “family” of the children of Gershon? It is to teach us that if we want to raise our heads, where the brain is found, then we must chase the evil inclination from our minds, as well as all the desires that come to disrupt our service of G-d. It is in this way that we will elevate ourselves in serving G-d, through the study of Mussar. This is Parsha Beha’alotcha, which alludes to Torah study, for “when you light the lamps” (*Numbers 8:2*) alludes to the verse, “the mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light” (*Proverbs 6:23*).

As we know, the lamp represents the soul, as the verse states: “A man’s soul is the lamp of the L-RD” (*Proverbs 20:27*). It is solely through Torah study that the body is sanctified, and the soul is happy to reside in such a holy body.

In reflecting upon this, we realize that this is man’s goal in life. This is what constitutes the tremendous difference between man and animal. We know that animals have no goal in life; nobody has ever seen an animal punching a ticket at a train station or one walking around with a suitcase. Even if we dress one up, like in a circus, it still remains an animal. The whole life of an animal is made up of eating and drinking, and then it dies. However man has a tremendous goal in life, and he possesses the ability to modify his nature, be it for better or for worse.

This is why the Torah teaches man to become a veritable human being, and not to change his nature toward the animal side. He must remain steadfast in his moral path, and the Torah will help to elevate him. Once again, this does not mean becoming boastful over others – especially not that! This is because the Torah is acquired only through humility, and its only objective is to teach man to behave humbly, to become calm and speak softly. This is why it helps man in two ways: It trains him to break away from his negative instincts, and at the same time it elevates him to remain humane, moral, and humble.

The Sages have said, ““Who is strong? He who subdues his inclination” (*Perkei Avoth 4:1*). They did not say, “Who is strong? He who lifts tremendous weights.” That is not strength! A man’s true strength consists of knowing how to control his instincts, to dominate his anger, and to conquer the negative side of his nature. An example of this would be a person who is wealthy, yet remains humble and does not flaunt his wealth or boast.

We learn all this from Parsha Nasso. Elevate yourself, yes, but rise above yourself – not others. We must always remain moral, humane, and humble with others. All this is achieved through the study of Torah and Mussar.

### *Can Someone Be a Nazir in our Time?*

A Chassidic story tells of a simple man who went to see the saintly Rabbi Aaron Zatzal, the Rebbe of Karlin. The man told the Rebbe of his great anguish, caused by the fact that he did not have a revelation of Eliyahu HaNavi. Upon hearing this, the Rebbe smiled and asked the man: “Who told you that you’re worthy of receiving a visit by Eliyahu HaNavi?” The man almost became angry: “What kind of question is that?” he asked. “It’s obvious that I’m worthy of it, since I conduct myself like a *Nazir*: I don’t shave, I don’t drink wine, and I never go to funerals!” The Rebbe continued his questioning: “And who told you that a *Nazir* merits the revelation of Eliyahu HaNavi?” The man immediately replied, “It’s obvious that he does! We see it with the valiant Samson, who was a *Nazir*. The spirit of Hashem began to stir in him, which means that he merited the revelation of Eliyahu.”

The end of this story does not concern us. However it is certain that the thinking of this simple Jew – who believed that he was a holy *Nazir* because he refrained from shaving, drinking wine, and going to funerals – should make us think, for really what is a *Nazir*? What does his holiness consist of, and does the concept of a *Nazir* as described in our parsha apply in our time? On the verse, “You shall be holy, for I the L-RD your G-d am holy” (*Leviticus 19:2*), the Ramban gives an explanation according to what the Sages said (*Yebamot 20a*), namely that it consists of restraining (*lehitnazer*) and distancing oneself from certain things, even non-prohibited things, and to sanctify oneself “in what is permitted.” This means that in our era as well, and for each of us, there are things that are truly permissible, things that carry no prohibition whatsoever and are in no way forbidden. They consist of neither transgressions nor sins, yet they encompass the area of pleasure, things that we can easily live without, for they really change nothing. It is precisely concerning such things that Scripture says, “You shall be holy.” Even if these things are permissible, you – a Jew – are not to engage in them if you really want to serve G-d and elevate yourself a little above this material world. Instead, distance yourself from them and sanctify yourself even in things that are permitted.

This is the nature of the *Nazir*. Who does not cut their hair? Just about everyone gets their hair cut when it becomes cumbersome. Furthermore, we know from books of Kabbalah that hair is compared to *kelipot* (forces of impurity), which evoke sin. It is therefore obvious that they must be removed by cutting, especially when they create problems for placing Tefillin on the head, as mentioned in the *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim*. It states that it is forbidden to place the head Tefillin on a thick tuft of hair. Yet what should a man do if he wants to sanctify himself, to become a *Nazir*? He refrains from cutting his hair, and for 30 days he lets them grow, thus deciding to become a *Nazir* devoted to G-d. In this way he sanctifies himself in what is permitted; he distances himself even from things that are allowed. Consequently, his nature does not reside in the fact that he does not cut his hair, but rather in the holiness and the distance between himself and permitted things. His intention is not to refrain from cutting his hair, but rather to separate and sanctify himself with great holiness.

There is more. As we know, drinking wine makes a person cheerful, as the verse states: “Wine that gladdens the heart of man” (*Psalms 104:15*). The Sages have also said, “There is no rejoicing except with wine” (*Pesachim 109a*). It is therefore obvious that a person can become joyful by drinking wine. By drinking wine, he can arrive at serving the Creator with greater joy, and is there anything loftier than joy? We know that all the rebukes addressed to the Children of Israel came about because they “did not serve the L-RD your G-d amid gladness and goodness of heart” (*Deuteronomy 28:47*). We therefore see that joy is a great principle in serving Hashem, and we received the commandment to serve G-d in joy.

However the *Nazir* sanctifies himself by what is permitted. He avoids drinking wine, and he even separates himself from the vine in order not to arouse any desire

to drink wine. This means that he serves Hashem in joy without drinking wine, but instead by studying Torah, for “the orders of the L-RD are upright, rejoicing the heart” (Psalms 19:9). We find this idea alluded to in the word *nazir*, which is formed by the letters of the word *ner* and the letters *yud* and *zayin*. *Ner* (“lamp”) – these are the *mitzvot*, for “a *mitzvah* is a *ner* [lamp] and the Torah is light” (*Proverbs 6:23*) – and the letters *yud* and *zayin* have the same numerical value as the word *tov* (“good”). Now *tov* refers to the Torah, for there is nothing good other than Torah (*Perkei Avoth 6:3*). This means that the *Nazir* sanctifies himself by performing *mitzvot* and studying Torah.

Furthermore, who among us does not know that escorting the dead is a great *mitzvah*? This *mitzvah* is among those whose fruits are eaten in this world, while the principle is reserved for the World to Come (*Peah 1:1*). If the deceased has nobody to take care of him, if he has no heirs, the *mitzvah* is dozens of times greater. However the *Nazir*, once again, sanctifies himself in what is permitted and does not allow himself to become impure for a corpse. He does not participate in a funeral, but instead elevates himself with supreme holiness.

Consequently, in our time each person can also resemble a *Nazir*. However this does *not* mean that he is already a *Nazir* and deserving of its rewards if he refrains from drinking wine, cutting his hair, and participating in funerals. Absolutely not! These are only meant to teach us that the essential thing is to “sanctify yourself in what is permitted,” meaning that we must become holy by distancing ourselves from permitted things as well. Let us inflict a little damage to our cravings for material things, all while broadening the extent of our holiness. Then we will truly be like a *Nazir* devoted to Hashem.

## *Parsha Beha'alotcha*

### *Man's Soul is the Lamp of G-d*

The Midrash recounts that Moses experienced more difficulty with regards to the Menorah than with any other item in the Sanctuary, to the point that the Holy One, blessed be He, had to show him in detail how to make it (*Bamidbar Rabba 15:4*). The same thing occurred for the hooves of pure and impure animals, as it is written, "These are the creatures you may eat ... this is what you shall not eat" (*Leviticus 11:2,4*), which indicates that He showed him these in detail. And as for the New Moon: "This month shall be for you the beginning of the months" (*Exodus 12:2*). Regarding that which concerns the Menorah, it is written, "This is the workmanship of the Menorah, hammered out gold" (*Numbers 8:4*). Moses therefore experienced great adversity, to the point that the Holy One, blessed be He, said, "Take a block of gold and throw it into the fire." He did this, and a Menorah came out by itself, as it is written, "You shall make a Menorah of pure gold" (*Exodus 25:31*), meaning that it would be made by itself. This is why the Holy One, blessed be He, told Moses, "If you are careful to light before Me, I will protect your souls from all harm." This is because the soul is compared to a lamp, as it is written, "A man's soul is the lamp of the L-RD" (*Proverbs 20:27*).

The book *Sheerith Israel* (by the Admor of Pilov-Kotzk) states the following: It must be understood why Moses found the Menorah more difficult to understand than the hooves of animals or the New Moon, since for the latter two G-d showed him in detail, but for the Menorah even that didn't suffice, and in addition it had to be made by itself. Moreover, since in the end the Menorah was, in fact, made by itself, why was it necessary for the Holy One, blessed be He, to begin by showing Moses how to make it in detail? He could have arranged things such that the Menorah was made by itself immediately, at the outset!

In my humble opinion, we can explain this in the following way. The Menorah, its branches, flowers, buds, and cups represent the body of man and his limbs, while the olive oil represents the soul, the latter being pure and originating from under the Throne of Glory (*Zohar III:29*), the most holy of places. Consequently, Moses' great difficulty consisted in understanding how a man can be made of one single piece, truly whole and perfect in the ways of G-d. And even though G-d showed him in detail that a person can work on himself until becoming perfect, he still found this difficult to understand, for every day the evil inclination is stronger than man and is trying to kill him (*Sukkah 52a*), and it is very difficult to defeat it.

At that moment, the Holy One, blessed be He, showed him that by means of the pure soul found in the body of man and which helps him, it is always possible to defeat one's desires and to be stronger than them. Yet despite all this, Moses still had difficulty imagining that man, who is dust and ashes, can defeat the stronger evil

inclination every single day – an inclination that seeks to make him transgress – even with the help of the soul that is a Divine spark.

This is why G-d finished by telling him, “Strike it with a hammer, and it will be made by itself.” This is an allusion to the fact that man should work diligently on Torah, and that it is only by this relentless labor that he will perfect himself. (The allusion is contained in the word “hammer”, which cross-references what the Sages said about the evil inclination, namely that a hammer will shatter it). Without the considerable effort that this represents, man will experience much obscurity in his service of G-d. And as Rav Israel Salanter wrote, that which characterizes Torah labor is actual sweat while studying. When we build an object with a hammer, the more we strike it, the more finished it becomes. It is the same when we vigorously study Torah: The more we work, the stronger we become in terms of controlling our drives. This is what the Midrash says at the end, namely that the Holy One, blessed be He, told Moses, “If you are careful to light before Me, I will protect your souls from all harm,” for the soul is compared to a lamp. In working on Torah, it is possible to become stronger and to be protected from all harm, since it is also stated, “For the mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light” (*Proverbs 6:23*). The Torah and the mitzvot are also called a lamp, and the one who delves into the study of Torah and performs the mitzvot is protected from the *Yetzer Hara* (“evil inclination”, as it written, “only evil the whole day” [*Genesis 6:5*]).

One may also explain the Midrash in another way. Why in fact did Moses – who what a great Sage (*Vayikra Rabba 1:15*) and who possessed enormous intelligence (*see Hagigah 14a*) – experience such difficulty with regards to the Menorah, animals, and the New Moon? In particular, with regards to the Menorah, it was not Moses who received the order to build it, but rather Betzalel and Oholiav. Consequently, even if Moses did not understand how to make it, who says that this would have also been the case for Betzalel? Perhaps he would not have had any difficulty with it!

The answer to this, of course, is the one that we have already given above, and we learn from all this how a man can shape himself into a single unified whole, to connect himself to the Holy One, blessed be He, and to conquer his evil inclination.

Everyone should learn from this that it is not easy to understand the Torah without an enormous amount of effort, since even Moses, who was extremely great, experienced difficulties in things such as the Menorah, animals, and the New Moon. For these, he put in much effort and strain in trying to understand, yet in the end he didn’t succeed and so he asked G-d to help him, which also shows us his humility. Every man should learn how to acquire Torah: When he does not understand something, even if it consists of something simple, he should not be ashamed to ask again and again. This is the only way, and it is in line with what the Gemara says: “It is from myself and from you and the subject will be properly understood” (*Pesachim 88a*). Thus, he will be able to elevate himself in Torah knowledge.

It is written, “When you light the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light towards the front of the Menorah” (*Numbers 8:2*), which signifies that if a man desires to elevate himself as much as possible in Torah and the fear of Heaven, he should invest a great amount of work into doing so. Then the seven lamps light the Menorah, which represents the body, and he will be protected from all harm and similar to a single block by his spiritual perfection. When he attains this ideal state of body and soul, he sees the Holy One, blessed be He, everywhere, as the verse states, “I have set the L-RD before me always” (*Psalms 16:8*), and everything he does, he does to unite the Holy One, blessed be He, and His Shechinah. Even in darkness and obscurity, he only feels the reality of G-d.

At that moment, the Holy One, blessed be He, also sees him in all places, follows him attentively, and protects him from all harm, as it is written in the Gemara concerning the verse that states, “all your males shall be seen” (*Deuteronomy 16:16*). The Hebrew word for “shall be seen” can also be read as “shall see” (*Hagigah 2a*), meaning that in the same way that he comes to be seen, he also comes to see. He sees the face of G-d, and G-d also sees him. This is what is said in the following verse: “The eye of the L-RD is on those who fear Him” (*Psalms 33:18*), for G-d regards all Jews favorably. This means that those who fear Him are also the ones who desire to see Him (the Hebrew for “fear” and “see” have the same roots), and desire to elevate themselves at every moment in Torah and mitzvot, in whatever circumstance they may be found.

There is much to support this idea, as for example the Parsha containing the commandment of tzitzit: “You shall look upon it and remember all the mitzvot of the L-RD” (*Numbers 15:39*). In effect, if a man wants to observe all the mitzvot, in accordance with the idea that tzitzit are considered equal to all the mitzvot (*Nedarim 25a*), he should see the reality of G-d everywhere (“You shall look”). This is also what is said in the following: “When you light the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light towards the front of the Menorah” (*Numbers 8:2*), meaning that if one wants that the lamps be lit, one should always face the Holy Shechinah. During the festival of Chanukah, we also say, “These lamps are holy. We do not have the right to benefit from them, but only to look at them,” which is to say that if one desires to feel the holiness of the lamps, the holiness of the mitzvot, one should live in the fear of G-d (as we have said, the Hebrew words for “fear” and “see” are formed by the same letters). How can one achieve this? When one feels the reality of G-d, one finds oneself in front of the Menorah.

When a man conducts himself as such, he receives from Heaven an abundance of faith to thank and praise G-d, and he feels that G-d protects and performs miracles for him. This is just like a baby that always has his eyes on his mother, and she looks back at him with mercy, as it is written, “As a nurse carries a suckling” (*Numbers 11:12*). Thus a man who conducts himself as such belongs solely to the Eternal and elevates himself without cease.

### *Wicked Thoughts Lead to Sin*

Our Parsha recounts that the Children of Israel complained about the manna by saying: “We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free of charge; and the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions. . . . But now, our life is parched, there is nothing; we have nothing to anticipate but the manna!” (*Numbers 11:5-6*). At that moment, they fell into sin.

It is necessary to understand what is happening here. How is it possible that the Children of Israel complained because of the fish, cucumbers, and melons that they ate in Egypt, while in the desert they weren’t given such food? How did they come to expressing such demands? Another difficulty: How is it possible that the generation of the desert, which we call the *Dor Deah* (Generation of Knowledge – *Vayikra Rabba 9:1*), made up of great Tzaddikim, had had enough of the manna to the point of saying, “But now, our life is parched” and only desired material food, whereas they knew that the Torah could only be explained by those who ate the manna (*Mechilta and Tanhuma Beshalach 17*)? How did they fall to the point of longing for nothing other than material sustenance?

We begin our explanation by citing what the Sages have said on the verse, “It tasted like the taste of dough kneaded with oil” (*Numbers 11:8*): In the manna, each person found several tastes, much like a baby finds different tastes in his mother’s breast milk (*Yoma 75a*). The Sages also said that G-d made the manna come down with all the flavors they wanted (*Shemot Rabba 25:3*). If someone felt like having meat, that is what he tasted, without even asking for it; it was simply enough to think about a flavor in order to obtain it. The manna was actually “the bread of the mighty” (*Psalms 78:25*), the bread of the ministering angels (*Yoma 75a*). G-d therefore demonstrated great kindness towards the Children of Israel by giving them all the tastes they desired through the manna. This was in order that they might spiritually elevate all foods, each one having a different taste.

Yet instead of using the manna to their advantage in achieving this goal, the Children of Israel tried to taste what they had known in Egypt (“we remember the fish. . .”), for in reality it was the material taste that they were interested in, to the extent that they caused themselves to spiritually plummet. This is an indication that they weren’t sufficiently attached to the Torah. Actually, someone who is entirely immersed in the holy Torah completely forgets what he has eaten the day before. If he remembers, this shows that his principle interest is not in Torah, but rather in food, and he is in very great danger.

We learn from this that someone who continually remembers his past behavior and his sins in their least detail easily risks falling into despair. This is why the evil inclination tries without stop to make a man recall his sins and the fact that he is a sinner. Certainly, one must be conscious of his sins and repent of them, but should not concentrate on their details. As King David said, “For I recognize my transgressions, and my sin is before me always” (*Psalms 51:5*). It is only in this way that one can repent completely.

We also note that after the sin of the golden calf, once the evil inclination returned, it didn't stop trying to make the Children of Israel transgress. This was in order to make them fall into despair, which was also the case as regards the manna. The evil inclination saw all the kindnesses that G-d had bestowed on us (by giving us the bread of angels in order to sanctify and purify us) and it knew that the manna allowed a person to explain the Torah. The evil inclination also observed all the other good things that were bestowed on the Children of Israel, as it is written, "Your garment did not wear out upon you and your feet did not swell" (*Deuteronomy 8:4*), and it immediately tried to make all sorts of doubts and wicked thoughts enter into their heart. It wanted to confuse them concerning the difference between the manna (spiritual food that was holy) and what they ate in Egypt (material food, savory and nourishing). The Children of Israel then concluded that they also wanted the food of Egypt.

Even so, they should have understood that all this stemmed from their evil inclination, which looked for ways to make them sin. In fact, what did it matter what the Egyptians ate at other times – wasn't the main thing to rejoice at present over spiritual food such as the manna? Yet they didn't reflect upon this, and they dropped considerably in their spiritual level. This teaches us that if a man doesn't sufficiently reflect upon things, and doesn't pay enough attention to his wicked thoughts, his spiritual state can suffer greatly.

Recalling sin can be dangerous, to the point of destroying the desire to repent. One should therefore always ask G-d to "remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellions" (*Psalms 25:7*). The Gemara contains two instructions on this point. The first (*Kiddushin 40a*) is that the Holy One, blessed be He, does not ascribe a wicked thought to the deed, as it is written, "Had I perceived iniquity in my heart, the L-RD would not have listened" (*Psalms 66:18*). The Sages' second instruction, however, is that imagining sin is worse than actually committing it (*Yoma 29a*). What difference is there, therefore, between thought and imagination?

A wicked thought is not actually considered an act, for an actual act has not been committed just by thinking about it, and if it has been, it still remains possible to correct it through repentance. But imagining a sin, dreaming about it, affects the heart and has an influence on the entire body. Now a man doesn't consider it necessary to repent of an imperfection of the heart, which is what makes it so serious. He takes joy in his daydreams, which brings about a great spiritual fall. One must therefore avoid such fantasies and remedy them immediately. In the desert, the Children of Israel recalled what they had eaten in Egypt, enjoying these impure foods in their imagination so much that their hearts and thoughts were affected, resulting in their stern protests against Moses.

Each person should therefore purify his thoughts, which will allow him to be elevated. This is what we observe at the end of the account concerning Tziporah: "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses regarding the Cushite woman he had married" (*Numbers 12:1*). Tziporah was called a "Cushite woman" (eminently beautiful) because

everyone recognized her beauty, which alludes to her beauty both in appearance and deeds (*Tanhuma 96:13*). How were her deeds beautiful? Apparently, she could have protested against her husband Moses because he had separated himself from her for the sake of the community (a decision that G-d had approved – *Shabbat 87a*), and she probably would have wished to continue living with him. However, she didn't at all complain, and she kept herself from all harmful imaginations and wicked thoughts concerning her husband, which is why she was called beautiful both in appearance and deed. In fact, wicked thoughts bring about sin, whereas holy thoughts elevate a man.

### *The Greatness of Humility*

Concerning the verse, “Now the man Moses was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth” (*Numbers 12:3*), the commentators ask a well-known question: How is it possible that our teacher Moses did not refuse to record such a verse in the Torah, given that he was so humble? And even if that did not bother him, how could he write that he *himself* was the most humble of all men?

There is an opinion which states that the last eight verses of the Torah (concerning the death of Moses) were not written by Moses at G-d's command, but by Joshua (*Bava Batra 15a*). Since those eight verses contain compliments about Moses, we may also question why Moses did not ask G-d that someone else should write the verse before us (*Numbers 12:3*) as well, rather than himself.

To explain, let us begin with the teaching of the Sages concerning the time that the Children of Israel committed the sin of the golden calf (*Shemot Rabba 47:14*). It was at that point that G-d wanted to exterminate them, yet Moses stood before Him with the following argument: “When You gave me the Torah, You said, ‘I am the L-RD your G-d ... you shall have no other gods before Me’ [*Exodus 20:2-3*]. You spoke to me in the singular, not in the plural. Therefore why are You accusing the Children of Israel, who are many, since You said nothing to them? It was to me that You spoke, not to them.”

Since we are on the subject, we should explain why G-d referred to Himself by the word *Anochi* rather than *Ani*. By doing this, He wanted to teach the Children of Israel during this great event that if they wanted to accept the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven and the Torah, each of them should annul their ego (*anochiut*) and the pride embedded within them, for the Holy One, blessed be He, cannot dwell with one who is proud (*Erchin 15b*). All forms of arrogance are abominable to Him, and He alone is elevated, as Scripture relates (*Psalms 93:1*). The Torah can only be acquired by modesty (*Perkei Avoth 6:5[6]*), and a person should direct all his pride to walking in G-d's ways, as it is stated concerning King Jehoshaphat of Judah: “His heart was elevated in the ways of the L-RD” (*II Chronicles 17:6*).

I have seen in the book *Sichot Mussar*, by the Gaon Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz *Zatzal*, that in the future nature as we know it will be abolished and become what it was like when the Torah was given. At that point, pride will no longer rule over any of the

Children of Israel, for in leaving Egypt they had eliminated the 49 levels of impurity (Zohar Chadash Yitro 39a) and elevated themselves to the highest degree, to the point of abolishing all their evil instincts. They performed each mitzvah easily and naturally, as it is written: “This is my G-d, and I will magnify Him” (*Exodus 15:2*), meaning that we should be spotless before Him by performing mitzvot (*Shabbat 133b*), all this in humility. In addition, the Children of Israel annihilated all the evil that was within them, to the extent that the Sages said that when the Torah was given, the evil inclination was torn out of their hearts (*Zohar I:52a, 56a, 63b*). It was only with the sin of the golden calf that it returned to them.

This is the meaning of nature being abolished in the future: Nature alludes to wicked character traits, for the word *hateva* (“nature”) has the same numerical value as *Elokim*, the Name that represents G-d’s strict justice (*Zohar III:30b*). Thus in the future evil will be annulled, as well as strict justice, and all that will remain will be good, in that every good thing is pleasing to G-d. If a person will change his nature and commit evil deeds, the Shechinah will distance itself from him. Furthermore, when G-d created the world He fashioned it in such a way that it operates on the laws of nature, not by miracles. We know that modifications to this process by means of miracles (the splitting of the sea, etc.) were already known at the time of Creation, G-d having imposed on Creation the condition that everything should remain secret. However for the Tzaddikim, the laws of nature do not apply, since they can annul them (“the Tzaddik decrees, and the Holy One executes” – *Moed Katan 16b*). In fact, it is clear that they annul all evil and only do good, at which point the Holy One, blessed be He, also annuls nature for them.

What we have said up to now allows us to understand why it was Moses himself who wrote the phrase, “Now the man Moses was exceedingly humble.” When the sin of the golden calf occurred, Moses asked the Holy One, blessed be He, to forgive the Children of Israel, otherwise “Erase me now from Your book that You have written” (*Exodus 32:32*). That was said in the same spirit as, “And if this is how You deal with me, then kill me now” (*Numbers 11:15*), for it was only to Moses that G-d used the word *Anochi*, not to the Children of Israel. Therefore Moses implored G-d not to kill them, but rather to forgive them. The Holy One, blessed be He, responded with the statement, “I have forgiven according to your word” (*Numbers 14:20*), meaning that it was precisely “according to your word” – not because of their prayers – but because of what you said. In other words: “I spoke only to you, not to them, to the extent that they fell into this sin.” Thus when G-d told Moses to write, “Now the man Moses was exceedingly humble,” he certainly began by refusing to do so, and it is also possible that he asked the Holy One, blessed be He, that the person who would write the last words of the Torah should also write these ones.

On this point, however, the Holy One used a weighty argument against Moses: “Given that I annulled the decree concerning the sin of the golden calf because of your words – ‘It was to me that You spoke, not to them’ – know that I took the initiative when I said *Anochi*, not *Ani*, in order to teach that a person must annul his own pride. If you

merited receiving the Torah, this means that you are truly humble and have reached the level whereby you have annulled all your negative character traits. Therefore no harm will come to you if you write, ‘Now the man Moses was exceedingly humble.’”

This was in the same spirit as the verse, “Remember the Torah of Moses My servant” (*Malachi 3:22*), for G-d told Moses, “Given that you diminished yourself, the Torah will carry your name” (*Shabbat 89a*). Humility was so deeply rooted in Moses that he could write concerning himself, “Now the man Moses was exceedingly humble.” Although the Holy One, blessed be He, knew that Moses had said what he did to protect the Children of Israel, this gave Him an argument to use against Moses.

Let us continue with the same subject. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, “How can you want that My words concern only you and not the Children of Israel, since the first word, *Anochi* – ‘*Anochi* [I] am the L-RD your G-d ... Who brought you out of the land of Egypt’ [*Exodus 20:2-3*] concern all the Children of Israel who were slaves in Egypt? In addition, these words were not addressed to you, for you are part of the tribe of Levi, and it is known that the tribe of Levi was not reduced to slavery [*Shemot Rabba 5:20*]. It is you who wants that I should interpret these passages as concerning you in order to save the Children of Israel. Therefore write the passage, ‘Now the man Moses was exceedingly humble,’ for in reality you have attained great humility, and you are the intermediary between Myself and the Children of Israel to give them the Torah” (*Yerushalmi Megillah 7*).

However in reality, the evil inclination was extremely powerful before the giving of the Torah. We know that the holy Patriarchs fought against it in horrendous battles and by extraordinary means, for they suffered greatly because of it. Abraham fought against the Satan by his generosity, Isaac by severity and generosity, and Jacob primarily by the study of Torah, as it is written: “Grant truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham” (*Micah 7:20*), and truth always designates the Torah (*Tanna D'vei Elyahu Zutah 21*). Jacob also fought the evil inclination by his Divine service and generosity. Now we know that the deeds of the Patriarchs are signs for their children (*see Sotah 34a*), and that whoever is greater than his fellow has a greater evil inclination than him as well (*Sukkah 52a*). In addition, the Sages have said that it was by the merit of our father Jacob, whose face appears on the Throne of Glory, that Abraham was born and saved from Nimrod’s fiery furnace (*Bereshith Rabba 63:2*). Consequently, Jacob had a very difficult fight against the Satan. Next it was our teacher Moses who came and fought against the evil inclination. We therefore see that when the Children of Israel were in Egypt, the evil inclination was very powerful, but they were saved due to their solid character traits and the fact that they preserved their Jewish characteristics by not changing their names and other customs (*Vayikra Rabba 32:5*). They were also perfectly united, and as we know they gathered the sparks of holiness that had fallen from Adam (*see Ohr HaChayim on Genesis 49:9*). This is why the evil inclination was uprooted from their hearts at the giving of the Torah, and even though it later returned, it was not with the same intensity as before, for the Torah was already acting as an antidote and weapon against it (*Kiddushin 30b*).

If we devote ourselves to the Torah, and particularly to acquiring the same humility as Moses, we can easily conquer the evil inclination, and the power of the Satan will actually diminish more and more, until our redeemer arrives, soon and in our days. Amen.

### *Concerning Lashon Harah*

We have already seen the passage that describes Miriam speaking ill of Moses because of his black wife (*Numbers 12:1*). It is a passage that presents some difficulties.

How can we possibly imagine that the prophetess Miriam – who saved Moses and stood at a distance to see what would happen to him (*Exodus 2:4: Sotah 9b*) – could speak ill of her brother, the father of the prophets, concerning his black wife, and furthermore that she was punished for it? Miriam was undoubtedly aware that Moses had separated himself from his wife in order to attend to public matters, and particularly to speak with the Holy One, blessed be He. To that end, Moses' prayers were very short, as evidenced by the fact that in praying for his sister (who had been struck by leprosy and was as white as snow), Moses was content with simply saying: "Please, L-RD, heal her now" (*Numbers 12:13*). This is because he had to continuously annul severe judgments. If he separated himself from his wife, it was therefore not for his honor, but for G-d's. Moses was ready each time that the Holy One, blessed be He, desired to call him. Why then did Miriam speak ill of him?

We recite in the Shabbat morning service that Moses rejoiced in the gift (the Torah) that he was given, for "You called him a faithful servant." In other words, the joy and happiness that Moses experienced were not due to the fact that he was a great prophet and had brought the Children of Israel out of Egypt, but rather because he was called the faithful servant of his Master, as it is written: "Not so is My servant Moses. In My entire house he is the trusted one" (*Numbers 12:7*). Due to his immense humility, he felt that he was G-d's servant for the Children of Israel. He also had the merit of speaking with G-d on many occasions, and he rejoiced in clinging to his Creator's attributes: Mercy, leniency, etc (*Shabbat 133b*). That was the primary source of Moses' happiness. In a certain way, we may say that he was rich because he was satisfied with his lot (*Perkei Avoth 4:1*).

As for Miriam, she was one of Israel's seven prophetesses (*Megillah 14a*). It was Miriam who led the women and transmitted to them the instructions that she heard from Moses her brother. She heard Hashem's voice speaking to him, and it was because of her that the Israelites drank from the well during their journeys in the desert (*Taanith 9a*). In fact it was Miriam who separated the women from the men at the Song of the Sea (*Exodus 15:20*). Endowed with so many virtues, how could Miriam speak ill of Moses?

The reason is that when Hashem created *adam* (man) He said, "I will make him a helper corresponding to him" (*Genesis 2:18*), which our Sages interpret as meaning that if a man is worthy, she will be a help for him; if not, she will be against him (*Yebamot 63a*). We see by practical experience that when a Jew strives to intensify his Torah study and

fear of G-d, his wife in general aids him, even if she is not fully observant. Hence if he is worthy, he will be helped. However if he is not worthy and does not aspire to live a life filled with holiness, she will make him suffer, even if she is fully observant. This is why King Solomon said, “I find more bitter than death the woman” (*Ecclesiastes 7:26*).

As a result, since Moses was the leader of the generation – a Tzaddik, the foundation of the world (*see Proverbs 10:25*), with the Divine Presence speaking from his throat (*Zohar III: 232a*) – his wife Tzipporah certainly helped him to constantly elevate himself until he arrived at the greatest of levels.

Aaron and Miriam asked: Did Hashem speak to Moses just to prevent him from having relations with his wife? Did He not speak to us as well? Nevertheless we continue to elevate ourselves, even though each of us is still married. Thus if Hashem speaks face to face with Moses [*see Numbers 12:8*] and he does not cease elevating himself, it is clear that with Tzipporah’s help he could have attained even more sublime levels.

Nevertheless, it was essentially due to his humility that this man, this *Ish* (a title of greatness) Moses, found grace in Hashem’s eyes and could elevate himself to such an extent. Thus the goal of Miriam and Aaron was not to speak ill of him, but on the contrary to highlight his wife’s assistance, thanks to whom he elevated himself. Furthermore, they said that Moses should not have separated himself from his family, just as they had not done.

Yet in some way this constituted Lashon Harah, for Miriam did not speak directly to Moses. Instead, she spoke before her brother Aaron, and as we know, Moses’ wife Tzipporah was also with them. If she and Aaron did not respond, it was because they had no intention of relating the conversation to Moses. By mentioning the fact that Hashem had also spoken with her, Miriam truly demonstrated her pride. This was in contrast to Moses, whose humility was legendary. Thus the criticism that Miriam expressed in pride is also termed Lashon Harah, even if she had only good intentions regarding her brother. Miriam was struck by leprosy in order for everyone to draw a lesson from it (*Tanhuma 96:13*) and to realize the gravity of Lashon Harah, even if said with the sole intention of helping the person in question, and even if does not bother him in the least.

Another explanation may be offered for what Miriam said. In affirming that Hashem spoke to them as well, Miriam seemed to be saying that it due to *their* merit that Moses reached such a high spiritual level, almost as if she were stating: I waited for him by the river. It was I who took him from Batiah and brought him to nurse with a Jewish woman [who turned out to be Moses’ own mother, Jochebed]. You too Aaron, you rejoiced when you went out to meet him, as it is said: “When he sees you, he will rejoice in his heart” [*Exodus 4:14*]. You agreed that he should be your leader, as well as the leader of all the Jewish people. Since Moses lived in Midian for 60 years, the Children of Israel did not recognize him [*Ramban and Rashbam on Exodus 2:23*]. It was therefore because of you and I that he ascended to the level of being the leader of the generation. It was through us and because of our merit that Hashem spoke to Moses! If we elevated him

without having to separate ourselves from our families – yet we still maintained our high spiritual level – why must he separate himself from his wife and act differently than we do?

The Holy One, blessed be He, responded to Aaron and Miriam: It is true that you both elevated him, however there is no connection between the fact that he became the leader of the generation and the fact that he separated himself from his wife. He attained such a degree of humility primarily because he exerted tremendous effort in refining his character traits. His wife certainly helped him, but now that he has acquired the virtue of humility, he needs nothing more from her, and there is nothing that she can teach him.

One who begins a mitzvah, he is told to complete it. Yet one who abstains from doing so will end up burying his wife, the Talmud teaches (*Yerushalmi Pesachim 10:5*). Why such a severe punishment (*Sotah 13b*)? What sin did the wife commit such that her husband did not finish a mitzvah that he started?

The explanation is that if one begins to perform a mitzvah, this is an indication that he is upright and being helped from Heaven to begin undertaking it. It is therefore incumbent on him to finish it, for otherwise he disgraces it by leaving it incomplete. If he does not really complete it, his punishment will be severe. Actually, if he begins a mitzvah, his wife will help him to perform it. In the event that he does not finish it, his wife will no longer be there to help him, for he will have buried her. This is what we saw earlier: If a man is not worthy, his wife will be against him. In our case, his wife will bring accusations against him in the Celestial Court, for she will have died because he did not finish performing his mitzvah.

As a result, it is forbidden for two individuals to speak Lashon Harah about a third, even if good things are also spoken of him. This is a case of undesirable reprimand, brought about by pride and which can lead to Lashon Harah. This is what our Sages call *Avak Lashon Harah*, the dust of Lashon Harah (*Bava Batra 164b*).

When the spies saw that Miriam was struck with leprosy (since she has spoken Lashon Harah against Moses), they should have drawn a lesson from it. They should not have spoken ill of Eretz Israel, the land that Moses longed to enter in order to perform the mitzvot that depend on it (*Sotah 14a*). Since they did not draw this lesson, they were severely punished by not having a part in the World to Come (*Sanhedrin 108a*), for they spoke ill of a land in which we can perform numerous mitzvot, such as the selection of a king, the bringing of first fruits, the construction of the holy Temple, and wiping out the memory of Amalek from under Heaven (*Sanhedrin 20b*). In this way they demonstrated that they were opposed to the Divine Presence dwelling among them, preferring instead the presence of Amalek, the incarnation of pride. Thus they were opposed to G-d's Name and the Celestial Throne being complete, something that would only happen after Amalek's memory was erased.

The spies are called heretics because they denied the mitzvot (*Sanhedrin 99b*). All this was a result of their pride, their desire to be princes of the Children of Israel. The spies

did not think of their offspring's fate in the desert, for one who is arrogant never thinks of others, and the Holy One, blessed be He, cannot live with such a person (*Sotah 5a*).

### ***A Love For Food is Very Dangerous!***

Our Parsha recounts one of the sins that the Children of Israel committed in the desert, which we term *chet ha-mitonenim* ("the sin of the complainers"). While in the desert, the Children of Israel merited having Hashem provide them with everything they required. They had no need to go looking for food during that time, for everything came to them directly, to the door of each person's tent. In the desert they had spiritual nourishment, the manna, which was completely absorbed by all their bodily members (*Yoma 75b*), and in this food they tasted every flavor that existed.

Yet therein lay their great sin. For 40 years they ate the same nourishment, the same kind of food, yet they wanted something else. What did they say? "We remember the fish that we used to eat in Egypt for free, the cucumbers and the melons..." (*Numbers 11:5*). This was extremely serious. In the manna they tasted every possible flavor, including obviously the taste of cucumbers, melons, and so on. Therefore why did they suddenly want to eat such food? The answer is that those who complained about the manna were certainly not among the *tzaddikim* of the generation. Those evildoers certainly did not task all the flavors in the world when they ate the manna, and even if they tasted a little in it, they complained for another reason: We don't want to eat food with spiritual flavor! We want to taste material food; we want to see onions, cucumbers and melons with our own eyes. We don't want to believe that there's the taste of melons in the food we're eating. We want real melons! Why? Our physical innards are incapable of containing spiritual food.

Let us think for a moment: What is the difference between someone who devotes himself to Torah and his entire being is oriented toward spiritual endeavors, and someone who is completely immersed in a material life? The one occupied with Torah is not at all worried about his sustenance. He does not even remember what he ate the previous day, and if he does remember, he will not give much thought or ascribe importance to it. Such is not the case for one who is immersed from head to toe in the desires of this world, especially in a love for food. This person deeply contemplates dinner plans, from appetizers to desserts, and perfectly remembers what he ate the previous day, and knows what he will eat on the next day. Such a person constantly demands and asks for material things, for material nourishment. He wants to see it with his very eyes.

It is not without reason that there have been *tzaddikim* – and we find such people even today – who when eating during the week would say, "I'm eating to acquire strength to serve the Creator." Then on Shabbat, with each mouthful they consume, they would say, "I'm eating in honor of the holy Sabbath." Such people only speak and concern themselves with spiritual matters, with elevating themselves spiritually.

As for other people, their conversations and concerns revolve around food, around various dinner plans. These people are even capable of selling everything that is precious and holy for “a good meal that is worthy of the name.” They are even capable of complaining about the spiritual nourishment that existed in the desert, the “bread of the mighty.”

Therein lay the sin of those who complained in the desert, and it was not by accident that they ended up sinning. The same people who complained about the manna in the desert had certainly absorbed the faults of the Egyptians. They were certainly among those who mixed among the Egyptians, going to their theaters and circuses (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 1*), and there they certainly saw the “good food” of the Egyptians. This is why, when they arrived in the desert, they saw that there was *nothing there*. Where had all the good food gone? Where were all the dinner plans that served to feed the body? This is why they arose to demand the same kind of food they had seen in Egypt, for it was only that kind of food that they were inclined to eat.

To our great shame, it is possible to find such people today as well. There exist people today in whom a love for food burns like poison. Base faults, deeply rooted within such people, lead them to focus their full attention on meals, nourishment, dinner plans – on various kinds of food – everything except spiritual matters.

At this point things truly become disgraceful. All 248 limbs and 365 sinews of such people are invested in the food before them, and with what obvious desire do they discuss it! If that were not enough, they seek out appetizing food from morning till night, and if they cannot find it in a certain place, they will unfortunately risk going elsewhere to find such food, which may easily turn out to be unkosher.

Furthermore, even people who care about outward appearances, who are important in their own eyes, are liable to become ensnared by the evil inclination. Do they not remember the last wedding they went to, when they saw how honorable people “pounced” on the best food? It may be that they had not seen such eating habits in a long time, since the time when poverty was prevalent in society.

We must learn a lesson from the sins of those who complained in the desert. First of all, we must realize that our glory does not depend on material sustenance. We must not expend all our energies on material food, nor should we think about it excessively. Instead we must take the decision to follow in the footsteps of the generation of the desert, the ways of the *tzaddikim*, whose purpose in life was the holy Torah. At that point the food we eat will be like the manna, bread from Heaven. Amen, may it be so.

## *Parsha Shelach*

### *Eretz Israel is Acquired Through Trial and Effort*

One the verse that states, “Send for yourself men” (*Numbers 13:2*), Rashi writes in the same of the Sages: “‘Send for yourself.’ if you judge them useful, you may send them if you want to. Myself, I do not order you to do so.” One may refer to what commentators have said concerning this subject, since it is not within the scope of this article to deal with the subject in depth.

However, there are several points that we should try to understand:

1. If the Holy One, blessed be He, did not command Moses to send the spies, why then did he do so?

2. It must be understood why Moses gave Hoshua bin Nun the name Yehoshua (“Joshua” – *Numbers 13:16*). Moses added the letter *yud* to his name and prayed that G-d protect him from the evil designs of the spies. He therefore knew that they had evil plans and would relate wicked things about Eretz Israel, as the Sages in fact confirmed by their statement: “Their going is compared to their coming” (*Sotah 35a*), which implies that they left with harmful intentions. In such a case, why did Moses send them?

3. The most difficult question of all concerns the following statement: “They were all distinguished men; they were heads of the Children of Israel” (*Numbers 13:3*). At that point their intentions were still good (as Rashi writes). Consequently, how is it possible that all of a sudden they damaged the holiness of both themselves and the land by means of slander?

Let us try to explain all this as best we can. Moses was afraid to have all the Children of Israel enter into Eretz Israel at one time because he knew that there were giants living there. If everyone entered, the fear they would experience would greatly weaken them, and they would begin to speak badly of the Holy Land even while in it. This risked bringing about a great punishment, from which thousands of the Children of Israel would have died as a result, not to mention the punishment that future generations would have experienced.

This is why Moses decided to send the spies to observe the land. He told them that there were giants and other curious things in the land, but added that there was nothing to fear. In reality, Moses wanted to battle the enemy by natural means, without having to resort to G-d’s help. Now to wage war by natural means, a precise plan is required. Moses therefore thought that these spies could prepare a battle plan for fighting against the enemy in Eretz Israel, and that in this way all the Children of Israel would be encouraged and fight like lions. Yet despite all this, he still felt that the spies were not very strong, for they were not yet accustomed to normal living, meaning that they were not used to a life which comprises trials that must be overcome when there is no way to avoid them. Moses perceived their weakness in this area.

This is why the spies were righteous while they were still in the camp. However the great trial began when they had to leave, for they knew that if they entered Eretz Israel, they would lose their positions as commanders. Thus for them, it was a formidable test to renounce their status for the good of the Children of Israel (and even to report nothing but good things concerning the land), in order to be of service to their brothers who suffered in the desert. However, Moses was cognizant of their weakness, and doubted if they would be capable of renouncing their status. This is why he decided to conduct himself according to the natural order of things in exploring the land in order to prepare a battle plan, a plan in which the spies (who were commanders) would also participate. They would have therefore learned to confront their pride, lowering themselves for the sake of all the Children of Israel, and reporting good things about the land. Even if they were to have encountered strong people, or giants, in Eretz Israel, they would not fear because “the L-RD is a man of war,” and with His help one can conquer the enemy.

This is why Moses asked them to see how “the land is that they dwell in ... and how the cities are in which they dwell; are they open or are they fortified” (*Numbers 13:19*). He wanted to know all this in order to follow the natural order of things. If they had fortified cities, heavy armament would have been required, and if they had open cities, the army’s requirements would be less. Despite everything, he decided that it was good to add the letter *yud* to the name of Hoshua, for he suspected the weakness of the spies and didn’t want Joshua to be influenced by them to his detriment. Moses wanted to spare him from acting out of pride (as did the spies) for pride is proper only for G-d, as it is written, “The L-RD has reigned. He has donned pride” (*Psalms 93:1*). Moreover, the Hebrew word *gaavah* (“pride”) has the numerical value of 15, meaning that of the Divine Name *Yud – Hei*. This is what Moses told Joshua, namely “May G-d [*Yud – Hei* ] protect you from the evil designs of the spies, in order that you not become proud.”

Consequently, we understand everything. Moses did not want to bring the Children of Israel into Eretz Israel under a cloud of testing and slander, which is why he sent the spies (who at that time were upright and just men) even though Moses knew that they were already morally weak. One finds an allusion to this in the words *shelach lecha* (“send for yourself”), for *shelach* (“send” – שלח) is formed from the same letters as *chalah* (“weak” – חלש). He therefore wanted to strengthen their faith in G-d and send them to observe the land to prepare combat plans according to the natural order of the world.

In reality, since the text relates that the spies stayed in the land for 40 days (*Numbers 13:25*), this proves that they themselves loved Eretz Israel. If the opposite had been true, they could have immediately come back to Moses and told him, “We came into this land and saw the Nephalim there, descendants of giants. As well, we saw enormous fruits and were terrified. This is why we came back right away without delay.” If they stayed there for 40 days, it was because they themselves loved Eretz Israel. They were good and upright at the start of their journey, for in their hearts they were attached to

the land, even if they later maligned it. Nevertheless, they were weak, which led them to pride and the desire for honor, which was the cause of the terrible catastrophe that stuck all the Children of Israel in the desert, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua. These two were self-effacing before Moses, affirming that the war depended on the Eternal and that “they [the inhabitants of the land] are our bread. Their protection has departed from them and the L-RD is with us” (*Numbers 14:9*). These two were protected from harm.

And if we are correct, this explains the connection between Parsha *Beha'alotcha* and Parsha *Shelach*.

Rashi writes in the name of the Sages: “Why does the account of the spies follow Parsha *Beha'alotcha*? Because Miriam had spoken of Moses and was punished with leprosy. Now the wicked ones noticed this, yet did not draw a lesson from it.” The connection between these two events must be understood. Miriam had spoken ill of a man and was punished. Notwithstanding, the spies has spoken ill of an entire land! The question then becomes, how could they have learned from Miriam’s lesson?

It seems that the answer to this lies in that which is written concerning Moses, namely that he “was very humble, more than all the men upon the face of the earth” (*Numbers 12:3*). Consequently, he considered himself as if he were made of the dust of the earth. Hence if Miriam spoke ill of Moses, it was as if she had spoken ill of the earth. (The Hebrew words for “man” – *adam* – and “earth” – *adamah* – are similar because man originates from the earth). From this, the spies should have understood that it is forbidden to slander an entire land! This is the criticism that was made of them, namely that they could have learned from Miriam’s lesson, yet completely failed to do so. Then they followed an evil path and did not overcome their test. This is why Moses did not want to risk endangering all of the Children of Israel (see Shabbat 32a), and so decided that all that generation would die in the desert because it had let itself be carried away by the counsel of the spies.

In everyday life, it is easy to check if one behaves with true humility or partakes of the harmful trait of pride, a trait that should always be fought. For example, suppose that the president of a synagogue notices that someone is sitting in his seat. If he is really humble, he will understand that this is nothing to get upset about. Consequently he will say nothing, for it is obvious that the newcomer did not know that it was the president’s seat (otherwise he would not have sat in it). The president will thereby demonstrate his wisdom and his moderation, and this will be accounted to him as if he had overcome a test. However, if the president insults the newcomer, he demonstrates just how weak his own character is, and how filled it is with pride and love of honor.

It was this that was the sin of the spies. On one hand, they were leaders and upright men, yet on the other hand they were weak in character, for they desired only honors, and they opened their mouths wide to speak ill of Eretz Israel, having learned nothing from Miriam. In addition, they showed themselves to be ungrateful towards the earth that nourishes men and they were severely punished for it.

When I was in Austria, I heard the following explanation from the Chief Rabbi of Austria, Rav Eisenberg: Moses' great strength lay in the fact that, on the one hand, he knew how to fight the battles of G-d, as it is written, "The L-RD is a man of war" (*Exodus 15:3*), and on the other hand, he knew how to be the most humble of men when it came to matters of self.

It seems to me that one finds an allusion to this in the words, "The L-RD is a man of war. The L-RD is his name" (*ibid.*). At one point war is mentioned, and at another point G-d's Name (which represents mercy towards created beings) is mentioned. Consequently, the spies should have learned from Moses how to conduct themselves with humility and mercy, yet in the end they learned neither from Moses nor from Miriam. This is what caused them to disappear from off the face of the earth, for it is only through devotion and victory in times of trial that Eretz Israel is acquired.

### ***Don't Trust In Yourself Until The Day You Die***

The incident of the spies calls for clarification from several points of view. I will first enumerate the questions, then shed light on them one by one in order to demonstrate the unity underlying them all.

In his book entitled *Sichot Mussar*, the Gaon Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz *Zatzal* asks how we can say that the spies sinned, since we know that they were righteous and upright when Moses chose them.

In my humble opinion, we may add several other questions:

1. Since Moses knew that in the end the spies would fail, why in fact did he send them? Proof of this is that he added a *yud* to the name of Joshua and prayed that he be protected from the influence of the spies (*Sotah 34b*). Now if he had not sent them, he would have saved the Children of Israel from having to spend 40 years in the desert, and he would have also prevented the destruction of both Temples!

2. As we know, Caleb son of Jephunneh feared being influenced by the spies, which is why he went to pray by the tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron (*Sotah ibid.*). Why did he not instead flee from them by returning to the desert? That way he wouldn't have needed to go to the tomb of the Patriarchs. Why did he need to go to Hebron and stay with the spies?

3. The greatest difficulty is that it is written, "They were all distinguished men" (*Numbers 13:3*), for at that moment in time they were clean of all sin. How can we understand that immediately afterwards they became fundamentally bad?

We will attempt to explain all of these points. The Sages have said, "Do not be sure of yourself until the day you die" (*Perkei Avoth 2:4*), for Yochanan the High Priest was a priest for 80 years, and in the end he became a Sadducee and killed several thousand Jews (*Yoma 9a*). This demonstrates just how much we must pay attention to not becoming a victim of the evil inclination and the forces of darkness, even if someone is a great

individual. Concerning this it is said, “It is better for man not to have been created than to have been created” (*Eruvin 13b*), for a man can stumble into sin at any moment if he doesn’t pay serious attention to not letting himself succumb to his evil instincts, and he should do everything to correct them.

Consequently, we may say that the spies were in reality wicked at their very core. We may assert that they only became righteous when they were surrounded by Tzaddikim such as Moses, Aaron, and the Sanhedrin, as well as when they saw the manifestation of the Shechinah, since all these things influenced them for the good. The fact remains that they did not rectify the foundation of their heart and that their words did not correspond to their primary intentions.

This teaches us that each and everyone should wage a battle against his flaws, even if he often comes into contact with the righteous. He should benefit from every moment that he is in their presence in order to better himself, until it becomes impossible to say that his interior does not correspond to his exterior behavior (*see Berachot 28b*), as it is written, “Their heart was not constant with Him” (*Psalms 78:37*). It should not be that only their exterior resembles the righteous while their interior – their heart – remains spiritually poor and doubtful. Everyone mistook the spies for Tzaddikim, for this was really the outward image they projected when they approached Moses.

This is why Moses sent them to explore the land. It was precisely because he was aware of their weaknesses and knew that their interior was different than their exterior. He feared letting them enter the land at the same time as all the Jewish people, for he knew perfectly well that they had wicked intentions (*Sotah 35a*). This constituted a grave danger for the rest of the people who risked allowing themselves to be influenced by them. Moses therefore sent them in order to separate them from the presence of the righteous. The evil that was in them would then reveal itself on that great day, and thus everyone would understand that it is not enough to be like the righteous on the outside, but that the inside should also be pure before G-d. The result was that the Children of Israel remained in the desert for 40 years and all that wicked generation died there, leaving only the righteous whose interior was like their exterior. The others did not enter into Eretz Israel, but rather perished in the desert.

This is also why Moses added a *yud* to the name of Joshua and prayed for him, for Moses had to send Joshua with the spies, yet he feared that Joshua might allow himself to be influenced by them. Hence Moses added the *yud*, and thus his new name (Yehoshua) included 3 of the 4 letters of the Tetragrammaton. As for Caleb son of Jephunneh, he already had these 3 letters in the name of his father Jephunneh, and so he didn’t need a change of name. It was enough for him to go to Hebron to pray by the tomb of the Patriarchs, for the interior of his heart was as pure as his exterior, and furthermore he had to go with the spies. He therefore prayed by the tomb of the Patriarchs and succeeded in not being influenced by them.

However, let us return to the spies themselves. When they returned from Eretz Israel after 40 days, they began by saying good things about the land and showed

the people the size of the fruits that grew there. This is amazing, for far from being righteous, they were evil! Yet as soon as they came near some of the Tzaddikim, all of a sudden they began to say good things and once again acted as if their interior was similar to their exterior. Only afterwards did they begin to slander the land. Why did they do so? It was because of self-interest, for they knew that if they only spoke well of the land, the Children of Israel would enter it and they – who wanted to remain leaders of the people – would lose their positions.

This is what caused them to lose their senses. Instead of sanctifying the Name of G-d by going into the land and assuring that all the Jewish community entered into it – resulting in them not having to stay in the desert for 40 years and that both future Temples would not be destroyed – they preferred to satisfy their desire for honor and moved the people to tears during the night (*Numbers 14:1*). The result was that tears have marked this night for the generations since (*Taanith 29a*). They also brought hatred and jealousy between themselves and Moses, and between themselves and the Children of Israel, causing them to wander in the desert for 40 years. During that time they learned Torah, which is acquired by 48 qualities (*Perkei Avoth 6:5[6]*). All this was due to their love of honor, as it is said, “Envy, lust, and honor-seeking drive a man from the world” (*ibid 4:21*). They left the world and died in the desert.

Such was the wickedness of the spies, who deformed the truth and renounced the kindnesses of G-d (*Bamidbar Rabba 16:9*). In fact the spies didn’t disguise themselves when they went to explore the land, and when the giants saw them, none of them attacked the spies. Since they didn’t recognize G-d’s beneficence, they couldn’t see that the Canaanites’ protective shade had left them. It is thus certain that they renounced all the kindnesses that G-d bestowed upon them from the time that they left Egypt. Instead of saying that the Eternal had done all this in order to make things easier for them (since at that time the Canaanites were burying their dead – *Sotah 35a*), they disregarded this heavenly help and said, “[It] is a land that devours its inhabitants!” (*Numbers 13:32*). The spies hurt themselves in so doing, for they wanted the Children of Israel to return to Egypt where they could remain leaders. All this occurred because during the times that they were in contact with the righteous, they did not take advantage of the opportunity to eliminate their faults.

We can draw a great lesson from this. A man should never trust himself until the day of his death. Even if he is righteous, he should fear that deep inside he has flaws that have not yet been fixed, and he should know that there’s good reason to be very careful. This also teaches us that trials assail a man after he has left the proximity of his teacher and study environment. It is then that we clearly see if he is the same on the inside as on the outside, and at that point he can correct himself. If he is not able to do so, he should hurry to get back to his teacher, and there he will correct everything and elevate himself in Torah and the fear of Heaven.

### *Pride is the Source of All Sin*

Parsha Shelach recounts the sin of the spies, men who spoke derisively of Eretz Israel. We know that they did this primarily because of pride, for they wanted to remain in the desert and continue leading the Children of Israel. The spies knew that if they were to settle in Eretz Israel, new leaders would be appointed and therefore the spies would lose their status. This is why they slandered the land, as it is written: “They brought forth to the Children of Israel an evil report on the land that they spied out” (*Numbers 13:32*).

We know that the role of a leader consists, above all, of encouraging Jews to serve G-d. If leaders carry out this task, good and well, but if instead they seek only to profit from the honors accorded them, they risk provoking a spiritual fall among Jews. This is because honor, far from belonging to man, is the privilege of the holy Torah, and between them there exists the same difference as between a king and a Tzaddik. True honor attaches to a Tzaddik, not to a king, for the honor of a Tzaddik is internal – it is that of the Torah – whereas the honor accorded a king is external and replete with deceit and flattery.

The Tzaddik, who possesses true honor, directs it to the Holy One, blessed be He, because pride and honor belong to G-d, as it is written: “The L-RD has reigned. He had donned grandeur” (*Psalms 93:1*). In the case before us, the spies sought authority and power for themselves, which is alluded to by the words *shelach lecha* (“send for yourself”), whose numerical value (including letters and words) is equal to that of the word *shilton* (“government”). Consequently, in their hearts they obviously wanted to dominate others and be glorified. However the Torah said, “send for yourself,” which means: “Send back power and honor from yourself”. This is only possible when a person humbles himself before the Tzaddik, and even more so before the Holy One, blessed be He.

This is why the Mishnah says: “Sages, be careful with your words” (*Perkei Avoth 1:18[11]*). Sages should avoid acquiring power, for afterwards their disciples will not humble themselves before them, and they will also seek out power due to pride and a love of honor, which is completely forbidden. The Torah should not be used for personal ends (*Perkei Avoth 4:8[5]*; *Nedarim 62a*), such as seeking out honor because of what one has studied, for studying itself is what confers dignity to a man (*Perkei Avoth 6:3*).

In reflecting upon this, we see that this is precisely what happened to the spies. Moses sent them to explore the land, which is expressed several times by the word *latur* (*Numbers 13:17*), meaning like a tourist (*tayar*), who looks at every little thing and for whom everything is important. However the Children of Israel said to Moses, “Let us send men ahead of us *ve’yachperu* [and let them spy out] the land” (*Deuteronomy 1:22*). In other words, they went to explore (the word *chaphar* can also mean to dig) – meaning to break, destroy, and wreak havoc, both spiritually and materially – because they desired power. Hence they were the cause of the Children of Israel’s tears for all the

generations to come (*Sotah 35a*). The pride that controlled them was what harmed them. True, the Sages have said, “The air of Eretz Israel bestows wisdom” (*Bava Batra 158b*), yet in no way were the spies influenced by the air of Eretz Israel and its holiness, since they entered it in a spirit of pride and domination.

This situation is similar to that of a man who is filled with boastful pride and goes to visit a Rebbe for his blessing. The Tzaddik cannot help or bless him, for he cannot have an influence on someone who considers himself to be greater than he. However in not receiving a blessing, this proud person leaves and speaks ill of the Tzaddik, who in reality can do nothing for him. The fault lies not with the Tzaddik, but with the person himself: His immense vanity prevents him from benefiting from the influence of the Tzaddik.

We find the same thing with Korach and his supporters. It is written: “And Korach took...” (*Numbers 16:1*), which the Sages explain as meaning that he placed himself apart to arouse controversy in the community concerning the priesthood (*Tanuma ibid. 2*). This means that his entire sin consisted of pride and a desire for power, for in reality he wanted to be the High Priest. Instead of drawing a lesson from the incident of the spies, who had taken a position against Moses – and who were the cause of the tears for the generations to come, and who lost their portion in the World to Come – Korach actually followed their example and through his pride he quarreled with the Tzaddik of the generation by demanding honors. This is why his punishment was also very severe, for he ended up with no part in the World to Come, and instead he inherited Gehinnom (*Sanhedrin 109b*).

Such was not the case with Moses, about whom the Torah states: “The man Moses was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth” (*Numbers 12:3*). He directed every honor that he received to the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Torah fittingly testifies about him: “Never again has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the L-RD had known face to face” (*Deuteronomy 34:10*).

We learn from here that pride is the source of all sin, and that the Torah only survives with a person with humility (*Taanith 7a*). Moreover, the subject of humility arises in several places in the book of Numbers (*Bamidbar*), for the Torah only remains with a person who makes himself into a desert (*midbar*), in humility and simplicity (*Midrash Aggadah Chukat 21:19*).

It is true that pushing humility too far risks leading a person to despair, for the evil inclination will come and say: “You’re unimportant in the eyes of the Holy One, blessed be He. The mitzvot that you perform have no meaning whatsoever,” which can lead a person to stop performing mitzvot completely. This is why in Parsha Nasso the Torah tells us, “*Nasso et rosh* [Take a census] of the sons of Gershon” (*Numbers 4:22*), meaning that if the evil inclination comes and tells you such things, you should *nasso* (literally “elevate”) yourself and feel worthy, as in the verse, “His heart was elevated in the ways of the L-RD” (*II Chronicles 17:6*). Hence “Gershon”: You must *garesh* (expel) the evil inclination from you once and for all.

Actually, in Parsha Beha'alotcha we also find that a person who lives in spirituality should direct his heart to the ways of Hashem. If he performs a mitzvah, he should rightly feel within himself that he had done something valuable. For example, if he gives money to the poor, he should realize and sense that his body has accomplished the mitzvah of Tzedakah, an act of great importance (see Bava Batra 10a), and that this will elevate him. As for his soul, it too will be elevated when he performs the mitzvah of loving his neighbor as himself, which is what constitutes "When you kindle the lamps" (*Numbers 8:2*). The word *beha'alotcha* ("when you kindle") can be read as *B ha'alotcha*, meaning: "Twice shall you elevate" (i.e., when you perform mitzvot, you elevate both body and soul).

If the evil inclination tries to convince a person to commit a sin, we know that he should reflect upon the day of his death (*Berachot 5a*). And before doing that, he will have studied Torah and recited *Shema*, as it is written: "Tremble and sin not. Reflect in your hearts while on your beds and be utterly silent." (*Psalms 4:5*). We also find an allusion to this in the words "toward the face of the Menorah" (*Numbers 8:2*), meaning that a person must realize that time passes quickly and he will eventually have to stand before G-d (represented by the Menorah), and give an accounting to Him. Reflecting on that will lead a person to humility. The words *el mul pnei hamenorah* ("toward the face of the Menorah") have the same numerical value as the expression *zot ha'anavah* ("this is humility"). A person will then experience good in this world and in the World to Come.

### ***Eretz Israel is Acquired Through Sacrifice***

Commenting on the verse, "Send forth men for yourself, and let them spy out the land of Canaan" (*Numbers 13:2*), Rashi cites the Midrash: "By your discretion; I am not commanding you" (*Tanhuma ibid. 5*). This explanation raises a few questions:

1. If the Holy One, blessed be He, did not expressly order Moses to send the spies, why did he do so?

2. Why did Moses add the letter *yud* to Joshua's name (*Numbers 13:16*) and pray, "May Hashem save you from the counsel of the spies" (*Sotah 34b*)? Was Moses not aware that the spies had decided, from the very outset, to speak ill of the land? Let us recall the teaching of the Midrash and the Talmud (*Sotah 35a*), namely that their departure was under the same conditions as their return. In such a case, why did Moses send them?

3. Given that the spies were tribal leaders of the Children of Israel (*Numbers 13:3*) and that, according to Rashi, they were upright men at their departure, is it conceivable that they could have fallen to such a degree by maligning the holiness of Eretz Israel?

The explanation is that Moses was afraid to bring the entire Jewish people into Eretz Israel all at once because he knew that they would discover giants and enormous fruits there. In such a case, the weakest among them would have begun to fear and

thus slander the land and its holiness. This would have resulted in a much greater punishment, and who knows how many thousands would have perished? Let us not forget to take into consideration the punishment upon future generations as well.

This is why Moses took the initiative and sent spies to evaluate the exact situation in the land. He warned them that they would discover giants there, but that they should not fear. In fact Moses wanted to wage war against the enemies of the Jewish people by natural means, without Divine assistance. He therefore thought that these spies would prepare a battle plan designed to defeat the enemy, and that the Children of Israel would be motivated by it and devote body and soul to a final victory. Nevertheless, Moses knew that the spies were not capable of meeting the challenge and emerging victorious.

As long as the spies were in the camp, they were upright; their great trials began after they left. The spies knew that once the Children of Israel entered Eretz Israel, they would lose their positions as princes. Of course this would benefit the Children of Israel, and so the spies should have spoken only good of the land and thought about the resulting good that would occur for their brothers. However since Moses knew beforehand that the spies were not ready to make such concessions, he decided to make them lead the battle by natural means. These princes had to demonstrate humility for the good of their brothers, and if they entered into contact with the giants of the land, they were not to fear, for Hashem is the Master of war (*Exodus 15:3*). With His help, they could conquer their enemies.

Moses wanted to know whether the cities of the land were open or fortified (*Numbers 13:19*). If they were fortified, heavy weapons would be needed; otherwise light arms would suffice. Moses added a *yud* to Joshua's name because he feared that he would be affected by the spies' frustration and arrogance, for pride (*ga'avah*) belongs solely to G-d (*ga'avah* having the same numerical value, 15, as G-d's Name *Y-h*).

Moses therefore *shalach* (sent) spies who were, at the time, upright men. He knew that they were also *chalash* (weak), a word with the same letters as *shalach*. Therefore he sent them to strengthen their faith and prepare a battle plan against the enemy by natural means.

Incidentally, even though the spies slandered Eretz Israel, they still loved the land; otherwise they would not have spent 40 days there (*Numbers 13:25*). They could have immediately returned and told Moses, "We saw giants as well as enormous fruits that frightened us." They were upright at the start because deep in their hearts they loved the land. However their weakness led them to pride and the pursuit of honor, with the Jewish people suffering greatly in the desert as a result. The only exceptions were Caleb and Joshua, who yielded before Moses and tried to reassure the people, as it is written: "You should not fear the people of the land, for they are our bread. Their protection has departed from them. The L-RD is with us!" (*Numbers 14:9*).

We can therefore better understand the connection between Parsha Beha'alotcha and Parsha Shelach.

As we saw, Rashi sites the Midrash which states that the spies did not draw a lesson from seeing Miriam struck by leprosy and white as snow because she had spoken ill of her brother Moses. Miriam's punishment and that of the spies does not seem analogous, for she was punished for speaking spoke ill of a human being, whereas the spies spoke ill of the land (which cannot feel humiliation and is insensitive to slander). Thus how can it be inferred, from Miriam's punishment, that it is forbidden to speak ill of the Holy Land?

The reason lies in the fact that Moses was so humble that he considered himself to be like *adamah* (earth). Thus if Miriam spoke ill of an *adam*, it was as if she had slandered *adamah*, from which *adam* comes (see Numbers 12:3). The spies should have therefore learned that it is forbidden to speak ill even of the land. Since Moses did not want to expose the Children of Israel to danger (see Shabbat 32a), and preferred that they not enter into Eretz Israel, the entire generation that was persuaded by the spies' arguments had to perish in the desert.

How can true modesty be distinguished from fake, which is actually hidden pride? As an example, let us take the case of a synagogue director who has discovered a stranger sitting in his seat. If he is truly modest, the incident will not upset him at all, and he will not say a thing to the person in his seat (who probably didn't realize that the seat belonged to the director, otherwise he would not have sat there). The incident is thus closed. However if the director gets upset with the man, he demonstrates that he is, above all, weak in character, someone who only seeks personal honor.

Such was the exact situation with the spies. On one hand, these spies – princes of the tribes of the Children of Israel – were all Tzaddikim. On the other hand, since all they sought was personal glorification, they dared to open their mouths and slander Eretz Israel. Furthermore, they demonstrated their ingratitude to the earth that sustains man, and so their punishment was extremely severe.

During my stay in Austria, Chief Rabbi Eisenberg taught that Moses knew, on one hand, how to wage G-d's battles, as it is written: "The L-RD is Master of war" (*Exodus 15: 3*). Yet on the other hand, Moses was the most humble man on the face of the earth on a personal level, even tolerating insults. The verse in full states, "The L-RD is Master of war. The L-RD is His Name." The expression, "The L-RD is the Master of war" is a reference to the attribute of Judgment; "The L-RD is His Name" is a reference to the attribute of Mercy concerning His creations. The spies should have emulated Moses our teacher and in turn infused themselves with these two attributes. Since they did not draw a lesson from either Moses or Miriam, they were wiped off the face of the earth, for it is only by being devoted to Eretz Israel, and by overcoming the hardships that it presents, that we may acquire it.

### *The Land is Exceedingly Good!*

One of the gravest sins committed by the Children of Israel appears in our parsha, a sin that occurred in the desert and which is known as “the sin of the spies.” Although they were in the desert at the time, the Children of Israel desired to enter Eretz Israel, the land where the Canaanites (who were known for their depravity) were then dwelling. Nevertheless, the Children of Israel were afraid of not being able to chase the inhabitants out of the land in order to take possession of it. What were they to do?

They asked Moses to send spies into Eretz Israel to see what the situation was like in the land, in order to prepare for its conquest. However Hashem was not satisfied with this measure, and He told Moses: “Send men for yourself and let them spy out the land of Canaan” (*Numbers 13:2*). Rashi paraphrases this as: “According to your opinion. I do not command you. If you wish, send.” In other words Hashem was saying: “I know that the land is good and that you can enter it and live there without problem. However if you, the Children of Israel, want to send spies to examine the land, then send them for yourselves, not for Me.”

Twelve spies were sent from Kadesh Barnea to explore and spy out the land. Moses told them, “See the land – how is it? And the people that dwells in it – is it strong or weak? Is it few or numerous? And how is the land in which it dwells – is it good or bad?” (*Numbers 13:18-19*). That is, he asked them to verify whether Eretz Israel was a good or bad land. However the spies made a serious mistake in their mission, one that cost the Children of Israel a fixed date on which to weep in generations to come for the destruction of the Temple.

The spies arrived in Eretz Israel and there they saw that the land was good. They saw that its fruits were large, and that it was a land flowing with milk and honey. They also saw that it was easy to conquer from all sides, and they could certainly invade and take control of it. However to our great regret, upon witnessing all these things, the spies did not see what was good in the land. They saw neither its beauty nor its appeal. What did they see? They saw that the land devoured its inhabitants. They clearly saw that its fruits were so large that they were impossible to transport. Everywhere they looked, they perceived that its inhabitants would be very difficult to defeat, just as they told Moses: “Nevertheless the people that dwells in the land is powerful, the cities are very greatly fortified” (*Numbers 13:28*). For us, what emerges from all this is that the spies were not content on remaining silent, and instead they actually spoke ill of the land. They spoke *Lashon Harah* about Eretz Israel, about the Holy Land. Was it a minor thing in their eyes to find a Jew and tell him that the home he is about to purchase is infested with cockroaches and sludge, oozing out mud and mire, and that it is about to topple over? What could a person think after being told such a thing? How could a person value his new home in that case?

True, our Sages have said (as Rashi and others note in commenting on *Numbers 13:3*) that the spies were all tribal chiefs and righteous men when Moses sent them off. Yet

suddenly, having barely entered Eretz Israel, their hearts completely changed and they became capable of slandering the land, of seeing only the negative side of Eretz Israel. How could that have happened?

A story is told of two Jews, chassidim of the holy Rabbi Israel of Rozhin, who traveled to Eretz Israel separately. When they returned to Rozhin, each of them went to see the Rebbe. The Rebbe asked the first Jew, “What did you see in Eretz Israel,” to which he replied: “What can I tell the Rebbe? I saw many farmers, many peasants, coach drivers, merchants, and all kinds of people.” The Rebbe gave him his blessing, and he left. The Rebbe then asked the second Jew what he had seen in Eretz Israel. He replied, “What can I tell the Rebbe? I saw synagogues, *Batei Midrash*, *talmidei chachamim*, Torah giants, *yeshivot*, and *kollelim*. I also saw people who, even though they were engaged in business, were in the Beit Midrash at the end of the day to study a page of Gemara, regardless of everything else.”

After his departure, the Rebbe of Rozhin said: “You know what the difference between these two men is? They both saw the same people in Eretz Israel, but the difference depends on how we look at things. If we look at things with a generous eye, we see good things. And if we look at things with a bad eye, we see bad things.”

Dear friends, that is precisely what the spies did. They immediately looked at the land from a negative point of view. They arrived in Eretz Israel expressly for that purpose, to perceive only its problems. This is why they saw it in a negative light.

If we want, we can unfortunately notice this attitude today. Many people leave Eretz Israel – they “descend” abroad – because they did not find their place in the country. This happens because the land in which milk and honey flows, which Hashem promised to the Jewish people, did not affect their hearts. Such people do not realize that Eretz Israel is holier than all other countries. The reason for their departure is simply that the Holy Land does not concern them. Furthermore, they speak of the land in a derogatory way to others, which is why people do not want to live in Israel. They have heard over and over again how the country is far from good, how difficult it is to live there, and how people have it good elsewhere.

It is as we have said: Things depend on how we look at the land. If we look at it with a negative perspective, we will only see its drawbacks. However if we speak positively of the Holy Land, we will perceive its virtues. We must only look at the positive aspects of Eretz Israel, as it is written: “May you gaze upon the goodness of Jerusalem” (Psalms 128:5). Let us settle down in Eretz Israel to demonstrate our love for the land, for it is said: “Whoever lives in Eretz Israel may be considered to have a G-d” (Ketubot 110b) and furthermore, “The land is exceedingly good” (*Numbers 14:7*).

## Parsha Korach

### *The Sin of Korach: Pride and Vanity*

The verse that states, “Korach, son of Itzhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi *took ...*” (*Numbers 16:1*) presents some difficulties. Why is it stated that he “took”, and not that he “assembled”, since in fact he assembled the community to make it rise up against Moses? If the verse wants to tell us, as Rashi explains in the name of the Sages (Sanhedrin 109b), that Korach separated himself from the community and thereby brokered a bad deal for himself, we still would have understood this if the word “assembled” had been used in the verse. For in assembling the community against Moses, Korach created a controversy that was not for the sake of Heaven (*Perkei Avoth 5:17*) and thus took himself out of the community of Israel to contest the allocation of the priesthood.

It must also be understood how Korach dared to contest the authority of Moses, even though he had seen all the miracles in Egypt and in the desert. We should, as well, explain the connection between Parsha *Shelach* and Parsha *Korach*, as well as, more specifically, the connection between the passage concerning tzitzit (at the end of Parsha *Shelach*) and Parsha *Korach* that immediately follows it.

To see this more clearly, let us begin by citing a well-known passage: “At the moment that the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to give the Torah, all the mountains battled among themselves, each one saying, ‘It is upon me that G-d will give the Torah,’ while Mount Sinai humbled itself and said, ‘What am I that G-d should give the Torah upon me?’” (*Sotah 5a*). And it was precisely because of its humility that the Torah was given upon Mount Sinai, for the Torah is acquired through humility (*Perkei Avoth 6:5*), as well as by a broken heart, a modest manner, and the sense of being as completely barren as the desert (*Pesikta Zutah Terumah 25:16*). Moses possessed such humility, as it is said, “Moses received the Torah from Sinai” (*Perkei Avoth 1:1*), for it is from the mountain that he took this attribute.

One may add that the Torah itself alludes to this idea in the verse that states, “and they stood at the bottom of the mountain” (*Exodus 19:17*), for the Children of Israel reasoned, *a fortiori*, that if Mount Sinai, which has neither spirit nor soul, merited by its humbling itself to be sanctified and to become for several days the place of G-d’s abode, how much more so should the Children of Israel – which have both spirit and soul, and who constitute a permanent dwelling place for G-d (as it is written, “they shall make a Sanctuary for Me so that I may dwell among them” [*Exodus 25:8*]) – humble themselves more than the mountain if they want to receive the Torah. And it is in this way that it will continue to live in them. This is what “and they stood *at the bottom* of the mountain” means: They were lower and more humble than it.

Concerning this subject, I have seen in the book entitled *Minhat Yehudah VeYerushalayim* that the Torah is not allowed to dwell among one who is not humble

and modest, as was Moses, whom the Torah attests “was exceedingly humble” (*Numbers 12:3*). The Sages have affirmed this several times: “The Torah can only abide among one who is imbued with humility” (*Derech Eretz Zutah 8*), and again: “The Torah is not found among the proud” (*Tanhuma Ki Tavo 3*). Above all, it is said, “The Torah is compared to water, as it is written, ‘Everyone who is thirsty, go to the water’ [*Isaiah 55:1*]” (*Bava Kama 17a*). “Why is the Torah compared to water? In the same way that water flows towards lower ground, the words of Torah abide only with those of humble spirit” (*Taanith 7a*). It seems to me that they cite the verse in Isaiah that states, “go to the water” because all men should go in the same direction as water, which is to leave that which is high and to go towards that which is low, and to learn Torah only in a spirit of humility.

From this point, we may return to our subject, for the questions that we have asked at the outset can now be completely and satisfactorily answered.

Why did we receive the command that tzitzit should hang down, rather than point up? With regards to tzitzit, we know that because of them a man will remember all the mitzvot and the study of Torah, which leads him to action. As the Gemara states, sight brings about recollection, and recollection leads to action (*Menachot 43b*), just as it is written, “you shall see it and remember” (*Numbers 15:39*). This is why the tzitzit hang down. One must view them in a spirit of humility, and so one’s resulting action will also be marked by this spirit. Consequently, we see that the tzitzit teach man to serve G-d and to perform His mitzvot in a spirit of humility, without which a man would risk being entrapped by the desires of this material world. Therefore the Gemara states, “His tzitzit struck him in the face, saving him from sin” (see *Menachot 44a*).

If our views are correct with regards to this, we will be able to understand just what Korach and his supporters claimed. Korach believed that if the Torah abides only with one who is humble, and if it is necessary for a person to behave modestly, how would it be possible to be king or High Priest all while remaining humble? After all, a king must conduct himself with all the honors due his position, as it is written, “Set over yourself a king” (*Deuteronomy 17:15*). To this the Gemara adds; “His fear should be upon you” (*Ketubot 17a*) and also, “A king who pardons a wrong done to his honor, it is not pardoned” (*Kiddushin 32b*). How could Moses therefore take this great position upon himself? This is why the Torah places the passage concerning the tzitzit next to Parsha *Korach*, for Korach believed that the tzitzit represented humility, which seemed to him to be incompatible with the behavior required of a king.

Yet Korach contradicted himself, for he wanted to be High Priest instead of Aaron. How was it possible, on one hand, for Korach to reprimand Moses and Aaron for their lack of humility, and on the other to claim honors for himself? In fact, the Torah rejects Korach’s assertions, for it attests to the fact that “the man Moses was exceedingly humble” (*Numbers 12:3*). He was king and conducted himself in a dignified manner, yet nevertheless with perfect humility.

It is not by chance, either, that Parsha *Shelach* is found next to Parsha *Korach*. The Midrash says that the sin of the spies was to not have drawn a lesson from the punishment of Miriam, who had spoken against Moses, even though he had kept quiet. Now Korach himself didn't draw a lesson from the severity of the punishment against the spies (for having spoken badly against Eretz Israel), nor from the incident involving Miriam. Without having learned anything from all this, he said to Moses and Aaron, "Why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of the L-RD?" (*Numbers 16:3*), meaning that Korach accused them of not being humble and therefore not worthy of teaching Torah to the Children of Israel, for only those things which come from a modest heart enter into the heart of the listener. True, Korach knew perfectly well that the Eternal spoke face to face with Moses, however pride and jealousy made Korach transgress, and he assembled the community against Moses and Aaron. In fact, it is written, "Jealousy, desire, and honor-seeking drive a man from the world" (*Perkei Avoth 4:21*). Their dissension continued to the point that they still protested even when G-d descended into the Tent of Meeting, as it is written, "Dathan and Abiram came out standing at the door of their tents" (*Numbers 16: 27*). Instead of asking forgiveness and repenting, they continued to contest the authority of Moses and Aaron.

We see from this just how serious controversy is, for a man that takes pleasure in it (all while knowing that his arguments are not valid) ends up by justifying himself in his own eyes, thus bringing disaster upon himself and his family. This is precisely what is meant by a controversy that is "not for the sake of Heaven" (*Perkei Avoth 5:17*). Korach contradicted himself, and from here we note that "whoever pursues honor, honor flees from him" (*Tanhuma Vayikra 3*). This is what Rashi meant when he wrote, "He took himself to a different side, to be disassociated from the community and to cast aspersion on the priesthood," for his words were not true enough to be satisfactory, and he was therefore not able to assemble the community against Moses and Aaron except through means of deception.

Yet in reality, one also finds the following declaration of the Sages: In the future, the third Temple will be built by Messiah the king, and Korach will be the priest, for his controversy dealt with the desire to be G-d's priest (*see Shir Hashirim Rabba 7:10*). This seems to indicate that his actions contained some aspect of selflessness. Yet if so, why was he punished? It is because he had the ability to stop the controversy yet did not do so. He did nothing to avert the disaster that came upon himself and his family, and he continued to fight for the priesthood with all his strength. Now we know that G-d pays special attention to give to every righteous person his reward (*Perkei Avoth 2:16*). This is why He will give the priesthood to Korach in the future, notwithstanding that his sons said, "Moses is truth and his Torah is truth" (*Bava Batra 74a*). Korach, therefore, will receive his reward in order to show that, in reality, Moses is truth and his Torah is truth, and that Moses was truly a humble man and that there is no reason to oppose the leader of the generation.

### ***Korach and His Followers: A Controversy that was Not for the Sake of Heaven***

The Sages say, “Which controversy was not for the sake of Heaven? The controversy of Korach and his followers” (*Perkei Avoth 5:17*). We should try to understand how it is possible that Korach and his followers were opposed to Moses and Aaron for selfish reasons, since they possessed Ruach Hakodesh (which is alluded to by the expression *adat Korach* [Korach’s assembly], where *adat* is composed of the same letters as *da’at* [knowledge]). How could they dare oppose Moses and Aaron other than for the sake of Heaven? For that matter, how could Korach – who was among those who carried the Ark in the desert (*Bamidbar Rabba 18:2*) – challenge Moses while knowing that G-d had chosen Moses over himself?

We shall attempt to explain all this. A controversy for the sake of Heaven means that the protesters are not in any way thinking about themselves or their own dignity. Rather, their only goal is to magnify G-d’s Name in this world by restoring things back in their rightful place, as was the case in the controversy between Shammai and Hillel, or between Rabbi Eliezer and the Sages concerning an oven made of several parts (*Bava Metzia 59b*). A voice was then heard speaking from Heaven, and even though Rabbi Yehoshua replied that the Torah is not in Heaven and we do not rely on Heavenly voices to render Halachah (*Eruvin 7a*), G-d’s Name was truly sanctified in the whole world at that point because people saw that we must follow the opinion of the majority (*Exodus 23:2*). The evil inclination was then confounded, and G-d said: “My children have conquered Me” (*Bava Metzia ibid.*), which proves that His Name was glorified, sanctified, and magnified in this world.

Korach was opposed to all this. He looked for the reasons behind each mitzvah. The name *Korach* is composed of the same letters as *choker* (“one who searches”), and if he was not able to understand the reason for a mitzvah, he scorned and rejected it, believing that did not concern him. He did not consider the fact that according to the Sages, there are 248 limbs and 365 sinews in man that correspond to the 613 mitzvot of the Torah (*Makot 23b*). Korach, who did not understand the reason for Tzitzit, scorned this mitzvah and used a Tallit that was completely blue (*Tanhuma, beginning of Korach*). Now the mitzvah of Tzitzit carries as much importance as the other mitzvot combined (*Nedarim 25a*), for it leads a person to recall other mitzvot and carry them out (*Numbers 15:39*). By rejecting the mitzvah of Tzitzit, he rejected all mitzvot and felt proud of himself. He did not magnify G-d’s Name in this world, and he finished by instigating a controversy that was for selfish reasons.

This teaches us that even if a person does not understand the reasons for G-d’s mitzvot, he should still believe in them and not reject them. Korach was mistaken on this point. He rejected everything and became filled with pride, thereby falling from a lofty level to a deep pit (*Hagigah 5b*). He even suspected Moses of disloyalty to his wife, for the Satan succeeded in making him totally renounce everything. This is the meaning of the expression *va’yikach Korach* (“and Korach took”), for the word

*va'yikach* is composed of the same letters as the expression *vey chok* (“woe because of the decree”). Woe to Korach, for he also scorned the decree of the red heifer (see Midrash Peliyah ch.7), whose reason – despite all the study that he put into it – has only been known by Moses. That was a mistake on his part, for King Solomon, who was the wisest of all men, said concerning the red heifer: “I said, ‘I will get wisdom,’ but it was far from me” (*Ecclesiastes 7:23*). King Solomon was never able to fathom the reasons for that particular mitzvah (*Pesikta Rabbati 14:7*), even though he is described as being “wiser than all men” (*I Kings 5:11*).

Korach, in having reached the point of scorning all mitzvot (including that of the red heifer), became filled with pride and declared to Moses and Aaron: “The entire assembly – all of them – are holy and the L-RD is among them; why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of the L-RD?” (*Numbers 16:3*). In other words, “Don’t think that you know the secret of the red heifer, for I too am a great researcher and was not able to understand its meaning. It is therefore probable that you don’t understand it either, and it is simply because of your pride that you claim to know it.” It was in this way that Korach illustrates the teaching: “Whoever criticizes, he criticizes his own flaws” (*Kiddushin 70a*). Korach was really criticizing his own flaws, for in reality it was he who wanted to elevate himself and become the High Priest. It was certainly not G-d’s glory that he sought, but rather his own. This is what dragged him into a controversy that was for selfish reasons, bringing death and destruction upon himself and others. We find this idea alluded to in the word *machloket* (“controversy”), which is composed of the same letters as *lakach mavet* (“he took death”), for Korach took an evil part for himself (*Bamidbar Rabba 18:2*) and brought death upon himself and everyone that followed him.

By this we should understand that a person must increase G-d’s glory, not his own. Even if he is an intelligent person, he should use his wisdom as a means to glorify G-d, not as a way to scorn His mitzvot. This is what emerges from the mitzvah of Tzitzit, for it is said: “You shall look upon them and remember all the mitzvot of the L-RD” (*Numbers 15:39*). In addition, “You shall not follow after your heart and after your eyes”: A person must not trust in his own logic, for even King Solomon wanted to outsmart G-d’s mitzvot (*Sanhedrin 21b*), which prohibit a king from taking many wives and having numerous horses. The result was that Solomon’s downfall came about because he broke these very mitzvot. Hence a person has no reason to demonstrate that he is cunning. Rather, he has only to carry out the will of the Creator, without turning either to the right or to the left from His words and mitzvot.

This is truly impressive. What amazing lessons can be drawn from this parsha! In particular, it demonstrates how those who learn in yeshiva should conduct themselves: When they discuss the words of the Rishonim and Acharonim, they should do so for the sake of Heaven, with their goal being to completely understand what is being said. They should not study with the goal of demonstrating that they themselves are correct, imagining as they do that they fully understand what the Rishonim and Acharonim

have stated, which is a way of scorning their words. Whoever studies Torah must do so with humility and self-effacement (*Taanith 7a*), be it while debating with friends or while discussing with students (*Perkei Avoth 6:6*). A person should keep in mind that all the mitzvot written in the Torah apply to everyone, rich or poor, healthy or sick, and so on. If a person is convinced of this, he will not scorn any mitzvah, but instead will realize that they all emanate from G-d.

In the opposite case – if a person trusts in his own wisdom and wants to reject something in the Torah or some mitzvah – he harms his own body and soul. This is because the 613 mitzvot correspond to the 248 limbs and 365 sinews of the body (*Makot 23b*), and if he neglects one of them, he will finish by despising them all, for they are all connected. A person should therefore not try to show how smart he is, but instead should focus on carrying out G-d's will with humility and self-effacement.

Along the same line of thought, the Sages have said, “When a man and a woman merit it, the Shechinah dwells among them. If not, a fire devours them” (*Sotah 17a*). Actually, we know that the word *ish* (man) contains the letter *yud*, and that the word *isha* (woman) contains the letter *hei*, and together they form the Name Y-H. However if we remove the letters of Hashem from the words *ish* and *isha*, we are left with the letters *aleph* and *shin*. These form *aish* (fire), the fire that devours them. *Ish* is the man who must study Torah (which is like fire – *Tanhuma Yitro 12*) in humility and self-effacement. At that point he will merit *isha*, the woman, which alludes to the Torah, and which connects him to the Holy One, blessed be He, for he only came into the world to increase G-d's glory. If he does not merit it, the woman will be against him (see *Yebamot 63a*), for she follows him in his desires and his flaws. Thus when he seeks out his own honor rather than G-d's glory, there is no Y-H between them, and the only thing that remains is *ga'avah* (pride), which has the same numerical value as Y-H. Now glory belongs to G-d, as it is written: “The L-RD has reigned; He has donned grandeur” (*Psalms 93:1*). Consequently, such a man damages the vestment of the Holy One, blessed be He.

The same thing is alluded to with Korach: *Va'yikach Korach* (“And Korach took”) – alluding to *vey lakach* – he took for himself *ga'avah*, which has the same numerical value as the Name Y-H. He also took honors, and together they have the same numerical value as the word *vey*. In seeking his own glory, he deceived both himself and others, and he fell into a deep pit. As for Moses – who in no way sought out honor and negated everything before G-d's glory – concerning him it is stated: “*Ve'haish* [And the man] Moses was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth” (*Numbers 12:3*). Moses is described with the word *ish* (man), whom the Shechinah abides with if he is deserving.

The same thing happens in our time, regardless of the community, when one Rabbi comes and opposes the Rav of a given community. If he comes and says, “I'm greater than you, which is why I'm more worthy than you to be the Rav here,” this is repulsive to G-d. Even if his intention is to bring honor to G-d, this is not the proper way to act,

for if a Rabbi is the Rav of a community, he was certainly chosen for that position and pleases G-d. Why then should someone come to oppose him and take his position? This shows inner pride and self-satisfaction, and both of these are selfish reasons for a controversy. A person should be careful to do everything for the love of G-d, without scorning any Jew. How much more, therefore, should he not scorn any of the mitzvot, for everything comes from G-d. This must be understood, and I rejoice and thank G-d for having enabled me to explain it.

### ***The Torah Can Conquer Even Angels***

After the death of Korach and his followers, when a plague began to strike the Jewish people, Moses commanded Aaron: “Take the fire-pan and put on it fire from upon the Altar and place incense – and go quickly to the assembly and provide atonement for them” (*Numbers 17:11*). Commenting on this verse, Rashi cites the teaching of the Talmud (*Shabbat 89a*). There it is taught that Moses, when he ascended to Heaven to receive the Torah, was given the secret of the incense from the Angel of Death, as it is written: “You ascended on high, you have taken spoils” (*Psalms 68:19*).

The author of *Sichot Mussar*, Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz, asks a pertinent question: How is it possible that this angel, which was delegated to kill living beings, revealed to Moses the secret of the incense, since that would stop the plague from killing people?

To this question, we add three of our own:

1. Why was Moses afraid of the angels when he ascended to Heaven? Had the Holy One, blessed be He, not commanded him to do so? Why did the angels want to burn him with their fiery breath (*Shabbat 88b*)? Had G-d not delegated him to receive the Torah there for the Children of Israel?

2. Why did Moses have to explain to the angels that the evil inclination did not dwell among them, that they had not been made slaves in Egypt, and that the Torah did not belong to them (*Shabbat 88b-89a*)? They certainly knew all this. The Talmud teaches, furthermore, that Moses’ words found favor with the angels and that they gave him gifts.

3. Why did Moses ascend to Heaven to receive the Torah? The Holy One, blessed be He, could have brought it down on Mount Sinai and taught it to Moses, who would not have had to face any criticism from the angels.

As we have seen, the Torah was a treasure that G-d delighted in constantly two thousand years before Creation, as it is written: “I was then His delight every day” (*Proverbs 8:30*). It was therefore difficult, so to speak, for Him to part from it. This was also true for the angels, to whom the Holy One, blessed be He, constantly revealed secrets. Moses therefore had to personally bring the Torah down from Heaven, and the angels then had no other choice but to conform to G-d’s will. Moses, however, was not content with the Torah he received, for he also wanted to know everything that G-d said in Heaven and instructed the angels.

The angels therefore became irritated with Moses, and he in turn was seized with fear. G-d then told him, “Take hold of the Throne of Glory...and answer them.” In other words, explain to them that the Children of Israel must know and understand everything. Moses then asked the angels if the evil inclination dwelled among them, or if they stole or murdered. In other words, how could the Children of Israel successfully confront the evil inclination, which brought them down to the 49th degree of impurity, if they did not receive answers to their questions? The angels possessed many secrets and had the answers to everything, and if they did not reveal these secrets to Moses, how could the Children of Israel serve their Creator? How could they understand that they must not steal or commit other sins? However if the angels revealed these secrets to Moses, the light of the Torah would enable the Children of Israel to take to the right path and thus easily rid themselves of the evil inclination (*Yerushalmi Hagigah 1:5*).

Moses explained to the angels that a body that is not nourished by Torah could be burned by them, and it could not measure up to the evil inclination. The Torah contains great secrets, and to confront the evil inclination one must understand the secrets inherent in the laws that the angels were aware of.

Thus the angels understood that they possessed things that did not belong to them. Without G-d’s intervention, they would have burned Moses with their breath. Having seen before them a being of flesh and blood that tried to confront the evil inclination, they decided to give him what he needed and reveal the secrets of the Torah to him. Even the Angel of Death was persuaded by Moses’ argument and became confused, thus immediately giving him the secret of the incense, endowed with the power to heal the plague.

Moses therefore enticed the angels by the words of his mouth and devoted both body and soul to the Torah. The Zohar teaches that one who devotes body and soul for the love of G-d will inherit 400 worlds in the World to Come (*Zohar I:124b*). Since Moses risked his life by ascending to Heaven, the Holy One, blessed be He, helped him. The one who devotes himself to Torah study with all his heart and soul, G-d will subjugate his enemies before him. The Angel of Death gave Moses the secret of the incense because he understood that he would have nothing to do if everyone was dead.

Before his death, Moses said concerning the tribe of Levi: “They shall place incense *be’aphecha* [before Your presence]” (*Deuteronomy 33:10*). Targum Yonatan ben Uziel and the Yerushalmi translate this as the incense that they presented when the Holy One, blessed be He, became angry (*charon aph*) at the time of the plague. Moses then blessed them: “Bless, O L-RD, his resources” (*v.11*), for according to the Talmud (*Sanhedrin 26b*), the Torah weakens the one who engages in its study (see also *Keli Yakar*). The Torah, which embodies the concept of the incense, can conquer even angels.

The one who devotes himself to the Torah can even subjugate the Angel of Death and survive, as it is written: “He shall live [by the words of Torah]” (*Leviticus 18:5*). The Talmud states that they are not meant to kill (*Yoma 85b*). Rather, the Torah gives life and can save the holy people from the plague.

### *Beware of the Glowing Embers of the Tzaddikim*

One of the great figures and leaders of the Children of Israel was Korach. Our Sages say that he was among those who carried the Ark, which means that he was one of the Levite leaders who loaded the Ark of the Covenant and transported it. Korach was very intelligent, and he also had a dynasty of *tzaddikim* descend from him, with the prophet Samuel at their head. Despite all this, he experienced a bitter end, being swallowed alive by the earth along with 250 other people.

The Sages ask how Korach, who was so intelligent, could have done such a foolish thing. Korach wanted the priesthood for Elizaphan the son of Uzziel. Yet how did he arrive at such a lowly level that he was literally swallowed by the earth? How did it happen that Korach contested the word of Hashem, Who said that Aaron would be High Priest, no one else?

Korach's sin lay in the fact that he rebelled against the *tzaddik* of his generation. He rebelled against Moses by telling him, "The entire assembly – all of them – are holy and the L-RD is among them. Why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of the L-RD?" (*Numbers 16:3*). Was that really the case? Korach knew and could actually see that Hashem constantly summoned Moses and spoke to him, teaching him Torah and entrusting him with prophecies to transmit to the Children of Israel. Yet despite this fact, Korach went to Moses and Aaron and told them that they were exalting themselves at the expense of Hashem's people! Of all people, Moses – described by the Torah as "exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth" (*Numbers 12:3*) – was exalting himself at the expense of Hashem's people? Moses was seeking greatness for himself and his brother Aaron?

Such foolishness, such shameful thoughts, led Korach to the abyss. They led him to set himself apart to contest the priesthood. Furthermore, the Sages said of him: " 'Now Korach took' [*Numbers 16:1*]. Resh Lakish said: He took a bad deal for himself" (*Sanhedrin 109b*). This means that the essence of his sin was to have broken the power of the Jewish people's unity. He took 250 men with him, leaders of the community, and with them he went to oppose our teacher Moses. He broke the power of the Jewish people's unity, and thus he set himself up for failure. He wanted to be for himself – alone – not being in harmony with Moses the *tzaddik* of the generation. That is why he ended up lost and destroyed.

However if we examine the situation a little more in depth, we will see that in our generation there are also people like this, people who resemble Korach in terms of opposing the *tzaddikim* of the generation. We often hear various people around us opening their mouths, without shame or fear, to discuss and belittle the *tzaddikim* of the generation. These people are not all necessarily adults. We hear such things from youngsters as well, even from children, who are capable of telling one another: "Mine is greater than yours...mine is the greater *tzaddik*." Where do they find the permission and audacity to speak like this? The answer is extremely simple: The young learn it from

hearing adults speak. They learn it from listening to how one person speaks against a certain *tzaddik*, and from how another spews forth insults from his mouth against the great of the generation, against *rabbanim*, *dayanim*, and *talmidei chachamim*. Yet no one responds. Nobody tells them to stop. None calls out and shouts, “Don’t you care about the Torah’s honor? How can you insult the angels of G-d?” Why is that? How can people reach such a state? To our great regret and shame, today a situation exists in which nothing is important to a person except himself. People think only of themselves; they arrange a bad deal for themselves and decide, “Who’s to tell me what I can and cannot do? Who’s to tell me what I can and cannot say?” Sadly, this is why people think that they can say and make others hear whatever they want. Today this is called “freedom of expression,” for people feel free to say whatever happens to come into their heads. Yet who can foresee the catastrophic results of such behavior?

If people speak like this against *tzaddikim* and *rabbanim*, who will guarantee that we can educate a generation of righteous, G-d-fearing people? It is not without reason that this is called “freedom of expression,” for such harmful ways of expressing oneself soon become completely free, leading to a total rejection of the yoke of the Torah and its *mitzvot*. Now the Sages have said, “Warm yourself by the fire of the Sages, but beware of their glowing embers, lest you be burnt – for their bite is the bite of the fox, their sting is the sting of a scorpion, their hiss is the hiss of a serpent, and all their words are like fiery coals” (*Perkei Avoth 2:10*). Are people not frightened by this? Do people not realize that they will have to give an accounting after 120 years for such words, as well as for not protesting when they heard *talmidei chachamim* being disparaged?

My friends, let us learn a lesson from the wife of On, the son of Pelet. The Sages said: “On, the son of Pelet, was saved by his wife. She said to him, ‘What does it matter to you whether one [Moses] remains as leader or another [Korach] becomes leader, since you are only a follower?’” (*Sanhedrin 109b*). Because Pelet would remain a follower in any case, his wife told him that getting involved in Korach’s dispute would serve no purpose.

We should constantly be reminding ourselves of the same thing. When a discussion occurs among the *tzaddikim* of the generation, we are not to stick our noses into it; we are not to get involved into matters between mountains. We have no right to get mixed into it, for in any case our personal opinions will not be heard. Therefore since we have no say in the matter, why should we get involved? Why do we need to open our mouths and speak against someone who is holy and precious to the Jewish people? How can we speak against *tzaddikim*, *rabbanim* or *talmidei chachamim*?

We must adopt an attitude of faith. We must believe in Hashem and realize that all His paths are true and fair. Nevertheless, it is impossible to believe in Hashem if we do not believe in the *tzaddikim* of the generation, whoever they may be. In fact it is written, “They believed in the L-RD and in Moses His servant” (*Exodus 14:31*). If we have faith in the *tzaddik*, we will have faith in Hashem. If we act in this way, we will experience good both in this world and in the World to Come. Amen.

## Parsha Chukat

### *A Spiritual War for all Generations*

It is written, “Moses sent emissaries from Kadesh to the king of Edom” (*Numbers 20:14*), and further it is said, “Let us pass through your land ... on the king’s road shall we travel ... if we drink your water – I or my flock – I shall pay their price ... He said, You shall not pass through!” ... So Edom refused to permit Israel to pass through his border.” Several points regarding this passage need to be understood. We shall specify them one by one.

1. How is it possible that Edom, who greatly loved wealth, refused to let the Children of Israel pass through his territory? The Edomites could have earned a fortune because the Children of Israel were ready to pay for the permission to pass through. Now the Children of Israel did not lack money, for they possessed all the riches of Egypt, yet Edom opposed them to the point of marching out to war against them, as it is written, “Then Edom went out against him with a massive throng and a strong hand” (*v.20*). How can this be understood?

2. We are still more surprised when we recall that Edom represents the descendant of Esau. Now the latter passionately loved gold and riches, since the Sages have said, “From where did Jacob have a tomb in the cave of Machpelah? He took all his silver and gold and placed it into a pile, which Esau took and gave Jacob his portion in the cave of Machpelah” (*Tanhumah Vayechi 6*). Esau therefore greatly desired silver and gold. Thus how can we understand that Edom refused to take what the Children of Israel proposed to give them in exchange for the water they would use?

3. There is yet another problem. After the refusal of the king of Edom, it is written, “and Israel turned away from near him” (*v.21*), meaning that the Children of Israel immediately gave up and left. How could Moses not fear that the Children of Israel would become instilled with terror (since they were going to have to wait for 40 years in the desert) by making them back away as soon as they reached their first obstacle? Was Moses not afraid that from that moment on, the other peoples would not at all hesitate to come out against the Children of Israel because they had backed away from before Edom? Moses should have at least demonstrated an outward show of strength, and even if G-d had ordered him not to fight against Edom, in any case he should not have backed away immediately without leaving the Children of Israel any way out for all the years to come!

We shall now explain all this. Concerning Jacob and Esau, the Sages say that already while in the womb of their mother, they shared the heritage of two worlds (Tanna D’vei Eliyahu Zutah 19). Esau had taken this world, which is why he sold his part in the world to come to Jacob, as it is written, “Jacob said, ‘Sell, as this day, your birthright to me’” (*Genesis 25:31*), meaning “according to that which we’ve agreed

to in our mother's womb." We know that this world is filled with food and drink and the possibility of becoming rich, everything that Esau desired and obtained. We therefore see that the sharing between them did not consist of a material distribution, but rather that it was above all a distribution of the whole, according to which Esau would not partake of any spiritual resources whatsoever. In fact, the Sages teach: "If one tells you that there is wisdom among the nations, believe him; that there is Torah among the nations, do not believe him (*Lamentations Rabba* 2: 17). The wicked Esau passed down to all his descendants the characteristic of not attributing any worth to spirituality. They were people who did not have any regard whatsoever for the Children of Israel because they had no portion whatsoever in the G-d of Israel.

There is a difference between Jacob's and Esau's nature. Even before blessing Jacob, Isaac said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are Esau's hands" (*Genesis* 27:22), meaning that in the same way that a voice is only heard (and not seen), Jacob's children (the Children of Israel) do not only believe in what they see, but also in that which is hidden, in spirituality. It is not same with Esau ("the hands are Esau's hands"), who believes in hands that are seen – in his own strength – and in that which he sees with his own eyes. This is why he does not believe in the G-d of Israel. It is because he does not see the Creator.

We will now understand why Edom did not allow Israel to cross over his territory. During the 40 years that the Children of Israel spent in the desert, they elevated themselves to a high level of spirituality, to the point that they truly resembled the angels, arrayed in glory. Their faces beamed with the radiance of the Shechinah, for in them was a portion of G-d Most High, particularly with Moses at their head. Who would not have marveled at their holiness? Just the fact of letting them cross their territory would have amounted, therefore, to recognizing the Creator of the world, and this Edom would not do at any price! "It is known that Esau detests Jacob" (*Sifrei Beha'alotcha* 9:10), and his hate is such that he preferred to lose gold and silver rather than to accord the least recognition to the Children of Israel, a recognition that would have been equivalent to recognizing the Master of the world. That would have been impossible, for Esau and his descendants have no portion in the G-d of Israel.

It remains for us to understand why Moses wanted to pass through Edom, since he could have bypassed that country without the risk of having to reverse the Children of Israel's direction and allowing fear to take hold of them. He did this because he understood the danger that Edom represented to the spiritual lives of the Children of Israel, even until the coming of the Redeemer. This is why he wanted to subject them to Esau, from the very beginning. It was in order to make Esau understand the greatness of the Children of Israel, for all undertakings begun by Moses are permanent. And even if it had been decided that Moses himself would not enter into Eretz Israel (*Numbers* 20:12-13), he laid out for the Children of Israel the path to the Redemption, of which the submission of Edom was the first step.

However the Holy One, blessed be He, did not let the Children of Israel fight against Edom, for before the time of the Redemption, Edom and the Children of Israel must retain their free will. “The voice is Jacob’s voice” – when the voice of Jacob will be heard in the places of prayer and study, the hands of Esau will be powerless (*Bereshith Rabba 65*). And if, unfortunately, this is not the case, then the hands of Esau will be dominant and the voice of Jacob will have to return through the intermediary of the sufferings that the nations will make him endure. This is why Edom did not allow Israel to cross over his country. He feared that this would give the Children of Israel an influence over the Edomites, that they would push them to believe that there is a G-d and try to precipitate their repentance. If this were to have been the case, Edom would have had to admit that the blessings rightfully belonged to Jacob, which would have meant that they would have had to submit themselves and disappear from the world. This is why it was preferable to them that they lose a great amount of wealth than to let the Children of Israel enter.

We should be even more amazed by the fact that the king of Edom was not afraid to come out for battle against Israel, even though he had heard what had happened to Pharaoh in Egypt and by the sea. As it is written: “Then the chieftains of Edom were confounded, trembling gripped the powers of Moab, and the dwellers of Canaan dissolved” (*Exodus 15:15*). In reality, Edom was very fearful of the Children of Israel, and if he went out with a great quantity of men and weapons, it was not for waging war. When the king of Edom noted Moses’ persistence (since even after Edom refused the Children of Israel the right to cross his territory, Moses still asked him, “And if we drink your water – I or my flock – I shall pay their price”), he began to ask himself why Moses continued to act in this way. Certainly, he wanted to enter in order to have an influence over the people of Edom and to convince them to return to G-d, which is demonstrated by the words “if we drink your water.” He planned to bring them closer to the Torah, which is compared to water (*Bava Kama 17a*), and to have that which they had swallowed come out of their mouths, similar to what is written in the verse that states, “He devoured wealth, but will disgorge it” (*Job 20:15*). The king of Edom therefore came out to meet him with many people in order to make the Children of Israel understand that the spiritual battle had not yet ended, and that it would continue until the time of the future Redemption.

This is the difference between Edom and the Children of Israel. Edom said, “You shall not pass through me – lest I come against you with the sword!” (*Numbers 20:18*). All Edom’s strength is in his sword and spear, in accordance with the blessing of Isaac to Esau his son: “By your sword you shall live” (*Genesis 27:40*). Yet the strength of the Children of Israel is in their mouths, as it is written, “We cried out to the L-RD and He heard our voice” (*Numbers 20:16*). Their entire nature was to be completely self-effacing before the Eternal, without any ulterior motives. From this, everyone should understand that sometimes a person does something and thinks that it constitutes a desecration of the Divine Name, while in reality there is a sanctification of the Name. How is that possible?

Imagine that someone who wears a kippah, eats kosher, and observes the mitzvot is scorned by all those around him. He may therefore think that this entails a profanation of G-d's Name, since they are really scorning the Torah and the mitzvot. Now he should realize that it is precisely because he pays no attention to them and observes the mitzvot with pride that he sanctifies the Name of G-d! In fact, in the case of Edom and Israel, when G-d commanded the latter that they not wage battle against Edom, they could have thought that this constituted a profanation of G-d's Name, since all the other peoples believed that the Children of Israel did not have the means to defend themselves. However the Children of Israel had no ulterior motives. Thus by performing His will by not defending themselves, they sanctified the Name of G-d.

In this we find a proof for what we mentioned earlier, namely that Edom did not wish to do battle against the Children of Israel because he was content by coming out against them without pursuing them. Why this attitude? We have already said that Edom wanted to imply to them that their spiritual war was not over, but that each side would continue to try and weaken the other, similar to what is written in the verse that states, "I will be filled, for she was destroyed" (*Ezekiel 26:2*). When Edom was destroyed, Jerusalem lived in peace, and when Jerusalem was destroyed, Edom lived in peace (*Megillah 6a*), for the goal of Israel is to influence Edom, and vice-versa. This battle will continue up until the time of the Final Redemption, when that which is written will occur: "And saviors will ascend Mount Zion to judge the Mountain of Esau" (*Obadiah 1: 21*). Thus the Eternal will uproot Edom from the world, speedily in our days. Amen.

### ***What Happened to Israel in the Desert is a Lesson for all the Generations***

Our Torah section of the week, Parsha Chukat, is filled with events that happened to the Children of Israel in the desert, and even though there is perhaps no connection between them, all are symbolic and teach us in every generation how to elevate and better ourselves in the service of G-d. What follows are some examples of what I have found.

Following the sin at the waters of Merivah, Moses and Aaron were not able to enter into Eretz Israel. Why? The Rambam believes that the entire sin of Moses consisted of having said to the Children of Israel, "Listen now, O rebels" (*Numbers 20:10*), meaning that he spoke ill of them. As for the Ramban, the best interpretation of the text is given by Rabbeinu Chananel, which is that Moses told the Children of Israel, "Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?" Instead, Moses should have said, "G-d shall bring forth water," for everything comes from Him, and they (Moses and Aaron) make nothing on their own. This is why they had to strike the rock instead of speaking to it, as He had commanded them (*v.8*).

In my humble opinion, we may say that there is no contradiction here. Because they had become angry against the Children of Israel and spoken ill of them, they ended up having to rely on their own greatness, not G-d's. Following that, they had to strike

the rock, whereas G-d had commanded them to speak to it, the initial cause being that beforehand, they had become angry at the Children of Israel.

Even though Moses, in his vexation, used the expression *na* (“please”), which expresses a petition, this shows that his anger was not so great. And yet G-d reprimanded him all the same, for He is extremely demanding with regards to those who are close to Him (*Yeblamot 121b*), and He punished him. Now why did Moses strike the rock rather than speak to it? Because he thought that the Children of Israel had sinned by harshly demanding water, and that as a consequence they did not merit that the water should flow out of the rock through speech, but only by striking it, for speech represents mercy whereas striking represents strict justice. Yet G-d reprimanded him, for He didn’t want the water to be viewed as a manifestation of justice, but rather solely as a manifestation of mercy, and that is why He punished Moses. G-d even added, “Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel” (*Numbers 20:12*), which means that He reprimanded Moses and Aaron for not have relied on G-d’s greatness, but rather on their own. However G-d did not call this a sin, but only a weakness in their faith. Yet since anger had brought about this disobedience to G-d, they were not allowed to enter Eretz Israel.

If Moses and Aaron would have been allowed to enter, the entire world would have yielded to them, the Temple would not have been destroyed, and the Redemption would have occurred immediately. Since this was not the case, disasters began. The king of Edom, who had positioned himself in front of the Children of Israel to prevent them from passing through his country, immediately told them, “You shall not pass through me – lest I come against you with the sword” (*v.18*). What is the meaning of the conditional tense “lest I come”? The Sefer Emet says that it refers to the long-term future. In effect, what Edom said is: If in the future I will be able to fight you, it is because there will be an exile, and consequently I can deny you passage through my land as of now. Actually, if Moses and Aaron had entered Eretz Israel, they would have judged Edom and eliminated the Kelipah, which is in fact what will happen in the future: “And saviors will ascend Mount Zion to judge the Mountain of Esau” (*Obadiah 1:21*), the saviors being Moses and Aaron. This is because if they had entered, it would have been permanently, without exile or destruction. Yet because the time for the Redemption had not yet arrived, they did not receive permission to enter and fight against Edom.

To understand this passage, we must say that Edom knew that Isaac had said, “The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are Esau’s hands” (*Genesis 27:22*). Esau probably also heard that he had said, “one people shall be stronger than the other people” (*ibid 25:23*), meaning that there would never be peace between them, which is the reason why Edom didn’t let Israel pass through. And even if in all fairness Edom should have yielded before the Children of Israel, as it is written, “The elder shall serve the younger” (*ibid.*), he still refused to do so.

In saying, “lest I come against you with the sword,” he alluded to two things:

1. Do not pass through me, since you will be influenced by my character and sins, and I will then be able to wage war against you, for “by your sword you shall live ... you shall shake his yoke off your neck” (*ibid* 27:40) and I will conquer you. Naturally, he wasn’t saying this because of his love for Israel (whom he feared tremendously, as it is written: “Then the chieftains of Edom were confounded” [*Exodus 15:15*]), but only as a trick. And in fact G-d wisely decreed that it wasn’t necessary to fight against Edom before the Redeemer (Mashiach) arrives to judge the mount of Esau, and that royalty belongs to G-d.

2. How can I let you pass through and benefit from my country, since tomorrow I will destroy your Temple? Better that we remain enemies until the future and that you don’t pass through me.

The death of Aaron occurred after this entire episode, and concerning him it is said, “When the entire assembly saw that Aaron had perished, they wept for Aaron thirty days” (*Numbers 20:29*). Everyone wept for him, for he loved and pursued peace (*Perkei Avoth 1:12*). Even when the Children of Israel complained of him, he held no grudge against them. On the contrary, he always made peace between a husband and his wife and between a man and his fellow. In this way, he brought about the love of G-d, Whose name is also *Shalom* (“Peace” – *Shabbat 10b*), and we know that G-d finds nothing better to contain blessing than peace.

This is why Aaron merited being the High Priest, for the clothes, sacrifices, and blessings of the High Priest connect the Children of Israel to their Father in Heaven. Concerning upright men, it is said that they establish peace between the Children of Israel and the Holy One, blessed be He (*Tanhuma Toldot 1*), and G-d blesses His people by peace (*Psalms 29:11*). All this was because of the merit of Aaron the peacemaker.

The importance of Aaron’s merit is such that the Clouds of Glory were due to him (*Taanith 9a*). They protected Israel against all enemy intrusion, and also against the cold and the heat – just like Aaron, who had a good influence on everyone and made peace reign among all. The clouds also had the goal of bringing the Children of Israel to repentance, for the Sages said that the clouds rejected those who had sinned (*Tanhuma Teitzei 10*). When this occurred, Aaron certainly realized what was happening and came to teach the person who had sinned how to repent and return to the interior of the cloud in order to benefit from the influence of the Holy One, blessed be He, and gain protection from all harm (*Bamidbar Rabba 19:15*). Concerning this, Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin explains that the clouds were due to the merit of Aaron, not anyone else, for it was Aaron himself who brought an abundance of good to the people, in the same way as did these clouds.

However when Aaron died, the clouds disappeared (*Taanith 9a*). This beneficial influence and protection were interrupted and there was no one left to guide the people in the way that Aaron had done. The House of Israel wept for him for two reasons: Because this beneficial influence had been interrupted, and because there was no one to make peace among men and teach them to return to G-d. Now clouds,

as we know, can be small. Yet the wind often connects one cloud to another, to the point that one very large, powerful cloud can take shape. This is a teaching for all the Children of Israel: Through love and fraternity, by respecting the commandment “you shall love your fellow as yourself” (*Leviticus 19:18*), each person can connect to another, and at the same time the Torah and mitzvot connect them to the Holy One, blessed be He, for love is a great principle of the Torah (*Bereshith Rabba 24:7*) and it brings people closer to G-d.

Once all this stopped with the death of Aaron, the war began. At that moment, the Canaanite king of Arad heard that Aaron had died (*Numbers 21:1*) and that the Clouds of Glory had vanished. He believed that this was a sign of weakness, and so he attacked the Children of Israel and took some of them prisoners. From this we see the harm brought about by sin and hatred. Up to then, the Tzaddik had protected them from all harm, and no nation could fight against them, but then he passed away and they began to argue among themselves, to the point that they were punished by the Canaanite (who in reality was Amalek). How did the Canaanite become aware of what had happened? It was Balaam who told them that the Children of Israel were surrounded by Clouds of Glory because of Aaron’s merit. We therefore see to what extent the Tsaddik can protect the entire people, even if they are not worthy, for by his very nature he wants to do good for Israel in every possible way.

How did the Children of Israel succeed in defeating the king of Arad? It is written, “Israel made a vow to the L-RD and said, ‘If He will deliver this people into my hand, I will consecrate their cities’ ” (*Numbers 21:2*). They understood that Amalek came to fight them and make them sin, which is why they immediately made a vow, as a single man with a single heart (“made a vow” is singular in Hebrew). They promised to conquer their evil inclination, to consider everything as consecrated, and not to use their enemy’s riches. They in fact were successful, and the merit of Aaron returned because the Children of Israel had immediately repented and succeeded in overcoming the weakness that had allowed Amalek to take prisoners from among them.

From what we have said up to now, we understand that everything is connected to the beginning of the parsha, where the subject is the ashes of the red heifer, followed by the death of Miriam. Actually, the Sages have said, “In the same way that the ashes of the red heifer atone, the death of the Tzaddikim purify and atone” (*Yerushalmi Yoma 1: 1*). This is because with their passing away, everyone cries for them (as they did for Aaron), and they repent and draw closer to G-d. This is why the Children of Israel obtained victory through Aaron’s merit.

Every person must learn from this that he should possess a merit that will protect him, such that in dangerous situations this merit will come to his aid. This is what the Children of Israel did by immediately making a vow. What is a vow? It is a weapon against the evil inclination to prevent it from enticing us, similar to what the Sages have said: “The one who sees the degrading ordeal of the Sotah should make a vow to abstain from wine” (*Sotah 2a*). A vow permits a person to establish a distance between

himself and the pleasures of the world and to conquer his instincts, thus allowing him to become holy and pure. This is a lesson for all the generations. In case of tragedy, a person must try to sanctify and purify himself. This allows him to conquer the evil inclination and defeat the enemy, as did the Children of Israel when they triumphed over Amalek. It is in this way that one comes closer to G-d.

***Distance Yourself From a Bad Neighbor and Do not Associate with the Wicked***

It is written, “The L-RD said to Moses and Aaron at Mount Hor by the border of the land of Edom, saying, ‘Aaron shall be gathered to his people...Take Aaron and Elazar his son and bring them up to Mount Hor. Strip Aaron of his vestments...and Aaron shall be gathered in and die there.’...Aaron died there on the top of the mount” (*Numbers 20:23-28*).

Rashi relates the teaching of the Midrash, which describes Mount Hor as a small apple on top of a large apple (*Tanhuma Chukat 17*). Even though the cloud leveled the mountains and made them equal in size, three of them remained: Mount Sinai for the giving of the Torah, Mount Hor for Aaron’s burial place, and Mount Nebo for Moses’ burial place. Furthermore, commenting on the phrase, “by the border of the land of Edom” (*Numbers 20:23*), the Midrash explains: Since they had contact with the wicked Esau, their deeds were corrupted and this Tzaddik was take away from them.

We need to clarify a certain number of issues concerning this subject:

1. Why did our Sages describe Mount Hor, where Aaron was buried, as a small apple on top of a large one? In the final analysis, it is a large mountain. What exactly is the meaning of one mountain on top of another? Finally, why does the verse state “Mount Hor” at one point and “the top of the mount” at another?

2. Concerning contact with Esau, Rashi supports his view with an incident involving King Jehoshaphat: “Because you have allied yourself with Ahaziah, the L-RD has wrecked your undertakings” (*II Chronicles 20:37*). Yet here the Children of Israel, whose only goal was to make it to the Holy Land, did not ally themselves with Edom. On the contrary, the king of Edom did not give them his authorization to pass through his territory.

3. Moses sent emissaries to the king of Edom to obtain his authorization. What sin is there in that? Why was it specifically Aaron who died when the Israelites were by the border of Edom?

Actually, we may say that the Children of Israel were responsible for Aaron’s death. When the king of Edom refused to allow them to pass through his land, they should have immediately proceeded to the Holy Land by another route. However they did not do this, and instead they insisted on passing through his territory, as it is written: “Let me pass through on foot” (*Numbers 20:19*). Moses in no way shared the same viewpoint, and it was the Children of Israel who believed that it was necessary to pass through

his territory. Therefore they were the ones who sent emissaries. We may say that in the final analysis, it was the Children of Israel who wanted to associate with the wicked (G-d forbid).

It was this insistence on the part of the Children of Israel that caused Aaron's premature death. The death of a Tzaddik like Aaron is an enormous loss, for the Tzaddik rectifies the spiritual worlds and brings abundance to the world. (Concerning this subject, the Ohr HaChaim writes, "The sentence had already been pronounced, but he could have lived for a few extra days"). Commenting on this verse in his book *Pituchei Chotam*, Rabbi Yaakov Abihssira writes: " 'When you light the lamps' (*Numbers 8:2*), Aaron brought good upon all. He loved peace and continuously sought it, and he made peace reign between man and wife, and between man and his fellow (*Perkei Avoth 1: 12*). His sudden and premature death was a tremendous loss. ...The Torah stresses the fact that he died by the border of the land of Edom in order to make us understand that the Children of Israel had not distanced themselves from that wicked one. They were not careful to avoid falling into his traps, and their contact with Edom brought about the premature death of the Tzaddik."

This verse mentions Mount Hor at one point and the top of the mount at another because, as we know, the evil inclination has seven names (*Sukkah 52a*). It often changes form and manages to entice a person in a different way each time. It may even appear as a Tzaddik at times. We must therefore be very careful not to fall into its traps. For example, King Jehoshaphat of Judah was a great Tzaddik, yet he associated with Ahaziah, the king of Israel, who was wicked. Jehoshaphat certainly wanted to make Ahaziah return to the right path, yet a prophet had forbid him to associate with Ahaziah. This is because he was susceptible to his harmful influence, for if Ahaziah had failed to heed his own father's voice, why would he listen to Jehoshaphat?

Our Sages compare the evil inclination to a mountain (in the eyes of the righteous), and to an unbreakable rock (*Sukkah 52a*). If we break it in one way, it gets stronger in another, and if we think that we have defeated it, it appears in exactly the same place but in a different form. Concerning this subject, Kabbalah explains that if a person distances himself from sin, this is an indication that he wants to rectify it. By distancing himself from the evil inclination, which constantly changes appearance, a person will manage to eliminate it.

Listening only to Moses' voice, the Children of Israel insisted several times on passing through the territory of Edom. They should have understood that this was the work of the Satan, which tried to persuade them to do so. The evil inclination appears as a small apple on top of a large one, yet afterwards it ascends to the top of the mountain and there tries to make people sin. Up there, it erects structures abounding in sin to entice people to sin (*see Shabbat 105b*). Hashem therefore commanded Moses to bring Aaron up Mount Hor, for the goal of the evil inclination was to prevent him from influencing the Children of Israel. Aaron had to be at the top of the mount in order to defeat it.

Having heard of Aaron's death, the king of Arad came and attacked the Children of Israel. How could this king have dared to confront Moses, who could have easily defeated him? After having seen the Clouds of Glory disappear, the king of Arad heard that Moses, followed by the Children of Israel, had sent emissaries to the king of Edom to ask him for permission to pass through his territory. The king of Arad therefore concluded that they wanted to associate with the wicked, which caused Aaron's death, for Hashem loathed their conduct. Furthermore, seeing their weakness, the king of Arad immediately decided to wage war against them.

By their death, Tzaddikim expiate the sins of the generation (*Shabbat 33b*). The king of Arad, a Canaanite, therefore rushed out to fight the Children of Israel before they could repent and begin to mend their ways. Being a descendant of Esau, he knew that when the voice of Jacob would not be heard, the hands of Esau would dominate them. Nevertheless, the Children of Israel strengthened their faith and made a vow, and Hashem accepted their repentance. Therefore they managed to defeat the Canaanite.

The Children of Israel thus continued on their way to the Promised Land. However the people became discouraged while on route (*Numbers 21:4*), frustrated by the "light bread" (v.5), meaning the manna. Now as we know, bread alludes to Torah (*Yalkut Shimoni, Vayeilzei 123*). Thus they denied the Torah and distanced themselves from Teshuvah. The evil inclination therefore controlled them, for the Torah is its antidote. This occurred because the wicked traits of Edom were still rooted in them, which was the cause of Aaron's death.

The Children of Israel were punished by fiery serpents, which killed multitudes of them. This was an unusual punishment that had never been seen before. Hashem thus said to Moses, "Make yourself a fiery [serpent] and place it on a pole, and it will be that anyone who was bitten will look at it and live" (*Numbers 21:8*). The Talmud asks, "Is it the serpent that kills? Is it the serpent that keeps alive?" (*Rosh Hashanah 29a*). Why is it that a serpent brings death and causes healing?

The reason why G-d sent the Children of Israel fiery serpents is because they began to distance themselves from Him and associate with the wicked Edomites. Furthermore, instead of entering the Holy Land, they were getting farther from it and thus detaching themselves from the Torah and Judaism. The serpent embodies the evil inclination, the Satan, the forces of evil, the other side (*Zohar I:114a*). G-d acted strictly with the Children of Israel, as He does with all Tzaddikim (*Yebamot 121b*). Nevertheless, He immediately healed them. As the Talmud states (*Rosh Hashanah 29b*), all they needed to do was to look at the overhanging serpent, the essential thing being to raise their eyes and see beyond it to Hashem.

Mount Hor alludes to the evil inclination, which is called a mountain. A person should therefore come closer to Hashem and never distance himself from Him, and he should constantly engage in *heshbon nefesh* (personal accounting, introspection). Commenting on the verse, "Regarding this the poets would say: Come to Heshbon" (*Numbers 21:27*), the Talmud explains that this is a reference to those who control their

inclination, to those who take an accounting (*heshbon*) of their life (*Bava Batra 78b*). Let us therefore not be seduced by the vile one who takes on various forms. We will thus follow the path laid out by Aaron, who knew how to draw a line between himself and the evil inclination. Let us distance ourselves from the evil inclination and come closer to the Holy One, blessed be He. We will then experience good in this world and in the World to Come.

### ***The Power of Purity Also Exists Today***

The *mitzvah* of the “red heifer” has no logical reason behind it. It is called a *chukah*, as the Sages have taught: “The Satan and the nations of the world taunt Israel by saying, ‘What is this command and what reason is there for it?’ The Holy One, blessed be He, says: ‘I have laid down a statute; I have issued a decree! You cannot transgress My decree!’ ” True, the *mitzvah* of the red heifer is a decree that has neither a reason nor an explanation for it. Our Sages said that even King Solomon wanted to understand the reason behind it, and he thought that he might succeed. Yet in the end, he was forced to admit that it was beyond him and that he understood nothing, as he himself said: “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me” (*Ecclesiastes 7:23*).

All the same, we note several things in this *mitzvah* that are both amazing and surprising, things that may teach us lessons for daily living, even today. First of all, the heifer must be completely red, and even two black hairs will disqualify it. Why is this so? What does it matter if the color of its hide is not entirely red? Secondly, the heifer must never have been worked, as the verse says: “Upon which a yoke has not come” (*Numbers 19:2*). This also requires an explanation.

In addition, the Sages say that the ashes of the red heifer render the impure pure, and the pure impure. This means that when the ashes of the red heifer were sprinkled on a person who was impure, he was rendered pure. Yet at the same time, a pure person who came into contact with the ashes (or the one performing the sprinkling) was rendered impure. This is very odd. Why do we find something and its opposite here, since we could have inferred that because the ashes purify the impure, then they should certainly *not* render the pure impure, but rather leave him pure!

In addition to all this, we need to understand something fundamental. We know that the red heifer atones for the sin of the golden calf, as the Sages have said: “This may be illustrated by a parable. A handmaiden’s boy polluted the king’s palace. The king said: ‘Let his mother come and clear away the filth.’ In the same way the Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘Let the heifer come and atone for the incident of the calf’ ” (*Bamidbar Rabba 19:8*). Now this seems difficult to understand, for we know that Hashem repays measure for measure, with the rectification being in exactly the same area as the sin. Now since the Children of Israel sinned by making the golden calf, the rectification of that sin should also have been done by a calf, not by a heifer (*i.e.*, by a cow, which is the mother of a calf).

My friends, this teaches us that today also, in our generation, we can attain purity as during the time when the ashes of the red heifer were available. To purify and sanctify ourselves, we simply need for some prior conditions to be met.

An ordinary individual is filled with imperfections, be they sins, moral defects, or simply unpleasant character traits that he must correct. The sad thing, however, is that a person does not see his own shortcomings. He cannot really see his deficiencies. This is why the Torah comes and tells us that the heifer must be completely red, without the least amount of black hairs. This means that before all else, we must repair our inadequacies and become perfect and whole in our character traits and *mitzvot* performance. It is only in this way that we can achieve complete purification and sanctification, and as such we can come closer to Hashem.

In addition, a person must put a devoted effort into improving his character traits by firing himself up with enthusiasm for serving Hashem. This is alluded to by the color of the heifer, for red is a sign of fervor; it is the color of the sacred fire for serving the Creator. It is only with fervor that a person can achieve purity.

We also need to meet another condition: The red heifer must never have carried a yoke. Our Sages say, “Whoever takes upon himself the yoke of Torah – the yoke of government and the yoke of worldly cares are removed from him” (*Perkei Avoth 3:5*). One who agrees to devote himself to the Torah and become purified through it, all obstacles in his service to Hashem are removed. If a person has not carried the yoke – that is, if he wears no other yoke, such as the yoke of materiality – and if he turns away from material concerns and the pleasures of this world, then the Holy One, blessed be He, gives him the yoke of Torah, and with it he purifies himself and comes closer to Hashem.

At the same time as all this, we must still remember a basic principle. It sometimes seems that we have perfected ourselves in all aspects of our service to Hashem, with nothing more to improve. In fact we may have already begun studying Torah, performing *mitzvot*, and conducting ourselves according to the dictates of the Torah and tradition. We may be giving to *tzeddakah* and helping people both through our direct efforts and our money, and therefore we may already seem perfect and without reproach, holy and pure without defect. We may even think that we already deserve a tiny part of *Gan Eden*, both below and above. This is why a certain detail regarding the law of the red heifer tells us that although its ashes can purify one who is impure and bring him closer to Hashem, its ashes can also make those who are pure – those who already consider themselves perfect, with nothing to improve – impure. The red heifer renders such a person impure, for he has no desire to sanctify or purify himself further, since he already thinks that he is perfect.

Above all, the last condition teaches us that the sin must be rectified not through the calf itself, but through its mother. This teaches us the power of our holy forefathers and the *tzaddikim* in every generation, for it is only by their merit that every Jew may sanctify and purify himself, and thus come closer to the Creator.

Let us adopt these principles as our own. Let us better ourselves by fervently correcting our defects, by completely accepting the yoke of Heaven – without allowing ourselves to think that we are already perfect – all while relying on the *tzaddikim* and our holy forefathers. In this way we will merit becoming truly pure and holy. Amen, may it be so!

## *Parsha Balak*

### *The Strength of the Children of Israel Resides in their Unity*

It is written, “Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorite. Moab became very frightened of the people because it was numerous, and Moab was disgusted in the face of the Children of Israel” (*Numbers 22:2-3*).

There are several points that need to be clarified here.

1. Why did Balak fear the Children of Israel, to the point that he and all his people were disgusted of life because of their fear? Even if they had seen all that Israel had done to the Amorite, this was still not a reason to fear the Children of Israel, for it was sufficient to let them pass by their border, contrary to what the Amorite did, in which case no harm could have come to them, neither to them nor to their wealth. And this does not even take into account that the Children of Israel had received the order, “You shall not distress Moab, and you shall not provoke war with them” (*Deuteronomy 2:9*).

2. The verse that states, “For I know that whomever you bless is blessed, and whomever you curse is cursed” (*Numbers 22:6*) must also be understood. Regarding this, the Sages have said: “‘For I know’ – because of the war of Sihon, whom you [Balaam] assisted in conquering Moab” (*Tanhuma ibid. 4, Rashi*). Where is the proof for this? If Balaam participated in the war of Sihon against Moab and was victorious, does this at all imply that he could now conquer the Children of Israel? The latter had fought more difficult wars, and with the help of the Eternal had vanquished Amalek, Egypt, etc. From where, therefore, did Balak obtain this assurance that he would be able to defeat Israel if Balaam would help him, to the point of saying “For I know” with absolute certainty?

3. If we say that Balaam did in fact have the power to defeat anyone, why did he remain indifferent and not come to the aid of Sihon and Og when the Children of Israel fought against them? This proves that he was not absolutely certain that he could defeat them!

We shall attempt to explain all this. Balak desired nothing other than to perpetually stay malevolent, and he dreaded that his own people become involved in learning how to do good from the Children of Israel. This is why he said, “Now the congregation will lick up our entire surroundings” (*Numbers 22:4*), meaning that up to now they were surrounded by wickedness and evil, but at present he feared that the proximity of the Children of Israel would have a good influence on his people, and that they would learn from their good deeds. This is why it was a question of a “congregation”, for it was the trait of a “congregation” (communal spirit, beneficial union) that he feared.

Balak also presented Balaam with the following argument: The entire success of the Children of Israel lay in the fact that they constituted a community, that they were united. The verse also states, “Moab became very frightened of the people because it

was numerous” (*Numbers 22:3*), their number adding to the performance of the mitzvot. In fact, what was not accomplished by one was accomplished by the other, and together they observed all 613 mitzvot, in the spirit of the expression, “with a perfect union, in the name of all Israel.” We know that the entire reason for the descent into Egypt was the baseless hatred that the brothers had for the righteous Joseph (*see Shabbat 10b*). We also know that while in Egypt they were reduced to slavery because among them there were slander mongers (*Shemot Rabba 1:30*), as Moses our teacher himself said: “The matter is known” (*Exodus 2:14*).

Yet at present, they had repaired this sin and found themselves perfectly united with one another, as it is said, “Behold! A people has come out of Egypt,” all united like single man. In addition, they covered the country, they were victorious in war, they defeated Sihon and Og (who were protecting Moab – *Tanhuma ibid. 4*), and their unity gave them considerable strength. Now they had settled in front of Moab, settled in their tents, occupied with Torah and the unified service of G-d, and thus had the ability to conquer Moab.

Consequently, Balak said, “So now – please come and curse this people for me” (*Numbers 22:6*), which is as if Balak were saying, “Give me advice on the way in which to fight them, so that I may create a breach in their unity. Do this because they are more powerful than me [v.6], and they may have a good influence on my people. If I can divide them, perhaps I can diminish them [*see Tanhuma ibid.*]. Perhaps we can manage to make a small number of them hate each other, and therefore I can chase them from my country. They will then be pursued and separated from one another. It is only necessary to make a breach in their unity in order for G-d to punish them.”

In fact, the Sages have said, “Jerusalem was destroyed because of Katzma and Bar Katzma” (*see Gittin 55b*). The hate between two people brought about the destruction of the entire city. How much more, then, will mass dissension among the Children of Israel bring about failure in their wars against the nations.

In reality, Balak knew how much G-d detests discord and controversy, for even the Torah was not given to the Children of Israel before they were perfectly united, as it is written, “Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain” (*Exodus 19:2*) “as a single man with a single heart” (*Mechilta ibid.*). This is why Balak wanted advice on the best way to separate them, and this is the sense of the verse that states, “My people, hear now what Balak, king of Moab, schemed” (*Micah 6:5*). Balak did not wish to fight, which is why he looked for a way to separate the Children of Israel. This is the reason why he told Balaam, “For I know that whomever you bless is blessed,” which is as if Balak had said, “It is true that you were not able to help Sihon in his war against the Children of Israel, for no people can do anything against them while they are united, and they will thereby always be victorious. However, let us try to find a way to divide them, thus allowing us to diminish them a little” (*see Tanhuma Nitzavim 1*).

We note here that two people commit a wrong greater than a single person. Because of their fear of the Children of Israel (*Sanhedrin 105a*), Midian and Moab made peace

between themselves in order to fight against their unity. And Balak taught this method to all the generations, to the point that we actually see that the nations unite against the Children of Israel. Yet because of G-d's goodness, this union did not help them. Even Balak and Balaam ended up by parting ways: "Now, flee to your place" (*Numbers 14:11*). G-d rewarded their plans measure for measure (*Shabbat 105b*), and in the end their own people fought with one another and separated themselves from each other.

Balaam had effectively understood by himself that G-d protects us from all harm, and that when Israel is united, no people can dominate him. At that moment Balaam cried out and said, "Behold! It is a people that dwells alone, and among the nations it will not be reckoned" (*Numbers 23:9*). Having seen that the entrances to their tents did not face one another, nor were gender-mixed (so that there be no indiscretion among them – Bava Batra 60a), Balaam added, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel" (*Numbers 24:5*). The Hebrew words *am levadad ishcon* ("a people that dwells alone") has exactly the same numerical value as the words *lev ha'am hazeh be'achdut* ("the heart of this people is in unity"). And the expression *mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov* ("how goodly are your tents, O Jacob") has exactly the same numerical value as the words *ve'am gueulei Hashem ohavim zeh lazeh* ("And a people redeemed by G-d are moved to love one another"). In this, Balaam made an allusion to the fact that when the Children of Israel are united, no one can cast the evil eye on them and harm them.

And even if they sin, the nations cannot vanquish them as long as they are united, as it is written, "He perceived no iniquity in Jacob, and saw no perversity in Israel" (*Numbers 23:21*). We may ask ourselves the following: G-d never forgoes judging sin according to His will, and the one who claims the contrary will have to give up his bowels for this (*Bava Kama 50a*). How can He therefore close His eyes to the sin of the Children of Israel? The answer is that when they form a united whole, even if they are idolaters, Divine justice does not affect them (*Tanhuma Shoftim 18*). We find an example of this occurring during the generation of Ahab (*Vayikra Rabba 26:5*), during which time they went to war and returned victorious, even though they worshipped idols. This was because they were united and there were no informers among them. This is the meaning of "and the shout of a king is among him" (*Numbers 23:21*). As long as he remains united, when he calls with the trumpet during wartime he dominates the enemy. The expression *u'teru'at melech bo* ("and the shout of a king is among him") has exactly the same numerical value as *derech tovim Israel arevim zeh lazeh* ("the good path for Israel is to be responsible for one another").

This is how Balaam encouraged the Children of Israel to remain united. He told Balak, "You have said, 'A people has come out of Egypt,' but they did not come out by themselves. Rather, it was G-d Who brought them out of Egypt. Despite their sins, the Children of Israel left because they were united, and when they are united they can vanquish anyone and bring themselves closer to G-d" (*Tanhuma ibid. 14*).

### ***G-d's Righteousness in the Face of Balak and Bilam's Wickedness***

It is written in the Zohar that no greater enemies have arisen against Israel than Balak and Bilam, who together planned to wipe out the entire Jewish people (*Zohar, beginning of Parsha Balak*). They were even more evil than Amalek, who is alluded to by the last two Hebrew letters of their names: **BilAM BaLaK**.

Let us try to explain this. When the Children of Israel left Egypt, Amalek wanted to cool the Children of Israel's faith in G-d with the hope that G-d would punish them, as it is written: "He happened upon [which can also be read as "cooled"] you on the way" (*Deuteronomy 25:18*). As for Balak and Bilam, other than the fact that they wanted to continue in the way of Amalek and cool the hearts of the Children of Israel, they also planned on sowing confusion into their holy thoughts so that their curse would be fulfilled and yield results. This would permit them to wipe out the Children of Israel from under Heaven.

This is alluded to by the first Hebrew letters of their names (**BiLam BaLaK**), which form the word *Bilbel* (confusion). From the beginning they had wicked intentions, as the prophet wrote: "My people, hear now what Balak, king of Moab schemed, and what Bilam son of Beor answered him" (*Micah 6:5*), all in order to cool and muddle the thoughts of the Children of Israel before their Father in Heaven so that He would punish them. In fact, that is exactly what happened. This is why the Torah uses the verb *mikre* (by chance, to happen upon) when G-d revealed Himself to Bilam, as it is written: "*va'yikar Elokim [and G-d happened upon] Bilam*" (*Numbers 23:4*). It was in order to weaken Bilam's ability to cool the hearts of the Children of Israel.

We find this idea alluded to in the Haftorah: "My people, hear now what Balak, king of Moab schemed . . . in order [that you] recognize the righteous acts of the L-RD" (*Micah 6:5*). This refers to the kindness that the Holy One, blessed be He, displayed for His people Israel, meaning that even though Bilam knew exactly when G-d became angry (as our Sages have said [*Berachot 7a*]), G-d acted with Bilam measure for measure: Bilam wanted to confound the Children of Israel, so G-d confounded Bilam by appearing to him by chance. G-d thus weakened him so that he would not succeed in cooling the hearts and thoughts of Israel, and so that he not curse them as he had planned.

This shows us just to what degree the hatred of Balak and Bilam extended. In fact all the nations knew that the world had been created for the Torah, as it is written: "If not for My covenant [the Torah], I would not have appointed days and nights, the decrees of heaven and earth" (*Jeremiah 33:25*). The world was also created for the Jewish people (Pesikta Zutah and Rashi on the beginning of Genesis), who are called "the first of His crop" (*Jeremiah 2:3*), for without the Torah, there would be neither heaven nor earth (*Pesachim 68b*). If Bilam had determined the exact moment that G-d became angry and had said, "destroy them" (Tosefta Berachot 7a, beginning at *she'ilmaleh*), the Holy One, blessed be He, would have destroyed the Jewish people. Consequently the whole world would have been destroyed. The hatred of Balak and Bilam for Israel was so

great (*Tanhuma Balak 5*) that they wanted all of them to die, even if it meant the destruction of the entire world and themselves with it, much like Samson accepting to die with the Philistines (*Judges 16:30*).

In addition, Bilam detested Israel even *after* his death. The Sages indicate this to us regarding Onkelos the convert (*Gittin 57a*). He wanted to raise Bilam's spirit by invoking his name in order to ask him who was important in the World to Come. Bilam answered: The Children of Israel. Onkelos then asked if he should join with them, and Bilam answered, "You shall not seek their peace or welfare" (*Deuteronomy 23:7*). It therefore seems that even after his death, Bilam continued to hate the Children of Israel.

Nevertheless, we have yet to understand why the Holy One, blessed be He, had to prevent Bilam from going to curse them. We also have to understand why, in a general way, there was reason to fear Bilam's curses, for when he wanted to curse them, G-d could have sent an angel to strike his mouth in such a way that he would never curse again. Furthermore, we have already seen that an angel stood in Bilam's path to deviate him from it and impede his progress (*Numbers 22:22*). Such was also the case with Nebuchadnezzar, for when he wanted to curse the Jewish people and praise G-d, the angel Gabriel came and struck him (*Sanhedrin 96a*). Otherwise, nothing would have remained of Israel. G-d could have therefore done the same with Bilam.

It should be noted that the curse *kalem* ("destroy them") is so short that even an angel would not have been able to prevent Bilam from uttering it, and furthermore the angels themselves did not know when G-d becomes angry. It was only G-d Himself Who could confound Bilam.

We cannot help but to be amazed by this: If Bilam knew exactly when G-d became angry, and if he was familiar with the mind of the Most High, why did he not curse the Children of Israel in Midian? Why did he need to go to Moab to curse them? It is precisely here that we see G-d's goodness toward His people Israel. Bilam was to arrive at Balak's in order to curse the Children of Israel, for Balak the sorcerer had to respond "amen" after his curses in order for them to work. As we mentioned earlier, we find in their names an allusion to the words *Amalek* and *Bilbel* (confusion). Yet it took a long time before this secret became known to them, and even though they were usually at war with each other, they consequently made peace with the sole intent of cursing the Children of Israel (*Tanhuma Balak 3*).

Therein lay G-d's goodness to Israel. Bilam was a great prophet of the nations (*Bamidbar Rabba 14:34*), for it is written that no one *in Israel* has ever arisen like Moses (*Deuteronomy 34:10*). Yet in spite of everything, G-d in His love for the Children of Israel prevented Bilam from cursing them, for He did not become angry during that time. His wrath vanished in the blink of an eye, and it was replaced by mercy as He demonstrated great kindness to them.

We may add that G-d wanted Bilam to bless the Children of Israel, thus allowing all the nations to hear how Bilam's curses had been transformed into blessings. This is why Bilam came to Moab and said, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob" (*Numbers 24:5*),

recognizing that no curses can work against the Children of Israel and that the entire world continues to exist because of their merits (as we have explained elsewhere on this parsha). This is also part of G-d's goodness to Israel.

In light of what we have said, it only remains for us to have confidence in our Father in Heaven. We need not worry about the nations of the world that try to wipe us out through words or by war. Even Amalek was not able to defeat us, nor Balak and Bilam for that matter. Nevertheless they harmed us with their evil counsel, and it is evil counsel that we must fear, for if G-d protects us with regards to material security, spiritual protection depends on us. The Sages have said concerning this, "All depends on Heaven except the fear of Heaven" (*Berachot 33b*). We should be on guard against the negative influence of other peoples. This depends on us alone, for Balak and Bilam were not able to physically conquer Israel, but they were able to harm us by means of their insidious advice. Finally G-d in His goodness sent Pinchas, the son of Elazar, who demonstrated his zeal for G-d, as it is written: "He zealously avenged Me among them" (*Numbers 25:11*). Without him, where would we be?

It was not only then, but in *every* generation that people rise up and try to destroy us with their evil counsel. Yet Israel is never abandoned, and the Holy One, blessed be He, delivers us from the hands of the wicked through the intermediary of the righteous that He placed in every generation to annul their wicked decrees (*Yoma 38b*). This is why it is written, "My people, hear now what Balak, king of Moab schemed" (*Micah 6:5*), for everything that concerns the soul depends on us alone. May G-d help us to overcome all evil counsel, and to serve Him with all our heart. Amen, may it be so.

### ***"How Beautiful Are Your Tents, O Jacob, Your Dwelling Places, O Israel!"***

Concerning Bilaam's blessings, we have seen that the word "tents" corresponds to houses of prayer, and "dwelling places" corresponds to houses of study. Rabbi Abba bar Kahana teaches that, except for these houses of study and prayer, all the blessings reverted to curses, which was Bilaam's real intent (*see Sanhedrin 105b*). This demands a certain amount of clarification.

1. If the reason why Bilaam's curses were not fulfilled is because he did not pronounce them sincerely and wholeheartedly, why was the blessing "How beautiful are your tents..." fulfilled? Did he pronounce that blessing wholeheartedly?

2. The author of *Ilana De'Chaye* asks why Bilaam's blessings were mentioned in the Torah if they were not said wholeheartedly. What was their purpose in that case?

To focus even more on the problem, let us consider the importance of deeds performed by a person who does Teshuvah. Even the greatest Tzaddikim can draw a lesson and grow stronger from the exemplary devotion of those who put the most sincere efforts into returning to the right path. If King David, who had learned but two things from Ahitophel, called him his teacher, his guide, and his mentor (*Perkei Avot 6:3*), how much respect should we pay to those who strengthen the foundation of our faith? Perhaps we should also call them our teacher and rav.

Some acquire the World to Come in an instant, exclaimed Rabbi in weeping (*Avodah Zarah 10b, 17b, 18a*). In other words, those who have returned to their Creator earn a great reward for all the effort and energy that they expended in a single moment to return to the right path. Rabbi also wept for those who could have acquired the World to Come by intensifying their Torah study, yet refrained from doing so. If a Baal Teshuvah (who did not previously know G-d) is assured of the World to Come, a person who recognizes his Creator can strengthen himself each day and every hour by considering that he has just now, on this very day, received the Torah on Mount Sinai (*Rashi, Deuteronomy 26:16*).

Nevertheless, one who chooses the good and desires to take to the path of righteousness must exert a great deal of effort to arrive at the goal that he has set for himself, since the evil inclination lays traps for him everywhere. If the evil inclination becomes aware of a person's strong desire to engage in Torah study, it will fear that his efforts will lead him to recognize his Creator. Even if he enters a yeshiva without studying Torah there, the very fact that he is in a place of study will have a tremendous effect on him, and he will certainly end up studying Torah for the very love of study (*Pesachim 50b*). We must therefore be aware of the obstacles that the evil inclination uses in order to make us transgress, and we must do our best to radically distance ourselves from it and only seek to be close to the good inclination.

The Talmud tells us, "If that repulsive wretch [the evil inclination] meets you, drag him to the house of study. If he is of stone, he will wear away; if of iron, he will shatter into fragments" (*Sukkah 52b*). Engage in Torah study and you will come to realize that the evil inclination only seeks to deceive you.

Some people radically distance themselves from our religion and even refuse to hear of it. Instead of recognizing the truth, they prefer to stay in the darkness of falsehood and impurity. This is because they pay attention to the evil inclination, which tells them that if they recognize the truth, they will never again be able to enjoy the delights of this world. To counter the evil inclination, we must expend every effort in getting to a place where Torah is studied. In doing so, even the most wicked will come to clearly recognize the Creator of the universe, for the voice of the Torah will penetrate his heart and the evil found therein will fly out in pieces. With respect to this, we have already seen the example of Resh Lakish, an infamous armed robber, who repented as soon as he heard the voice of Rabbi Yochanan. As it is written, "Behold, My word is like fire – the word of the L-RD – and like a hammer that shatters a rock" (*Jeremiah 23:29*).

Despite his wickedness and the hatred he felt for Israel, Bilaam marveled at what he saw. His heart broke when he saw the Children of Israel united around the Sanctuary, which connected them to their Father in Heaven, and when he saw them neglecting the vanities of this world to concentrate solely on eternal life. At that point he could only exclaim, "How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob." In other words, how beautiful is the Torah, which is called *Tov*, the study of which we engage in like our Patriarch Jacob, who "dwelled in tents" (*Genesis 25:27*), these being the academies of Shem and Ever (*Beresith Rabba 63:15*). Similarly, "Your dwelling places [*Miskenotecha*], O Israel" means

that Torah study enables a Jew to be *Nimshach* (drawn) to the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) and to connect with it.

These blessings were thus mentioned in the Torah because Bilaam pronounced them with great sincerity, from the depths of his heart, so moved was he by the greatness of the Children of Israel. From afar, he was dazzled by the sight of Jews engaged in Torah study and united around the Sanctuary. If he would have approached even closer, he certainly would have repented, and he too would have engaged in Torah study. He would have then become another man.

Such is the power of Torah, which can change a man as wicked as Bilaam. Hence a person who wants to know the path that the Torah lays out for him should, without hesitation, begin to study it. Otherwise the evil inclination, that old and foolish king (*Zohar I:179b*), is capable of catching him in its trap and radically distancing him from the Torah.

Nevertheless Bilaam did not react as Jethro did, whom he had known for a long time. Actually, they served together with Job as counselors to Pharaoh (*Zohar II:69a*). Concerning the passage, “And Jethro heard” (*Exodus 18:1*), our Sages asked what exactly he had heard (*Zevachim 116a*). The answer is that he had heard of Amalek’s war against the Children of Israel and the miracle at the Sea of Reeds. With that, Jethro left all his money and possessions behind in order to get closer to G-d. He fled from all the vanities of this world as soon as he recognized the Creator of the universe. On the other hand, Bilaam did an about-face because it was difficult for him to part from his possessions. It was wealth “hoarded by its owner to his misfortune” (*Ecclesiastes 5:12*) that controlled him. He failed to realize that a person can be protected by wisdom and protected by money (*ibid. 7:12*). Hence Bilaam needed very little to draw closer to Israel and earn his portion in the World to Come.

It was therefore money that prevented Bilaam from approaching Israel, and thus he lost everything and became the greatest enemy of the Jewish people.

We can now answer the question we asked at the beginning: If Bilaam’s blessings were not sincere, why does the Torah mention them? The answer is, given that he was very close to the truth, the Torah did not close the doors of Teshuvah to him. Rather, it left him with a choice: By seeing the Children of Israel diligently engaged in Torah study, would he be influenced by them and repent? All his blessings would then have been fulfilled.

Consequently, the Torah mentions his blessings because they *could* have been fulfilled. In that case, Bilaam would have attained a sublime spiritual level.

The Zohar teaches that there is no single word of Torah that does not contain secrets of great profundity (*Zohar I:21a*). Each of them embodies advice, parables, hymns, praises, and supreme wisdom (*ibid. I:135b; III:202a*). If Bilaam’s blessings, which at first seem superfluous, are mentioned in the Torah, it is certainly because we can draw great lessons in Mussar from them.

A person who goes to a place where Torah is studied can become noticeably influenced by it, even if he is very far from Judaism. He can then truly connect to that place and thus come closer to the Holy One, blessed be He. The light of the Torah will shine in his heart, and contrary to the case of Bilaam, the evil inclination will not be able to make him transgress. This is what King David prayed for, imploring G-d to lead him in the path of His commandments and to incline his heart to His testimonies (*Psalms 119:35-36*).

## Parsha Pinchas

### *Comparing the Devotion of Pinchas to that of Adam*

It is written, “Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the priest saw, and he stood up from amid the assembly and he took a spear in his hand” (*Numbers 25:7*). The Gemara explains: “He saw what was occurring and remembered the Halachah” (*Sanhedrin 82a*). There are several points that must be understood about this Parsha, in which it is said, “Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the priest turned back My wrath ... I give him My covenant of peace” (*Numbers 25:11-12*).

1. The statement “He saw what was occurring and remembered the Halachah” must be properly understood. What did he see? What case in history was similar, so much so that from it he could conclude what was appropriate to do concerning Zimri ben Salu? What exactly was the Halachah that he remembered?

2. On the verse that states, “he took a spear,” the Sages have explained: “By the merit of the spear that he took in his ‘hand’, the priests merited the ‘shoulder’ from the portion of the sacrifices that are given to the priest” (*Rashi, Deuteronomy 18:3*). What is the connection here? Not only that, but was there really a need to state “in his hand,” for is there another way to take a spear?

3. On the verse that states, “and he took a spear in his hand,” the Zohar says that Pinchas saw the letter ם (*mem*) flying up to the sky. He then seized it and joined it to his name (*Zohar III:237a*), which had the numerical value of 208 (also equal to the numerical value of the letters ך and ן). Together these three letters yield the word םךם (“spear”, having a numerical value of 248 in Hebrew), which means that he invested all his 248 members in the performance of this mitzvah. Now to accomplish it, 365 tendons are also required. Where, therefore, were Pinchas’ tendons to be found during the performance of this mitzvah?

In addition, concerning the verse that states, “Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the priest,” the Gemara asks why the Torah highlights the fact that he was descendant of Aaron (*Sanhedrin 82a*). The Gemara answers: Because the tribes disparaged him by saying, “Have you seen that son of Puti, whose mother’s father fattened calves for idol worship?” The verse therefore found it necessary to call to mind that he was a descendant of Aaron. Yet why did this criticism of Pinchas express itself at that time? It could have manifested itself well before! Furthermore, did he not at that time have the status of being Aaron’s grandson? It must also be understood why, in the name Pinchas, the letter *yud* is smaller than the others, and why the *vav* in the word *shalom* (“peace”) is broken (*Kiddushin 66b*).

We shall attempt to explain all of the above as best we can, doing so by initially discussing the sin of the first man when he ate of the Tree of Knowledge.

When one performs a mitzvah, it must be done with complete devotion, entirely for the love of Heaven. One must also invest one's 248 members and 365 tendons in humbling oneself completely and by putting all one's being into a state of humility. This is why we are greatly surprised in examining the story of the first man who ate of the Tree of Knowledge. The Holy One, blessed be He, had told him, "Of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil you shall not eat of it, for on the day of your eating of it, you shall surely die" (*Genesis 2:17*). Furthermore, this mitzvah is called an easy mitzvah (*Shabbat 55a*), at least with respect to the greatness of Adam. And yet Adam did not know how to hold himself back, finally eating of it. How could he, who had been fashioned by the hands of the Holy One, blessed be He (*Kohelet Rabba 3:14*), not manage to accomplish a mitzvah as simple as this? And even if it was difficult, he should have carried out G-d's will and refrain from eating! Moreover, G-d had told him, "on the day of your eating of it, you shall surely die." Why then, instead of making him die immediately, was G-d content by cursing him in saying, "By the sweat of your brow will you eat bread," death coming only afterwards?

When the man ate from the Tree of Knowledge, he was encouraged by his wife (*Genesis 3:6*). Now the Sages have taught us that women are more intelligent than men (*Bereshith Rabba 18:1*), therefore it seemed evident to him that her wisdom was encouraging him to undertake this action in order to better serve G-d. It was with this goal in mind – to better serve G-d – that he assumed that he should act with complete devotion, namely with all his 248 members and 365 tendons. Yet to him, this could only have been possible if he ate of the Tree of Knowledge. Certainly he knew that he thereby put himself in mortal danger, yet nevertheless he was ready to render his life unto G-d in order to serve Him in the highest way possible, in the spirit of what Sages spoke of: "One hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is better than all the life of the World to Come" (*Perkei Avoth 4:17*).

However, beginning from the moment that he ate from the Tree of Knowledge and his understanding was increased, he very well understood and felt the insignificance of his state, as it is written, "And they knew that they were naked" (*Genesis 3:7*). On this, the Midrash explains as follows: "They had a single mitzvah and they had been stripped of it" (*Bereshith Rabba 19:6*), meaning that he understood that from that moment on, he was truly stripped of mitzvot. Despite this feeling, far from reversing, he thought that since he had fallen and was no longer elevating himself, he should from then on continue without stop to perform the will of the Creator, which is why he wanted to taste of the Tree of Life. Now such a gesture would have been very arrogant. Not content with having transgressed G-d's commandment, he also didn't want to be punished for it. This is why the Eternal chased him out of the Garden of Eden in saying, "And now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the Tree of Life ..." (*Genesis 3:22*). Yet He did not immediately punish him with death, for Adam had acted with a positive goal in mind, in order to further elevate himself.

We see from this that if a man acts contrary to the will of G-d, even with all his heart, it is a mitzvah that is founded on a sin (*Sukkah 30a*). In addition, this sin engenders

others (*Perkei Avoth 4:2*). At that moment, even if he wants to increase his fear of G-d, he will not be able to do so, and this will be counted unto him as a serious transgression.

Having said all this, let us at now explain what Pinchas the son of Elazar did. To answer our first question, Pinchas saw something being done, meaning the act of Adam who had wanted, by going against G-d's will, to increase his fear of Heaven, something that he was not able to do. Pinchas recalled the Halachah according to which one must not go against G-d's commandment, even when done with devotion to G-d, and that if one wants to absolutely prove one's devotion, one must accompany it with total humility, without the slightest trace of arrogance or vanity. One's devotion should be used solely to perform G-d's will.

Having seen all this, Pinchas fervently prayed in order to prepare himself for the momentous act that he planned to undertake, for he needed much mercy from Heaven to obtain the miracle that they (Zimri and the Midianite woman) not die by his hand, since that would have rendered him impure because he was a priest. Then, he went to act with total devotion, with all this 248 members and 365 tendons, without the least bit of pride. This is the sense of the words, "He took a spear [רַמְחָ] in his hand": He took with him his 248 members (the numerical value of רַמְחָ). And to answer our third question (that is, where were his 365 tendons?), we note that the text employs the word בְּיָדוֹ ("in his hand"). Now it is obvious that he took the spear in his hand and not in his mouth or in any other way. Yet the word בְּיָדוֹ, in adding the values of its letters (22) to the word itself (1), has the same numerical value of the word גִּידוֹ ("his tendon", whose value is 23). This indicates that he used all his 365 tendons equally, with all his heart. This is why the priests truly merited the shoulder from sacrificed animals, for it represents the arm of the animal (the extension of the hand), which symbolizes strength and devotion.

At that very moment, the Holy One, blessed be He – Who probes hearts and minds (*Psalms 7:10*) – acknowledged the excellence of Pinchas' action. Having seen Moses and the Sages abstaining from all action, Pinchas decided to intervene, as the saying advises: "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man" (*Perkei Avoth 2:5*). It is true that by this act Pinchas put himself in danger, for whoever instructs Halachah before his teacher, which is what Pinchas did before Moses, is liable to death (*Berachot 31b*). Yet despite everything, in view of the sin committed by Zimri, which put the all of the Children of Israel in danger, he decided that it was worth the risk of incurring death in order to save the people from destruction.

This was how Pinchas conducted himself, contrary to Adam who incited a curse and committed a serious transgression. Adam, moreover, hoped for a reward, whereas Pinchas acted solely for the love of Heaven, without awaiting any recompense and by fervently praying so as not to cause harm. Then the Holy One, blessed be He, truly rewarded him by adding the letter *yud* to his name, which evokes the Name Y-H, whose numerical value is 15, like the word *ga'avah* ("pride"). This signifies that G-d would protect him from that time on from pride, for all his actions demonstrated humility,

love of Heaven, and the desire to increase G-d glory. This behavior is the mark of true devotion, and in fact G-d witnessed concerning him by stating: “He was jealous with My jealousy” (*Numbers 25:11*), meaning that all his actions were truly for G-d’s Honor.

In addition, Pinchas merited long life, and the Angel of Death never took hold of him (*Zohar III:214a*), for we know that Pinchas is Eliyahu (*ibid.*, *Perkei D’Rabbi Eliezer 47*). This is opposed to Adam, whose days were shortened and who died, and concerning whom it is said, “And now, lest [ןפ] he put forth his hand.” For Pinchas, his days were lengthened, and it is פי of Pinchas (פניחא) that repaired the ןפ of Adam. Furthermore, פח has the same numerical value as חייח (“life”), meaning that Pinchas had merited, through his own zealous act for the sake of Heaven, life for innumerable years.

If we are correct with regards to this, we will understand what the Tanna says when he states, “Reflect upon three things and you will not come to sin: Know from where you came, to where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give an accounting” (*Perkei Avoth 3:1*). We understand that a man’s knowing where he is going (and before Whom he will be called to give an accounting) can prevent him from sinning, for otherwise he would incur punishment. But how can “from where you came” have the same effect? According to what we have said above, we understand perfectly well that the fear of punishment is not enough to avoid sin. One must also behave with complete humility (as Pinchas) and not with pride (as Adam). This attitude has an effect on the perfection of mitzvot performance, and consequently when a man considers that he originated from a putrid drop, he will inevitably humble himself and act in a spirit of humility and self-abasement solely in order to perform G-d’s will.

According to this, we also understand why the letter *yud* is written smaller than the rest of the letters in Pinchas’ name. It is because it alludes to the humility that is in him. And why is the letter *vav* in the word *shalom* broken? It is because of the greatness of Pinchas, for, as we know, a broken *vav* takes on the aspect of a *yud*, consequently it is considered as both a *vav* and a *yud*, which together have the numerical value of 16. This value is equal to the sum of the initials in the verse חיל בלע ויקאנו (“He devoured wealth, but will disgorge it” – *Job 20:15*), and these initials form an acronym that is particularly tied to the reparation of sins dealing with the covenant of circumcision. Now we know that the essential thing concerning Adam’s sin (according to the Arizal) was that he didn’t wait until the evening of Shabbat to perform the mitzvah to “be fruitful and multiply,” without which a light would have surrounded him. He did it before Shabbat began, which gave the serpent the possibility of desiring Eve (*Beresith Rabba 18:6*), and in this Adam violated that covenant, which is the foundation of, and comprises the 613 mitzvot. Instead of arriving at *sheleimut* (“perfection”), which is similar to *shalom* (“peace”) – as it is written, “He makes peace in His heights” (*Job 25:2*) – he arrived at calamity and death. This is why Pinchas did not violate the covenant of circumcision (*Zohar III:220a*), why he showed himself to be jealous for G-d’s cause with humility, and why he received G-d’s “covenant of peace” (*Numbers 25:12*). The Hebrew word *brit* (“covenant”) has the numerical value of 613 (including the word itself in the

count), and so Pinchas received peace (*shalom*) and perfection (*sheleimut*) as well as וָבֵב (by the broken *vav*). He thereby merited repairing that which Adam had ruined.

Yet the Children of Israel, drawn by deception and deceit, gathered together around Zimri, who had asked Moses, “Who allowed you the daughter of Jethro?” (*Sanhedrin 82a*). Because the Children of Israel were arrogant, they did not view the action of Pinchas in a positive light, nor did they tell Zimri that Moses had married before the giving of the Torah, and that moreover he had done so in holiness. They preferred to scorn Pinchas by recalling the other side of his ancestry, for they wanted to remind him “where he came from.” They wanted to remind him that he came from a totally different side, not from Elazar and Aaron, but from the side of Jethro, who was the priest of an idolatrous cult. On his part, Pinchas continued to act with humility, self-abasement, and total devotion. He thus demonstrated to all men the path to follow for all generations, namely to know when one must truly rise up, and when one should be on guard that this elevation not undermine holiness. He showed us how not to act like Adam, who harmed this holiness and made himself liable for death, but rather how to act as he (Pinchas) did, who demonstrated his jealousy for G-d and merited all the good reserved for the righteous.

### ***The Zeal of Pinchas Repairs the Sin Committed in Midian***

It is written, “The L-RD spoke to Moses, saying: Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the Priest.... Therefore say: ‘Behold! I give him My covenant of peace’” (*Numbers 25:10-12*). There are several things to understand in these verses.

1. We know that throughout the Torah, when G-d wants to communicate something to the Children of Israel through Moses, He says, “Speak to the Children of Israel,” or “Command the Children of Israel,” and other such expressions. Consequently, here too it should have been stated, “Speak to Pinchas and tell him that I give him....” Why does the verse immediately refer to what Pinchas the son of Elazar did?

2. Why is the letter *vav* in the word *shalom* (“peace”) broken (see *Kiddushin 66b*)?

3. Above all, we must explain why the verse connects Pinchas to Aaron. Rashi says in the name of the Sages that since the tribes scorned Pinchas because he was a descendant of Jethro (who had been an idolater), the verse highlights that he descended from Aaron (*Sanhedrin 82b*). Now this is very surprising. Pinchas removed the threat of annihilation that weighed heavily upon the Children of Israel because they had strayed after wicked ways (*Sanhedrin 93a; 106a*), which rendered them liable to death. The Torah explicitly says, “I did not consume the Children of Israel in My vengeance” (*Numbers 25:11*). As a result, how could they get the idea of scorning the man who had saved them from certain death?

We shall attempt to explain all this. One should realize that the temptation to get involved in forbidden relationships is incredibly powerful, to the point that the Sages regarded it as necessary to surround the prohibition with numerous protective

injunctions. For example, in the area of speech the Sages have said, “Do not indulge excessively in conversation with the woman” (*Perkei Avoth 1:5*), because in this way a person risks harming himself: Excessive talk leads to looking, then to more serious things. As the Sages have said, “The eye sees, the heart desires, and the body commits the act.”

There is an enormous difference between this desire and all others, for with all others a man is limited. Even if he has a great amount of money, the desire for more does not go beyond a certain level; money can't be eaten, it can only be kept. In reality, there is not much difference between the rich and the poor, other than one having money and the other not, one possessing businesses and homes and the other not; the fact remains that they both have food to eat. It is different with desires connected to forbidden relationships, which are very difficult to conquer. This is, moreover, why the Torah warned us about it so much, and why the Sages established fences that prevent us from even coming close to a woman in niddah or being alone with a woman. It is in order that we avoid the risk of sinning.

What follows is a story that illustrates to what point it is appropriate to impose prohibitions on oneself. One day a certain Jew, who had returned to the Torah and become a G-d fearing Talmid Chacham, came to see me in tears. He had failed to keep himself from being dragged into this grave sin at his office with a non-Jewish woman (who was married to a non-Jew). They had begun by joking around with each other, until they had almost committed this sin. Yet the power of Torah had sustained him; he fled from his office, and now he was crying before me. He asked, “How did I get to this point, since I studied Torah and carefully observed all the mitzvot? How is this possible?”

I replied, “First of all, you don't have to cry or feel hopeless. The evil inclination wants nothing more than to bring a man to deep despair by telling him, ‘You clearly see that you don't have the strength to repent of your sins.’ You should therefore take heart and realize that you did a great mitzvah and an act of valor, since far from actually committing the sin, you fled at the last minute, which will be considered as a great merit on your account. Yet all this is on condition that you never place yourself in such a situation, for who knows if you will again manage to be victorious!

“As for the question of knowing how this could happen to you since you study Torah, know that it came as a result of your transgressing the prohibition against being alone with a woman. You were alone with this woman in your office, and following that you began to speak with her of this and that, until finally the situation got to the point that you wouldn't have been saved without the merit of the Torah.”

This terrible story occurred during the week of Parsha Balak. Concerning this fact, I explained to him that we read this parsha during vacation time, for it is a time when the streets are filled with lewdness, to the point that Balaam's advice on how to make a Jew sin takes on its full strength once again. Yet G-d created a balance in the world (*Ecclesiastes 7:14*), and it is precisely during the week of Parsha Balak, during a time

when debauchery prevails, that we read of the deed of Pinchas, who demonstrated his zeal for the L-RD of Hosts and thus awakened the power to conquer this particular temptation.

Everything that we have explained allows us to understand why Pinchas is called “son of Elazar, son of Aaron the Priest.” Actually, he prevented an epidemic from breaking out in Israel, and consequently he should have immediately received his reward from G-d. Now if G-d had said, “Speak to Pinchas...”, the reward would have been delayed by a slight instant, which would have been an imperfection. This is why He immediately said, “Pinchas, son of Elazar...” It was to give him his reward immediately, without having to wait an instant. This is also why the letter *vav* is broken: It teaches us that everything which Pinchas did was perfect, for the word *shalom* (“peace”) with a broken *vav* can also be read as *shaleim* (“perfect”, “complete”). He therefore acted to perfection – without any personal concerns – solely for the honor of G-d, and with the totality of his 248 members and 365 tendons. The upper part of the *vav* points upwards, for everything was done for the love of Heaven, and the lower part alludes to the resoluteness of Pinchas, who remained as perfect as before, without any sin.

And yet when we examine Pinchas’ action, our surprise and questions increase. First, he apparently did not have the right to act in this way without the permission of the Beit Din. Second, he deliberately put his life at risk. Third, he taught Halachah before his teacher Moses, who did not remember that those who are inflamed with zeal can strike one who has relations with an Aramean (*Tanhuma Balak 20*). Finally, the offending party could have died by Pinchas’ hand, yet he was a priest and it was forbidden for him to become impure through contact with the dead. He could not have known that a miracle was going to be performed for him at that instant.

To answer these questions, we must say that Pinchas felt that this sin was, so to speak, tormenting G-d. Now a man should at all cost avoid any actions that arouse this type of suffering. For Pinchas, it was urgent to put an end to it, be it by infringing upon the laws of the Torah for G-d’s sake (*see Psalms 119:126*). It was to the extent that Pinchas did not address himself to any Beit Din, neglected danger, and ignored his teacher Moses and the Sanhedrin. Pinchas only considered the glory of G-d, which was being profaned at that moment. Yet not everyone is able to arrive at such a perfect state of godly fervor. This requires extreme vigilance, for there is a great risk of profaning G-d’s Name, through pride – through a sense of one’s own honor – by wanting to have the same zeal for the glory of G-d as did Pinchas. Yet here, the Holy One, blessed be He, testified concerning Pinchas that all his zeal was for the love of Heaven (“when he zealously avenged *Me*”), which is why He gave him His covenant of peace.

Since we are mentioning this, I thought to add that Pinchas’ deed was marked by a love of Heaven to the point that even if the spectacle of what Zimri did made Pinchas recall the Halachah (*Sanhedrin 82a*), it still remains that it is said concerning him: “He stood up amid the assembly” (*Numbers 25:7*). This means that he still felt himself to be an

integral member of the community, not superior to it. He was free of all pride, which is the meaning of “when he zealously avenged Me *among them*” – not in any way above them.

If Pinchas’ behavior had contained the slightest trace of personal interest, this could have put the community in danger. This is why it is written, “He stood up amid the assembly.” This means that even when he acted, he remained in the midst of the community, without any pride or sense of vanity. This is what brought about a perfect response, pleasing to G-d and true. This idea is also behind the scorn of the Children of Israel: It was difficult for them to imagine that Pinchas could have acted for the love of Heaven. In fact, if that had been permitted, wouldn’t Moses – the head of the people – have done so himself? They therefore concluded that Pinchas wanted to embarrass Moses for not having known the Halachah in such a case, which is why they scorned him, for they couldn’t see into his heart. When a person does something good, everyone regrets not having done the same, and they ask themselves what merit permitted that person to do so. Yet at the same time they mock and scorn him in order to downplay the importance of his deed. This is why the verse highlights that Pinchas descended from Aaron the Priest. It is a way to assert that he only acted for the love of Heaven, as did his grandfather, and that the Jewish people were saved by his merit.

### *Pinchas’ Jealousy: Rectifying the Sin of Midian*

The first verse of Parsha Pinchas presents a certain number of difficulties:

1. We know that when G-d wants to transmit something to the Children of Israel through Moses, He uses the formula, “Speak to the Children of Israel” (e.g. *Exodus 35:1*) or “Command the Children of Israel” (e.g. *Leviticus 24:2*). Here too He should have said: “Speak to Pinchas and say to him: I give to him My covenant of peace.” Instead, why does the Torah immediately tell us what happened to Pinchas (see *Numbers 25:10-12*)?

2. Why is the letter *vav* in the word *shalom* (*Numbers 25:12*) cut in two (see *Kiddushin 66b*)?

3. Why does the passage in question trace Pinchas’ lineage back to Aaron? Although we have seen Rashi’s answer to this, the question still remains. As we know, Pinchas annulled the strict sentence pronounced against the Children of Israel following their sin with the daughters of Midian. Since the Holy One, blessed be He, abhors immorality (*Sanhedrin 93a, 106a*), this transgression rendered them liable to annihilation, as it is written: “I did not consume the Children of Israel in My jealousy” (*Numbers 25:11*). Hence is it possible to think that the Children of Israel humiliated the very person who saved them from certain death?

The explanation lies in the fact that the sexual impulse in man is extremely powerful and very difficult to control. Our Sages have warned us to not indulge in excessive conversation with our own wives (*Perkei Avoth 1:5*), for such conversations lead to excessive staring. Now as we know, the eye sees, the heart desires, and sin is carried out.

In the case of other sins, a man is limited. For example, if a person has many possessions, he cannot use them all; at the most, he can only jealously protect them. What difference is there between the wealthy and the poor? The wealthy owns land, businesses, homes, and so on, while the poor is destitute of these things, yet both have enough to eat. The same cannot be said with respect to sexuality. It is very difficult to control this impulse, which is why our Sages have categorically prohibited men from having any physical contact with a woman during her period, and they also prohibited a man from being alone with a woman (*Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer 22:1*), lest he succumb to sin.

In Midian, the Children of Israel looked at the idol of Peor that the daughters of Midian showed them and relieved themselves before it (*Sifri 25:1*). Can we even conceive of such a vile sin? Let us distance ourselves from such a detestable thing. Let us make ourselves barriers to completely avoid such things. One of my friends, a very religious man who had recently started to engage in Torah study and mitzvah performance, once came to me in tears and explained that he had succumbed to sinning with a non-Jewish woman who worked in his office. It all began with an innocent, lighthearted conversation. Nevertheless, the Torah had saved him, and like a lightning bolt he rushed away from his office. “How did I get to this point?” he asked me in tears. “You know me: I study Torah diligently and I scrupulously observe all the mitzvot!”

“First of all,” I told him, “there’s no use crying and losing hope over this. That’s exactly what the evil inclination wants: To make you believe that the sin you committed is so serious that there’s no way for you to repent.” I then advised my friend to strengthen himself and explained that he actually performed a great mitzvah by not succumbing literally to this sin, for he avoided it at the last minute. “You have great merit,” I said to him. “But only if you don’t put yourself in such a situation once more. Who knows if you’ll be able to control your evil inclination again? Although you definitely study Torah, you should realize that you transgressed a single mitzvah: You should not have stayed alone with that non-Jewish woman in your office for a single instant. Without your Torah, you would have been lost.”

This incident occurred during the week of Parsha Balak. I explained to my friend that this parsha normally occurs during the summer vacations, when perversions fill our streets. The tainted advice of Bilaam can then take on extra weight and attempt to deceive everyone. However, as the wisest of men said, “G-d has made the one as well as the other” (*Ecclesiastes 7:14*), and it is precisely at the end of this parsha that Pinchas’ deed occurs. Pinchas demonstrated his jealousy on G-d’s behalf and showed us that we can control the evil inclination.

So why is this sin so serious?

1. In his book *Likutei Torah*, the Arizal teaches that Adam’s primary sin was that he did not wait until Shabbat to have relations with his wife. The kelipah of the serpent, meaning the evil inclination, then attached itself to them and they both sinned. This is why the evil inclination is more powerful in this area than in any other.

2. Since Creation is devoid of any meaning without man, and since the world only survives through the mitzvah of being fruitful and multiplying (the first of the Torah's 613 mitzvot), it is here that the evil inclination is particularly entrenched. The person who transgresses this mitzvah is therefore at risk of transgressing all G-d's mitzvot.

Living in the Garden of Eden, Adam enjoyed a heavenly abundance of things. The angels served him roasted meat (*Sanhedrin 59b*), so when he ended up eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, it was mainly because he did not fulfill the aforementioned mitzvah on Friday night. As a result, the serpent attacked him. Although we know the unfortunate consequences for Adam and all humanity, we should nevertheless realize that the reward is proportional to the effort we put into controlling the serpent, the evil inclination (*Sotah 11a*).

Pinchas, thanks to whom the plague was stopped, therefore had a right to an immediate reward. Now if the Holy One, blessed be He, had said: "Speak to Pinchas and say to him: I give to him My covenant of peace," his reward would have been delayed for a short time. This is why the verse immediately states, "Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aaron the priest" (*Numbers 25:11*). As for the letter *vav* in the word *shalom* (v.12), it is broken in two in order to show us that Pinchas attained *shaleim*, completeness and perfection in everything he did. As we have seen, Pinchas exclusively sought G-d's glory and acted with incomparable devotion by utilizing the 365 sinews and 248 limbs of his body. The top part of the *vav* alludes to the heavenly domain, for he carried out his deed solely for the sake of Heaven, whereas the lower part alludes to Pinchas' resoluteness, for he retained his original completeness by being free of all sin.

All the same, Pinchas' action invites us to ask a certain number of questions:

1. Did Pinchas not need to consult the Beit Din before taking action?
2. Why and how could Pinchas have deliberately put his life at risk?
3. How could Pinchas have dared to teach Halachah before his teacher Moses, the Halachah being that the zealous can kill anyone who cohabits with a non-Jew (*Sanhedrin 82a, Tanhuma Balak 20*)?
4. Since Pinchas was a priest, had he touched the corpse of Zimri the son of Salu or Cozbi the daughter of Tzur, he would have become unclean. Since he certainly could not have known that a miracle was going to be performed for him, how could he run the risk of touching them by the action that he took?

The explanation lies in the fact that Pinchas sensed G-d's great sorrow as a result of this transgression. Pinchas knew that a man's goal in this world should only be to raise the Shechinah from the dust of the earth. He therefore had to act as quickly as possible, embodying the concept of "It is time to act for the L-RD; they have voided Your Torah" (*Psalms 119:126*).

Thus Pinchas did not consult any Beit Din, he ignored all possible danger, and he took into account neither his teacher Moses' authority nor that of the Sanhedrin. He

cares only about the Glory of G-d, which he saw was being soiled before his very eyes. All the same, we must understand that not everyone can reach such a high level, one in which he can demonstrate his jealousy for the L-RD of Hosts. We must be extremely prudent in our actions, otherwise we risk achieving the very opposite of what we want, namely a desecration of G-d's Name. This is what happens when we seek out honor for ourselves and reveal our pride.

Such was not at all the case with Pinchas, who arose from the midst of the congregation. He did not feel superior to his brothers, and we see no sign of pride in what he did. He demonstrated his jealousy for G-d's sake "in the midst of" (not over) the Children of Israel. This concept can be illustrated by the case of a poor Jewish community in which a request has gone out to contribute to the liberation of a certain number of prisoners, taken captive only because they were Jewish. Each member of the community must of course do what he can. However if one of them were to suddenly announce, "I will contribute a million dollars," he would be applauded to no end for such a noble deed. Imagine for a moment the feelings of such a generous person, one who contributes to saving so many Jewish lives. Similarly, Pinchas saw the community of Israel in tears, the pitiful masses who were incapable of stopping the plague that descended upon them. They asked questions of one another, but answers were not forthcoming because everyone had forgotten the Halachah. Pinchas then remembered the Halachah governing such a case and immediately arose to save the entire community.

If Pinchas' action had not been performed solely with the intention of glorifying G-d's Name, he would have put the whole community at risk, as we saw above. However the tribes began to humiliate Pinchas for what he did, for according to them he had not acted in G-d's Name, and it was Moses – the leader of the Jewish people – who was responsible for doing so. The tribes felt that Pinchas had killed Zimri and Cozbi only to shame Moses, who had forgotten the Halachah concerning what to do in such a case. It was similar to someone performing a good deed, and all those who knew him thought, "Too bad I didn't do this. Who does he think he is, acting in this way?" Thus the tribes began to mock Pinchas in order to lessen his merit. In fact, what they lacked was gratitude.

By tracing Pinchas' lineage back to Aaron the priest, the verse wants everyone to understand that Pinchas followed the path marked by his grandfather Aaron, who loved peace and continuously sought it, and that it was because of him that the Jewish people were saved from annihilation.

The Zohar notes that after each severe punishment pronounced against the Children of Israel, Moses beseeched Hashem to forgive their sins and annul their punishment (*Zohar III:198*). Moses even asked G-d to wipe his name out of His book after the sin of the golden calf (*Exodus 32:32*). However here, with the incident involving Zimri, Moses forgot the Halachah and refrained from taking action. All this occurred so that Pinchas could come and assume the responsibility for such a noble deed.

Moses bitterly regretted this, for G-d's Name was likely to be desecrated. G-d also gave Pinchas the strength to act without taking into consideration the thousands of soldiers that surrounded Zimri, a tribal leader, and without fearing the numerous dangers that faced him, as well as the problem of teaching Halachah in the presence of one's teacher. Pinchas acted in this way so that Moses would not suffer, and this is what earned Pinchas the priesthood. As we have seen, it was only *after* he killed Zimri the son of Salu that Pinchas merited to become a priest (*Zevachim 101b*).

The text states, "The L-RD spoke to Moses, saying: 'Harass the Midianites and smite them, for they harassed you through their conspiracy that they conspired against you in the matter of Peor, and in the matter of Cozbi, daughter of a leader of Midian, their sister, who was slain on the day of the plague, in the matter of Peor' " (*Numbers 25:17-18*).

Why did Hashem command Moses to exercise the vengeance of the Children of Israel upon the Midianites, after which Moses would die (*Numbers 31:2*)? How could this be, since G-d had not commanded him to wage war against Amalek before his death? It is because of Amalek that G-d's Name and His Throne are not complete, and they will only be complete when Amalek's progeny is wiped out (Tanhuma Ki Teitzei 9). As we know, this situation can be corrected, for through Torah study we can wipe out the memory of Amalek and rectify the Name *Y-h*. In addition, the Children of Israel were not excessively responsible for Amalek's attack, for it occurred before the Torah had been given. Amalek attacked the Children of Israel because they had neglected a limited number of commandments that G-d had given them up to that point (*Sanhedrin 106a*). As a result, if they had received the Torah and not engaged in its study, the results would have been infinitely worse.

The war against Midian is, on the other hand, substantially more serious than that of Amalek. Let us keep in mind that the Midianites made the Children of Israel sin at Shitim, which occurred after the Torah was given and an entire generation had perished in the desert after doing evil in G-d's eyes. The episode with Midian involved a new generation of righteous men who were destined to enter the Holy Land. If it had not been for Pinchas, who stood firm like a rock and killed the tribal leader of Shimon, the Children of Israel would have been wiped out. It was also Pinchas who conquered Midian because of the Ark and Headplate. It was difficult for Moses to not do anything to help Israel, therefore Hashem commanded him to exercise the vengeance of the Children of Israel on the Midianites, thus easing his pain and granting him peace for having helped them.

The timing of Moses' death depended on one thing only: The war against Midian. Moses could have delayed its start in order to live longer, yet he did not delay it in the least (*Sifri 25:34*), and in this we see his greatness. He only sought to glorify Hashem and cared solely for the welfare of the Children of Israel. This was not a private war for Moses, the proof being that after he was given the command to go to war against the Midianites, he ordered others to prepare for combat (*Numbers 31:3*) so as to exercise Hashem's vengeance against Midian.

Moses also knew that if someone causes others to sin, or makes them hate the Children of Israel, he is classified as an enemy of G-d. All those who hate Israel also hate the One Who created the world by His word (*Sifre 10:35*). Moses could not do anything in the episode involving Zimri, for the latter was an enemy of G-d. Vengeance therefore had to be taken against him. It was only after the Children of Israel had repented that vengeance – G-d’s vengeance, not Israel’s – was taken. As a result, if it was not up to Moses to carry out this vengeance, he did not have to delay it. In the end it was Pinchas who managed to rectify things and increase Hashem’s glory.

### *All the Tzaddikim Come to the Aid of the Generation*

One of the worst sins that the Children of Israel committed in the desert was the “sin of Baal Peor.” While staying in Shittim, the Children of Israel began to sin with the daughters of the land. As we know, this was the result of the advice that the wicked Bilam gave to Balak before leaving: “The G-d of these [people] hates lewdness...come and I will advise you” (*Sanhedrin 106a*). What Bilam advised him to do was to make them sin by Baal Peor, thinking that in this way the Jewish people would never recover.

In fact at the end of the previous parsha (Parsha Balak) we read, “Pinchas the son of Elazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw and stood up from among the assembly and took a spear in his hand” (*Numbers 25:7*). Here the Sages ask, “What did he see?” They answer, “He saw what was happening and remembered the Halachah...He who cohabits with a heathen woman is punished by zealots” (*Sanhedrin 82a*). Hence a zeal for Hashem arose in Pinchas.

This is clear for everyone to see. Hashem wanted to save the Children of Israel from destruction, but how? It was for this reason that He brought forth a leader from among them, a man of great stature – Pinchas the son of Elazar the priest – who was filled with a zeal for Hashem and killed the sinners among them. The result was that the Children of Israel survived, for all evil had been removed from their midst. If we were to reflect a little more deeply on what happened, we would see just to what extent the things that a person sees can lead him to sin. Not only that, but what a person sees can incite him to scorn the leaders of the generation and to mock them. Pinchas arose from among the assembly, meaning that he did not feel superior to any of them; he did not think of himself as being important. When he told Moses that the Halachah “He who cohabits with a heathen woman is punished by zealots” is known, Moses replied, “He who reads the letter, let him be the agent” (*Sanhedrin 82a*).

This is why Pinchas, the son of Elazar the priest, drew courage from his holiness, took a spear in his hand, and killed the sinners. It was not only them, but 24,000 other people who died in the plague resulting from the sin of Baal Peor. Why so many people? It was because the sin of indecency is extremely serious. What happened then? The Sages said that eight miracles were performed for Pinchas, eight supernatural events by which Pinchas succeeded in removing evil from among the Jewish people

and bringing them holiness. When Pinchas did act, all the Jewish people were of course standing on the side, and they saw with their own eyes the great miracles that occurred for him. The people saw that Hashem was standing by his side to help him increase their degree of purity. Yet it is precisely here that the Sages ask why the verse connects Pinchas to Aaron. Why does the verse state, “Pinchas the son of Elazar, the son of Aaron the priest” (*Numbers 25:11*)? They answer that it is because the tribes began scorning him: “See this son of Puti, whose maternal grandfather fattened cattle for idols, and who has now slain the chief of a tribe of Israel” (*Sanhedrin 82b*). That is why the verse connects Pinchas to Aaron.

This is astounding: A tribal leader of Israel brought such a serious sin upon the Children of Israel that 24,000 of them died, yet the tribes complained about Pinchas after he purified the people? How could that be?

We can learn an important lesson from all this, for now and all the generations. At that time the Children of Israel had a burning desire to sin, and they did so with the women of Moab, who by their enticing words led them to committing the worst of sins. As a result, although they clearly saw the miracles that were being done for Pinchas, and even though they realized that things could not continue like this, they still scorned Pinchas for what he did. Why did act like this? When the Children of Israel saw the sin of Baal Peor with their own eyes, they simply descended a few levels lower on the spiritual scale. This descent is what led them to mock even the *tzaddikim* of the generation. Their eyes led them to laugh at Hashem’s holy one, Pinchas, mocking him to the point that they said his grandfather fattened calves for idolatry.

From this we see just how sins can drive a person mad and turn him away from G-d. When a person sins, he is liable to mock the *tzaddikim* of the generation, who fight to repair breaches in the walls of piety and holiness. In reality, “A person does not commit a transgression unless a spirit of folly enters into him” (*Sotah 3a*), and if that does happen, it will even lead him to speak against the *tzaddikim* of the generation. We must be very careful not to offend the honor of the *tzaddikim* or the leaders of Judaism, wherever they may be, for they are the only ones who can plead our cause, and only they can stand between us and our Father in Heaven. The verse says as much by stating, “Pinchas the son of Elazar, the son of Aaron the priest,” connecting Pinchas to Aaron the priest. Why does the verse not continue to cite the ancestors of Aaron as well? Here too the Torah shows us just how great Pinchas truly great. He followed the paths of his grandfather Aaron the priest, whom the Sages describe as loving peace and pursuing peace. He loved others and brought them closer to the Torah (*Perkei Avoth 1:12*). What is the meaning of “pursuing” peace? Even when the Children of Israel wanted to disrupt his peace, Aaron did not allow that to happen. He always pursued peace, for he knew that it was essential. Peace (*shalom*) is one of Hashem’s Names, and it is only through Him that can peace can reign between a person and his fellow. This is why we

must strengthen ourselves by the power of the *tzaddikim* of the generation, for among the servants of G-d they are the only ones who can lead people to protect themselves and be saved from all sin. By their great power, it is only the *tzaddikim* who can shine their influence upon us to perform *mitzvot* and good deeds.

## *Parsha Matot*

### *The War Against Midian in its Time is For All Generations*

It is written, “Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites; afterwards you will be gathered unto your people” (*Numbers 31:2*). This should be examined a little more closely. What is the connection between the death of Moses and the war with Midian, and why did the Holy One, blessed be He, make one dependent on the other? The commentators have equally looked into the formulation of G-d’s command to Moses: “Take vengeance for the Children of Israel,” and Moses’ transmission of this command to the people: “To inflict the L-RD’s vengeance against Midian” (*v.3*). See also what is written with respect to this in the book *Lev Eliyahu*.

To explain this, we may say that the Holy One, blessed be He, asked Moses to exercise the vengeance of the Children of Israel against the Midianites because they gave advice to the nations of the world on how to weaken Israel. How could this be achieved? By provoking immodest behavior in the Children of Israel. As the Sages have explained concerning the verse that states, “in the matter of Peor” (*Numbers 25:18*), they prostituted their daughters to lead the Children of Israel astray and to bring them to follow the worship of Peor (*Sanhedrin 106a*; *Rashi ibid.*). In this way, the Holy One, blessed be He, would be continually angry against His people, for He detests indecency.

One may ask why there would be reason to get angry at the Midianites, since it was the Children of Israel who were commanded to distance themselves from wicked practices (*Leviticus 18*), as well as to establish fences and safeguards so as not to transgress such a serious prohibition (*Vayikra Rabba 27:6*). Consequently, what are the Midianites guilty of? Why not attribute the sin to the Children of Israel, since they did not pay enough attention to safeguarding themselves?

One must keep in mind that up to that time, the whole world knew, just as well as the Children of Israel, that no one should behave indecently because this is a trait that the Holy One, blessed be He, detests (*Sanhedrin 93a, 106a*; *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10:2*). Moreover, everyone knew that this sin had provoked the destruction of the world at the time of the flood, as it is written, “The earth had become corrupt” (*Genesis 6:11*), which the Sages explained as resulting because of “forbidden relations” (*Rashi ibid.; Sanhedrin 57a*). However at present, the Midianites began to sin anew in this area because they knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, would not destroy the world a second time since He had promised, “Nor will I again continue to smite every living being as I have done,” and also, “Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood” (*Genesis 8:21; 9:11*). There would never again be a flood to destroy the earth. And especially after the giving of the Torah, they understood that the Holy One, blessed be He, would not again destroy it. From that moment on, the Midianites again began to commit that sin.

Certainly, they knew very well that the Eternal would not let this pass without rebuke, and that He would punish them, however their hate for the Children of Israel was such that they were ready to incur death, given that they also sin and they also be punished with death, just as Samson said, “Let my soul die with the Philistines” (*Judges 16:30*). It was for this reason that the Holy One, blessed be He, ordered that the Children of Israel’s vengeance should be taken upon the Midianites.

However Moses, who always defended the Children of Israel, told them to exercise “the L-RD’s vengeance.” By this he arranged things such that every time the nations make Israel fall into immodesty, the Holy One, blessed be He, would remember in their favor that they had fought Midian to exercise His vengeance, and because of this merit, He would not punish them by the measure of strict justice, but rather with mercy. The Tetragrammaton (which we have translated with the word “L-RD”) alludes to mercy (*Bereshith Rabba 12:15; Zohar I:180b; III:202b*). And since G-d made Moses’ death dependant on the war with Midian, when Israel sins by behaving immodestly, G-d will remember in their favor the death of Moses, a man who had given everything for the Children of Israel. G-d will also remember that, far from trying to delay his own death, Moses encouraged them to exercise His vengeance.

It is in this way that one must explain the connection between the war with Midian and Moses’ death. The Holy One, blessed be He, told Moses that if he fought against Midian and the Children of Israel avenged themselves on the Midianites because of Peor (that is, because of the advice that the Midianites had given to the nations of the world on how to make the Children of Israel sin), when Israel happens to sin, He will not punish them by the measure of strict justice, but would recall in their favor Moses’ death and his devotion towards them. This is the meaning of the phrase, “afterwards you will be gathered unto your people,” the death of the righteous constituting an atonement for Israel (*Moed Katan 28a; Vayikra Rabba 20:7; Zohar III:56b*). Consequently, Moses immediately sent the Children of Israel to war and told them to execute “the L-RD’s vengeance on Midian,” since because of Peor this war was for all generations.

We may also explain in another way why Moses restated G-d’s command as “the L-RD’s vengeance on Midian.” The Holy One, blessed be He, told Moses that the Children of Israel should avenge themselves of the Midianites without cease, meaning that they were never to allow themselves to be led to sin in the area of forbidden relations. Moses used the expression, “the L-RD’s vengeance” because he feared that the Children of Israel, despite everything, would fall into sin because of the evil inclination that lies in wait for man at every instant. It does so in order to make a man transgress, particularly if he is a Talmid Chacham (*Sukkah 52a*). This is why, up to the present, we must still exercise “the L-RD’s vengeance”; we must continue to avenge ourselves on them, as the book *Lev Eliyahu* explains. In this Moses showed himself to be a good advocate, and through this war he managed to arrange things such that G-d’s vengeance is upon the peoples that make the Children of Israel transgress in every generation. It is against them that the Holy One, blessed be He, will vent His wrath,

rather than on us, similar to what is stated in the expression, “The Holy One, blessed be He, has poured out His wrath on the wood and the stone” (*Lamentations Rabba* 4:15).

This is the lesson that we should learn from the war of Israel against Midian. At every instant, there is reason to wage real war against those who sin and make others sin. This is in order that they not continue to act in this way, that others not continue to learn from their behavior, that G-d’s punishment not fall upon the community of Israel, and that the latter not be punished for its silence.

It must also be reasoned, *a fortiori*, that if G-d ordered that the peoples which made Israel sin be punished, how much more will the punishment of a Jew be greater if he causes another Jew to sin! This is because he knows the gravity of sin, he received the Torah at Sinai, and yet despite everything still caused another Jew to sin. Now it is written, “One who sins and causes the public to sin is not allowed to repent” (*Sanhedrin* 107b; *Avoth d’Rabbi Nathan* 40:3). One must obviously fight against this person and reprove him, as it is written, “You shall reprove your fellow and do not bear sin because of him” (*Leviticus* 19:17).

### ***Keeping One’s Word and Gratitude Brings a Person Closer to G-d***

It is written, “Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Children of Israel, saying: ‘...If a man takes a vow to the L-RD or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not desecrate his word. According to whatever comes from his mouth shall he do’ ” (*Numbers* 30:2-3).

The apparent redundancy (“he shall not desecrate his word” and “According to whatever comes from his mouth shall he do”) must be examined. Why the text juxtaposes the heads of the tribes with vows and oaths, and why this parsha was spoken precisely to the heads of the tribes, should also be examined.

We may say that the Torah alludes to two ways that allow a Jew to increasingly attach himself to his Creator. The first way consists of putting all his focus into carrying out everything that he says and promises, without any compromising or beating around the bush, but rather with determination, and above all to do so in things that deal with spiritual life. If a desire arouses itself to make a vow or to perform a good deed, he should do so! The Torah obligates a person to keep his commitments, even after that inner spark has cooled. This action will certainly provoke other good deeds, for “one mitzvah brings about another” (*Perkei Avoth* 4:2), and in this way we can powerfully attach ourselves to the Creator.

The word *nedar* (“vow”) has the same numerical value (with the kollel) as *haNer* (“the lamp”), as it is said, “A man’s soul is the lamp of the L-RD” (*Proverbs* 20:27). This means that if a man, who is different than an animal in that he is gifted with divine speech, makes a vow, this word definitely comes from the depths of his soul, which is a part of divinity. It is the soul that demands this vow of a man, in order to be able to elevate itself evermore in the paths of G-d and the performance of the mitzvot, which

are called “lamps”. As it is said, “For a *mitzvah* [commandment] is a lamp and the Torah is light” (*Proverbs 6:23*).

This is why “he shall not desecrate his word.” If the soul demands that the body elevate and sanctify itself, then he cannot desecrate (לחל) his word; he must not make something profane (חולין) of his words (*Sifri Matot 30:3*). On the contrary, “According to whatever comes from his mouth shall he do.” By this he will merit reaching very lofty spiritual levels and know his Creator.

Why is this parsha said precisely to the heads of the tribes? In general these were “all distinguished men” (*see Numbers 13:3*), who were an example for the people. This is why the Torah commands that they watch their words with the greatest of care and that they perform every word that comes out of their mouth (even if it is not in the form of a vow), in order to avoid at all costs that from their conduct others learn to make promises without keeping them. In fact we generally listen to and spread the words of the tribal heads, which is why they should be extremely careful to observe what they say in order to be *matzdikei harabim* (“those who justify the many”) and *mekadeshei hauma* (“those who sanctify the people”) – expressions that have the same numerical value as *rashei* (“heads”) – and to carefully avoid causing the opposite to occur.

In addition, the word *nedar* (“vow”) has the same numerical value as *ba'al ayin tova* (“master of the good eye”), which is why the one who makes a vow “is good in the eyes of G-d and man.” This is the second path taught in our parsha for coming as close to the Creator as possible. It consists of gratitude. As the Sages have said concerning the verse that states, “Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites; afterwards you will be gathered to your people” (*Numbers 31:2*): “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, ‘Take vengeance’ – you personally! Yet he sent agents, as it said: ‘Moses sent them’ [v.6]! This is because having lived a longtime in Midian, he thought that it was not right to cause harm to the land that had done him good, in accordance with the saying, ‘Into the well from which you drank, do not cast a stone’” (*Bamidbar Rabba 22:4*).

These are apparently very surprising remarks, and they raise the following questions:

1. What did Moses gain in sending others instead of going himself? Did the Sages not say that a person’s messenger is the same as the person himself (*Berachot 34b*)?

2. How did Moses think that he could modify the command of the Holy One, blessed be He, which was to “take vengeance”? And what gratitude should one have towards the wicked, who almost brought about the destruction of the Jewish people?

3. We should also wonder about another modification to G-d’s command. Moses was told, “Take vengeance for the Children of Israel” (*Numbers 31:2*), yet Moses spoke to them of “the L-RD’s vengeance” (v.3).

4. We should also understand what the Sages said concerning the passage, “Moses, Elazar the Kohen, and all the leaders of the assembly went out to meet them outside

the camp” (*v.18*), meaning that the reason that they left was because they saw some of the young of Israel who wanted to seize the spoils of the campaign (*Sifri 42*). This implies that the sole reason for their departure was the war booty that had been brought back, among these being the women of Midian. Moses reprimanded them severely for this, and it seems that without the spoils of war, he would not have gone out to meet them. Why is this so? Did they not otherwise deserve a proper reception? After all, they had killed a people that had nearly caused their destruction. Had they not, through this action, corrected the sins of the past?

5. Another difficulty is why the Children of Israel let the Midianite women live, since the main reason for taking vengeance on them was because they had caused the Children of Israel to sin. Besides the fact that they recognized these women, the Sages have said that they knew which Midianite woman had caused which Israelite man to sin (*Yalkut Shimoni 785*). Now they were all upright and righteous (*Sifri 42*).

This passage shows us the extreme importance of gratitude, in the spirit of the adage: “Into the well from which you drank, do not cast a stone,” even if its waters are extremely murky. Of course, all this is only valid if the Holy One, blessed be He, is not opposed to such a stance, for when He commands otherwise, it is quite obvious that His orders must be expressly carried out.

And yet despite Moses’ great desire to combat and exterminate the enemies of G-d, particularly given the fact that G-d Himself had given him the order, in his heart Moses doubted whether he could carry out this task with the desired perfection. He doubted because of the gratitude that he had felt for the Midianites in the past. In fact, he had not struck the sea (which has no soul and which does not speak) even while knowing that striking it would have greatly helped the Children of Israel. He acted to sanctify the Name of G-d with regards to Pharaoh and his servants, as the Sages have explained on the verse that states, “Say to Aaron” (*Exodus 7:19*): “The river had protected Moses when he had been thrown into it. It was not struck by him – not for the plague of blood, nor for the plague of frogs – but rather by Aaron” (*Shemot Rabba 9*). This profound gratitude, which was rooted in Moses’ heart, even towards his enemies, was part of Moses’ greatness. Moreover, he feared that the nations would accuse him of ingratitude.

Yet on the other hand, Moses knew that in the end the enemies of G-d had to be destroyed, which is why he found a right and just way to accomplish this task. He entrusted it to other people who had no personal feelings in the matter and who were not motivated by any feelings of gratitude. And to be certain that this vengeance would be properly exercised to the utmost, Moses put Pinchas the son of Elazar in charge, whose immense zeal had already been mentioned by the Torah, as it is written, “he zealously avenged Me” (*Numbers 25:11*).

We shall now return to the expression used by G-d: “Take vengeance for the Children of Israel.” In repeating this command to the Children of Israel, Moses used the expression “the L-RD’s vengeance,” which shows us that when we incite someone to sin, we do so with the express purpose of irritating G-d, which is why someone who

instigates sin is called the enemy of G-d. At that moment, we should not assign the sin to the guilt of a man who has not overcome the test. By nature, such a man wanted to accomplish G-d's commands, but he only acted otherwise because of the suffering that he endured. This is why Moses modified G-d's expression and called the Midianites the enemies of G-d, knowing they had pushed the Children of Israel to sin, and that, according to the Sages, whoever hates Israel hates G-d.

For His part, the Holy One, blessed be He, said, "Take vengeance for the Children of Israel" because He wanted to avenge them for the suffering they had experienced, meaning that because of the Midianites, 24,000 of the Children of Israel had died (*Numbers 25:9*). They came very close to being exterminated, yet when a man sins it creates great pain for the Holy One, blessed be He, because of the imperfection that this sin brings about in all the worlds (*Zohar III:122a*), and which will perhaps only be repaired after the disappearance of the instigators. He therefore asked Moses to annihilate them.

As for Moses, he was careful to modify G-d's expression, for he always defended the Children of Israel and devoted himself to them at all times (*Tanhuma Beracha 1*). In this way, for the generations to come, when they would fight against those that would make them sin, this war would be called "the L-RD's vengeance," to the point that would be no accusations lodged against the Children of Israel, nor any favorable recollection for the instigators. It would already be the vengeance of G-d, through the power of which the sin would be erased forever.

And if we are correct with regards to this, let us now explain why the Children of Israel allowed the women to live (women who had caused them to sin), whereas they were the only reason for this war of vengeance. One must see in this the greatness of the Children of Israel, who even when they encountered these women who had made them sin before, far from touching them, they conquered their feelings and brought them before Moses so that he could pronounce what was to be done with them. In obeying Moses without question, they repaired their sin and showed that they had completely repented (*Sanhedrin 82a*), demonstrating their righteousness in public.

By this act, Moses also rectified his weakness and proved his firmness in displaying his anger towards them. He had kept quiet in the face of Zimri's act, as the Sages have said on the passage, "They were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of meeting" (*Numbers 25:6*), namely that the Halachah had escaped Moses and it was Pinchas who had come to remind him by saying, "I received from you [the teaching] that anyone having relations with a gentile woman is to be executed by the zealous" (*Rashi on Numbers 25:7*). Here, however, it was Moses who became angry and explained that they had to kill these women, while Pinchas kept silent. In condemning to death all those who had known a man, Moses repaired this imperfection (*Sanhedrin 82a*).

There remains one question concerning what the Sages said on the statement, "Elazar the Kohen said..." (*Numbers 31:21*): "Moses had let himself be taken by anger [since it is written, "Moses was angry"] which involved a fault, and the Halachah escaped him" (*Pesachim 66b*). This is difficult to understand insofar as Moses' anger was

motivated by a love of Heaven. In such a case, why was he punished at that time? It was because accusation and Divine wrath were awakened against him at that precise moment. If he showed himself capable of facing up to the *all* the people and give them a tongue-lashing, why didn't he do as much in the case of Zimri, when his anger would have been directed only against the tribe of Shimon?

In reality, Moses had no intention whatsoever of going to meet the Children of Israel if they had not brought back the foreign women with them. That would have impaired the gratitude that he felt for Midian, without mentioning the fact that Moses would have filled the men's hearts with pride if they had seen Moses himself coming to meet them at their return. The proof that his anger stemmed from their failure to destroy G-d's enemies, as he had ordered, comes precisely from the fact that he only went out to meet them because of these women that they let live.

Yet for their part, the Children of Israel and Pinchas had only saved the women in order to show their loyalty to Moses and his directives. The Sages testify that they were not suspect of having had forbidden relations with them, nor of having stolen spoils of war, which means that they were absolutely righteous. If this had not been the case, the wrath directed against them would have been much greater.

### ***The Role of the Tribal Leaders is to Lead The Children of Israel in Paths of Humility and Introspection***

It is written, "And Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Children of Israel, saying: 'This is the thing that the L-RD has commanded: If a man takes a vow to the L-RD, or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not desecrate his word. According to whatever comes from his mouth shall he do' " (*Numbers 30:2-3*).

There are several points that need to be clarified:

1. Why is it written, "the head of the tribes" rather than "the princes," since they were princes?
2. Why does the verse begin with the word *va'yidaber* ("and he spoke"), which always denotes a harsh way of speaking, and continues with *leimor* ("saying"), which denotes a gentle way of expressing oneself (see Shabbat 87a)?
3. Concerning the heads of the tribes, Rashi writes: "He bestowed honor on the leaders by teaching them this law first, and afterwards all the Children of Israel." Now it is difficult to see what new information this gives us, for it seems obvious that the leaders should be honored first. What is Rashi telling us by this?

Moses our teacher knew that the princes had the ability to influence the behavior of the Children of Israel, for better or for worse. We see this concerning the spies, who were the greatest among the people, but who exerted a bad influence on the Children of Israel, to the point that they refused to enter Eretz Israel and died in the desert after staying there for 40 years. We see the same thing with Korach and his followers, among

others being Nachshon and Aminadav, who led a portion of the people to contest the priesthood as well as Moses' position. All this is due to the fact that they only sought their own interests. The spies wanted to remain in the desert as princes, knowing that they would no longer hold such positions once they entered Eretz Israel, which is why they spoke derisively of the land (see *Numbers 14:37*). Korach also spoke derisively of Moses and Aaron because he wanted to take over their roles with his 250 followers.

However when princes – leaders of the Children of Israel – behave with humility and self-effacement before G-d, when they study Torah and perform mitzvot selfishly, it is clear that they can have a good influence over the people, who are thus encouraged to serve G-d. Naturally, this is only on condition that they are not preoccupied with their own personal honor, but rather G-d's alone.

We may now understand this passage concerning the princes. The Torah begins with a harsh way of speaking (*va'yidaber*) because here the text deals with the good and honor of the princes. Moses wanted to teach them the correct way to serve G-d so that his harsh words would be beneficial to them, which is why he spoke “to the heads of the tribes” to transmit the following information to them: To have a positive influence on the Children of Israel, you must behave with humility by abasing and disregarding yourselves. You play an important role, which is that of a tribal leader and prince, a role that involves many honors, and it is precisely up to you to be careful not to benefit from that and become filled with pride.

This is why he calls them “heads of the tribes,” not princes, for this teaching is alluded to in the word *hamatot* (“the tribes”), which has the same numerical value as the words *haga'avah met* (“pride is death”). The word *matot* also teaches us that princes should conduct themselves with humility – as heads of the tribes (*hamatot*) by gazing downwards (*lematah*) and not with upraised eyes through pride – for one must expunge and completely eradicate pride. In fact pride is only fitting for G-d, as it is written: “The L-RD has reigned. He has donned grandeur” (*Psalms 93:1*). If they behave as such, the Children of Israel would learn this trait from them. He also spoke harshly to them so that they would learn from their predecessors (the spies and Korach & his followers) who died for not having diminished their pride. If they would understand that lesson and behave humbly, good would result for them in this world and in the World to Come. This is what constitutes *leimor*, a gentle word, gentle and good, like the good to come, since it was from them that the Children of Israel would learn how to get closer to G-d with humility, abasement, and self-effacement.

However to arrive at the virtue of humility, we must study Torah, for without Torah it is impossible to expunge pride. This is why Moses began by honoring the princes and teaching them about vows, for a vow and the Torah are related, as is evident from what the Sages have said: “The one who says, ‘I will get up early to study such and such a passage’ has made a great vow to the G-d of Israel” (*Nedarim 8a*). This is a great vow because from Torah stems greatness and honor. In fact, through the intermediary of this vow, study no longer becomes an ordinary act, but rather a sacred deed before G-d, and

the one makes a vow to study Torah is protected from the evil inclination, for the Torah is an antidote to it (Kiddushin 30b). In fact Torah study enables a person to establish limits for himself and to behave with sanctity, in the spirit of the verse that states: “He shall not desecrate his word. According to whatever comes from his mouth shall he do” (*Numbers 30:3*). If the princes behave with humility, the Children of Israel would also learn from them to behave with humility. They would also be vigilant with everything that comes from their mouths, and G-d would carry out everything they say.

This was the advice that Moses gave to the princes: If they wanted to be leaders, they would have to behave with humility and erase their pride by using vows and Torah study. The Children of Israel would then learn to conduct themselves in the same way, their words would no longer be mundane, and G-d would perform everything that comes from their mouth, in the spirit of the teaching: “The righteous decrees and the Holy One, blessed be He, executes” (*Moed Katan 16a*). The Holy One, blessed be He, decrees and the righteous annul the decree, for a righteous person has sanctified his words, and the Holy One, blessed be He, will carry out them out.

### ***The Sin of Lashon Harah: “You Shall be Guiltless Towards the L-RD and Towards Israel”***

It is written, “You shall be guiltless towards the L-RD and towards Israel” (*Numbers 32:22*). This verse teaches us that if we accuse somebody of having done something that he did not do, the accused is forbidden to keep silent, for the suspicions raised about him could seem justified in the eyes of others. Instead, he should prove his innocence to everyone, otherwise he transgresses the Divine commandment, “You shall be guiltless towards the L-RD and towards Israel.” However if he proves his innocence, yet people continue to have doubts about him and begin to speak ill of him, they will be the ones transgressing commandments, such as “You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people” (*Leviticus 19:16*). As the Talmud teaches, people who transgress in this way will be afflicted with physical pain (*Shabbat 97a*).

The gravity of *Lashon Harah* (“evil speech”) is literally indescribable. Communities and entire cities have been destroyed because of it. We note in particular the gossip peddling of idle women on Shabbat and holidays, when they meet in their homes or in synagogue. This is the why the prophet proclaims, “My soul detests your New Moons and your appointed times” (*Isaiah 1:14*). Hashem detests them because they are not celebrated in holiness, because peace and harmony do not reign between a man and his fellow, and because people gossip about one another. When Sodom and Gomorra were destroyed, it was essentially because people did not respect one another (a source of *Lashon Harah*). As for the generation of the flood, our Sages teach that their fate (to be wiped out) was sealed by the sin of theft (*Sanhedrin 108a*), as it is written: “The earth was filled with robbery” (*Genesis 6:11*), for each person stole from the other and there was no unity among them.

Rabbi Akiva had 24,000 disciples who all died between Passover and Shavuot because they did not show respect for one another (Yebamot 62b). The Talmud also teaches that the second Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred that raged among Jews (*Yoma 9b*), and especially because of Lashon Harah, which is as serious as the three cardinal sins combined (*Erchin 15b*). The Holy One, blessed be He, detests the person who speaks ill of his fellow, even if it is the truth (see Sotah 35a). Lashon Harah generates hatred and controversy, putting the entire world in danger.

As we have seen, the generation of King Ahab of Israel worshipped idols. The Talmud even states that Ahab wrote on the gates of Samaria that he renounced the G-d of Israel. Nevertheless, they were victorious when they went out to war. Why did this king, who was among the 10 monarchs who reined over the entire world (*Perkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 11*), merit this? It is because in his time Jews did not speak ill of one another, nor were there informers among them (*Vayikra Rabba 26:5*). We therefore see that harmony reigns when Lashon Harah is not rampant, and thanks to such unity we achieve abundance, even if we deny our faith, as did Ahab, who nevertheless respected the Torah (*Sanhedrin 102b*).

“I would prefer that they forget Me but keep My Torah, because the light of the Torah would bring them back to the right path,” exclaims Hashem (*Eicha Rabbati, Introduction 2*). This passage is difficult to understand, for if the Children of Israel do not respect Hashem, how can they respect His Torah?

The answer lies in the fact that for the Holy One, blessed be He, the Torah symbolizes the unity of the Children of Israel. This is of primary importance in His eyes, as we saw above in the case of King Ahab’s generation, for idol worship was rampant at that time. The Torah tells us the story of the king of Aram, who sent messengers to Ahab demanding that he send him a Torah scroll in a disgraceful way. Despite the fact that he had renounced Hashem, Ahab and his people refused to comply with the king of Aram because they respected the Torah. Ahab said, “Understand now and realize that this man is seeking evil” (*I Kings 20:7*). Ahab then offered Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram, silver and gold, but he refused. What he wanted was the most precious thing of all, a Torah scroll (*Sanhedrin 102b*), obtained in a disgraceful way. Ahab nevertheless refused. He waged war against Aram and was victorious, even though Ben-Hadad was stronger than he. This victory was due to the respect that Ahab showed for the Torah. Moreover, his servants testified to the respect that they showed one another and to many Torah commandments that actually deal with interactions between man and his fellowman.

This is sadly not the case in our days when rabbis, who consider themselves to be great sages, do not hesitate to speak ill of others. Transgressing the mitzvah of judging their fellow favorably and finding good in them (*Perkei Avoth 1:6*), they tarnish the image of G-d in their fellowman and taint the entire world with evil by means of their Lashon Harah.

I often see people being attracted by tidbits of gossip, rumor peddling, and slander during a Torah lecture. Instead of receiving the reward reserved for those who engage in Torah study, they will be punished for having spoken ill of their neighbor. They

obviously forget that a person who favorably judges his fellow will be favorably judged by the Holy One, blessed be He (Zohar I:79b). Why then should a person succumb to this sin, since it is so easy to watch over words coming out of one's mouth?

Someone once asked me for advice on what to do, given that he often hears Lashon Harah during a weekly Torah class. I explained to him that according to the Torah, it is forbidden to attend such a class, especially since the person organizing it at his home is attacking others and slandering them. Since that person sins and makes other people sin, how will his repentance be accepted? As we have seen, that person will not be given the chance to return to the right path. Instead of bringing heavenly abundance down into the world, that person (whose home is a meeting place for pious Jews) actually strengthens the forces of impurity and brings strict judgments, even illnesses, upon the world (Zohar II:122a, 264b). Those who organize Torah classes and whose goal is to bring their brothers to the right path should be especially careful to not speak ill of others. Otherwise, when they face adversity and call out to Hashem and implore Him for help, He will not come to their aid, for they have succumbed to the grave sin of Lashon Harah, a sin that destroys both body and soul. In addition, if they do not ask forgiveness of those against whom they have spoken, their sin will not be atoned (Yoma 85b).

Concerning this topic, we know that in the will that the Vilna Gaon left his wife and family, he forbid them to go to synagogue on Shabbat and holidays, lest they hear Lashon Harah from other women. The Zohar teaches that one who speaks ill of others creates an angel who brings accusations against him to G-d, and G-d cannot, so to speak, stop him (Zohar III:85a). As for the Talmud, it teaches that such speech shortens one's life.

My dear brothers, take a firm decision to stop speaking ill of others! Let us remember the episode involving Miriam the prophetess, by whose merit a well provided water to the Children of Israel in the desert for 40 years (Taanith 9a). Nevertheless, she was struck by leprosy when she spoke ill of her brother Moses (ibid. 16a). Let us also remember the episode of the spies, who did not draw a lesson from her leprosy and spoke ill of Eretz Israel (Tanhuma Shelach Lecha 5). Let us therefore refrain from this extremely grave sin and not listen to those who slander others and peddle rumors, nor accustom ourselves to listening to lies. In this way we will not come to hating others.

If we see two groups who do not share the same point of view, in no way must we get involved. Let us flee from all those who speak ill of the great of Israel. Concerning this subject, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov said that because of ordinary individuals who speak ill of others, the Satan dances in the midst of the Tzaddikim. In order for controversy to not reign among them, these ordinary people must be taught to not speak ill of others. Peace and harmony will then reign among all.

Someone once asked me if the spies were punished for having spoken ill of the land and what were the consequences of their sin. I replied that not only have they no part in the World to Come (Sanhedrin 108b), but that they died of the plague, eaten away

by the worm (Sotah 35a), and are called rebels (Pesikta Zutreta, Shelach Lecha 14:4). It was also because of them that all the generations that followed have continued to shed tears over the destruction of both Temples on the 9th of Av. Finally, their Lashon Harah brought about the death of an entire generation in the desert, and only their descendants had the merit to enter the Holy Land (see Numbers 14:31).

We may now understand why Eretz Israel was also punished. As we have seen, G-d poured out His anger on wood and stone. This is because Lashon Harah kills three people: The one who speaks ill of another, the one who is spoken ill of, and the one who listens (Erchin 15b). This is why Eretz Israel was destroyed by the Babylonians and the Romans, and it is also why the spies were punished. The Talmud teaches that they ended up worshipping idols, a sin that is equal to Lashon Harah (ibid.). Their descendants too were punished, since they were not able to live in Eretz Israel, which vomited them out because they defiled it (see Leviticus 18:28).

If the land received such punishment, what of a person who speaks ill of his fellow, who was created in the image of G-d? He simply does not realize how much damage he causes, destroying both his life and that of his family, for they will certainly suffer a severe punishment. One who speaks ill of his fellowman changes the Divine image that he embodies, and people also begin to change their behavior with respect to him, thinking ill of him. Thus he tarnishes G-d's work. As the Talmud teaches, the entire world was created for this man, now a victim (Sanhedrin 37a). Therefore one who speaks Lashon Harah destroys G-d's universe, and the transgression of this sinner cannot be expiated other than by asking the victim for forgiveness before all who heard him being maligned. Otherwise, even if he is a Tzaddik, this sin cannot be expiated other than at his death, following which he must give an accounting to his Creator.

As we have seen, it was because of Lashon Harah that the first and second Temples were destroyed and the Jewish people exiled from its land. Cain, who murdered his brother Abel, was condemned to be a *nah ve'nad* ("fugitive and wanderer"—Genesis 4:12) because he spoke ill of him. Actually, instead of admitting his sin to G-d, he exclaimed: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (v.9). In other words: "I hate him and I don't know where he is. I'm not interested in him at all, and I'm not responsible for watching over him." Even though Cain later repented and was reconciled to his Creator (Bereshith Rabba 22:28), he was condemned to wander about in exile. With respect to this, we note that the last letters in the term **Lashon Harah** form the word *nah*.

The Talmud teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, acted measure for measure with Cain (Shabbat 105b). In fact, a person who speaks ill of another is trying to make him repugnant in the sight of others, so that people distance themselves from him and refuse to trust him. The person who has sinned is therefore forced to wander about and be humiliated wherever he goes.

My friends and brothers, let us strive to completely put a halt to this wicked trait and to live in peace with everyone. We will then be guiltless towards Hashem and Israel. We may say that the expression *ve'hitem ne'kiyim* ("and you shall be guiltless"

– *Numbers 32:22*) has the same numerical value (681) as the phrase *rodfeh shalom* (“those who pursue peace”), which represents integrity and complete harmony. In addition, the expression *ve’hitem ne’kiyim mei’Hashem u’mey’Israel* (“and you shall be guiltless towards the L-RD and towards Israel”) has the same numerical value (1334) as the phrase *issur lashon harah u’fi tzaddik ye’he’geh chochmah* (“Lashon Harah is forbidden, and the mouth of the righteous speaks words of wisdom”).

### *The Sanctity of Speech*

The beginning of this week’s parsha speaks to us concerning vows. What exactly are vows? When someone wants to prohibit himself from using a certain object, or from eating something in particular, he can pronounce the words, “This object is forbidden to me.” At that point it becomes forbidden for him to use or benefit from that object. How long does the prohibition last? Until he goes to a Torah scholar and is released from his vow.

From this we see just how great and sanctified speech truly is. It can change reality, instantly transforming something that is permitted into something forbidden. Enormous power is thus hidden in speech, both for better and for worse. Do we need further proof of the sanctity of speech?

At the beginning of the parsha it is stated, “When a man vows a vow to the L-RD... he shall not profane his word. According to all that proceeds from his mouth, he shall do” (*Numbers 30:3*). The Sages interpreted the phrase, “He shall not profane his word” to mean: “Let him not make his words profane.” He must accomplish everything he says because a person’s words are sacred. Hence if someone explicitly says that he is going to do something, but does not, he has uttered his words in vain. He has quite simply profaned his words, and one day he will be punished for it.

My friends, my dear brothers, these few remarks should suffice to prove to each and everyone the power that a few words have to exert a perpetual influence on things. What we have said up to now is all that is needed to demonstrate just how much importance we should attribute to each word emerging from our mouths, in order that they should have a beneficial effect, not a detrimental one. In fact when we utter a word, it becomes impossible to take it back; it has already been released, and what has been done cannot be undone.

This is a fitting place to recount a well-known incident that occurred to the disciples of the holy Rebbe of Pshischa, Rabbi Simcha Bunim, may his merit protect us. One day the Rebbe of Pshischa called several of his disciples and told them to go on a journey. He said that upon arriving at a certain place, they would understand why they had been sent. Thus they took to the road, without knowing where their steps were leading them. Towards nightfall his disciples arrived at an inn by the side of the road, where they decided to stay for the night.

The innkeeper welcomed them with great honor, setting up a table and serving them fine dishes of meat to replenish them after their day's journey. At that point, however, some of the disciples turned to the innkeeper and began asking him all sorts of questions. "Who's the *shochet* here? Is he reliable? Did he slaughter the animal according to all the stringencies of Halachah? Was there a rav who checked the knife from time to time? Can we trust his *shechita*?"

All of a sudden, a faint voice was heard from near the stove: "Gentlemen, gentlemen! May your ears listen to what your mouths are saying. You're asking many questions with regards to what enters your mouths, engaging in all kinds of inquiries. But do you do the same kind of checking when it comes to what leaves your mouths [a reference to speech], to determine whether it is permitted to say or not?" As soon as Rabbi Simcha Bunim's disciples heard that, they understood that it was solely for this reason that their Rav had sent them there.

All this should instill us with a new way of looking at things, a completely different way of thinking about what we say. It should infuse us with a sense of the holiness of words, and it should make us think about what we are actually saying. When we look at what our Sages said regarding this subject, we find dozens and even hundreds of instructions concerning the sanctity of speech and the extreme attention that we must give to it.

Concerning the command, "You shall speak of them" (*Deuteronomy 6:7*), our Sages said: "Of them you may speak, but not of other things" (*Yoma 19b*). This means that a person must constantly speak of holy things, not forbidden subjects, for if he gives free reign to his tongue, he will allow himself to say everything that comes to mind. In that case, "Sin will not be lacking" (*Proverbs 10:19*), as King Solomon, the wisest of all men, said. Forbidden speech leads to sin, and it is only by guarding one's tongue that a person can protect himself. Do we need anything more than the teachings of the Chafetz Chaim, who composed an entire book devoted to the subject of guarding the tongue and the power of speech? The Sages said, "The curse of a Sage, though uttered without cause, takes effect" (*Makkot 11a*). This means that when a *tzaddik* says something, Hashem takes his words into consideration, even if they were said unintentionally.

In addition, we find in our parsha (Parsha Masse, the second one that we read this Shabbat) something that is completely incredible. Parsha Masse deals with cities of refuge. An individual who had unintentionally killed another person was to flee to one of these cities of refuge, and there he would stay until the death of the High Priest. Once the High Priest died, the killer could return to his home. Now since every killer living in a city of refuge wanted to return home as quickly as possible, such individuals were liable to pray to the Holy One, blessed be He, for the death of the High Priest, thus enabling them to regain their freedom. This is the reason, say the Sages, why the mother of the High Priest would provide food and drink to those killers living in cities of refuge. She did this so they would not pray for the death of her son. Can we grasp the meaning of this? The Holy One, blessed be He, listens to the prayer of everyone.

Even when a killer prays, addressing his words to Hashem, He listens to his prayer, which in this case might provoke the death of a High Priest! This is why the mother of the High Priest would provide nourishment to killers living in cities of refuge, which tempered their reasons for praying for the High Priest's death. This teaches us the power of speech, the influence that a word can have, either for good or for bad. We must use this sacred power to our advantage and only utter sanctified and permitted words. That will be our reward. Amen, may it be so.

## Parsha Masei

### *The Significance of the Cities of Refuge*

It is written, “Three cities shall you designate on the other side of the Jordan, and three cities shall you designate in the land of Canaan. They shall be cities of refuge. For the Children of Israel and the proselyte and resident among them shall these cities be a refuge, for anyone who kills a person unintentionally to flee there.... For he must dwell in his city of refuge until the death of the High Priest, and after the death of the High Priest the killer shall return to the land of his possession” (*Numbers 35:14-15, 28*).

Let us focus on the origin of this divine commandment:

1. What exactly is meant by a “city of refuge”?
2. Why does the unintentional killer not hide in his own city instead?
3. Why does the verse connect the return of the killer with the death of the High Priest? Why does the Torah not set a predetermined time for the return of the killer from the city of refuge?

4. Our Sages teach that the mothers of the High Priests gave food and clothing to whoever had unintentionally killed. This was in order for them not to pray for the death of their sons (*Makkot 11a; Yalkut Shimoni 788*). Does this mean that if these killers had prayed, their requests would have been granted and the lives of the High Priests would have been in danger? It is not written, “An unwarranted curse returns” (*Proverbs 26:2*)? The Midrash replies that the priests should have instead implored Heaven to have mercy on their generation (to prevent killings from happening in the first place), yet they refrained. The question still remains: How can we possibly imagine that the prayer of a killer could be granted and thus bring about the death of the High Priest? We must say that they were really not murderers, for they did not kill intentionally. Our Sages have nevertheless explained that if they were unintentionally responsible for the death of one of their brothers, it is because they were not truly upright (*see Shabbat 32a; Bamidbar Rabba 13:17*). Commenting on Numbers 34:15, the Rambam points out that in the land of Gilead, willful murderers hid their crimes and made everyone believe that they were unintentional killers.

It is written, “You reduce man to pulp, and You say: ‘Repent, O sons of man’ ” (*Psalms 90:3*). On this subject our Sages have explained that every gate was closed, with the exception of the gate of tears (*Zohar I:132a; Berachot 32b*) and that of repentance (*Eicha Rabbati 3*). The killers living in cities of refuge had certainly repented. The suffering brought about by forced exile (separation from relatives and friends, and living with strangers) is equal to death. Since the gate of tears and repentance are never closed, their *teshuvah* was certainly accepted. Let us remember that despite his grave sins, King Manasseh was forgiven (*see Sanhedrin 102b-103a; Perkei d’Rabbi Eliezer, start of ch.43*). Our Sages teach that Manasseh testified to the fact that the Holy One, blessed be He, accepts those

who return to Him (*Tanhuma, Nasso 28*). If killers can reach the level of *tzaddikim*, it was feared that their prayers would be answered. Therefore if they cursed the High Priest, their curse was liable to be fulfilled.

What did the High Priest do? What sin did he commit so as to die as a result of the exiles who repented? Where is G-d's justice is this?

Commenting on the subject of the cities of refuge, Rashi cites the Talmud in explaining that despite the fact that nine and a half tribes lived in the land of Canaan – while only two and a half tribes lived beyond the Jordan – both contained three cities of refuge because “manslaying was rife in Gilead” (*Makkot 9b*). We may say that the evil inclination is stronger outside the land of Israel. If this is true for extremely grave cases such as unintentional killing, what happens in less serious cases, ones in which the evil inclination tries to make a Jew stumble, especially in unintentional sins, which not everyone can perceive? Since the evil inclination sometimes succeeds in this way, a person who lives outside of Israel must strive to cleave to the Holy One, blessed be He and His commandments. Only Hashem, Who probes the heart of every person, knows man's tendencies and the exact circumstances that can lead to a Jew killing (unintentionally) another. Everyone must therefore rouse themselves, do *teshuvah*, and be ready to overcome the trials of life.

The High Priest must show unintentional killers the way to return to G-d. He must implore Hashem to accept his repentance, without being afraid that the accused will pray to G-d to be able to leave his city of refuge (and thus precipitate the High Priest's death). He must have faith in G-d, as it is written: “The ways of the L-RD are straight. The righteous walk in them and sinners will stumble over them” (*Hosea 14:10*).

We know that every person constitutes an entire world, and when the hour comes for him to leave this world, the Holy One, blessed be He, is careful to replace him with another in order that nothing should be lacking in the world, G-d forbid (see *Midrash HaGadol, Vayeilzei 28:16; Zohar III:33,247b*). This applies especially when it comes to *tzaddikim*. Commenting on the verse, “The sun rises and the sun sets” (*Ecclesiastes 1:5*), our Sages explain that a *tzaddik* does not leave this world unless another person of the same caliber is born (see *Yoma 38b; Pessitka Zutah 23:1*). As a result, when a person kills someone, it is as if he destroyed an entire world (*Sanhedrin 37a*), shedding his blood and the blood of all his potential descendants until the end of time. If we are dealing with a murderer who acts with premeditation, it is clear that only his own death will atone for his sin (*Sanhedrin 43b*). The sin of the unintentional killer must also be atoned for, however, and he must repent for his grave misdeed. Through his tears he can restore what he took from the world.

Such a person must flee to a city of refuge, where he will have time to reflect upon his situation. He must ponder the fact that if he was the unintentional author of such a grave misdeed, it means that he is certainly guilty. This realization will push him to sincerely repent and implore Hashem to forgive his sin. If he feels that the Holy One, blessed be He, is ready to help him leave this place of imprisonment, it is because his

prayer was heard in Heaven. He will then attain the level of a *baal teshuva*, whose sins are transformed into merits (*Yoma 86b*). He thus fills the void that he created in the world through his sin.

It is nevertheless forbidden for him to pray for the death of the High Priest. If the latter's death will enable him to leave the city of refuge, he will have fulfilled a *mitzvah* that was brought about by a sin (*Berachot 47b; Sukkah 30a*). He must instead pray for the welfare of the High Priest, and the Holy One, blessed be He, will act with him measure for measure (*Shabbat 105b*). During his stay in the city of refuge, he must not stop infusing himself with the holiness of the Levites who live there (see *Chinuch 108*). His judgment will therefore be less severe. He knows that his sin will be forgiven and that he will elevate himself on the rungs of holiness. However he must not pray to leave his place of refuge, for his prayer may cause the death of the High Priest.

This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, considers the death of an ordinary Jew to be like the passing of the High Priest. The mothers of the High Priests were careful to give food to unintentional killers living in cities of refuge in order for them to express their gratitude. If they have truly repented, they would not refrain from doing so, and thus they will pray for the welfare of their son the High Priest. The Torah linked the problem of the unintentional killer to the death of the High Priest in order to prevent the latter from leaving the world on account of the former's prayer.

If cities of refuge are more numerous outside of Israel, it is because the evil inclination is stronger there. Sensing a lack of holiness, a person will hasten to sincerely repent and beg Hashem to bring him back home quickly, for he will find it unbearable to live outside the land. He will express his ardent desire for Hashem to return him to Israel, which is holiest of all lands (*Kelim 1:6; Bamidbar Rabba 7:8*). Once inside, he will be able to easily repent and bring about the death of the High Priest.

We may also say that the problem of the unintentional killer is linked to the death of the High Priest in order for the latter to pray to Hashem that all His children should be upright and not sin, not even unintentionally. The *tzaddik* must pray for his generation, and if he does not, responsibility devolves on him (see *Makkot 11a*). The *tzaddik* must elevate himself and bring his brothers closer to their Father in Heaven, a concept embodied by the verse, "When you kindle the lamps" (*Numbers 8:2*), which are the souls of the Jewish people. This is because "man's soul is the lamp of the L-RD" (*Proverbs 20:27*) with regards to the Menorah, which represents the *Shechinah*.

The Torah actually wants the good of both parties. The unintentional killer must overcome his hardship and not pray to leave the city of refuge, which might bring about the death of the High Priest. The *Kohen Gadol* ("High Priest") – a term that has the same numerical value as *ovdei Hashem* ("servants of Hashem") – must especially concentrate when praying in order that the supplications of the unintentional killer do not bring about his own death.

This teaches that we must not refrain from demonstrating goodness, meaning teaching the Torah to others without fearing that with time their understanding and

character traits will be greater than our own. We must not be ashamed of this. Let us instead prepare ourselves and share our Torah knowledge with all who want to come closer to the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written: “Do not withhold good from its rightful recipients, when you have the power to do it” (*Proverbs 3:27*). If another person achieves greater Torah understanding than we do, let us control ourselves and be happy that he is abiding by Hashem’s will. It may turn out that the Torah will emerge from him.

I knew someone who was very knowledgeable in Talmud, though his study partner was less sharp. When I asked the latter why he had stopped studying with him, he said: “I’m embarrassed by the fact that he understands things faster than me!” I naturally criticized such an attitude.

Similarly, if we utter a prayer that is liable to harm another person, we must refrain from saying it, even if will be beneficially to us (*see Eruvin 100a*).

Let us end this lesson by introducing the following Gematrias: The term *ir miklat* (“city of refuge”) has the same numerical value (459) as the expression *shevilei ha-emunah* (“the paths of faith”), which drives the unintentional killer on the paths that lead to the house of G-d when he repents and faces the trials of life. The phrase *Hashivenu Hashem El-echa* (“Bring us back to You, O L-RD” – Lamentations 5:21) also has the name numerical value as *ir miklat* (459 + 1 for the kollel). Finally the expression *Elokim hashivenu* (“O G-d, return us” – Psalms 80:4) has the name numerical value (466, including 1 for the kollel) as *ir miklat* (459 + 7 for each letter = 466).

### ***Ask Your Father and He Will Tell You***

Commenting on the verse, “You shall separate three cities for yourselves” (Deuteronomy 19:7), the Talmud explains that road markers showed unintentional killers the way to the nearest city of refuge (*Makkot 10b*). Nevertheless, these markers were not placed on the roads leading to Jerusalem. Why not?

The reason is that one who has unintentionally killed a person must spend his time asking for road directions from passers-by. The avenger of blood is therefore liable to find him and kill him. The road markers were thus meant to save him time and increase his chances of survival. On the other hand, these road markers did not exist on the roads leading to Jerusalem, the holy city and the abode of the *Shechinah* and Torah, a place from which people infused themselves with Hashem’s spirit and abundance. The killer therefore had to ask for information from passers-by on the roads leading to the cities of refuge, and he had no reason to worry about being attacked.

When we study Torah, we must not content ourselves with what we know. Instead we must constantly be developing our understanding and learning from everyone who can help us. We must never end our studies, for every stoppage is liable to lead to an irreparable spiritual fall. It is only by the Torah that we can find our way, but only if we continue asking questions in order to truly understand it.





# DEUTERONOMY

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## *Parsha Devarim*

### *The Remedy for the Destruction of the Temple and the Descent of the Shechinah Depends on All Israel*

The verse states, “How can [*eichah*] I alone carry your contentiousness, your burdens, and your quarrels?” (*Deuteronomy 1:12*). At the time of the destruction of the first Temple, the prophet Jeremiah also began his lamentation with the word *eichah*: “How does [*eichah*] the city sit solitary, that was full of people” (*Lamentations 1:1*). It seems, therefore, that there is a connection between these two verses.

Now we know that the main reason for the Shechinah’s presence in the Temple is for it to reside among the Children of Israel. How can we attract it to us? Solely by the diligent study of Torah (*Torat Kohanim 26:3*) and uniting with G-d, which awakens kindness from on high towards the Children of Israel (*Zohar 1:77b*). Yet if the will to study weakens in Israel, it follows that the instrument that was to receive the Shechinah in order to spread good among the Children of Israel can no longer perform that task. Consequently the existence of the Temple becomes unnecessary, since there is no longer anything to spread, which is the reason why the Temple was destroyed. This is the meaning of the destruction of the Temple and the exile.

The remedy for these consists of building synagogues and houses of study & prayer from which the Torah will emanate. In this way we build the Temple, as it is written, “I have been for them a small sanctuary” (*Ezekiel 11:16*), which the Gemara interprets as synagogues and houses of study (*Megillah 29a*). Already during the time of the destruction of the second Temple, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai asked, “Give me Yavneh [יבנה] and its Sages” (*Gittin 56b*), and Rashi explains that it is not to be destroyed and that its Sages are not to be killed, for they are the source of a resurgence for the Jewish community, which will be rebuilt [יבנה] by constructing yeshivas.

However there is one condition that is absolutely necessary for this to happen: The entire people should immerse itself in the study of Torah. We find this idea alluded to in the words *kerem Yavneh* (“vine of Yavneh”). The word *kerem* is formed by the same letters as the word *mecher* (“sale”), which means that a man should be completely “sold” to Torah. Even G-d expresses Himself in this way concerning the Torah: “So to speak, I sold Myself with it” (*Shemot Rabba 33:1*). At that moment, the Temple is rebuilt [יבנה] and the Shechinah comes to rest on it, for it does not move from synagogues and houses of study. These two things depend on one other. If we build synagogues and houses of study to elevate ourselves, through them, in Torah, we will study even more, which will allow us to acquire still further wisdom (*Perkei Avoth 2:7*), and wisdom is preferable to prophesy (*Bava Batra 12a*). The Torah (being wisdom) is the essential thing, for it is through it that the Shechinah will come to rest on man.

This is the meaning of Moses' exclamation, "How can I alone carry," which means: "How can I be connected to the Holy One, blessed be He, and close to Him without your determination? For you, the Children of Israel, are responsible for one another" (*Sanhedrin 27b*). It is difficult for an individual to observe the 613 mitzvot, for there are some that deal only with the priests and others that deal only with the Levites. Therefore, only collective responsibility allows for the accomplishment of all the mitzvot. Moreover, before performing a mitzvah we say, "in the name of all Israel." This is what Moses said, namely that he did not have the ability to exist by himself; he could only do so through their study of Torah and observance of the mitzvot. In fact, G-d's will is that everyone should be together, and through "in the name of all Israel," everything can be achieved.

In addition, Moses told the Children of Israel, "May the L-RD, the G-d of your forefathers, add to you a thousand times yourselves" (*Deuteronomy 1:11*). This means that the Eternal is your G-d only when you add to your study of Torah without interruption. Pay very special attention to your conduct towards one another and to the mitzvot that govern conduct, as it is written, "Judge righteously between a man and his brother or his litigant" (*v.16*). It is solely this increase in Torah study, coupled with mutual responsibility, which will "force" (so to speak) the Holy One, blessed be He, to make His Shechinah reside among you. Without joint responsibility and Torah, there would be no Shechinah in the Temple to spread its beneficial effects among you.

We now understand what the prophet Jeremiah said: "How does the city sit solitary, that was full of people" (*Lamentations 1:1*). This means as follows: How is it possible that Jerusalem, a city so full of people, is now sitting alone, and that the crown has fallen from its head? How could the Shechinah have left this city that was once so populated that all eyes turned to her? The answer lies in the word "solitary": Each person lived for himself, and there was no unity of the type evoked by the expression "In the name of all Israel." Furthermore, there was no joint responsibility, which is why Jerusalem was destroyed.

Consequently, on one hand Moses warned the Children of Israel that if they wanted to elevate themselves, this did not depend only on the greatest sage of the time, but on the will of all the people and on their sense of responsibility. It is true that the Tzaddik can have a beneficial influence, but each person should make of himself a vessel ready to receive this influence. If not, the righteous will sit solitary, there will be neither mutual responsibility nor beneficial influence, and he will not be able to elevate himself or Israel with him. However, in order for a man to receive this influence, he should distance himself from all that can deter him, which we learn from the verse that states: "You shall command the people, saying, 'You are passing through the boundary of your brothers the children of Esau, who dwell in Seir; they will fear you, but you should be very careful' " (*Deuteronomy 2:4*). When the Children of Israel carry out G-d's will, all the peoples and all the wicked fear them and try to find favor with them. When they try to please Jews, it is at that moment that the Torah commands us to be very

careful. Now as we know, the Sages have said, “*Very* – it is the evil inclination” (*Bereshith Rabba* 9:9). One should be *very* careful of their tricks because they are inspired by the evil inclination, and the possibility exists of falling prey to the same harmful desires as the other nations. We find an allusion to this idea in the word “Seir”, composed of the same letters as the word *reshei* (the wicked), which means that a person should not allow himself to be swept up by the wicked or the evil inclination.

The Torah also commands us, “You shall not provoke them” (*Deuteronomy* 2:5). Rather than saying, “Since they are afraid of me, I will settle next to them,” a person must distance himself from a place of temptation. In fact, “I shall not give of their land even the right to set foot” (*ibid.*) means: I will not let you follow in their footsteps, and if you do so nonetheless, you will fall into their hands. In addition, you don’t have the right to receive gifts from them. You must pay for what they provide you with, for you have been lacking nothing, and the Holy One, blessed be He, has blessed all the works of your hand. You are therefore duty bound to distance yourselves from temptation. This will allow you to be receptive to the influence of the Sages and the Tzaddikim of your time, and this will be the remedy for the destruction of the Temple through the descent of the Shechinah.

### *How to Rebuild the Holy Temple I*

We find the term *eichah* used in two Scriptural verses:

1. “*Eichah* [How can] I alone carry your contentiousness, your burdens, and your quarrels?” (*Deuteronomy* 1:12).

2. “*Eichah* [How does] the city sit solitary, that was full of people” (*Lamentations* 1:1).

Let us examine if a connection exists between these two verses.

Although the Shechinah resides in the Holy Temple, it dwells primarily among the Children of Israel through their diligent Torah study (*Torat Kohanim* 26:3) and their constant efforts to come closer to the Holy One, blessed be He. Thus they receive, as we have seen, an awakening from Above. Nevertheless, without the resolve of the Children of Israel, the Divine Presence does not find a vessel suitable for containing it. Hence they no longer need the Temple in Jerusalem, for no influence is exercised over it, which is why it was destroyed. This is the primary reason for the destruction of the Temple and the exile.

We can correct this situation by the construction of synagogues and houses of study from which the Torah emerges, for these are themselves Sanctuaries (*Megillah* 29a). When the second Temple was destroyed, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai asked the Roman Emperor to spare the city of Yavneh and the lives of the Sages (*Gittin* 66b) in order for the Jewish people to survive (*Rashi*), for the community of Israel would be rebuilt by the construction of yeshivot.

For this to happen, the Jewish people must diligently engage in Torah study; they must be *machur*, sold to it (*Kerem Yavneh*). The Holy One, blessed be He, was also “sold” with it, as it were (*Shemot Rabba* 33:1). Increasing the number of yeshivot increases wisdom, Hillel taught (*Perkei Avoth* 2:7). The Torah is the essential thing, and a wise man is preferable to a prophet (Bava Batra 12a). One who engages in Torah study causes the Divine Presence to reside in him.

“How can I alone carry...” exclaimed Moses. How can I connect myself to the Holy One, blessed be He, without help on your part? This is because all Jews are guarantors for one another (*Sanhedrin* 27b). A single Jew cannot accomplish all the 613 mitzvot in the Torah, for some mitzvot apply only to Kohanim, while others apply to Levites, and so on. Because Jews are guarantors for one another, it is as if they carry out all the mitzvot of the Torah. This is why we recite, before performing a mitzvah, a passage that mentions the name of all Israel. The only way I can survive alone, Moses told them, is if you study the Torah and carry out the mitzvot. Hashem wants all of you to be united.

Hashem rightfully belongs to you only if you increase your Torah study. “May the L-RD, the G-d of your forefathers, add to you a thousand times yourselves...” (*Deuteronomy* 1:11). Nevertheless, be careful about mitzvot that deal with man and his fellowman: “Listen among your brethren and judge righteously between a man and his brother or his litigant” (v.16). Hashem will then make His Shechinah reside upon you.

We can thus understand the prophet’s exclamation: “[How does] the city sit *badad* [solitary], that was full of people” (*Lamentations* 1:1). How can Jerusalem remain solitary, its crown removed? How could the Divine Presence have left this city, to which the eyes of the whole world were turned? The answer is found in the very exclamation of Jeremiah: Each was *badad*: Unity did not reign among the Children of Israel, and they were not guarantors for one another. That is what caused Jerusalem’s destruction.

Moses had succinctly explained to the Children of Israel that if they wanted to elevate themselves, they must not count solely on the greats of the generation, but rather on their desire to be united. The power of a Tzaddik consists of transforming a person into a vessel suitable for receiving a flow of spirituality. Otherwise the Tzaddik remains solitary and cannot elevate others along with himself.

To receive this influx, Jews must rid themselves of every obstacle placed before them. This is what is alluded to in the verse, “You shall command the people, saying: ‘You are passing through the boundary of your brothers the children of Esau, who dwell in Seir; they will fear you, but you should be very careful’ ” (*Deuteronomy* 2:4). When the Jewish people conform to G-d’s will, all the peoples and the wicked of the world are seized with fear, and it is then that they try to find favor in their eyes. The Torah therefore warns us to “be *meod* [very] careful,” for the Midrash teaches that *meod* is the evil inclination (*Bereshith Rabba* 9:9). The word *Seir* alludes to this, for its letters form the word *rishi*, meaning that we must not let ourselves be seduced by the wicked.

“You shall not provoke them” (*Deuteronomy 2:5*), the Torah continues. Above all, do not tell yourselves, “Since the nations are afraid of us, we cannot live with them,” for I am not giving you their land. In other words: I will not let you follow their ways, and if you follow them, you will fall into their hands. You are forbidden to receive gifts from them, for you lack nothing, and G-d has blessed you in everything that you do. Therefore do not put yourselves to the test. You can then be influenced by the Tzaddikim and the greats of the generation, and the Temple will be rebuilt and the Divine Presence will reside in you.

### *How To Rebuild The Temple II*

The Shabbat of Parsha Devarim is also known as Shabbat Chazon, from the name of this week’s *Haftorah*, which begins with the words *Chazon Yeshaya ben Amotz* (“The vision of Isaiah, the son of Amoz”). In it the prophet Isaiah rebukes the Children of Israel for having committed various sins, and he calls upon them to completely repent before the Holy One, blessed be He. This Shabbat always precedes the fast of Tisha B’Av, the day when our Temple was destroyed, when our pride and glory disappeared. We can no longer offer sacrifices on Hashem’s altar, a situation that will continue until He takes pity on the remnant of His people, allows us to rebuild the Temple, and sends us the redeemer, speedily and in our days. Amen, may it be so.

Yet to rectify the sin that caused the destruction of the Temple, we must constantly search our hearts in order to know how to better ourselves and bring about the construction of the new Temple. The Sages said, “Every generation that does not see the rebuilding of the Holy Temple is guilty of having destroyed it” (*Yerushalmi, Yoma 1:1*). Do we really want people to say that we destroyed the Temple with our own hands? Obviously not. Therefore we must think about how best to bring about its restoration. Some useful advice for bringing about the construction of the Temple is given at the beginning of Parsha Devarim. There we read of the reprimands that were addressed to the Children of Israel by Moses before he died. If we were to actually take them to heart, Hashem would quickly restore the Temple in all its glory.

At the beginning of the parsha we read, “These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, in the desert, in the Arabah, opposite Suf, between Paran and Tophel, and Laban and Hazeroth and Di-zahab” (*Deuteronomy 1:1*). These names indicate the places where the Children of Israel angered Hashem, however Moses mentioned them only by way of allusion, for the sake of the Children of Israel’s dignity. We must explain the meaning of these allusions, for the references show us the path to follow and the deeds to perform in order to conquer the evil inclination and hasten the rebuilding of the Temple. In fact we are well aware of the Sages’ statement that “if a man makes himself like a desert, abandoning himself to all [Rashi: He teaches Torah to everyone for free], then the Torah will be given to him as a gift” (*Nedarim 55a*). Only such a man can acquire the Torah. This is what Moses said

to the Children of Israel: The first condition for rebuilding the Temple is the study of Torah. Furthermore, if we study Torah all other good things will come our way.

In the expression *ba'arava* (“in the Arabah” – Deuteronomy 1:1), the word *arava* contains the same letters as *avera* (“sin”). This means that Moses warned Israel that when a person wants to study Torah, the evil inclination immediately comes and incites him to sin. That is, not only will it *not* let a person study Torah, it will incite him to do the very opposite! This is why the wise foresee things, allowing them to completely reject the evil inclination. Some may ask, “How can I do that? How can someone as insignificant as myself rebuff the evil inclination? My desires are so strong, and temptations are so powerful, how can I possibly conquer them?” This is why Moses continued by saying *mol suf* (“opposite Suf”). This alludes to a well-known piece of advice that the Sages gave to those who want to subdue their evil inclination. What must a person do in that case? He must study Torah. If that fails to work, he should recite *Shema*, and if that also fails to work, he should reflect upon the day of death (Berachot 5a). This is the meaning of the words *mol suf*, namely to remind the evil inclination of the end (*suf*) of man’s days, for everyone is destined to die. In this way each of us can truly conquer the evil inclination. At the same time we must strengthen ourselves in other areas. Now there are some people who truly want to better themselves, who want to become spiritually stronger, people who want to study Torah and perform *mitzvot*. They try to subdue the evil inclination day and night, yet they unfortunately continue to be occupied with useless things, things that have no value whatsoever, foolish pursuits that have nothing to do with serving G-d.

This is why Moses told the Children of Israel, “Between Paran and Tophel.” The word *paran* evokes the word *perurim* (“crumbs”), and *tophel* recalls *tefelim* (“useless words”), things that are completely unjustified. This means that if you truly want to strengthen yourselves spiritually, to be G-d-fearing Jews and hasten the Final Redemption, you should not be occupied with “crumbs” – useless things that have no justification – with petty sins. You should abandon all foolish pursuits and concentrate solely on the essential. You must focus on true spiritual values, for it is only the study of true spirituality that will raise you to great heights and lofty levels.

A person must adopt all these suggestions – studying Torah and defeating the evil inclination by reminding it of the day of death – all without occupying himself with petty foolish pursuits, but instead with spiritual ones. If a person does that, Moses continues to tell the Children of Israel, he will succeed in arriving at the primary thing. Such a person will arrive at *lavan* (“white”), for all his sins will be transformed from red to white, as it is written: “If your sins are like scarlet, they will become white as snow” (*Isaiah 1:18*). Furthermore, deliberate sins will become merits, in which case a person may have a great deal of merit!

In addition to this, “Hazeroth” – you will truly merit finding yourself in the courtyards of Hashem’s house, rejoicing in His presence, gazing at His glory, and visiting His palace. All this will happen because you overcame all evil and strengthened

yourself solely in what is good. Finally there is “Di-zahab,” a reference to money, to *zahav* (gold). In other words, if you do everything mentioned above, you will receive a tremendous reward from Hashem in the world that is entirely good (the World to Come) for all the *mitzvot* and good deeds that you have accumulated. Why all this? It is because you will have conquered the golden calf, meaning the evil inclination that is alluded to by the word “Di-zahab.” You will have deeply buried the evil inclination into the ground, and your entire personality will shine with holiness and purity, with Torah and *mitzvot*.

These are not simply sanctimonious remarks. We must implant these ideas deeply in our minds and in our hearts, for actions speak louder than words. It is only in this way that we will merit to hasten the Final Redemption and the construction of the Temple, speedily and in our days. Amen, may it be so!

## Parsha Vaetchanan

### *Great is Repentance Before Prayer*

It is written, “I implored the L-RD at that time, saying ...” (*Deuteronomy 3:23*). Most of the commentators have questioned the meaning of the expression “at that time.” What time was that? They have explained that it consists of the time mentioned in the passage, “As for me, may my prayer to You, O L-RD, be at an opportune time” (*Psalms 69:14*). Moses asked that this moment be favorable in G-d’s eyes for accepting his prayer. Yet despite this, his prayer was not answered, for G-d had decided that he would not enter the Holy Land.

Regarding this subject, the book *Beit Shemuel* explains that “at that time” means the present moment, meaning that one shouldn’t think of the past or the future, but should only be concerned with the time in which he can correct his behavior. This is why Moses prayed when he could in order to implore G-d. Concerning this, I have heard that the word *leimor* (“saying”) alludes to the fact that a man’s prayer (as in the verse itself: “I implored”) should always be in his heart and mouth in order that he can say it (*leimor*) when he begins praying.

In my humble opinion, there is another way of explaining the expression “at that time” and *leimor*. Concerning this, the holy Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk states in his book *Noam Elimelech*: “When someone wants to perform a mitzvah, he should begin by repenting of the sins he has committed, for by his sins a man creates accusers and destructive angels (*Perkei Avoth 4:13[11]*) that prevent him from subsequently elevating his mitzvot. Consequently, if there is no repentance, mitzvot cannot rise up.”

May I allow myself to add that not only do mitzvot not rise up in such a case, but that even the holiness that stems from them becomes the victim of the forces of impurity, which feed off of it. The *Noam Elimelech* affirms that we can remedy this situation by repenting before performing a mitzvah, for then we eliminate all accusers and destroy them by repentance, to the extent that mitzvot can rise up and we bring satisfaction to our Creator.

Following the same line of reasoning, we may add that we should also repent before praying in order not to be disturbed by these angels and accusers that seek to nourish themselves from prayer. Thus our prayers will be received with favor. This is why the Sages said, “The early righteous ones prepared themselves for an hour before prayer” (*Berachot 30b*), for they were actually undertaking a self-evaluation in order to repent of their prior sins so that their prayer would be received with favor. In fact it is written, “Know before Whom you stand” (*Berachot 28b*), yet how can one stand before the King of kings while stained with sins, faults, transgressions, and evil thoughts? This is why, before praying, we should recall all our sins and take it upon ourselves to not fall back into them. And even if one is certain to have not committed any sin – even if a person is righteous to a fault – we know that G-d is extremely demanding with

those who are close to Him (*Yebamot 121b*). If He were to make the holy Patriarchs pass before Him in judgment, even they would not emerge innocent, for He would rebuke them. For what would they be reprimanded? On details so minute that a man doesn't even take note of them. Consequently, it is also good to repent of all our sins before praying.

This allows us to understand the connection between Parsha Devarim and Parsha Va'etchanan. At first, Moses reprimanded the Children of Israel for all their wicked deeds, and he also enjoined himself to repent, in particular for the incident in which he struck the rock twice with his staff (*Numbers 20:11*). Concerning that, Moses told the Children of Israel, "But the L-RD became angry with me because of you, and He did not listen to me" (*Deuteronomy 3:26*). Then, when he finished and reprimanded himself and repented, he began to pray and implore G-d (*va'etchanan*). When was this? It was "at that time" – when he repented and there were none of his accusers left. His prayer was continually in his mouth (*leimor*), and yet it was not granted.

Everything that we have seen up to now allows us to explain the rest of the passage: "Let me please cross and see the good land that is on the other side of the Jordan" (*v. 25*). The Vilna Gaon explains that if Moses had said, "Let me please cross and please see the good land" (saying "please" twice), as he had done in his prayer for Miriam his sister ("Please, L-RD, heal her please" [*Numbers 12:13*]), his prayer would have been granted, as it had been for Miriam. In such a case Moses would have entered into Eretz Israel and the land would never have been devastated. However the Holy One, blessed be He, immediately stopped Moses and said to him, "It is too much for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter" (*Deuteronomy 3:26*), meaning, "Do not say 'please' [*na*] a second time" (see *Imrei HaGra*). We see, therefore, that Moses had his prayer so ready in his mouth that if the Holy One, blessed be He, had not stopped him so as to Sanctify His Name in public, his prayer would have been granted.

From all this, we learn that we may continually pray and think that our prayers are being heard, yet this may not be true if we have not completely repented of our wicked deeds beforehand. This is why we recite, before praying, the passage concerning sacrifices (*Shulchan Aruch Orah Haim, beginning of paragraph 48*). This is a way for a man to offer himself as a sacrifice before G-d and to repent of all his sins before addressing Him. It is a good way to prepare for prayer, but a great amount of concentration is required for it to be considered as if he had really sacrificed himself, for according to the Ramban (see *Leviticus 1:9*), a sacrifice replaces a man. Thus all that is done to an animal should really have been performed on a man. When a person realizes this, he will certainly repent, humble himself, and become like a sacrifice before G-d.

### ***The Power of Prayer At Any Time***

The holy Tanna Hillel said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" (*Perkei Avoth 1:14*). What does the last

statement mean? What exactly is the issue with regards to doing something now? In the second chapter in Perkei Avoth, Hillel also stated: “Do not say, ‘I will study when I have free time,’ for perhaps you will never have free time” (*ibid.* 2:4).

The explanation is the following: It is obvious that the words of Hillel in the second chapter of Perkei Avoth (“Do not say, ‘I will study when I have free time’”) refer to Torah study. This means that a person has no right to say, “When I have the time, then I’ll study Torah,” for in that case he might not be able free himself to study when the time comes. We must therefore use every spare moment to study Torah, lest when the time comes and we want to study, various interruptions will prevent us from doing so.

The *gaon* Rabbi Israel Salanter *Zatzal*, the great master of Mussar, said that the words of Hillel in the first chapter of Perkei Avoth (“And if not now, when?”) as well as those in the second chapter (“Do not say, ‘I will study when I have free time’”) both refer to prayer. The book *Al HaTorah* cites Rabbi Salanter as saying: “A man must not say, ‘This time is perfectly suited for study and prayer, but that time is not. I can therefore take it easy now, for I have no energy or ability to focus, and I have no time to study. However when I do have the time, then I’ll study.’” Not at all! All times are suitable for Torah study and prayer. Every moment is convenient, and if not now, when? We must not neglect Torah study or prayer at any time.

Concerning which verse did Rabbi Salanter make such comments? He wrote them with regards to the first verse in our parsha: “I implored the L-RD at the time” (*Deuteronomy* 3:23). Moses prayed to the Holy One, blessed be He, at that time because he wanted to enter Eretz Israel. What time was that? Rabbi Salanter answers this question by saying, “It was not an exact and definite point in time, for all times are suitable for prayer, and we can arouse Hashem’s mercy at each instant.”

What does this pertain to? There are some among us who, when we ask them to pray for something (be it for sustenance, help in various predicaments, or for a health-related matter) they answer, “Not now. It’s not a good time to pray. We have to organize a special ‘prayer day’ and invite all the great men of the generation, for then the entire house of Israel will recite supplications before our heavenly Father and the gates of Heaven will certainly open and deliverance will surely come.” People who say such things simply do not understand anything about the power of prayer. They know absolutely nothing of its potency. They fail to realize that the gates of prayer are not tightly sealed. This means that the gates of prayer are open before the Holy One, blessed be He, at all times and at every instant – each day, 365 days a year – and it is possible *at any time* to implore Hashem, to ask and beseech Him for help. If the people described above feel that all these times are not suitable for prayer, it is because they believe that we cannot always ask G-d for help. Yet Moses himself did not wait for a special time to beseech G-d, for he began to pray as soon as he learned that he was not to enter Eretz Israel. We must therefore make such people understand that all times are good for prayer.

Concerning one of the *tzaddikim* of the previous generation, it is said that he would normally light the Chanukah candles in the presence of his servants and family members (not with his chassidim). One day one of his chassidim, who had been childless after seven years of marriage, came to see him before he lit the candles. He wanted to witness the Rebbe lighting the Chanukah candles in the hope that, just maybe, he would have a son by the power of these sanctified lights. His Rebbe, however, told him: “With the Holy One, blessed be He, every moment and all times are the same. There is neither Chanukah nor the month of Tammuz, for just as we can beseech Hashem before the Chanukah candles, so too can we beseech Him in the month of Tammuz.” As it turned out, a year and a half later – during the month of Tammuz no less – the wife of this chassid had a baby boy! This story clearly proves that we can indeed successfully implore Hashem at all times. We find an allusion to this idea in the verse, “For I have given you a *tov* [good] teaching, do not forsake My Torah” (*Proverbs 4:2*). The word *tov* has the same numerical value as the word *hahu*, which appears in the verse, “I implored the L-RD *hahu* [at that] time” (*Deuteronomy 3:23*). This means that Hashem sends *tov* (good) our way, and that all times and every moment is good for Torah study and prayer. It is forbidden for a man to delay his Torah study for another time or to say that he will pray later on. We must not give up. We must not neglect the time we have before us. We must pray and study *now*, as soon as the time presents itself. Rabbi Yochanan said with regards to this, “If only a man could go on praying the whole day!” (*Berachot 21a*). This is because the entire day is suitable in Hashem’s eyes for Torah study, and even more so for prayer. One day the disciples of Rabbi Chaim of Sanz asked him, “What does our teacher do before prayer?” He replied, “Before prayer, I ask Hashem for the ability to ‘pray at the time of prayer,’ for all hours are suitable for prayer. I therefore ask to be able to pray and take advantage of this good time for prayer.”

This applies to every generation. Furthermore, it applies not only to men, but to women as well. As we know, women are exempt from the duty to pray, yet many women still do so. No woman should think that she needs to pray at the same three times that men do, for all times are good for prayer. With regards to righteous women, it is said that when they prepared breakfast for their husbands, they said a special prayer from the depths of their heart. Is that not a prayer? Is such a prayer not accepted by G-d? It is as we have said: The power of prayer exists at any time. Therefore let’s take advantage of the moment!

## Parsha Eikev

### *Torah and the Fear of Heaven Lead to the Reward of the World to Come*

Resh Lakish reflected upon the verse that states, “If the snake bites because it was not charmed, then there is no advantage to the charmer’s art” (*Ecclesiastes 10:11*). “In the future,” he said, “all the animals will assemble themselves and go to the serpent and say, ‘The lion rips apart its prey to eat it, the wolf rips apart its prey to eat it, but you – what benefit do you derive from your prey?’ The serpent will reply, ‘What benefit does someone have who speaks evil?’ ” (*Erchin 15b*). The connection between the serpent and one who speaks ill of others must therefore be understood.

We can understand the relationship between the two in the following way. The serpent is used to biting the heel, as it is written, “[It] bites a horse’s heels so its rider falls backward” (*Genesis 49:17*). Rashi explains that the serpent makes a tiny bite on the foot without its victim feeling a thing, and then all of a sudden this wound begins to swell up tremendously (*Rashi on Exodus 22:24*). It happens in exactly the same way regarding slander. At the beginning it is nothing at all (like a person’s heel, which he neither sees nor notices), but in the end it swells up until the entire body suffers. And if the serpent bites precisely on the heel, it is measure for measure (*Shabbat 105b*), for the mouth that should have studied Torah spoke ill of others instead. The punishment is therefore a bite on the heel (בִּקְבֹעַ) because effort wasn’t put into fixing (קִבְעַ) times for Torah study.

It must be understood that gossiping is a very grave sin. Rabbi Ishmael teaches that whoever speaks ill of others commits a sin as great as idolatry, adultery, and murder (*Erchin 15b*). The passage, “You shall not be a gossipmonger among your people” (*Leviticus 19:16*) means that if someone speaks ill of others, he should realize that it’s as if he is also speaking ill of himself, since he is included in the term “your people.” In doing so, he harms the unity of the Jewish people because of the power of gossip’s venom. We find this idea alluded to in the very same verse (“You shall not be a gossipmonger [*rachil*] among your people”), for the word *rachil* has the same numerical value as the letter *yud* and the word *ner* (“lamp”), the letter *yud* being at the beginning of the word *yadlik* (“he will light”). This means that he lights a lamp by making slanderous remarks, and this light then penetrates to all holes and crevices, damaging every area it penetrates.

We should be very careful before opening our mouths, because a tiny word barely more important than a person’s heel can bring about devastating results, as it is written, “Evil speech kills three people: The speaker, the subject, and the listener” (*Devarim Rabba 5:10*). It acts in exactly the same way as the serpent bite that, starting from the heel, puts the entire body at risk.

All this is alluded to in the verse that states, “And it shall come to pass [*vehaya*], because [*eikev*] you will hearken” (*Deuteronomy 7:12*). As the Sages have said, the word

*vehaya* always denotes a joyous event (*Bereshith Rabba* 42:4). This means that we must live in joy and love our neighbor by being on our heels (*eikev*) in order to provide him with what he lacks, even the most insignificant thing, and to listen to him as he speaks of his worries and troubles. When we act in this way and refrain from speaking ill of others, and when we remain immersed in joy, we bring about an awakening on earth that is reciprocated in Heaven.

Another important lesson is also taught to us in this parsha. It begins with the words *vehaya eikev*, which denote joy, and in the remainder of the parsha the Children of Israel are reminded of the sin of the golden calf and all they did to irritate the Holy One, blessed be He. This is in order to teach us that Torah study alone (that is, without the fear of Heaven) is not enough, for “Not by bread alone does man live” – bread referring to Torah (*Yalkut Shimoni Mishlei* 9) – “rather by everything that emanates from the mouth of G-d does man live” (*Deuteronomy* 8:3), which refers to faith in G-d. We may also explain it to mean the opposite, that faith alone is not enough without Torah study, since faith alone cannot be maintained. Both things together are needed: Torah study and faith. We should also stress that it is not only while studying that one should think of G-d, but always, even when on vacation and while resting. We can do this by searching our hearts, for it is written: “by everything that emanates from the mouth of G-d,” which is to say that we must always remember Him.

We may also explain that the verse alludes to the fact that if a Tzaddik is sick and cannot give an answer to his students, they should attach themselves to his books. It is only in that way that a person will receive the answers he needs, and that is what constitutes “because you will hearken” (עֲקֹב תִשְׁמָעוּ) – whose initials form the word תָּו (“time”) – meaning that a man should set times for the joyful study of Torah.

With regards to this, in the Torah we find the phrase: “Because you will hearken to My laws [*mishpatim*]” (*Deuteronomy* 7:12). Why is the reference here not to decrees (*chukim*) or commandments (*mitzvot*), rather than exclusively to laws (*mishpatim*)? These types of ordinances are relatively simple and understood by each and everyone. Even non-Jews have these types of ordinances, which is why the Torah comes to teach us that a Jew must perform them with immense joy on the inside – to the depths of his being – rather than being satisfied with a superficial approach. For example, when the Torah writes, “You shall not murder,” it includes the command not to shame another Jew. Similarly, “You shall not steal” refers to stealing a person’s opinion (i.e., making a person believe something which isn’t true).

The verse also alludes to the fact that the reward for performing mitzvot is given in the future, at the time that precedes the coming of Mashiach (*Ikveta d’Mashiach*, literally “the heal of Mashiach”). As it is written, “In the future, the Holy One, blessed be He, will give to each righteous individual 300 worlds” (*Sanhedrin* 100a). The main part of this reward deals with the mitzvot that man has a tendency to trample underfoot (literally, “with his heels”), as Rashi writes: “If you observe the easy mitzvot that a man tramples on with his heels, G-d will keep His promise to you” (*Rashi on Deuteronomy* 7:12).

I have found the following parable in *Likutei Torah* of the *Baal HaTanya*: It is like a king whose servant wanted to please him. After having thought about it a great deal, he decided to bring him a talking ape, a rare thing indeed, which he would no doubt greatly enjoy. Similarly, when we want to bring joy to the King of kings, it is not enough to be satisfied with simple things. A person's entire heart must be focused onto accomplishing His will. That is what will bring joy to the King.

In my humble opinion, the fact that the passage contains the word *vehaya*, which denotes joy, shows that the King has joy "because [עקב] you will hearken," solely when a man performs the important mitzvot by considering himself like a עקב, a heel (i.e., humble), by abasing himself completely. This is what brings joy to the Creator. In addition, the expression ויהיה עקב has the same numerical value as עקב and the name חבו, which alludes to the atonement for harming the covenant of circumcision. This means that Yaakov, who continuously took hold of the idea of the heel, never arrives at committing this sin because he remembers that he is but dust.

The expression *vehaya eikev* also has the same numerical value as twice the Name *Elokim*, alluding to the fact that Yaakov fought twice against the manifestation of strict justice (once against Esau and once against his ministering angel). He defeated them twice and transformed them into mercy. This is the reason why he said, "I am too small for all the mercies" (*Genesis 32:11*), which means: "I am too small because I am only a heel. In examining myself, I said, 'What am I that the Holy One, blessed be He, shows me His goodness?'" By the merit of this humility, which corresponds to the covenant of circumcision, he is protected and saved from strict justice.

In reality, to succeed in Torah a man should reduce himself to nothing before every Jew, as it is written, "Who is wise? He who learns from every person" (*Perkei Avoth 4:1*), and further, "From all my teachers I grew wise" (*Psalms 119:99*). There is an allusion to this idea in the verse that states, "From where [*mei'ayin*] will my help come?" (*ibid.* 121:1), for *mei'ayin* can also be read "as nothing," meaning that the man who considers himself "as nothing" will be helped because of it.

### ***The Greatness of Eretz Israel***

Our Sages have said, "The land of Israel is holier than all other lands" (*Kelim 1:6*). This means that no one should think that if he goes outside the land, he can still infuse himself with holiness and purity. The Sages tell us that we can only discover the paths of holiness in Eretz Israel, and it is not without reason that they described other places as "the land of the nations." Such places hold impurity, whereas in Eretz Israel holiness is everywhere. In our parsha we are told of the nature of Eretz Israel and all the good it contains, as the Torah states: "For the L-RD your G-d is bringing you to a good land, a land with streams of water... a land of wheat, barley, grape, fig and pomegranate, a land of oil olive and honey, a land where you will eat bread without poverty" (*Deuteronomy 8:7-9*). If we were to examine these verses closely, however, we would discover something very surprising.

Why does Scripture not detail the *spiritual* advantages of Eretz Israel? Why does it only detail the material advantages of the land, namely one that is filled with rivers and valleys, where bread can be had without difficulty, and in which its fruit, the seven species, grow and enhance the surroundings? Would it not have been better for the verse to specify just how much holiness and purity exists in the land, how much Torah and prayer can be had in Eretz Israel? After all, spirituality is the main thing, while material things are secondary. We can all learn a great lesson from this, which is that if we go and find someone and tell him to study Torah, to pray and don *tefillin* every day, and to observe Shabbat in all its details, this individual is liable to respond, “How can I do all that, since I have almost nothing to live on? I have barely any bread to eat or clothes to wear, and morning, evening and noon I have to work in order to feed my family. How can I free myself from all these things to perform *mitzvot*?”

This is why the Torah comes and spells out the virtues and material benefits of Eretz Israel. It is telling us, “There is no Torah [learning] like the Torah of Eretz Israel” (*Bereshith Rabba* 16:4). There is no place other than Eretz Israel where we can perform *mitzvot* and study Torah so well. Why is that? It is because everything that we need to serve Hashem in peace, calm, and tranquility exists in Eretz Israel.

We can earn a living in Eretz Israel, and it is there that we can eat bread without difficulty. There are springs of water in the land, and growing in its soil are the seven fruits that have made it famous. It is therefore precisely in Eretz Israel that *mitzvot* are easiest to perform. It is not without reason that among the Sages there is a concept of “*mitzvot* that are dependent upon the land.” It is easier to perform *mitzvot* in Eretz Israel, for it is there that we find everything we need.

However this is not the only thing expected of us. True, it is easier to fulfill the Torah in Eretz Israel, but the demands are considerably greater there as well. Near the end of our parsha it is stated, “A land that the L-RD your G-d seeks out. The eyes of the L-RD your G-d are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year’s end” (*Deuteronomy* 11:12). This is difficult to understand, for if the eyes of Hashem are upon it from the beginning of the year to year’s end, why does the verse add the word “always”? It is an apparently redundant word, since it would have been sufficient to state: “A land that the L-RD your G-d seeks out; the eyes of the L-RD your G-d are upon it from the beginning of the year to year’s end.”

The *gaon* Rabbi Zevulun Charlap, the Rosh Yeshiva of *Beit Zevul* in Jerusalem and one of the rabbis of the city, stated that from here we learn that it is completely forbidden to turn one’s thoughts away from Eretz Israel. With regards to both *tefillin* and the *Tzitz* attached to the forehead of the High Priest (which the Torah also describes using the word “always” – *Exodus* 28:38), our Sages explain that it is forbidden for a person to turn his thoughts away from them. The same applies with respect to Eretz Israel, since Scripture also uses the term “always” in describing the land. This means that it is forbidden, even if just once, to turn one’s thoughts away from Eretz Israel.

What is the issue here? It is precisely during this time, the days following Tisha B'Av, that people take their summer vacation. During this time, many Israelis travel abroad to spend their vacation, or they leave for purposes of health or other reasons. At the airport's departure terminal, there's almost no empty place to be seen, for people are leaving precisely during this time. It is a time described by the Sages in the following terms: "From then on, one who adds [hours to his daily Torah study schedule] will add [days to his life]" (*Bava Batra 121b*). This means that it is a *mitzvah* to augment one's Torah studies during this time, yet people abandon their Gemaras to go on vacation, even traveling outside Eretz Israel to do so!

People who do this should realize and take what the Torah says to heart, namely that the eyes of Hashem are always upon Eretz Israel. It is there that holiness is found. It is not without reason that the Sages said, "Whoever lives outside the land may be regarded as one who has no G-d" (*Ketubot 110b*). This is because holiness is found primarily in Eretz Israel, not elsewhere. Jews who leave Eretz Israel must fully realize this and not turn their thoughts from the land. To our great regret, the reality of things is far different, for there are Jews who leave the country for good. It is true that at first they are simply "leaving," but with time they end up "descending." They settle elsewhere and completely forget Eretz Israel and its great virtues. Pity the generation whose offspring act in this way! Pity the generation whose children scorn the chosen land of their ancestors. Why is this happening to Eretz Israel? It is because the Jewish people want to be like all the other peoples of the world; hence the virtues of Eretz Israel no longer speak to the heart of Jews. During this time we are in the midst of the weeks of consolation, a time following Tisha B'Av. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforts us by the restoration of Jerusalem, as it is written: "By Jerusalem you will be consoled" (*Isaiah 66:13*). Yet are we consoled? Gentiles want to exterminate us and take over the Holy Land, and each day they try to hasten our end by their murderous attacks. We must strengthen ourselves against them. We must demonstrate our love for Eretz Israel, the Holy Land – the holiest of all lands – for only in this way will it remain ours. Amen, may it be so!

## *Parsha Re'eh*

### *Hashem is the Source of Blessing*

The Torah states, “See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing, that you hearken to the commandments of the L-RD your G-d...and the curse, if you do not hearken to the commandments of the L-RD your G-d” (*Deuteronomy 11:26-28*). Some questions arise when we examine these verses, while at the same time some moral lessons become clear.

First of all, the text begins with the singular *re'eh* (“see”), yet it continues in the plural and finishes in the same way: “That I present *lifneichem* [before you] today” (*v.32*). Secondly, why does the text have to say that Hashem will send us a curse? If He sends us a blessing when we perform His commandments, it is obvious what will happen if we fail to perform them. That is, since the very opposite of a blessing would come upon us in that case, why the need to explicitly mention a curse? Thirdly, the way that the blessing is formulated in the text differs from the way the curse is formulated. For the curse, the verse states: “And the curse, if you do not hearken to the commandments.” Hence the blessing should also have been formulated in the same way, namely: “If you hearken” (as opposed to “that you hearken”). This implies that we will certainly receive a blessing!

From this text we learn just how good Hashem is and how much goodness He bestows upon His creatures. As the Ramak said, “One who is good is accustomed to doing good.” Therefore nothing bad will ever come from Hashem; He only sends us what is good. In the natural order of things, everyone wants to live in peace and tranquility. There is almost no one on earth who wants to experience hardship and have Hashem send him misfortune and suffering. In fact we pray each day to avoid such things when we recite, “Do not bring us into sin...or into temptation.” Normally when a person experiences some hardship or problem, he quickly loses his calm and says, “I can’t overcome this! It’s ruining my life! How can I continue to live like this?” His life ends up in complete turmoil, to the point that his faith in Hashem begins to diminish. On the other hand, everyone must realize that Hashem does not bring hardship upon a person if he cannot withstand it. As the Sages have said in explaining the verse, “He gives snow like wool” (*Psalms 147:16*), if Hashem sends a person snow and frost, He also compensates by sending wool to cover and warm him. If some misfortune or problem arises for a person, Hashem knows that he is capable of overcoming it and can continue serving Him with all his 248 limbs and 365 sinews.

Furthermore, it often happens that a person is inundated with hardships, leaving him with the impression that he is actually being cursed. He feels that, far from such events being good, they are actually curses, ones that have come upon him because he has not been worthy of G-d’s love. This is not true in the least! We must understand

that even events that appear to be a curse are only a blessing, meaning that Hashem does not bring curses upon men. Instead, if a person experiences some tragedy or mishap, he must realize that Hashem only wants his good, as we are taught: “Whatever the All Merciful does is for the good” (*Berachot 60b*). As we have said, nothing bad comes from Hashem, only good. Therefore whatever appears to be a curse is but a blessing from Him. If we look closely, we will see that all this appears in the verses we shall soon cite.

The Torah states, “I present before you today a blessing and a curse” (*Deuteronomy 11: 26*). This means that even something that we believe is a curse is nothing but a blessing. In fact Hashem wants to give us nothing but blessings. This is why the verse states with respect to the blessing, “that you hearken,” for the Holy One, blessed be He, truly wants to bestow every possible good upon us. He knows that we will certainly obey His words and carry out His commandments. This is why He tells us “the blessing, that you obey,” for we shall certainly receive blessings because we will, in fact, obey His words and carry out His commandments to perfection.

However if a person wants blessings to rest upon him, he must make himself into “vessel that can contain blessings.” He must prepare himself to be a vessel for the blessings that Hashem will pour upon him. How can a person do this? Two things are needed, both of which are mentioned in the verses that we have cited.

The first, which is a well-known requirement, is Torah study. When a person engages in Torah study, he receives all the blessings mentioned in the Torah. This is because the Torah itself is a source of blessing. Hence Hashem will definitely pour an abundance of blessings upon a person when he studies it. The second requirement is unity. When Jews are perfectly united, when they express their love for one another and are guarantors for each other, Hashem sends blessings upon them in abundance. Not only that, but no nation can stand up to them.

The verse testifies to this by using the singular *re'eh* (“see”). This means that if we are all united, Hashem will place before us – before all the Jewish people – an abundance of blessings. Furthermore, when the Jewish people are united and some misfortune occurs to an individual, another person will come and encourage him. That individual will then realize that his problem is not so serious, and he will regain courage.

Although we will certainly merit blessings when we hearken to Hashem’s voice, we must still ask ourselves what will happen if we *don’t* obey Him. If the Torah had not stated, “The curse, if you do not hearken,” a person could think: “I’ll do whatever I want and nothing will happen to me.” It is in response to such an attitude that the verse states: If you do not hearken to the voice of Hashem, you will receive curses from Him, for Hashem does not forgo His demands. As the Sages have said: “Anyone who says that the Holy One, blessed be He, is disregarding [of sin], his life may be disregarded” (*Bava Kama 50a*).

Consequently we should learn a life lesson here, as well as a moral teaching. In other words we must study Torah, live in harmony with one another, obey Hashem's voice and perform His commandments to perfection. In this way we will become suitable vessels for containing blessing, and we will merit the blessings of Hashem for all time.

## Parsha Shoftim

### ***For Justice Belongs to G-d: The Importance of Teshuvah During the Month of Elul, Before the Days of Judgment***

The verse that states, “Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities” (*Deuteronomy 16:18*), shows us to what extent the Torah penetrates to the depths of a man’s thoughts, as well as the power of a man’s impulses. True, the Sages have said that the Torah is an antidote to the evil inclination (*Kiddushin 30b*), but we realize that Torah study alone is not enough to conquer it, and that we must also appoint judges and officers for ourselves to keep us from sinning. Without extreme vigilance, the evil inclination will be stronger than us, and we will end up with a situation in which “men will swallow one another alive” (*Perkei Avoth 3:2*). Judges and officers will make the fear of the authorities reign, and we will not harm one another.

Nevertheless, we are aware of the question that has already been asked several times before: Since it is the officer that leads a person before the judge (and therefore comes first), why does the Torah place the judge before the officer? In addition, the officer also protects the judge’s life. Hence as a result, the officer should be mentioned first.

Let us attempt to explain this point. We read Parsha Shoftim during the month of Elul, to which the commentators have applied the verse, *Ani ledodi vedodi li* (“I am My Beloved’s, and my Beloved is mine” [*Song of Songs 6:3*]), whose initials form the word *Elul* (*Shulchan Aruch*). Actually, even the greatest Tzaddikim are in awe of the day of judgment, and everyone tremblingly prepares for Rosh Hashanah, the day when it is decided who will be abased and who will be elevated, who will live and who will die, who will be poor and who will be rich, and so on. Even though the Tzaddikim have not sinned, they still fear for their flock, who are not free of sin, and for themselves least they be carried away by the sins of the generation.

All this should encourage us to prepare with great vigor for the day of judgment, and to gather defenders who will plead our case before the Holy One, blessed be He. These defenders are none other than the Torah and mitzvot, and the better we prepare ourselves, the better things will be.

This is the meaning of “Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities.” To prepare himself for the day of judgment (for on that day the Holy One, blessed be He, judges the whole earth), a person should make sure that accusers do not catch him in sin. Otherwise, the verdict will sway towards severity, and officers will then carry out the sentence. If a person has the misfortune of being declared guilty, the officers will bring him into prison. However if a person is declared innocent, they will accompany him with great honor even if at first they were not favorably inclined towards him. It goes the same for each of us: If a person increases his prayers and supplications, he

increases the number of judges who are favorable to him, as well as the number of personally appointed officers who will bring him out with great honor. We therefore understand why the judge comes before the officer in the verse, for it is he who comes to execute the verdict pronounced by the Judge, the Holy One, blessed be He.

The person of whom we are speaking has such merit that all accusers transform themselves into angels of mercy, and his willful sins are turned into merits (*Yoma 86b*). This occurs, however, only on condition that he profoundly regrets his sins with a humbled and broken heart. Since these accusers will be transformed into angels of mercy, their fearsome form will become pleasant, and it is they who will accompany a man in peace to the end of Yom Kippur, as the Sages have said: “At the end of Yom Kippur, a voice is heard saying: ‘Go eat your bread ... for G-d has already accepted your deeds’ ” (*Yoma 87a, Tosaphot beginning at VeHa'amar*).

This teaches us that when a person repents out of love, all his wicked deeds are transformed into acts of goodness, acts pleasing to G-d. During these days of Elul, he should therefore hope that all his deeds will become good, for it is the time of “My Beloved is mine.” The Holy One, blessed be He, is inclined to help whoever asks Him as the Judge of the entire world, this in order that a person not fall into the hand of accusers and be declared guilty on Rosh Hashanah. If a person asks to be judged by G-d, we should realize that when his willful sins are transformed into merits, the officers will accompany him when he comes to the judgment, and when he leaves they will accompany him toward life and peace. This is the meaning of “Judges and officers shall you appoint,” which indicates man’s choice in having the Creator judge him. This is why we also go and pray by the gravesites of Tzaddikim during the month of Elul, for we ask that G-d have pity on us and grant us a favorable judgment on the day of awe because of their merit. In relation to the magnitude and the depths of a person’s repentance, he may obtain a situation in which the officers who accuse him will be the ones who themselves are transformed into benevolent officers to protect him from all harm.

We may add that in general, a person fears what others might say about him outside his home, but he is almost never concerned about the fact that G-d sees him inside his home, where no one else sees him. He therefore behaves politely and gently outside so that no one speaks ill of him, since he realizes that others watch him. Inside however (where others are not watching), he does what he wants, and it seldom enters his mind that the Judge and Creator of the world sees him.

This is why the verse, “Judges and officers shall you appoint” begins with judges, for a person should realize that there is a Judge who observes him both outside and inside his home, and that He is much more important than others who only see him outside, for their lives are also in the hands of the Judge of the whole world. Even an armed officer fears an unarmed judge, for a judge is the main thing. We find a confirmation of this idea in the words of Rabbi Yochanan to his disciples: “May your fear of Heaven be as great as your fear of man.” They asked him, “Is that all?” and he

replied, “That in itself would be marvelous! Know that when a man commits a sin, he tells himself, ‘No one should see me.’ ” This is what we have said: A person should realize that although he is seen outside, the Judge of the whole world sees him both outside and inside, and he should fear Him at least as much as he fears men.

This also applies when a person judges himself by doing some soul-searching, even concerning his conduct at home where nobody sees him, as it is written: “Consider ... the gain [derived] from a sin against the loss [that will follow]” (*Perkei Avoth 2:1*). If a person behaves in this way, he will be able to judge himself, be his own officer, and distance himself from every tendency to sin. He will motivate himself to perform mitzvot, and Heaven will certainly help him.

We find a similar idea in the Midrash: “Chanoch was a cobbler, and whenever he worked on a shoe he would say, ‘Blessed be the name of the glory of His kingdom forever and ever’ ” (Midrash Talpiyot). The question may be asked: As he was stitching, when did he unify G-d’s Name and His Shechinah, since that depends on mitzvot? What mitzvah was he performing?

We should all realize that when a person performs a mitzvah, he should do so with the correct intentions, because performing mitzvot relates to G-d’s honor. The same applies to a mitzvah between man and man (such as Tzedakah or kindness), for he must do everything for the unity of the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Shechinah. Yet when a person sews shoes or repairs watches, he receives a salary from his employer, and in such a case there’s no reason to have such elevated thoughts. However Chanoch comes to teach us something new. In reality, a man’s thoughts at work are concentrated on the wages that he will receive from his employer. Hence it would seem that he could potentially become materialistic and be tempted to rush his work, even when he has many shoes to repair, in order to satisfy everyone. It can then happen that in his rush to complete his work and earn as much money as possible, he does not repair them correctly, in which case he risks stealing from his clients. This is why Chanoch, as he sewed each of his stitches, uttered a prayer so that he would perform this material work with the fear of G-d and without a trace of sin.

This is a primary element in the fear of G-d, namely to behave honestly with others, as it is written: “ ‘You shall love your fellow as yourself’ [*Leviticus 19:18*] is a great principle of the Torah, for one who has no fear of G-d will end up deceiving others” (*Bereshith Rabba 24:8*). In fact, almost nobody sees a person when he is in his shop working, and he could, for example, use less nails than required to fix a shoe, thereby acting like a thief. However if he acts with the fear of G-d even as he works, and he does his work with the goal of uniting the Holy One, blessed be He, to the Shechinah, then it is obvious that he will not deceive others.

Envisioning G-d before us in every situation, even in everyday matters, is a principle of capital importance in serving Him, as it is written: “I have set the L-RD before me always” (*Psalms 16:8*). How much more, then, should we envision G-d in holy matters, which should be performed with as much fervor? This is what we learn from

Chanoch, who saw G-d – the Judge of the whole world – in even his material work. This led him to feel that if his work for his fellowman was imperfect, so too would his service of G-d be. This is why in each of his actions, he was a judge and officer for himself, and he was always (even when performing material acts) in a state of prayer. Everyone should learn from Chanoch to see G-d in all of his acts, for judgment belongs to G-d and He helps every person freely, particularly during the days of mercy and goodness that prepare for the days of judgment. By conducting ourselves in this way, we can become elevated and grow in the service of the Creator. We will therefore be inscribed on Rosh Hashanah and confirmed on Yom Kippur for a good year filled with blessings, good life, and peace.

### *The Time is Short and the Work Abundant*

How does the law normally deal with a crime? When a person is apprehended for having stolen something, or for having committed an offense that must be addressed in court, the police or law enforcement officer arrests the suspect and puts him behind bars until he is brought to court. Next, the judge decides the case in light of his offense and the law. Hence for all this to happen, an officer must first act, and only then can a judge get involved.

When we look at this week's parsha, however, we see something astonishing at the very outset: "Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all your gates, which the L-RD your G-d gives to you" (Deuteronomy 16:18). This is difficult to understand, for according to what we have just said, the verse should have stated: "Officers and judges shall you appoint." That is, the officers should have been mentioned first, and only then the judges.

The reason for this unusual order is that Scripture is not speaking of a material judgment here, but instead is expounding upon spiritual justice. This is particularly appropriate for the time in which we find ourselves, in the month of Elul, a time of mercy and the recitation of *Selichot*. People unfortunately tend to put things off until later, to procrastinate, just as the saying goes: "Why do things now when you can do them later?" However this is not the way of the Torah.

The harvest is over, the summer has past, and we have not yet been saved. Time passes and days go by, never to return again. We once again approach the days of judgment, a time when we shall stand before the throne of justice, before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. Everything hidden will then be revealed, including all the secrets that people keep. Hashem is the Judge, and He knows how to repay everyone according to his deeds and way of life. During such days we need extremely gifted advocates to plead our case. We must prepare first-rate defenders for ourselves, ones who know how to highlight our merits before Hashem, the Judge of all the earth. Yet how should we go about doing this? We must be, at this point, already progressing in Torah study and the performance of *mitzvot*, as well as working on ourselves. We

must fix everything that is not yet right in our relationship with G-d, and especially in our relationships with others. It is in this way that we can approach the days of judgment in a state of spiritual cleanliness and purity. This is why we must act as judges with respect to our own selves, evaluating each action we take to know if it is good or not, to determine if it is acceptable to Hashem. Would we act in a given way before a king of flesh and blood? After being certain that what we are planning to do is good, we can then go ahead and actually do it.

The judge represents the “legislative branch” of authority, whereas the officer represents authority’s “executive branch.” That is, the officer puts the judge’s decisions into action. This is why the Torah cites them in that order: “Judges and officers shall you appoint.” First judge yourself and determine if what you plan to do is desirable and upright, and only then should you, like an officer, carry out your decision. You will then be placing yourself under your own authority. Under what circumstances should this occur? It should happen “in all your gates” – at each instant you should act as a judge over yourself – for each action, each idea, and each thought – and only then should you carry out what you have deemed proper. If we were to adopt the reverse order, we would eventually wash our hands of all culpability and say, “It wasn’t so bad, and anyhow what’s done is done.” In that case, what would become of our decisions? In addition, we must recall that it is in our relationship to our fellowman that we must put the most effort. On this the Sages have said that for sins between a man and his fellow, even Yom Kippur does not effect atonement until the offended party grants forgiveness (Yoma 85b). This is why the verse continues by saying, “Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourself in all your gates, which the L-RD your G-d gives to you, according to all your tribes.” In other words we must not appoint judges and officers only for what concerns us, but instead we must think of what matters for each tribe – for every Jew – and try to better our relationship with them. It is in this way that we will better our relationship with G-d.

We find a similar idea concerning Chanoch, who ascended to Heaven while still alive. The Sages said, “Chanoch was a cobbler, and whenever he worked on a shoe he would say, ‘Blessed be the Name of the glory of His kingdom forever and ever’ ” (Midrash Talpiot). We need to understand what the Midrash means by this obscure remark. We know that we unify G-d’s Name when performing *mitzvot*, just as we say before accomplishing each *mitzvah*: “For the sake of the union of the Holy One, blessed be He, with His *Shechinah*.” Yet what does this have to do with working on shoes? Is that representative of any *mitzvah*?

Indeed it is. Nobody should think that it is only with *mitzvot* between man and G-d that we unify Hashem’s Name. This also occurs with *mitzvot* between man and his fellow. Even when performing these *mitzvot*, a person must think about not wronging his fellow. He must remind himself that the Holy One, blessed be He, is before him and sees everything he does, knowing whether he is performing a *mitzvah* to perfection or not.

Fixing shoes pertains to the domain of *mitzvot* between a man and his fellow. When a cobbler is in his shop and working for a client, he can do so with the utmost concentration. Alternatively, he can sin by using fewer stitches or less nails than he should, thinking that nobody can see what he is doing. In that case he would be sinning against his fellowman. With each stitch that Chanoch made as he worked on a shoe, he unified the Name of G-d. That is, he put the utmost concentration into his work, which is why he merited to purify himself in this world at a young age and ascended to Heaven while still alive. It is in this spirit that each of us must act during Elul, the month of mercy and the recitation of *Selichot*. We must place judges and officers over ourselves in all our gates, for each *mitzvah* that we perform, and in this way we will merit reaching Rosh Hashanah in a state of spiritual purity.

## Parsha Ki Teitzei

### *The War Against The Evil Inclination*

On the verse, “When you go out to war against your enemies, and the L-RD your G-d will deliver them into your hand, and you will capture its captivity” (*Deuteronomy 21:10*), the commentators have stated that this refers to the war against the evil inclination, which is the most difficult of all wars. Let us explain this point. When going out to war against an enemy, every warrior should be sinless before the Holy One, blessed be He. This is why the High Priest proclaims, “Who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house” (*ibid, 20:8*), and the Sages have said, “This is the one who fears the sins that he has committed” (*Sotah 44a*). It follows that only the righteous went off to war and were victorious, for only a person who knows how to conquer his instincts can be victorious over every kind of enemy (*Tikkunei Zohar Tikkun 70:133a*). Also, we know that our enemies draw their strength from the weakness of our Judaism, yet if we know how to dominate our instincts, we will conquer our enemies at the same time.

There is nothing easy about the war against the evil inclination, for it has 70 guises that it uses to entice us, which is why even honest people can fall under its sway. One day someone came to see me in Lyon. He was wearing a shirt that really wasn't appropriate, along with a black leather coat and a metal belt. He had the makings of a thug and seemed to have emerged from the underworld. All of sudden, to my great surprise, here it was that I asked him if we had not studied together in the same yeshiva in England! I was frightened when I realized that his face seemed familiar, but it was difficult to believe that it could be him, for the person who had studied with me was very diligent in study. More than that, I had covered my first Talmud tractate with him! He then confirmed that it was really him, that he had strayed to the point of reaching rock bottom, and all because of the seductions of the evil inclination. It had pushed him, day after day, hour after hour, a little bit each time, until he finally arrived at where he was now. How dangerous can our desires be!

This is why we must understand that the evil inclination rears its head precisely when we perform a mitzvah, and we must fight it until we have finished performing that mitzvah. We could perform half a mitzvah, imagining that we have accomplished it in its entirety and have done enough, but then the evil inclination grows stronger. This is what the verse is saying: “When you go out to war against your enemies” – you must go out to war against him in deeds, in words, and in thought, with all your capabilities. It is then that you will be certain to have accomplished everything required of you, and if you gather all your strength in these areas, with G-d's help you can conquer your instincts.

Therein lies the connection between our parsha and Parsha Shoftim, where it is stated: “Judges and officers shall you appoint in all your cities” (*Deuteronomy 16:18*). It is

difficult to understand why judges are mentioned before officers, since it is the latter who bring order to a city, and a person is only brought before a judge if he does not listen to an officer beforehand. The officer therefore comes before the judge, and the text should have first mentioned officers before judges. Are judges the ones who are responsible for order, judges who only come at the end? Yet it is written, “in all your *sha’arecha* [literally ‘your gates’],” meaning that we must place judges in every one of the gates, or openings, of the body (such as the mouth, ears, nose, eyes, etc.). This means that we should judge ourselves; we must survey, observe, and decide what must be done and what must not be done, what to say and what not to say, what to look at and what not to look at. We also need to avoid listening to gossip. We therefore first need to establish judges, and only then send officers to assure ourselves that everything is in fact being carried out as ordered, this so as to perform positive mitzvot and observe negative mitzvot.

The Sages recount the story of Elazar ben Arach (*Shabbat 147b*), who went to rest and drink the wines of Perogaisa and the waters of Diomisis, to where he was drawn, following which he forgot his study to the point of reading *Hacheireish hayah libam* (“Their hearts were deafened”) instead of *Hachodesh hazeh lachem* (“This month shall be for you” – *Exodus 12:2*). And this occurred to a great Tanna, who continued in this way until the Sages asked for mercy on his behalf and he once again began to study! From here we see the considerable power that the evil inclination has on even great Tzaddikim. We must conquer it, particularly by performing mitzvot, and by carrying them out to perfection.

### *The Virtue of Performing Mitzvot in Joy*

The Midrash encourages us to share in the joy of a person who offers his *Bikkurim* (first fruits) to the Holy One, blessed be He, for the first time in performing each of the mitzvot of the Torah (*Vayikra Rabba 11:7*). Let us look at an example: The birth of a firstborn son (*bechor*) fills parents with immense joy, especially if they have been awaiting a child for a long time. This joy brings them closer to G-d, to Whom they express their feelings of sincere gratitude. This birth brings with it the opportunity to perform many mitzvot, including circumcision and the redemption of the firstborn. But that is not all, for the delighted father is responsible for teaching him Torah and a trade, finding him a wife, teaching him how to swim, and so on (*Kiddushin 29a*).

However if this couple has a child each year, their joy is not the same, since routine begins to set in. Even though the father is supposed to carry out all the aforementioned mitzvot for each of his sons (except for *Pidyon Haben*, which only applies to the firstborn), his joy in doing so is less intense. Parsha Ki Tavo begins with the word *vehaya* and deals with the *Bikkurim* (*Deuteronomy 26:1*) in order to teach us that *each* mitzvah must be performed in joy, as if it was being performed for the first time.

This will help us to understand the connection between Parsha Ki Tavo and Ki Teitzei. In the latter, we wage war against the evil inclination and learn that it waits for

us everywhere, that it is constantly setting traps for us, and that it is deeply entrenched between the two parts of the hearts (*Sukkah 52b*). We also learn that it wants to make us sin precisely in that which is permitted, and to make us sink into routine. As a result, *ki tavo*, we must perform each mitzvah that presents itself to us in joy, as if we were doing it for the first time, and we should push ourselves not to miss such an opportunity (*Mechilta Bo 12:17*).

Let us drastically flee from the counsel of the evil inclination, which aims to make us sin gradually (*Shabbat 108b*). Let us do our best to perform mitzvot with the utmost modesty, embodying the concept of *Bikkurei Admatecha* (the first fruits of your land), a reference to dust, the incarnation of humility. This will enable us to elevate ourselves to a great degree.

The mitzvah of offering the first fruits must also be performed with the greatest joy. The Gemara devotes an entire chapter to this solemn ceremony (*Bikkurim Chapter 3, Mishnah 3*), highlighting the fact that *Hallel* was played on the flute, which infused all spectators who came to the Temple in joy. If, on the other hand, we perform this mitzvah without joy, it is because we have fallen into the trap of the evil inclination, the embodiment of the phrase, “An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather” (*Deuteronomy 26:5*), which tries to make us fall into despair.

We must especially refrain from being filled with pride while performing mitzvot, which during the first fruits ceremony in Temple times was exemplified by the rich bringing their offerings in gold baskets (while the poor brought theirs in plain baskets), for there is nothing worse than pride. We must realize that “my heart is *chalal* [wounded] within me” (*Psalms 109:22*); we must be aware of our emptiness, our nothingness. We are all far from perfection, and we must implore G-d to help elevate us to the same spiritual level as our ancestors.

Parsha Ki Tavo warns us: “But it will be that if you do not hearken to the voice of the L-RD...then all these curses will come upon you and overtake you” (*Deuteronomy 28:15*). The Torah then lists the curses and finishes by asking how a person can refrain from listening to G-d’s voice. The reason is “*Tachat asher lo* [Because you did not] serve the L-RD your G-d amid gladness and goodness of heart, when everything was abundant” (*v.47*). Therefore even if we were to perform mitzvot, but not in joy, we may be cursed (G-d forbid). The mitzvot that we perform in sadness are automatically grasped by the forces of evil, which are called *yagon* (affliction) and *atzvuth* (sadness), and thus losing to the evil inclination is guaranteed (*Zohar II:264b*). In the expression *tachat asher lo*, the word *asher* is composed of the same letters as the word *rosh* (“head”), meaning that if misfortune has come down upon your head, it is because you did not submit yourself and perform mitzvot in joy.

If we notice that our prayers are not answered, we are likely to experience doubts about our faith. The evil inclination naturally exploits such a situation and tells a person: “Forget about praying. You can clearly see that G-d is not answering you. Act as you would like – enjoy life!” The Torah interjects and encourages us not to get disheartened, but to continue moving ahead. It stresses the joy in studying Torah and

performing mitzvot with the utmost enthusiasm, as if we had received them this very day (*Tanhuma Eikev 7*). The Torah tells a person that in such a case, he will not be exposed to the trials of the evil inclination, which hates joy. All his improper thoughts will then disappear, and *simcha* (joy) will contribute to erasing them.

As we know, we read Parsha Nitzavim (*Deuteronomy 29:9-30:20*) before Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment (*see Zohar III:231a*). We should realize that, just as on Rosh Hashanah, we are actually presenting ourselves before Hashem – we are *nitzavim* (placed) before the Celestial Court each day – to be judged (*Rosh Hashanah 16a*). This is *ki tavo*: Let us present ourselves before Him each day in joy and obedience, as if we were praying for the first time, thus embodying the concept of *Bikkurim*. It is only in this way that our prayers will be answered and we will succeed in conquering the evil inclination.

### ***Going Out to War Against the Evil Inclination***

There are two parshiot in the holy Torah that speak of going out to war. In fact in the very first verse of this week's parsha we read, "When you go out to war against your enemies, and the L-RD your G-d will deliver him into your hand" (*Deuteronomy 21:10*). In Parsha Beha'alotcha we also have, "When you go to wage war in your land against an enemy who oppresses you, you shall sound short blasts of the trumpets, and you shall be remembered...you shall be saved from your foes" (*Numbers 10:9*).

We need to understand why this week's parsha promises us victory from the very outset, immediately upon going out to war ("the L-RD your G-d will deliver him into your hand"), whereas in Parsha Beha'alotcha victory is not promised to the Jewish people at first. It is only after we "sound short blasts of the trumpets," only after we have prayed and cried out to Hashem, that we "shall be saved from [our] foes." As we know, a war can unfold in two ways. When two countries are at war and one has breached the borders of the other and is in its territory, it is easier for it to gain victory. Because its soldiers are already in the land of its enemies, it is easier for the invading force to win. Conversely, from the vantage point of a country that has been invaded by enemy forces, the situation is ominous, and it needs help to defeat its enemy.

The kind of war being discussed in our parsha unfolds in the first way: "When you go out to war against your enemies." That is, it describes a situation in which we have already entered our enemy's land. Thus once there, victory is much easier. In fact "the L-RD your G-d will deliver him into your hand" immediately, and we will conquer them all at once. However in Parsha Beha'alotcha the second kind of war is being described, the one in which the enemy has invaded and penetrated our land: "When you go to wage war *in your land*." This war is not taking place outside our borders, but within them. Therefore we need heavenly assistance in order to win. Victory is not assured, nor is it promised to us right from the outset. We must sound the trumpets and pray to Hashem in order to defeat our enemy and expel him from our land.

How does this subject relate to us? With regard to our parsha, Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pshischa said that since today there is no longer the concept of a *mitzvah* to go out

to war, the enemy of our parsha is none other than the evil inclination. Simply put, *it* is our enemy. This means that everyone finds himself, 24 hours a day, in a state of perpetual warfare against the evil inclination. It is constantly trying to defeat us and make us fall into its trap, and we are obligated to fight it and win.

This war is a stubborn battle. The evil inclination will not allow a person to overcome it, and it never stops trying. As the Sages have said, “Man’s evil inclination gathers strength against him daily and seeks to slay him...and were the Holy One, blessed be He, not to help him, he would not be able to prevail against it” (*Kiddushin 30b*). Each day the evil inclination tries once again to subjugate a person, and each day there are victories as well as defeats. Yet what is the difference?

There is an enormous difference between a person going out to war against his evil inclination on its territory, and fighting it once it has already made its way onto his territory and is fighting him there.

If a person goes out to war against the evil inclination and fights it on its territory, managing to invade its domain, then it is obvious that it will be easier to defeat. Here the Torah promises us, “The L-RD your G-d will deliver him into your hand” (*Deuteronomy 21:10*). Furthermore, “You will capture its captivity” (*ibid.*), meaning that a person will be able to seize and retrieve from the evil inclination all the good things it has taken. However if the evil inclination has already managed to infiltrate itself among us, then the situation is far worse. We must work hard to repulse it, sounding trumpets, praying, and crying out to Hashem to save us from our great enemy.

This is why everyone who is Jew has the duty to do everything he can in order for this war to unfold exclusively on enemy territory. If we go out against the evil inclination and fight it within its borders, we will be victorious. How can we do this? How can a person facing such massive struggles manage to wage this war on enemy territory, not his own? We are offered some good advice on how to achieve this in our parsha, sound counsel that has constantly been put to use by the great figures of Israel, from the era of the Tannaim and Amoraim right up to the time of the previous generation, advice that can serve as a way of life for everyone. The Torah states: “If you build a new house, you shall make a guardrail for your roof so that you will not place blood in your house if anyone falls from it” (*Deuteronomy 22:8*).

This tells us what a person needs to do when he wants to renew himself, when he wants to take upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, conquer his evil inclination, and cling solely to his good inclination. He must “make a guardrail for your roof.” A guardrail pertains to barriers and fences that we impose on ourselves. We all know that there are things that are forbidden and things that are permitted. However a person must always be augmenting his holiness, meaning that he must add protective barriers and fences even to things that are permitted to him, things that he should consider forbidden. As the Sages have said, “Sanctify yourself by that which is permitted to you” (*Yebamot 20a*). As such we will increasingly sanctify ourselves in our deeds and way of life.

If a person conducts himself in this way, his home will be tightly sealed against the evil inclination, which will not be able to make its way inside. It will have to remain outside, and therefore the war against it will also be waged outside, on the evil inclination's territory. A person will therefore be assured of victory. This is also why the verse states, "You will not place blood in your house." That is, when you close your home to the evil inclination, a bloody war will not take place on your territory, but on that of the evil inclination. You will therefore defeat it once and for all. In fact we are promised victory over the evil inclination if we act in this way, and therefore we will make tremendous progress in our Torah study, fear of Heaven, and character traits.

## Parsha Ki Tavo

### Living with Constant Joy

Our Parsha begins with the verse that states, “*Vehaya* [And it will be] when you enter the land” (*Deuteronomy 26:1*), and concerning this our Sages have said, “The word *vehaya* always expresses joy” (*Vayikra Rabba 11:4*). One must therefore understand what type of joy is meant here, since the parents of all those who entered into Eretz Israel had died in the desert. They were the ones who had left Egypt, but now there was not one of them left because they did not have the merit to enter into Eretz Israel. In light of this, what could this type of joy consist of? If we say that it was the joy of bringing the first fruits, why does the Torah not immediately state, “*Vehaya* [And it will be] when you enter the land ... you shall bring the first fruits of all the produce of the earth”? It is the entry into the land that the Torah cites as the primary reason for the joy in question.

We will attempt to explain this point. The Torah teaches us two principles here, ones from which a man should learn to diligently work on himself, and ones that explain why joy must be felt when entering into Eretz Israel. Thus everything will become perfectly clear.

These principles are as follows:

1. Man should accept everything that happens to him with joy, in the spirit of the Sages’ teaching: “One must bless G-d for evil in the same way that one blesses Him for good” (*Berachot 54a*) in regards to everything that concerns the observance of mitzvot. It must be understood that everything comes from G-d, Who is a righteous Judge, and that there is no reason to protest His decisions or His commandments. In fact, if He sends troubles to someone, that person must examine himself and reflect upon the reason for this decree, for “Nothing bad comes from the mouth of the Most High” (*Lamentations 3:38*). Consequently, everything is for a person’s good, as it is written, “Everything that the Merciful One does is for the good” (*Berachot 60b*), and troubles come to a man but through his own sins, for “the L-RD admonishes the one He loves” (*Proverbs 3:12*). Thus everything that comes to a man from G-d is for the good.

This is what we note at the moment when the Children of Israel entered into their land. True, they were in pain because of the death of their fathers, who were not even allowed to be buried in Eretz Israel, but they had to keep in mind that it was their fathers who had brought this upon themselves by speaking ill of the Holy Land. This is why their children had to enter in joy and bring the first fruits to the Sanctuary with joy, for it is only through joy that one may acquire the land and that one may serve G-d. And at that very moment, the Holy One, blessed be He, gives to the Children of Israel both material and spiritual abundance, while if they act without joy He comes and reprimands them, as it is written, “Because you did not serve the L-RD your G-d with joy” (*Deuteronomy 28:47*).

Consequently, at the time when the children had to enter into Eretz Israel, even if they dreaded the wars that awaited them, this should not have prevented them from acting out of joy, for the Eternal fought for them. This is the connection with the previous Parsha, *Ki Teitzei* (“when you go out to war”). It was forbidden for them to sadden themselves over the fact that their fathers were not to be buried in the Holy Land, for this would have undermined their joy and therefore they would have had nothing in abundance. In such a case, they would not have had any first fruits to bring.

This is why they had to repair the sin of their fathers, men who had slandered the land (*Numbers 13:32*), so much in fact that it had not yielded its fruit to them. It was necessary for the children to enter into the land with joy, the joy of having merited such entry, and that joy would have enabled them to accomplish with fervor the mitzvot that depend on the land. This in turn would have allowed them to have agricultural products and first fruits to bring to the Sanctuary.

2. We may also add to this and say that “*Vehaya ki tavo*” teaches us that one must enter into the Holy Land with joy. We must enter in joy even if there are no first fruits to bring, or even if we must suffer shame and bring them in twig baskets while the rich bring them in golden baskets (*Bikurim Ch. 3, Mishnah 8*). In any case, one must always rejoice and guard oneself against rebelling against G-d’s word, for “the hidden things are for the L-RD our G-d” (*Deuteronomy 29:28*), and only He can know the cause of our pains.

Moreover, let us imagine a person who in the past was rich and brought his first fruits in golden baskets, but now has become impoverished. He worries over what people will say about him and how the priests’ attitude toward him will be, for in his mind they will certainly not honor him as before. He risks becoming saddened and depressed in his service of G-d, and yet the Torah tells us *vehaya*, an expression signifying joy. This is because, regardless of the circumstance, one must bring the first fruits to the Sanctuary with joy. And in any case, one must always rejoice over having the merit to live in the Holy Land, the most important land in the eyes of the Holy One, blessed be He, and the place where the Shechinah resides for all generations. As it is written, “the eyes of the L-RD your G-d are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year’s end” (*Deuteronomy 11:12*), so much so that there is no greater joy than living in the land, for the Shechinah and holiness of the land allow a man to increase in greatness, and his heart elevates itself in the ways of G-d (*II Chronicles 17:6*) and in His mitzvot.

One may also explain this Parsha according to the following words of the Sages: “Whoever brings a gift to a Talmid Chacham, it is as if he had offered first fruits [in the Sanctuary]” (*Kelubot 105b*). In fact, the generation of the desert had slandered the land, which represents the righteous, for as we know Eretz Israel is the holiest of all lands (*Kelim 1:4*) and instead of bringing it a gift (meaning, to attach oneself to it and to perform the mitzvot that depend on it, just as one attaches oneself to a Tzaddik), they spoke badly of it and didn’t want to bring it a gift. This is why the Eternal punished

them with death in the desert without letting them enter, and by way of compensation their sons received the command to attach themselves to Eretz Israel with joy, for it represents the Tzaddik. They were commanded to enter therein and to affront all the trials awaiting them there, for better or for worse, and thus it would be as if they had brought the first fruits. For in arriving in the land, they would elevate themselves, become influenced by the purity of the Sanctuary, and would attach themselves to the path of justice and goodness.

This teaches us a great principle: One may devote oneself to study Torah without participating in the work of the land, however in that case, one would not have first fruits to bring, for one would not have any fruits at all. Thus the Torah commanded us that regardless of the circumstance, one must put an effort to work the land and to bring the first fruits to the Sanctuary. Even if someone is rich and has workers to do his work for him, he should do as much as possible to bring the fruits himself in order to show his love for the land and the mitzvot. In the same way, in our time a great person who devotes himself to Torah should not neglect to go to the Tzaddikim of his generation, without worrying about the effort and weariness that this will entail. This is because there will always be something to be learned from them, and one must do so with joy, as was the case with the Sanctuary.

This is what the expression *vehaya* alludes to, a word that denotes joy, for in all circumstances a man should enter the Holy Land in joy, and not in hopelessness or despair, for no harm comes from the Eternal. Thus such a man will rejoice to bring his gift, will attach himself to the land, and will be able to triumph over all obstacles and all his suffering because of joy.

### ***The Importance of First Fruits: Connecting to the Tzaddik and Torah Observance***

The mitzvah of *bikurim* (first fruits) is among those special mitzvot that can be performed in Eretz Israel. To understand its full meaning, we shall present a brief introduction of the concept.

In the Morning Prayer we recite, “Who in His goodness renews each day, continuously, the work of Creation.” As we know, the renewal of Creation occurs through the merit of the holy Torah and its study, since without it the world would not have been created (*Pesachim 68b*). Furthermore the Sages have said, “The Holy One, blessed be He, looked into the Torah to create the world” (*Zohar II:161b*). To say that the world exists by the merit of the Torah is to include the Tzaddikim as well. When they join day to night in Torah study (*Mishneh Berurah, Orach Chaim 1:1*), the Holy One, blessed be He, looks upon the Torah emanating from their mouths and renews the work of Creation in its perfection, more so than He would have done without the Tzaddikim’s Torah.

When we say, “Who in His goodness,” this refers to the “good” of the Torah, which is called “good” (*Perkei Avoth 6:3*), as it is written: “For I have given you a good teaching,

do not forsake My Torah” (*Proverbs 4:2*). The Holy One, blessed be He, renews each day the work of Creation, and this daily renewal continues by the Torah of the Tzaddikim. We find this concept alluded to in our holy Torah: “But you who cling to the L-RD your G-d – you are alive today” (*Deuteronomy 4:4*). We are all alive by virtue of those who are connected to G-d, meaning the Tzaddikim, and we benefit from the life and the renewal of the work of Creation each day.

A person should realize that all renewal is a new creation, on which we must recite the blessing *Shecheyanu*, for all comes through the power of Torah. Consequently, we must be grateful to those who study Torah, for it is by their merit that the world exists and continues to be renewed each day. We should also realize, in particular, that the power of the Tzaddikim’s Torah is immense, for it can influence people to come closer to G-d and to purify their thoughts (see Zohar III:260a), which is why we must attach ourselves to the Tzaddik and believe in his power and holiness. By doing so, we will enable him to have a positive influence on us.

Since we have reached this point, we will be able to understand the extent of one’s connection to the Tzaddik. When people offered first fruits in Temple times, they were not brought individually. Rather, all the inhabitants of a given town assembled and came together to bring them – a king’s glory being demonstrated by a multitude of people (*Proverbs 14:28*) – and everyone ascended together. The ox advanced in front with its horns covered in gold, the flute was played before the procession, and so on, until they arrived at the Temple Mount (*Bikurim Ch.3*). It was then that each one said, “An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather...” (*Deuteronomy 26:5*).

What do the first fruits signify? When someone spends his entire life feeling that all of Creation belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He, he will believe that everything that he possesses really belongs to G-d. He will go to great lengths to reach the Temple with his first fruits to show that everything is G-d’s. He will thank G-d for these good things and implore Him to forgive him for having neglected Torah study, a neglect brought about by the fact that he worked the earth. In fact the first fruits indicate a certain degree of wealth; hence it would seem that there was a little negligence in Torah study. When he humbly arrives at the Temple, his very humility is what redeems him of this negligence, for the goal of all his work was the performance of mitzvot and the sustaining of Creation. Consequently, his ascension to Jerusalem with humility redeems his sin of neglecting Torah study, as well as the sin of feeling a certain degree of pride in his wealth. Furthermore, in the Temple he says, “An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather,” meaning that the evil inclination – the greatest of all deceivers (*ramai*, a word formed by the same letters as *Arami*, Aramean) – is the one who entices a person by telling him, “Go work the earth, and afterwards you can study.” The circumstances are such that he can then never study. However the Jew in his humility annuls the evil inclination and returns to the Holy One, blessed be He.

It is written in Scripture, “*Vehaya* [And it will be] when you enter the land” (*Deuteronomy 26:1*). The word *vehaya* always designates joy (*Bereshith Rabba 42:4*), for if a person

works the earth to serve G-d in joy, the evil inclination will have no power over him. However if he is worried about his future and only thinks about his sustenance and wealth, the evil inclination will continue to bring him to despair in order to prevent him from studying Torah. Then when his land yields fruit, he will become boastful and imagine that it was his strength that brought him this wealth (*Deuteronomy 8:17*), to the extent that the evil inclination will make him sin even more. This is why atonement occurs primarily through humility when he arrives in Jerusalem, and it permits him to conquer his evil inclination, to bring out pure thoughts from his heart, and to come closer to the Holy One, blessed be He.

All this occurred, however, during Temple times. Yet since the Temple has been destroyed because of our many sins, what are we to do? How can the sin of neglecting Torah study, caused by work, be atoned for? Let us say that it is by bringing a gift to a Talmid Chacham and attaching ourselves to him. The Sages have said, “Whoever brings a gift to a Talmid Chacham, it is like he brought first fruits [to the Temple]” (*Ketubot 105b*). This is derived from the verse concerning the prophet Elisha: “A man came from Baal-Shalishah, and he brought to the man of G-d food from the *bikurim* [first fruits]: Twenty loaves of barley bread and some fresh kernels in their husks” (*II Kings 4:42*). This shows us the magnitude of the Tzaddik’s power and holiness, for today he exerts the same influence as the Temple did during its time. He is like a Cohen, and the Shechinah resides on him. When a person lets the Tzaddik benefit from his possessions (without the Tzaddik asking for it), he thereby demonstrates that everything he possesses comes through the power of the Tzaddik, whose merit enables Creation to be renewed. When a person finds himself near such a powerful force, he spiritually elevates himself. The power and influence of the Tzaddik, and the fact that a person humbles himself before him, also enables such a person to conquer his instincts, to stop imagining that he is wholly responsible for his success, and to overcome the traps that the evil inclination has set for him.

The power of the Tzaddik is therefore like that of the Temple before its destruction. In the same way that people ascended to Jerusalem and G-d sent his blessing on the Temple, today people come within the shade of the Tzaddik during his lifetime, and even more so after the Tzaddik’s death (for he becomes greater after he dies, and even when he is dead he is called alive [*Chullin 7b*]). Now in the same way that water reflects the face placed before it, so too does the Tzaddik have the power to influence the one who comes before him. This is the meaning of the phrase, “Who in His goodness renews each day, continuously, the work of Creation.” By means of the Tzaddik’s power, the Holy One, blessed be He, can more fully renew Creation, for awakenings below have an influence on awakenings above (*Zohar I:77b*), and the influence of the Tzaddik on earth has an affect on the influence of G-d.

What we have said up to now allows us to understand why the mitzvah of first fruits requires us to state, “An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather. He descended to Egypt,” which we state with no other mitzvah. This refers to the evil inclination, which

works by weakening a person. In the beginning, it gives a person the impression that not only is it *not* bothering him, but on the contrary – that it helps him serve G-d! It is only when a person's mitzvah observance is about to become habitual (as in the verse, "Their fear of Me is like rote learning" – *Isaiah 29:13*), that the evil inclination completely attacks a person and tries to divert him from serving G-d and observing mitzvot.

Now the mitzvah of first fruits is different than other Torah mitzvot, since before bringing the first fruits a person must pass through a certain number of hardships. These include digging, planting, harvesting, and so on, without mentioning the fact that the first fruits themselves are forbidden to eat (considered as *orlah*) for the first three years (*Leviticus 19:23*), despite the amount of work put into it. After all this, a person must conquer the evil inclination as it sows doubts in his heart by making him think that he himself was responsible for all his success. Above all, when he finally brings the first fruits, the evil inclination tries cooling his heart to prevent him from performing the mitzvah to perfection and with true fervor.

However a person should reject all these doubts, conquer his instincts that lead him to sin, and humble himself before G-d. This is why, at the time that he brings the first fruits, he states that nothing of the evil inclination clings to him, and he rejects it entirely by stating, "An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather."

It follows that even someone who goes to see a Tzaddik should be vigilant that this does not become a causal excursion for him. Rather, the entire goal of his journey should be to receive the Tzaddik's positive influence and rejoice in the presence of the Shechinah. When a person presents himself and his family before the Tzaddik, he annuls his personality before him. Thus the Tzaddik can pour upon him all the good of the world, and he can give him blessings of salvation and peace, of abundance and success in this world and in the World to Come.

### ***The Value of First Fruits: Connecting to the Tzaddik and Torah Study***

In the Morning Prayer we recite, "And in His goodness He renews each day, continuously, the work of Creation." Now it is primarily through the study of Torah that Creation is renewed, for without it the world would not have been created at all (*Pesachim 68b*). As we have seen, the Holy One, blessed be He, looked into the Torah before creating the world, the same Torah whose study the Tzaddikim engage in both day and night (*Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chaim 1:1*). Due to this diligent study, G-d renews the work of Creation with even more intensity.

The word *u'vetovo* ("and in His goodness") refers to the Torah, for the Torah is called *tov* (*Perkei Avoth 6:3*), as it is written: "For I have given you a good teaching, do not forsake My Torah" (*Proverbs 4:2*). The Torah alludes to this in the verse, "But you who cling to the L-RD your G-d – you are alive today" (*Deuteronomy 4:4*), meaning that those who remained faithful were the Tzaddikim. It is because of them that we are all alive, and it is because of them that we renew each day the work of Creation.

We should realize that all renewal is actually a new creation, and that we should recite the blessing *Shecheyanu* on it. We should therefore express our gratitude to those who regularly study Torah, for it is due to their study that the world is sustained and renews itself each day. Their merit also encourages people to repent (see *Zohar III:260a*) and purifies their thoughts.

The ceremony in which first fruits were offered proceeded in the most solemn way. Since “A multitude of people is a king’s glory” (*Proverbs 14:28*), everyone gathered around the ministering priest as the procession, preceded by an ox whose horns were covered in gold, made its way through Jerusalem accompanied by the sounds of flutes until it arrived at the Temple Mount. There everyone recited the verse, “An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather...” (*Deuteronomy 26:5*).

The first fruits illustrate the fact that everything belongs to G-d. The one who comes to the Temple to offer them expresses his sincere gratitude to G-d and asks forgiveness for having neglected his Torah study as a result of his agricultural work. Due to this humility and sincerity, the Holy One, blessed be He, forgives him. He thus becomes especially vigilant in carrying out the mitzvot and sustaining the world.

“*Arami* [An Aramean] tried to destroy my forefather” (*Deuteronomy 26:5*) is a reference to the evil inclination, the great *ramai* (deceiver) that incites people to neglect Torah study for the benefit of working their fields. Through a person’s devotion and humility, however, he can eliminate it and thus come closer to Hashem.

“*Vehaya* [And it will be] when you enter the land” (*v.1*), if you work the earth in order to serve your Creator in joy, you will eliminate the evil inclination. However if you are only concerned about your sustenance and possessions, the evil inclination will not leave you the time to engage in Torah study. If the products of your field become abundant, you may claim, “My strength and the might of my hand made me this wealth” (*Deuteronomy 8:17*). Having to travel to Jerusalem leads a person to humility, enabling him to conquer the evil inclination, rid himself of inappropriate thoughts, and come closer to G-d.

All this was valid during the times of the holy Temple. However since it was destroyed because of our many sins, how can our neglect of Torah study, due to working, be forgiven? It is through the donations offered to Torah scholars and by attaching ourselves to them. As we have seen, one who offers a donation to a Torah scholar is considered to have offered first fruits, according to the Sages interpretation (*Ketubot 105b*) of the verse: “A man came from Baal-Shalishah, and he brought to the man of G-d food from the *Bikkurim* [first fruits]: Twenty loaves of barley bread and some fresh kernels in their husks” (*II Kings 4:42*). Here we see the role of the Tzaddik, which is similar to that of the holy Temple. Just like a Kohen, the Shechinah resides on him. If we offer him a donation without him asking for it, we demonstrate that everything comes from him and that it is because of him that Creation is renewed and man is spiritually elevated. The one who negates himself before the Tzaddik will succeed in conquering his evil inclination.

The spiritual power of the Tzaddik is similar to that of the Temple. Hashem instilled the person who ascended to Jerusalem with the blessings and holiness of the Temple. In our days, a person who comes to find refuge under the wings of the Tzaddik while he lives – and even more so after his death – will fully enjoy his blessing (*Berachot 18a*). Because of the Tzaddik, Hashem will more fully renew each day the work of Creation, with the Tzaddik's influence being felt below as well as above (*see Zohar I:77b*).

When the mitzvah of the first fruit was performed, one would recite: “An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather. He descended to Egypt,” which was not said with any other mitzvah. This was done in order to weaken the evil inclination, which at first tries to show that it in no way disrupts a person's service of G-d, and that on the contrary, it helps him! Nevertheless when the evil inclination turns a mitzvah into a routine act, embodying the notion of “their fear of Me is like rote learning” (*Isaiah 29:13*), it completely controls a person and continuously disrupts his Torah study and mitzvot performance.

Before bringing his first fruits to the Temple, a man first had to dig, plant, harvest, and so on. Furthermore, “for three years they shall be forbidden to you, they shall not be eaten” (*Leviticus 19:23*). Thus after working so hard, a person had to fight the evil inclination, for it tried to make him believe that it was his own power that earned him his wealth, and it endeavored to cool his enthusiasm for serving his Creator.

It is therefore fitting that we completely rid ourselves of these inappropriate thoughts, that we go out to war against the evil inclination (which tries to make us sin), and that we submit to Hashem. This is the meaning of “An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather.”

### *Connecting to the Tzaddikim of the Generation*

Our parsha begins with the passage describing the duty to bring *bikkurim* (first fruits) to the Temple. When we look at the verses of this parsha more closely, we see some profound principles that can serve as a model for personal conduct, rules by which to live our lives. However this only applies when we infuse these principles into our hearts, which in turn will be our reward. What is the *mitzvah* of *bikkurim*? When a person goes into his orchard and sees a ripened fig or pomegranate, he must attach a string to them and declare that they are *bikkurim* for the priests of the Temple. This means that he collects the fruits he has worked several years to grow and designates them for the priests. However this doesn't happen every year, since the fruits produced by a tree in its first three years are deemed *orlah*, and during the fourth year there are restrictions on how they may be eaten (their designation being *neta revai*). When a person can finally eat a tree's fruits, it is a *mitzvah* to bring its first fruits to the priests of the Temple. This principle shows us the paramount importance of having faith in G-d. Thus without saying a word in protest, a person must refrain from eating the fruits of his trees for four entire years. Even afterwards he has to have faith in G-d and His

mitzvot, bringing his first fruits to the priests in the Temple. In this way a person also demonstrates his faith in the *tzaddikim* of the generation – the priests – otherwise he wouldn't agree to bring his produce to them.

We discover another thing in the passage regarding the *bikkurim*. When a person utters his *vidui* (confession) upon bringing his first fruits, he is forbidden to say it softly. Instead he must raise his voice and speak loudly, as the Sages have said concerning the verse, “You shall call out and say” (*Deuteronomy 26:5*). What exactly does a person say? As the Sages have stated, to prove that we are not ungrateful he says, “Now I have brought the first of the fruits of the ground...” (*v.10*). We shall discuss this later on in more detail.

We discover something else at the end of the passage on the *bikkurim*. After his confession, a person states: “Look down from Your holy habitation, from Heaven, and bless Your people Israel...” (*v.15*). This is difficult to understand, for the person in question has just brought the first of his fruits – not the fruits of his neighbor – to the Temple. It would therefore seem appropriate for him to ask Hashem to look down from Heaven and bless him and his family! How could this be the right time to request a blessing for the entire Jewish people?

If we were to look at the subject more closely, however, we would see a connection between these three principles: Having faith, showing gratitude, and praying for the entire Jewish people. It is precisely by doing these three things that a person can and should live his life. The Sages have said that whoever brings a gift to a *talmid chacham* is considered to have brought *bikkurim* (*Ketubot 105b*). We need to understand this, for what connection is there between a gift offered to a Torah scholar and first fruits? A gift to a Torah scholar is a form of *tzeddakah*, yet what connection does that *mitzvah* have with the *mitzvah* of *bikkurim*? Perhaps we could understand the connection if the Sages had said that one who brings fruits to a Torah scholar is as if he had brought first fruits. Yet as it stands, what connection is there between the *mitzvah* of giving *tzeddakah* to a *talmid chacham* and bringing *bikkurim*?

It is in man's nature to live life with a sense of confidence, thinking that nothing bad will happen to him. Because people believe they know how to live their lives, if they ever have to make concessions to others or diminish their own importance, it seems catastrophic to them. However this is not the case for a person whose actions are all done for the sake of Heaven. Such a person constantly tries to better himself and come closer to Hashem.

Consequently, when a person sacrifices something he possesses and brings a gift to a *talmid chacham*, he demonstrates just how much confidence he has in his Creator and the *tzaddikim* of the generation. By doing so he proves that he is offering *bikkurim* to Hashem, for he wants to have faith in Him, observe all His *mitzvot*, and follow His ways. Therein lies the connection between a gift given to a Torah scholar and the bringing of first fruits.

It sometimes happens, however, that a person encounters the *tzaddik* of the generation but does not notice any effect from his blessing. This is because such a person has acted improperly and is not worthy of his blessing. The *tzaddik* then tells the person that he cannot help him, and that he has to address himself directly to the Creator. At that point a great deal of patience is required of a person, especially with regards to not showing ingratitude. He must not say, "If the *tzaddik* couldn't help me, it's because he's useless." Absolutely not! It's forbidden to be ungrateful, for the *tzaddik* also wants the good of people!

The *tzaddikim* of the generation make the connection between us, insignificant as we are, and the Holy One, blessed be He. It is very difficult to truly arrive at the Throne of Glory, and the *tzaddikim* of the generation intercede on our behalf to help us in everything we do, as Rabbi Shlomo Hachohen of Radomsk *Zatzal* said in his book *Tiferet Shlomo* (*Parsha Nitzavim*). If a person is ungrateful and does not acknowledge the greatness of the *tzaddik* of the generation, the latter cannot help him.

Above all, the *tzaddik* intercedes for the entire Jewish people as a whole. He desires the good of the community as much as the good of the individual. Hence when a person brings his *bikkurim*, he must say: "Bless Your people Israel." He must include himself in the entire community in order to benefit from the blessing of the *tzaddik* of the generation. If he says that they are of little concern to him and that only he himself counts, he will benefit from no blessing whatsoever.

Thus the passage on the *bikkurim* teaches us the proper guidelines to follow in life. It teaches us just to what point we must cling to the *tzaddikim* of the generation, since every favor we grant them is returned a hundred times over, bringing us good in every possible way. Let us cling to the *tzaddikim* of the generation and demonstrate our faith in them, just as the verse states: "They had faith in the L-RD and in His servant Moses" (*Exodus 14:31*).

## Parsha Nitzavim

### *Unity and Joint Responsibility are the Foundation of Israel's Existence*

On the verse that states, “You are standing today, all of you” (*Deuteronomy 29:9*), Rashi explains as follows: This teaches us that on the day of his death, Moses assembled the Children of Israel before the Holy One, blessed be He, in order to enter them into a covenant. In regards to this, the Ohr HaHayim raises the following question: What was the reason for this covenant, since it was already stated, “These are the words of the covenant” (*Ibid. 28:69*)? He also asks why it was necessary to specify “the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers” rather than simply, in a more general way, “all of you”. He answers by saying that by this covenant, Moses wanted to make them responsible for one another (*see Shavuot 39a*) so that everyone would watch that his neighbor not transgress G-d’s covenant, each of them being subject to punishment for the sins of others.

In my humble opinion, in saying “For you to pass into the covenant of the L-RD your G-d and into His imprecation” (*Deuteronomy 29:11*), Moses wanted that the covenant between the two parties make of them a united whole. This would be accomplished by virtue of the joint responsibility between individuals that formed the Children of Israel into a single body. This is the concept of *leavrecha* (“For you to pass into”), which is composed of the same letters as *learevcha* (“to make you a guarantor for the other”). This is like a man and a woman who marry and become like a single body by means of Chuppah and Kiddushin (*see Ketubot 7b*).

This is the sense of Rashi’s remark when he said, “This teaches us that Moses assembled them [*kinsam*].” Rashi uses the same word as the one that signifies the espousal of a woman (*koness Isha*), meaning that Moses made them enter into the covenant with the Holy One, blessed be He, so that they form a single entity with Him. But beforehand, Moses had to assemble the Children of Israel in order to unite them, which is why he specified “the heads of your tribes, your elders ... all the men of Israel.” Each one is placed according to rank and status, but only when it is a matter of personal function. When it is a matter of the community of Israel, all should be completely united in friendship and fraternity, without anyone feeling superior to another. This is why Moses said, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-RD your G-d”, meaning that in the same way that you are united as a single person by love, you should also be united to G-d, and so He will be united to you. All this, however, is on condition that no one considers himself superior to another, even if he has high status.

Therefore, what does “to stand before the L-RD” mean? We can understand it in two ways. The first, that it means to “set the L-RD before me always” (*Psalms 16:8*), which means that in every circumstance and in every place, a man sees the reality of G-d

before him. He sees it before him with awe, fear, and love, and not only in synagogue, but even in the street, outside. This is what Moses demanded of the community of Israel. “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-RD your G-d” means that in the same way that here, when you are assembled and standing before the L-RD and are entered into a covenant with Him, in other circumstances His glory must also be felt, and you must constantly stand before Him with fear and trembling in all places. This deals not only with respect to a man and his Creator, but also between a man and his fellow. One must sense the honor of the other, be he present or not, for it is only in this way that the Torah is acquired – by love for G-d’s creations and respect for one’s fellow.

There is another, quite remarkable way of explaining it. When a man stands in a synagogue without feeling that it is like a miniature Temple (*Megillah 29a*), this attitude is very harmful, for once he is outside, how much more will he not feel awe for the glory of G-d. Now it is very grave to not take this as being important, whether it be in synagogue or elsewhere. We note that such was the spiritual state of Dathan an Abiram, of which it is written, “And Dathan and Abiram came out standing at the door of their tents” (*Numbers 16:27*). This took place with the generation of knowledge (*Vayikra Rabba 9:1*) who in the desert stood before the Shechinah, witnessed miracles, and saw that G-d spoke face to face with Moses (*Numbers 12:8*), a generation that G-d also spoke face to face with (*Deuteronomy 5:4*). Yet despite everything, they “came out standing at the door of their tents,” meaning that they united in evil before the glory of G-d.

How could this happen to them? They stood at the door of their tents, and a tent always represents Torah (*Berachot 63b*). This means that they stood outside of the house of study, outside Torah, which is obviously considered as a sin on their behalf. This is a sign that even after they saw everything they did, they felt absolutely no change and remained outside of the tent. They found themselves perhaps physically inside, but deep down they remained outside, far from holiness. This distance led them to a terrible fall, to the point that they were not able to remain standing without fear or respect for the glory of G-d. All this stems from them not being united with Moses (for they ridiculed him) and from not feeling any love for their fellow. They therefore didn’t feel the holiness of the place (not to mention that the Holy One, blessed be He, is called *Makom*, “The Place”), and they stood for evil before the glory of the Holy One, blessed be He.

Coming out from all of this is the fact that the one who has the habit of going to synagogue but does not pay attention to the holiness of the place, or someone who remains indifferent to the reality of G-d even outside of synagogue, proves by this that he lacks love for his fellow. This undermines the unity and collective responsibility of the people. In spirit, he “doesn’t stand” in a steady way with his fellow, and consequently he behaves with the Holy One, blessed be He, sometimes in one way and sometimes in another. Everyone should therefore perform a careful introspection and ask himself why he has difficulty in recognizing the holiness of the place and why secular ideas come to him at the moment of prayer, so much so that he does not

perceive the reality of G-d. In this way, he will understand that all this stems from a lack of stability in his relationship with his fellow.

This is why the Torah says, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-RD your G-d... all the men of Israel.” You must stand before G-d in the same way that one stands under the Chuppah, in making yourselves guarantors for one another in order to become a single body. And you will succeed in becoming united one to the other through the intermediary of “all the men of Israel.” And if unfortunately you tamper with this stability, you will arrive at the sin of Dathan and Abiram, and your fear of Heaven and of the greatness of the glory of G-d will not be enough.

This is the connection between Parsha *Nitzavim* and Parsha *Vayeilech*. When will you be *nitzavim* (standing) before the L-RD? Only when *vayeilech Moshe* (Moses has gone); only when you will go to make yourselves guarantors one for the other without ulterior motives, each helping the other as Moses helped the community of Israel. Herein lies a great principle: Man’s attachment to G-d must first start by man’s love for others.

We may also explain this verse (“You are standing today, all of you”) in yet another way.

At the end of our Parsha, it is written, “to dwell upon the land that the L-RD sword to your forefathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give *lahem* [to them].” (*Deuteronomy 30:20*). Now *lahem* is composed of the same letters as the word *milah* (circumcision), meaning that the Children of Israel are worthy of settling in Eretz Israel because of the merit of the Patriarchs who observed circumcision, the sign of the covenant. This is the meaning of the verse that states, “You are standing today, all of you, the heads of your tribes.” When you observe circumcision, you are all righteous, and so you yourselves also become worthy of entering into Eretz Israel by the merit of circumcision. This sign of the covenant must continue to be observed by recalling that our father Abraham does not let one who is circumcised enter into Gehinnom (*Eruvin 19a*). By this, you can follow the paths of the Patriarchs and enter into the land, for they merited it by preserving their holiness, and you also should follow the same holy paths. We find an allusion to this idea in Rashi’s statement that Moses assembled them in order to make them enter into a covenant. It is possible that he is speaking of the covenant of circumcision, for it allows the Children of Israel to stand before G-d and to merit inheriting the land.

### ***“You Shall Love Your Fellow As Yourself” Is The Foundation of the Covenant of the Torah***

Before his death, Moses said to the Children of Israel, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-RD your G-d” (*Deuteronomy 29:9*). Why were they standing? It was in order “for you to pass into the covenant of the L-RD your G-d and into His

imprecation” (v.11). In addition, Moses told them that everyone was passing into this covenant – “whoever is here ... [and] whoever is not here with us today” (v.14) – for even those who were to be born later would then and there pass into the covenant before Hashem.

We may ask what Moses meant by this. According to the Sages, “When the Children of Israel heard 98 rebukes and curses [in Parsha Ki Tavo], they were overtaken with fear and said, ‘Who can follow all of this?’ Thus Moses told them, ‘You are standing today, all of you.’ If you ‘all’ stand in perfect harmony, you will then have nothing to fear of the curses and rebukes, for you are all united” (*Tanhuma Nitzavim 1*).

Some commentators explain that Moses knew that after their entry into Eretz Israel, he himself would not be able to assemble them because he was not going to enter the land. Yet now he had the opportunity to assemble the entire people – men, women, and children; scholars and officers; drawers of water and hewers of wood – which is what he did before his death.

Nevertheless, there is something very surprising here. Moses assembled the Children of Israel to tell them that as long as they were united, they had nothing to fear from anyone (*Zohar 1:6b*). Yet if so, why does the verse state, “for you to pass into the covenant,” which seems to indicate that *this* was the reason for assembling them? Moreover, what is the meaning of “to pass into the covenant”? At the giving of the Torah, the Children of Israel had *already* entered into a covenant, as it is written: “The L-RD our G-d sealed a covenant with us at Horeb” (*Deuteronomy 5:2*) and also, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the L-RD sealed with you” (*Exodus 24:8*). Thus why did Moses again speak of entering a covenant, since that had already occurred?

We shall attempt to explain this as best possible. First, however, we shall clarify a point that is relevant to our topic, allowing us to better understand it. Rabbi Akiva said, “‘You shall love your fellow as yourself’ [*Leviticus 19:18*] is a fundamental principle of the Torah” (*Yerushalmi Nedarim 9:4*), and Hillel the Elder said to the convert who wanted to learn the entire Torah while standing on one foot: “What is hateful to you, do not do to others” (*Shabbat 31a*). He did not tell him that the essential aspect of Torah was Shabbat or faith in the Creator of the world. Yet can the advice that he gave to the convert be so far-reaching? Can a person truly love his neighbor as much as himself, or even more than himself, to the point of putting his life in danger for him under certain circumstances?

As we know, a person is very close to himself. He is also the work of G-d’s hands (*Kohelet Rabba 3:14*). It is therefore from himself that a man can best learn to fear G-d, for he has the potential to elevate himself to a higher level than the angels. Furthermore, his soul is a part of G-d. Now the first and last letters of each word in the expression *Chelek Elokaḥ Mima’al* (“Part of G-d from Above”) illustrate this concept: The first letters (*cheth, aleph, mem*) plus the kollel, have the same numerical value as the 50 gates of holiness, and the last first letters (*koph, hei, lamed*) form the word *kalah* (“easy”). This means that every person can easily arrive at the 50 gates of holiness, since a part of G-d dwells within him.

From all this, it emerges that a person should look to his fellowman if he wants to fear G-d. He will then feel the presence of G-d and know that G-d resides within him, as it is written: “They shall make a Sanctuary for Me – so that I may dwell among them” (*Exodus 25:8*) – in each of them. Each person is a miniature sanctuary for the Divine Presence, hence in looking at one’s fellowman – in loving him and connecting to him in unity – a person will definitely succeed in connecting to G-d.

Since we have come to this point, we may understand what Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai meant when he told his disciples: “May your fear of G-d be as great as your fear of men” (*Berachot 28b*). This means that when the evil inclination disturbs a person in his service of G-d and brings hardships upon him, he stops fearing G-d and only fears men. Yet at that point if he looks at someone else and remembers that in this other person dwells a part of G-d, he can tell himself, “How can I fear this man and not fear the godly part dwelling within him?” Rabban Yochanan said to his disciples: “May your fear of G-d be as great as your fear of men” – you will then, as a result, realize that you must fear G-d, Who is found in man. Perhaps it is for this reason that by nature people fear others – so that people can reason this out for themselves.

This very same idea will allow us to understand the verse that states, “Then those who feared the L-RD spoke to one another, and the L-RD listened and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the L-RD and those who give thought to His Name” (*Malachi 3:16*). We must understand why it is written at the beginning, “those who feared the L-RD spoke to one another” rather than, “those who feared the L-RD and those who give thought to His Name spoke to one another”. Why does “and those who give thought to His Name” come only afterwards, when the verse speaks of a book of remembrance? This connects to the idea that the fear of G-d comes to a man by this “to one another” relationship, meaning that he should behave lovingly with others, with all his heart and soul, aware of the fact that a portion of G-d exists in the other – the work of His hands – to the point that he will achieve a fear of G-d.

Thus G-d, Who probes hearts and minds, will see how those who fear Him speak to one another. He will see the love and fear of Heaven that reigns among them, and this will earn them the merit of being inscribed in a book of remembrance before G-d, a sign of respect and appreciation before the King of kings. Now if it is considered an honor to be recorded in a human king’s book of remembrance, how much more should it be considered an honor to be recorded in G-d’s! In fact, those inscribed in G-d’s book of remembrance conducted themselves correctly with others and managed to achieve a fear of Heaven and perceive G-d in each person. This is why it is precisely when they are being inscribed that the verse states, “and those who give thought to His Name.” G-d saw that they achieved a superior level of understanding, for the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton can be counted (using a certain method) as being equal to 45, which is the same as that of the word *adam* (“man”). All this stems from the fact that if a person is concerned with his fellowman, G-d’s notes that person and inscribes him in a book of remembrance when it is written.

We therefore see that love for one's fellowman is a great principle of the Torah. It allows a person to attain the heights of spiritual greatness, even the 50th gate of holiness, as well as a fear of Heaven, for he sees G-d in each person, who is a part of G-d.

Everything that we have said allows us to fully understand what we asked at the beginning, namely why Moses spoke to the Children of Israel of a covenant if he had assembled them to tell them to stay united. The answer is that when he assembled all the Children of Israel of that generation (as well as the generations to come), he saw that it was a great opportunity to teach them that when they are united, they are guarantors for each other, and it is in this way that they can observe the entire Torah. This is what constitutes "For you to pass [*le'ovrecha*] into the covenant." The word *le'ovrecha* is formed by the same letters as *le'arevcha* ("to be a guarantor"), thus designating mutual responsibility and unity. In addition, the word *brit* ("covenant") has the numerical value (including the kollel) of 613, for if mutual responsibility and harmony exist among the Jewish people, there the Torah will be found. It may be that this is the origin of Rabbi Akiva's statement, "[It] is a fundamental principle of the Torah," for unity and mutual responsibility enable a person to become sensitive to his fellowman, which also leads to becoming sensitive to the reality of G-d. This is what constitutes, "You are standing today, all of you, before the L-RD your G-d" – united, so you can see the L-RD your G-d in everyone, for a person can perceive that part of G-d which is in the other.

At the end of his commentary to Parsha Bo (*Exodus 13:16*), the Ramban writes concerning communal prayer in synagogues and the power of the community. He states that we should have a place where we can assemble to acknowledge that G-d created us, to spread His Name, and to state before Him: "We are Your creations!" In this we see a summary of what we have said, meaning that when people assemble in harmony and each person loves the other, they will then automatically acknowledge their Creator G-d and say, "We are Your creations!" – You are perceived in us, and we are a part of G-d – all because of unity.

With regards to this, we may add that Moses' instruction to the Children of Israel concerning the holy Torah, "It is not in heaven ... nor is it across the sea" (*Deuteronomy 30: 12,13*), is a fundamental principle of the Torah. When a person wants to attain the Torah, he should realize that it is really close to him; it is not at all far away. He should also realize that through the Torah he may attain a fear of G-d, for by loving others "the matter is very near to you" (*v.14*).

This also allows us to fully understand the law concerning a person who seeks to lead others into idolatry, as stated in the book *Yirah VaDa'at* in the name of the Gaon Rabbi Simcha Zissel of Kelm. A person who seeks to lead others into idolatry is liable to stoning, even if he did not manage to convince anyone to do so (*Deuteronomy 13:11*). Why is this so, given that an idolatrous act was not committed in such a case? The Torah provides the reason: That person *tried* to lead others into idolatry, for we are judged

even on wicked intentions, and in the area of idolatry the Holy One, blessed be He, connects intentions to deeds (see detailed explanation in *Kiddushin 39b, 40a*).

Everything is now clear: The person who loves his fellowman will see G-d in him, and from his fellowman he will attain a fear of Heaven, gratitude, faith, access to the 50th gate of holiness, the covenant, mutual responsibility, and the entire Torah. If such a person ceases to study, that will lead him to deny all this, as well as to idolatry. He will denounce G-d, Who is found in others, and become liable to stoning because of the part of G-d found in him. This is because love should bring him to great spiritual levels between man and fellowman, and between man and G-d.

### *Toward the Day of Judgment*

It is written, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-RD your G-d: The heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all the men of Israel” (*Deuteronomy 29:9*).

We read this parsha before Rosh Hashanah, and the Zohar says that the reason we do so is because this first verse alludes to the judgment day of Rosh Hashanah. On that day, all Israel without exception is called upon to stand before Hashem: The heads of the tribes, the elders, the officers, etc. Even the most simple among the people, such as the woodchoppers and water carriers (who were really Canaanites that converted at the time of Moses – Rashi) were to stand before Hashem and be judged for their actions. As the Mishnah states, “At Rosh Hashanah all creatures pass before Him like children of *Maron*, as it says: ‘He fashions their hearts alike; He considers all their deeds’ [*Psalms 33:15*]” (*Rosh Hashanah 16a*). The Gemara questions the meaning of the expression “like children of *Maron*,” and states that it means “like a flock of sheep” (*Rosh Hashanah 18a*). Rashi explains: “Like sheep that we count in order to take the tenth part, we take them one by one through a narrow passage where they can only pass single file.” From this we learn that each of us is judged in great detail and exactitude, not superficially. “All creatures pass before Him” (*Rosh Hashanah 16a*), and as the Sages said: “Concerning countries, [judgment] is pronounced on [this day]: Which for war and which for peace, which for famine and which for plenty; and on it creatures are brought to mind, to remember them for life or for death.”

Just how terrifying is the depth of the judgment! It is such that the Holy One, blessed be He, even examines the mitzvot that we performed, such as our Torah study, prayers, etc. In fact during previous generations, the gravity of the month of Elul was felt everywhere, to the point that people said that even the fish in the sea trembled during that month.

One story has it that a certain Tzaddik wrote a letter to his son, and upon receiving it he noticed that his father’s handwriting was not very legible. When he asked his father about it, he replied, “What can I do? During the month of Elul, it’s difficult for me to write because my hand trembles with fear due to the approaching judgment day.”

How terrifying it is to think that people could not even write in former times because they so greatly feared the day of judgment, that people felt it in their bones! Those Jews of earlier generations did not seek out the vanities of this world. They knew that their lives hung in the balance; they knew that there was reason to fear because it is at this time that the outcome of the following year is fixed for each of us. Naturally, we all want to merit a life of goodness and health, without troubles or major difficulties. How can we earn this? The Gemara explains in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: “[So] great is the power of repentance that it tears up a man’s final sentence” (*Rosh Hashanah 17b*). In Parsha Nitzavim we read that the Holy One, blessed be He, personally promises that even if a person has committed a hundred sins, each worse than the next, if he repents G-d will show him mercy, accept his repentance, and forgive all his sins (*Deuteronomy 30: 2-6*).

The Rambam writes in his book *Hilchot Teshuvah*: “How great is repentance! Yesterday the sinner was separated from the G-d of Israel, as it is written: ‘Your iniquities have separated you from your G-d’ [*Isaiah 59:2*]. Yet today, he is attached to the Divine Presence...he cries out and is immediately answered, as it is written: ‘And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer’ [*Isaiah 65:24*].” The decision is in our hands, and only the power of repentance can cleanse us of the impurities of our sins.

Since we have only a few days before the coming judgment, let us take advantage of this precious time, a time in which our repentance is accepted and can reach the Throne of Glory. We will thereby merit presenting ourselves on the day of judgment in a state of purity, crowned with our mitzvot and good deeds.

### ***Everyone Can!***

“Is the shofar ever sounded in a city and the people not tremble?” asks the prophet (*Amos 3:6*). It has already been almost an entire month that we have been hearing the morning blasts of the shofar, as it encourages us to awaken from our spiritual slumber. However we have still not stirred ourselves to repentance before the day of judgment!

True, repentance is one of the most difficult *mitzvot* for anyone to perform. It is hard to wake up one morning and decide that, starting from this day forward, we will change our lives, that we will improve our conduct, begin to perform *mitzvot* and good deeds, and constantly study Torah. Yet when we look at this week’s parsha, the last parsha of the year, from the very first verse we are assured that there are many ways to repent and come closer to Hashem.

The parsha begins with the words, “You are standing today, all of you, before the L-RD your G-d, the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers – all the men of Israel” (*Deuteronomy 29:9*). This teaches us the power of unity. When all Jews stand united before Hashem, it becomes easier for each individual to come closer to Him, meaning

it becomes easier to repent. If one person falls, there is always another to help him get up and back to his previous state, for no accuser can defeat the power of unity.

Just to what extent should unity go? The Sages explain the verse, “Ephraim is attached to idols. Let him be” (*Hosea 4:17*) as meaning that when the Children of Israel are united, they are like a bundle of reeds that cannot be broken. What can this be compared to? It is like a group of people who are standing together and holding each other’s hands, forming a single block. An outsider trying to break this chain will never succeed, for everyone is standing together as one.

The same applies to repentance. When a person tries to repent on his own, individually, it will be very difficult for him. Alone, he is like a small tree on a vast plain. However when everyone is united and mutual love exists among them, repentance becomes easier. It is not without reason that before performing each *mitzvah* we recite, “In a perfect union in the name of all Israel,” words taken from the *leshem yichud* prayer. When we approach repentance in the name of all Israel – in harmony with the entire Jewish people – it becomes easier to return to Hashem.

Nevertheless, a person may still think: “Just who do I think I am? What importance do I have? What value do I possess? What worth do my deeds have? Perhaps the *tzaddikim* of the generation can come closer to Hashem, but I’m insignificant. I’m worthless! How could I ever elevate myself like them and come closer to G-d?”

There are two responses that we can give to such doubts. The first is found at the very start of our parsha, in which we find the interpretive principle of *klal uprat uklal* (a generalization followed by a specification and again by a generalization). The verse begins with, “You are standing today, all of you,” a generalization. This is followed by, “the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers,” a specification. Finally there is, “all the men of Israel,” which is another generalization. The saintly Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev said that when the entire Jewish people conduct themselves as one of these specific examples, such as “the heads of your tribes” – when they act righteously – then the *tzaddikim* can elevate the entire Jewish people, even the simplest, and truly bring them closer to Hashem. Furthermore, a *tzaddik* is able to show each Jew how tremendously important he is and just how much G-d loves him. All this occurs when a person is united with his fellow Jews, when he is sensitive to the other’s needs, and when he tries to help and support them.

The second response to such doubts can be found in the next verse, which states: “Your small children, your women and your stranger...from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water” (*Deuteronomy 29:10*). What importance do wood choppers and water drawers have? Why does the Torah mention them?

The chassid Reb Monia Mosenson, a diamond merchant, was once with his Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber of Lubavitch. At one point Reb Monia expressed his bewilderment at the Rebbe’s veneration of simple Jews: “Why does the Rebbe devote so much of his precious time to them?” he asked. The Rebbe replied, “Did you bring

any diamonds with you to sell at the fair?" When the chassid replied that he had, the Rebbe asked to see them. The chassid therefore opened his bag and showed the Rebbe his sparkling diamonds. The chassid pointed to one diamond in particular and said, "This one has really special qualities." The Rebbe replied, "I don't see anything special about it." The chassid then exclaimed, "Rebbe, to properly evaluate diamonds such as these, you have to be a diamond expert!" At that point the Rebbe shot back, "Listen to what you just said! So it is with simple Jews – you also have to be an expert of their qualities in order to appreciate them!"

This means that even a woodchopper or water drawer is important to Hashem. Each individual is valuable to the Master of the universe. This means that a person should never think, "Just who do I think I am? How important could I be to G-d?" No, absolutely not! Each person is important to G-d and everyone can come closer to Him, for every individual possesses special qualities. True, some are covered with dust – the dust of sin, the mask of materiality – yet when we remove that dust each person can shine like a diamond. Everyone can sparkle like a precious stone in the crown of the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

Thus we learn three great principles regarding how to return to Hashem and truly get closer to Him: Unity among the Jewish people, connecting ourselves to the *tzaddikim* of the generation (who are capable of elevating every Jew), and above all by not losing hope or dwelling on our perceived unimportance. We should instead proudly follow Hashem's ways in life. If we follow these three principles, we will truly be able to reach the day of judgment in a state of spiritual purity and cleanliness. We will have defenders on our side to ask for a good year filled with material and spiritual blessings. Amen, may it be so!

## *Parsha Vayeilech*

### *The Righteous Intercede for us During Their Lifetime and After Their Death*

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, “Behold, you will lie with your forefathers, but this people will rise up and stray after the gods of the foreigners of the land” (*Deuteronomy 31:16*).

It must be understood why, instead of encouraging Moses before his death (by consoling him over the fact that he is departing from this world and leaving the people of Israel alone in their destiny after being so devoted to him), the Holy One, blessed be He, does the exact opposite. He informs Moses of the grim news that after his death, this people will rise up and allow themselves to be led astray by other gods!

The explanation seems to be that when the Tzaddik leaves this material world and tastes of the Garden of Eden, at that moment he severs all connections with the material world. Since Moses was the defender of Israel (*Shemot Rabba 43:1*), during his lifetime the Holy One, blessed be He, told him that after his death, this people would rise up to allow themselves to be led astray by other gods, and that this would risk provoking His wrath. He told Moses this so that even after he passed away, he would continue to worry over the community of Israel and to defend it in order to save it from Divine wrath. This is why there is not one generation that does not contain a little of Moses’ spirit in it (*Zohar III:216b*), as he always intercedes for the Children of Israel as he did during his lifetime, and redemption will come because of his merit.

We note, in fact, that when Moses ascended to Heaven to receive the Torah, he was not at all aware that the Children of Israel were about to make the golden calf. This is because the Holy One, blessed be He, told him about it, as it is written, “Go, descend – for your people that you brought up from the land of Egypt has become corrupt. They have strayed quickly from the way that I have commanded them. They have made themselves a molten calf” (*Exodus 32:7-8*). It is obvious that if he had known about it beforehand, he would have descended from Heaven to prevent them from doing so.

We see in this a proof that when the righteous ascend to Heaven, they are totally separated from this world and know absolutely nothing of what happens here. When we light candles for the elevation of their souls, we awaken the merit of the righteous, as is stated in *Makor Haim* of the Tzaddik Rabbi Haim Pinto. In his work, he cites the introduction of Rabbi Haim Ben Attar’s book, wherein the latter states that the soul of a Tzaddik is awakened by the lighting of a candle lit for its elevation. The Tzaddik’s soul also takes into consideration the request of the person who lit the candle and intercedes in Heaven on his behalf.

We may also add that in studying the Torah of that Tzaddik, we connect it to his body. Moreover, his lips begin to move in the grave (*Yebamot 97a*). The Tzaddik derives

pleasure from the fact that his Torah is being evoked, because this entails the creation of angels, awakening the Tzaddik who studied it in this world. All this gives the Tzaddik great satisfaction.

This is why it is written, “Remember the Torah of Moses My servant” (*Malachi 3:22*). The entire Torah carries the name of the one who stated it, meaning Moses, in such a way that the lips of Moses never stop moving in the grave.

Now Moses was unique in his generation, and there has never arisen another prophet of his stature, as it is written, “Never again has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses” (*Deuteronomy 34:10*), and even more so after he tasted of the Garden of Eden. Therefore, so that he not forget the Children of Israel, but rather that he continue to intercede for them, the Holy One, blessed be He, told him to keep in mind that his people, whom he so loved, had given themselves over to idolatry and had provoked His wrath, a wrath that Moses was to turn back even after his death.

In Parsha *Haazinu*, it is written, “The L-RD spoke to Moses on that very day, saying” (*Deuteronomy 32:48*). Rashi explains that the expression “that very day” is mentioned in three places: Concerning Noah, concerning Egypt, and here concerning the death of Moses. The Children of Israel said, “We will not let him go, this man who brought us out of Egypt, who split the sea for us, who made the manna come down for us, who got us quail, who gave us wells, and who gave us the Torah – we will not abandon him.” The Holy One, blessed be He, said, “I will bring him into Heaven in the midst of the day.” We see from this that the Children of Israel suffered because of the thought that Moses was going to leave this world, to the point that they were ready to affront G-d’s wrath, to fight against the Angel of Death, and to give their life for Moses. This is what made the Holy One, blessed be He, say “on that very day,” meaning that their prayer and their battle would be of no use, for Moses’ time to leave this world had already come.

When the Holy One, blessed be He, told Moses “on that very day,” He wanted to tell him how much the Children of Israel loved him, to the point of being prepared to be killed by the Angel of Death in order that he remain alive. G-d did this in order to show Moses the greatness of their love for him, something that would encourage him to continue to intercede for them after his death.

### ***The Humility of Moses Towards All the Children of Israel***

The meaning of the verse that states, “Moses went and he spoke these words to all of Israel” (*Deuteronomy 31:1*) needs to be understood. In fact, on the day of his death Moses stood before the Jewish people and explained the Torah to them. Consequently, since he was always with them, where did he go?

There exists yet another difficulty. It is written, “I can no longer go out and come in, for the L-RD has said to me, ‘You shall not cross this Jordan’ ” (*v.2*), and Rashi explains in the name of the Gemara (*Sotah 13b*) that this refers to the words of Torah:

The instructions that Moses received had escaped him, and the sources of wisdom had been closed to him. This demands an explanation. Actually, Moses later gave them the mitzvah of the *Hakhel* (which takes place at the end of the Shmita year [Deuteronomy 31:12]), after which he again lavished his advice on them, wrote them a poem (v.22), and blessed everyone before his death (*ibid.* 33:1). All this seems to clearly show that no sources of wisdom had been closed to Moses, and that on the contrary, all such sources retained their full strength for him.

We will attempt to explain this point. We know that the Torah is extremely strict concerning relationships between people. The Torah especially punishes lapses in this area, for people find it difficult to humble themselves and ask forgiveness of others (without mentioning that those who have been wronged also have difficulty forgiving affronts to their honor), and they risk fighting to defend it, often engaging in a *machloket* (dispute). Note that this word is composed of letters that form the initials of the phrase *Maka Charon Likui Kelalah Toevah* (“Blows, anger, plagues, curses, abomination” – Bamidbar Rabba 18:10). One who engages in a dispute thus brings problems upon the entire community. Moreover, the one in the wrong should also seek forgiveness from his fellow (*Yoma 85b*). We see, therefore, that relationships among people are very important.

This was what the verse was referring to when it stating, “Moses went and he spoke.” Moses was the most humble of men (*Numbers 12:3*), friendly with everyone, to the extent that on the day of death, instead of occupying himself with personal affairs and his spiritual state, he went from one place to another, from one person to another, and from the beginning of the camp to its end in order to take care of the needs of the community, material and spiritual alike. He wanted to speak with everyone to encourage them to follow the right path, being careful that his words emanated from his heart so that they would enter the hearts of his listeners (*see Berachot 6a*). In addition, he saw no affront to his honor in doing this. Quite to the contrary, if he succeeded in making an impression even on the least significant of the people, that constituted his victory and his honor.

This is a lesson that every Rav should learn from Moses. If he believes that one of his students hasn't come to class as normal, it is proper that he should go find him and try to persuade him to have a better attitude. It is a mark of greatness and demonstrates an absence of pettiness for him to put the effort into going and getting someone, and the Gemara speaks several times of one of the Amoraim who wasn't at the Beit Midrash the day before (*see Bava Kama 20a*). We could be surprised that here it is written *vayidaber* (“and he spoke”), yet as we know, this word denotes a harsh response (*Tanhuma Tzav 1*). Why then did Moses use harsh language? It is because, according to what we have seen, the very fact that he bothered to go and find everyone without taking his honor into account is a very difficult thing for an ordinary man to do, and when such a man observes all of Moses' humility, this penetrates his heart and he draws a lesson from it.

To that which we have said up to now, I would like to add the following idea that I came across during my readings. In that which concerns Moses, the fact that he mingled with the Jewish people was a type of “descent in order to ascend” (*Makot 7b*). This means that being concerned with the most ordinary of people was considered by Moses as uplifting, since he raised them towards the royal path, elevating himself by so doing and bestowing merit to the community (see *Perkei Avoth 5:21[18]*), all this in order not to arrive at pride. The words “Moses went” recalls the expression “Go, descend” (*Exodus 19:24; 32:7*), for when Moses once again descended from the mountain towards the people, it was a “descent in order to ascend.” On the mountain, Moses received sublime messages, the only human being to have known them, as it is written, “You ascended on high, you have taken captives” (*Psalms 68:19*). Yet because of the fact that G-d told him, “Go, descend. Then you shall ascend,” shows that this descent was necessary in order to again ascend even higher.

Consequently, as I wrote elsewhere, by having a positive influence on even the most doubtful of the people, Moses earned us a Yom Kippur that is a day of forgiveness for the Children of Israel. He ascended a second time to receive the second tablets (*Tanhuma Tisa 31*), and it was by Moses’ merit, he who is the great defender of the Children of Israel, that each year they can come closer to G-d on Yom Kippur in asking forgiveness for all their sins.

Let us say at present that even if the sources of wisdom had been closed to Moses on the day of his death, in any case his heart was still filled with humility (which he demonstrated by going, through his own initiative, to each person, even the most ordinary). This allowed him to continue to reprimand the Children of Israel, to instruct them on how to live, and to bless them before his death, all so that they could learn humility from him as well. Among other things, he taught them the mitzvah of the *Hakhel*, which takes place at the end of the Shmita year. Now the instructions concerning the Shmita year were given on Mount Sinai, a mountain that, as we know, had greatly humbled itself (*Bereshith Rabba 99*). Thus everyone learned humility from Moses, who was humble like Mount Sinai and who had received the Torah from it (*Perkei Avoth 1:1*). Thus it would be known that Torah is acquired by humility (*ibid 6:4[6]*).

The Sages have said, “What connection is there between the Shmita year and Mount Sinai?” (Torat Kohanim and Rashi, beginning of Parsha Behar). We have already explained concerning this parsha that the Shmita year’s goal is to teach humility, for in that same year a master and his servant are equal, and the master makes the servant into his master. Consequently, even though the sources of wisdom were closed for Moses, his humility pushed him to go from one person to the other in order to bring everyone closer to Torah and wisdom. With kindness he taught them love for others and the mitzvah of the Shmita year (which is connected to humility), all this precisely before his death in order that we may remember it for all the generations to come.

This shows us just to what extent humility should go. Even though Moses had lost his strength and the sources of wisdom had been closed to him, his humility had

given him back his strength and wisdom, to the point that he wrote a poem for Israel, that he wrote the Torah down, and that he blessed them before his death. Actually, no decree can stand against humility and self-abasement, which also includes the act of bestowing merit to the community. As with all great character traits, humility is applicable to all men in every generation.

### *The Tzaddik's Testament Strengthens and Elevates*

It is written, "Moses went and spoke these words to all of Israel" (Deuteronomy 31: 1). Where did Moses go and why? The Children of Israel were constantly before him. It is difficult to imagine that he went to each person individually – tens of thousands of them – especially on the eve of his death!

Besides this, why does the verse state, "I can no longer go out and come in" (v.2) instead of "come in and go out"? We begin by first coming in, as we saw previously: "Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out" (Deuteronomy 28:6).

The reason is that Moses did not physically go to each member of the Assembly of Israel, yet his words became entrenched in their hearts due to the great love that he had for them. He told them the following: I am 120 years old today. I spoke to Hashem face to face (Numbers 12:8). I conquered the angels and touched the Celestial Throne (see Shabbat 85b), yet I have arrived at my end and it is useless to fight against the day of death (Ecclesiastes 8:8). Know that it is as if I had lived 120 years today, for I have not lost any of the days of my life. For your part, continue to serve Hashem with the same devotion and enthusiasm as at present, and do not turn to idols. Know that after a man's death, "neither silver nor gold nor precious stones nor pearls accompany him, but only Torah [study] and good deeds" (Perkei Avoth 6:9). Therefore be careful to fortify your Torah study and develop your fear of Heaven.

These words, in fact, awoke the Children of Israel and had a great impact on them. Concerning this subject, the Gemara relates the episode of Rabbi Eliezer's disciples. They came to visit him when he was ill, saying: "Master, teach us the paths of life so that, through them, we may win the life of the future world" (Berachot 28b). From this we see that the words of a Tzaddik on the eve of his death are a type of living testament that he leaves with his disciples, who will never forget them.

Today I am leaving this world, Moses continued, to rejoice in the life of the future world. I will not be able to leave my place up there and come and preach to you, for my departure from this world is final, contrary to my departure from Heaven to bring you the Torah. Imbue yourselves with my words, therefore, and reject none of them. Take the utmost advantage of this spiritual awakening that you are now experiencing.

As we have seen, before bringing a soul down into this world, the Celestial Court makes it swear to be upright, not immoral, so that it returns to its source entirely without sin. Of course, those in charge also give it instructions on how to rid itself of the evil inclination in this world.

Yet how and when is the soul made to swear this oath? Such a thing is only conceivable in this world, for there is no evil inclination or conception of sin in the supernal worlds. Therefore what good does it do to make the soul take an oath? We could try to answer by saying that a person is made to swear while in his mother's womb. However even there he learns Torah from an angel (*Niddah 30b*). The evil inclination does not exist there either, for it is outside, as it written: "Sin is crouching at the door" (*Genesis 4:7*).

The answer is that in reality, learning Torah in the womb constitutes an oath in and of itself, with the newborn receiving the command to continue studying in this world. The proof is that the holiday celebrating the giving of the Torah is called *Shavuot* ("oaths"), with every letter of the Torah being a delight, as it is written: "Taste and see that the L-RD is good" (*Psalms 34:9*), and the only good thing is Torah (*Berachot 5a*). It is therefore an oath whose existence we cannot deny.

This oath is made in the supernal worlds, the realm of souls. Even if a soul refuses to descend from these sublime worlds (where it is constantly engaged in Torah study), we force it to go down into the world of falsehood, as it is written: "Against your will you were created, against your will you were born" (*Perkei Avoth 4:22*). In the world into which you shall descend, you must remember that true life consists of engaging in Torah study and attaching yourself to the Holy One, blessed be He. It is as if you had sworn an oath before the G-d of Israel to continue in your spiritual fervor even once you have descended from the supernal worlds.

We may nevertheless ask ourselves if, in this world, we can remember what true life is, namely that of the supernal worlds. How can we remember that the soul is a part of godliness? It is because man is told, "Blessed shall you be when you come in." In other words, in the supernal worlds in which you now find yourself, everything is blessed, and here you fully enjoy spiritual delights. In that lower world, you will be able to take on the aspect of "Blessed shall you be when you go out." Therefore take care that it too becomes so blessed that you will have no desire to leave it.

We reach these levels only by engaging in Torah study and by fearing G-d. We then feel the existence of G-d in this world just as we felt it in the supernal worlds, and we will then have difficulty leaving this world, constantly yearning to elevate ourselves in Torah study and mitzvot observance. As we have seen, "One hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is better than all the life of the World to Come" (*Perkei Avoth 4:17*). If Moses in our verse is explaining to the Children of Israel that he cannot go out and come in, it is because when a person dies he can no longer perform the mitzvah of "when you come in...when you go out." This is due to the fact that "as soon as he dies he is restrained from [the practice of] Torah and good deeds, and the Holy One, blessed be He, finds nothing to praise in him" (*Shabbat 30a*). It is therefore appropriate for a person to be careful to rectify everything in this world so as to suitably present himself before G-d and have a more honorable place in the World to Come.

This is why, immediately upon awakening, we must express our gratitude to G-d, Who has returned our soul so that we may continue to engage in Torah study and the performance of mitzvot in this world, the World of Action. Blessings enable us to engage in Torah study, reconnect us to the Torah (which in the supernal worlds we swore to study), and allow us to continuously elevate ourselves. For example, the very fact of taking hold of a *lulav* and reciting a blessing on it makes us acquire it; it is part of the oath (see *Shavuot 38b*). Similarly when we raise a Torah scroll, it is as if we took an oath, and when we engage in Torah study we make the evil inclination swear to not disturb us (but only on condition that we have repented beforehand and are studying for the love of study itself, without ulterior motives or personal interest). We then feel ourselves living in a world that is blessed, and we can leave it free of all sin. This is the explanation for the verse that we saw above: “Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.”

This is why the words that Moses spoke to the Children of Israel on the eve of his death fixed themselves deeply in their hearts. They awoke from their spiritual lethargy and did complete and sincere Teshuvah. It was as if they had just been born, exempt of all sin (*Yebamot 22a*). Moses encouraged them to put an effort into not extinguishing their fervor, in order that they might see the face of the Supreme King.

## *Parsha Haazinu*

### *The Eternal Alone Leads the One Who Behaves Humbly*

It is written, “The L-RD alone did lead him, and there was no foreign god with Him” (*Deuteronomy 32:12*). The meaning of this verse is not clear, for if the Eternal alone directs Israel, it is obvious that there is no foreign god with Him. Why then the need to state this?

The Holy One, blessed be He, directs the Children of Israel and guards them so that they recognize Him, but only when they humble themselves before Him and remove the pride that dwells in their hearts. And the more someone isolates himself to examine his behavior, the more he merits knowing G-d. This is the meaning of “and there was no foreign god with Him.” The word *neichar* (“foreign”) has the same numerical value as *ra* (“evil”). In fact there is nothing as bad as pride, and if a man in his pretentiousness dreams of being compared to G-d, then G-d says, “He and I cannot live together in this world” (*Arachin 15b*), for such a man is called evil. When does G-d direct and lead a man? When that man has no foreign god with him, meaning that far from being imbued with pride, he on the contrary abases himself before G-d, and that is the meaning of “The L-RD alone did lead him.” The word *ra* (“evil”) has the same Gematria ketanah as *geieh* (“pride”), and in the absence of all arrogance, G-d leads him.

Who do we have who is greater than Moses, of whom it is said, “Moses came and spoke all the words of this song in the ears of the people” (*Deuteronomy 32:44*)? How did he manage to speak in private to tens of thousands of men, women, and children? This shows us his greatness, his humility, and his self-effacement before all Israel, to the point that his words were actually heard by all of them, words that descended into the heart of each of them individually. They therefore understood what each must work on and how each must serve G-d. Moreover, they had the impression that Moses personally spoke to every one of them.

Moses had arrived at this extraordinary level because he knew that pride is appropriate only for the Eternal. Now Moses was the most humble of all the men on the earth (*Numbers 12:3*), and his modesty had already allowed him to attain the level necessary to graze the flock that was Israel, even while he was shepherding the flock of Jethro his father-in-law in the desert (*Exodus 3:1*). From that point on, he never stopped elevating himself, to the extent that he arrived at humbling himself before all men made in the image of G-d. Thus in him was fulfilled the verse that states, “For the L-RD’s portion is His people. Jacob is the lot of His inheritance” (*Deuteronomy 32:9*), for the one who is part of G-d – who is attached to and abases himself before Him – he alone can be called “the lot of His inheritance.” He is attracted by G-d and attaches himself to Him, and G-d is his heritage and his portion. This is our role in the world: To humbly stand as servants before G-d.

In regards to this, our Sages have said, “Whoever becomes proud, it is as if he committed idolatry” (*Pesikta Zutah Beha’alotcha 12:2*). A man will do this in order to allow himself to sin, as it is said, “Israel only gives itself over to idolatry in order to allow itself to sin” (*Sanhedrin 63b*). At the time of the incident of the golden calf, it is written, “and they got up to rebel” (Exodus 32:6), and Rashi explains in the name of the Sages that this refers to forbidden relations (*Tanhuma Tisa 20*). It follows, therefore, that if a man is imperfect in the area of morals, as well as in the areas of idolatry, purity of the eyes, or wicked thoughts (or even acts), all this stems from the pride that is within him. Even if he studies, all his learning is aimed at feeling superior to others, an attitude that leads to the grave sin of forbidden relations or other serious prohibitions. At that moment, given that pride is a useless thing, he is punished measure for measure by useless spiritual blemishes. In the same way, someone who gives a course to students and derives pride from it falls into serious sin. This is because he only aims to show off at the expense of others, which engenders the sin, and he imagines that the Torah belongs to him and that he receives nothing from G-d.

As for Moses, he was self-effacing before everyone and the most humble of men on the earth. This means that he felt himself to be more insignificant than even the earth that is tread on by foot, and this is what earned him everything he merited. Everyone should follow his example, and if one wants to uproot one’s sins (which originate from animal matter), one must devote oneself to the holy Torah with humility and self-effacement. This leads to an awareness of G-d and to the bowing down before His glory. In this way a person contributes to the perpetuation of Creation, through humility and the love of others, and at that moment the Eternal will guide and conduct him on the right path.

In reflecting upon this, we note just to what point we are insignificant. For if the holy Patriarchs deserved that which we have not deserved, it is because their entire yearning was to arrive at an understanding of the Creator. Through self-effacement and personal effort, they arrived at the point where their kidneys became like two vessels overflowing with Torah (*Bereshith Rabba 61*), for they were entirely directed towards the search for truth. Consequently, only the holy Torah remains for us, accompanied by real introspection, and it is only with such that we will arrive at ever-higher levels of understanding. For the Torah is not enough; one must also fight against the evil inclination. This is the meaning of *heshbon nefesh* (introspection), whose initials make up the Hebrew word *nah* (the root of which means “rest”, “serenity”). In fact, one can only undertake a proper introspection when one is calm and tranquil. This is the sense of King David’s exclamation, “When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers” (Psalms 8:4): Is it only when calm and pensive that one comes to an awareness of G-d and can say “How abundant are Your works, O L-RD!” (*Psalms 104:24*).

With regards to this, how many times does a person witness the marvels of nature, yet by force of habit it does not enter his mind to praise and exalt G-d? The remedy for this is to go to the mountains and to contemplate nature, and to focus all one’s

attention on admiring the marvels of Creation. This is what constitutes “When I behold,” meaning that it is to observe nature without stop and thus to understand Who created it all, as did Abraham, who at first did not discern the Holy One, blessed be He, but finally became aware of Him.

The prophet Jeremiah said, “Let us search and examine our ways and return to the L-RD” (*Lamentations 3:40*). This alludes to the fact that it is when a man rests from all his work of the entire year that he has the time to examine himself and see if he is walking in the right path. The meaning of “examine our ways” is that in moments of tranquility, one must undertake a deep introspective examination of all that one has done and to repair that which needs repairing. In this way, one returns to the Eternal with all one’s heart and all one’s soul, and this allows one to begin the month of Elul.

One must also understand that Shabbat, when it is properly valued, is a day in which one should reflect upon one’s actions during the previous week and to try to find a way to correct one’s faults. The word *Shabbat* has the same root as the word *Teshuvah*, and its letters form the initials of the expression *Shabbat Bo Tashuv* (“repent on Shabbat”). This recalls the verse that states, “You reduce [*tasheviv*, which has the same letters as *Shabbat*] man to pulp” (*Psalms 90:3*), for on Shabbat it is easy to return to G-d. He then guides us, particularly on Shabbat, a day that is a foretaste of the world to come. Moreover, concerning Torah study, the book *Ben Ish Hai* states that even the person who does not have the opportunity to study during the week should at least do so on Shabbat, as the Sages have said: “That he makes his Shabbat into a entire day of Torah” (*Tanna D’vei Eliyahu Rabba 1*). In fact, the holiness of Shabbat can have a positive influence on all the days of the week, for a man who absorbs this atmosphere of purity can greatly elevate himself.

Since we have arrived to this point, we can now better understand the following expression in the Morning Prayer: “[He] has set us apart from those who go astray, and has given us the Torah of truth and implanted within us eternal life” as well as the blessing on the Torah: “Who has chosen us from among all peoples and given us His Torah.” This means that all the differences between a Jew and a non-Jew reside in the holy Torah, which directs the Jew towards eternal life. The Jew carries in him, engraved on his heart, the realization that he must take advantage of every moment in this world for Torah and mitzvot in order to merit life in the world to come. With every mitzvah that he performs, he senses that his entire life depends on it. He even uses moments of relaxation to reflect on his behavior, which is not the case with the non-Jew, for whom the entire universe begins and ends with this world and who dreams of nothing other than to spend one moment to the next rejoicing over what he can, and whose entire life is thus summed up by a profound weariness. This attitude is reflected in the verse that states, “they ... pursued futility and became futile” (*Jeremiah 2:5*). This is the meaning of “the L-RD alone leads them,” namely that He leads them when they occupy themselves with Torah, as opposed to idolaters.

Above all, a man must understand that the more the moment is appropriate, the more the evil inclination searches to bother him and make him transgress. One example of this principle is the Mincha prayer, of which it is stated, “And it was [*vayehi*] at the time of the afternoon-offering [*mincha*]” (*1 Kings 18:36*). Now we know that the expression *vayehi* is always used when speaking of a tragedy (*Megillah 10b*). For example, when we are in the middle of doing something that is potentially very profitable and the time for Mincha arrives, it requires much courage to close one’s store. Moreover, it requires strength to push oneself to attend Mincha services if one is tired and would rather rest. The word *mincha* means a gift, a present that one offers to the Holy One, blessed be He. A person merits a great spiritual uplifting when he takes it upon himself to perform Mincha at a difficult time. This is why the Sages have said, “Eliyahu was only answered during Mincha” (*Berachot 6b*).

In addition, during the Mincha prayer service of Yom Kippur, a person is hungry and tired, and it is difficult to concentrate on prayer. Yet if despite everything a person conquers his fatigue and offers his mincha, his gift, to the Eternal, it is as if he offered his life to G-d. It is similar to Abraham, who went to sacrifice his son Isaac, and who said with every gesture that he made on the ram: “May all this be considered as if I did it to my son Isaac” (*Tanhuma Shelach 14*). In offering one’s soul to G-d, one merits a great spiritual elevation, and so “the L-RD alone leads him.” He guides him in the way of good life, all this occurring when one is self-effacing before Him and studies the holy Torah with humility, a sense of lowliness, and self-effacement.

### *The Wonders of G-d Towards All Men*

In our parsha, the poem Haazinu recounts throughout its verses how the Holy One, blessed be He, bestows His beneficial influence upon the Children of Israel, in contrast to the other nations of the world. From the beginning we recite, “Ascribe greatness to our G-d” (*Deuteronomy 32:3*) and further on, “He would make him ride on the heights of the land . . . with honey from a stone, and oil from a flinty rock” (*v.13*). We also read, “For the L-RD’s portion is His people; Jacob is the measure of His inheritance” (*v.9*). Concerning this subject, Moses exhorts Israel as follows: “Remember the days of yore, understand the years of generation after generation” (*v.7*) in order to tell us that everything stems from the Holy One, blessed by He, Who made everything, and that all the wonders that we witness are due to Him.

Yet because of our many sins, today there are numerous people who look at all of creation without attributing any importance to G-d. They do so because they consider it as natural, as self-evident. In fact they believe that everything is natural and ordinary, yet they don’t ask themselves the same questions that Abraham did, who realized that all comes from G-d and that He is the Master of the world (*Bereshith Rabba 39:1*). Concerning them it is said, “We lead a man by the path that he wants to take” (*Makot 10b*), and if he wants to invent lies to explain the world, he is not prevented from doing so. However if a man desires to arrive at the truth, he is helped, and not only does he receive his

reward, but he also merits sanctifying G-d's Name. This is why it is written, "This emanated from the L-RD; it is wondrous in our eyes" (*Psalms 118:23*), which means that all wonders stem from G-d because He also created nature.

Yet those who don't look for truth simply say that all is natural and everything is self-evident. To these, G-d responds measure for measure. Actually, they claim that everything is natural, but we know that *hateva* (nature) has the same numerical value as the name *Elokim*. Now this Name represents strict justice (*Zohar 1:64*), which is why such people arouse severity, both in this world and the World to Come. Consequently, nature avenges itself on the wicked, as when all of a sudden a volcano erupts and kills multitudes of people, or when an earthquake causes destruction, or when people die in tempests or violent storms. This is because nature is *Elokim*, strict justice, and because justice attacks the wicked in order to teach us that everything stems from G-d.

Now when severity increases in the world, it doesn't distinguish between good and bad, and even the good are punished in this world, even if it means that they will receive their reward in the World to Come. Alternatively, it can also happen that G-d performs miracles and saves them from strict justice, which for them turns into mercy. They are therefore saved as a reward for their belief that G-d also created nature. Actually, all men fall under mercy's influence, and they can change justice into mercy by the power of their faith in the Creator.

This summer I was in the mountains, and I saw an extraordinary landscape of high peaks. I was taken with trembling before the glory of G-d's majesty and all that He created in the world by strict justice in order to punish those who deny His existence, not recognizing the truth but rather inventing lies in their heart. I then clearly felt the words of King David: "How [*mah*] abundant are Your works, O L-RD" (*Psalms 104:24*). The word *mah* has a numerical value of 45, which means that on one hand King David sees nature as having been created by justice, and on the other hand he says that because he sensed the truth, justice transformed itself into mercy. This allows a person to attach himself even more deeply to the Holy One, blessed be He, and this is what is expressed in the poem Haazinu: "Ascribe greatness to our G-d [*Elokeinu*]," for the Name *Elokim* represents strict justice. However if we recognize the truth, then "the L-RD's portion is His people." The Tetragrammaton (here translated as "the L-RD") represents mercy, which means that justice transforms itself into mercy – all this when we ascribe glory (even that of nature) exclusively to the Holy One, blessed be He.

While I was standing like this in front of the great mountains and imposing landscape, contemplating on all of Creation that G-d made and gathering faith in Him in my heart, someone approached me and told me that he had heard in the name of the Admor of Belz that the Holy One, blessed be He, brings the pure air of Jerusalem to Europe and the entire world. I then asked myself why in fact the Holy One, blessed be He, had created this magnificent landscape precisely in Europe, and why He had to bring Jerusalem's pure air to it.

To explain this, we shall digress slightly. Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav, “Israel knew perfectly well that there was nothing to idolatry, and they worshipped idols only as a means to permit itself public immorality” (*Sanhedrin 63b*). Rashi explains that a spirit of indecency seized the Children of Israel and they wanted to rid themselves of it, but a spirit of idolatry did not take hold of them. This is very surprising. Is it possible that the generation of the desert, which heard the voice of G-d speaking to them from out of the fire (*Deuteronomy 4:12*), and which witnessed all sorts of miracles, was drawn to lewd behavior? How was such a thing possible, especially for that generation, which even in Egypt had maintained all of its purity in this area? They had not damaged the covenant of circumcision, and they had changed neither their names, nor their language, nor their style of dress (*Vayikra Rabba 32:5*). Furthermore, they had sanctified themselves after passing through the 49 gates of impurity (*Zohar Yitro 39a*), and they had received the Torah! Did they need to go and make a golden calf in order to permit themselves this lewdness that they had so carefully protected themselves against while in Egypt?

Concerning this, it must be explained that the generation of the desert arrived at this terrible situation because it neglected Torah study. Now we know that idleness leads to boredom, which leads to indecency (*Kelubot 59b*) and a degree of depravity that cannot even be imagined. This is why the Children of Israel pretended to deceive Heaven by saying that they needed a leader as powerful as Moses, and that for him to be accepted by everyone (even according to Aaron), it had to be done by sorcery, which is why they made the calf. Yet inside their hearts they knew very well that all this wasn't true, and that if they had wanted to, they could have destroyed it without anyone preventing them. They only wanted to allow themselves to behave lewdly because that's what they had in mind given their negligence in Torah study and the boredom that ensued, and they were not able to save themselves from this desire.

This shows us the seriousness of neglecting Torah study, for even with as great a generation as that one, it leads to depravity, and even to idolatry, forbidden relations, and murder. Consequently, it is forbidden to take a break from the holy Torah. The goal of relaxation should only be for soul-searching in order to continue to attach oneself to G-d and to become aware of one's responsibility in the world. Everything that G-d created in His universe is designed so that man doesn't remain idle for a single moment, so that he doesn't arrive at boredom and committing grave sins. Yet when he rests, he should renew himself in his service of G-d and contemplate Creation. He should say, “How abundant are Your works, O L-RD” (*Psalms 104:24*). He will then know and understand Who created all of this, and his love for his Creator will increase. When he finds himself in the mountains, the pure air will inspire wisdom in him.

This is complete understandable, for G-d did everything for the Children of Israel, not for the delight of those who reject His yoke and claim that everything is natural. Such people want to allow themselves everything that is forbidden, arriving at indecency, idolatry, violence and murder. They obey all their instincts and transgress

laws by even crossing some animal species with others, still thinking that G-d will continue to allow things to be, without realizing that He can also destroy everything and reconstruct everything.

This is why, in reality, even when Israel is in exile, G-d ensures that he enjoys the splendors of nature. This is due to the simple fact that contemplating the beauty of nature leads Israel to “ascribe greatness to our G-d” (*Deuteronomy 32:3*) and realize that everything comes from Him, contrary to those who believe that everything is natural and self-evident. In Parsha Haazinu we learn to see G-d in everything, to become aware that everything stems from Him, and to realize that we should not slacken in Torah study.

### *Unity and Torah are the Foundations of Teshuvah*

Our Sages say, “Great is Teshuvah, for it reaches to the Throne of Glory, as it is said: ‘Return, O Israel, to the L-RD your G-d’ [*Hosea 14:2*]” (*Yoma 86a*). From this we see just how great and importance Teshuvah is. True, we are past Rosh Hashanah, following many prayers and blasts of the *shofar*, yet we need to understand that there is something special about Shabbat Teshuvah, something that is not found in any other Shabbat.

We should realize that there are two basic principles upon which we can easily return to G-d, namely Jewish unity and Torah. In fact the prophet states, “Return, O Israel” (*Hosea 14:2*) and “Take words with you” (*v.3*). Which words are these? They are the words of Torah, as well as ones of unity and love among the entire Jewish people. We cannot repent if we are not united with others, for the Sages have said: “For transgressions between man and his fellow, Yom Kippur does not procure atonement until he has pacified his fellow” (*Yoma 85b*). It is only when we find ourselves united with others that we can appreciate the seriousness of our sins and repent with all our heart and soul.

This is why the prophet states, “Return [*shuvah*], O Israel” with the singular term *shuvah*, not the plural term *shuvu*. It is because all Jews must be completely united, for then they can repent like a single person in complete Teshuvah before Hashem.

Nevertheless, let no one think that unity alone is enough for complete Teshuvah. Absolutely not! A person also needs the power of the Torah, which is what the prophet alludes to by stating, “Take words with you.” These consist of the words of Torah, for what is written in the Torah returns a person to the right path (*Yerushalmi, Hagigah 1:7*). The light within the Torah shows a person just how much he must improve his deeds and repent, not only of the sins that he committed against others, but also of those he committed against G-d.

We need to pay careful attention to this if we want to merit a good year. Thus the greatness of Shabbat Teshuvah, which occurs between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, lies in its ability to help every individual engage in complete Teshuvah.

In addition, on Yom Kippur we also forcefully demonstrate our unity, for at the beginning of Yom Kippur we say, “We hereby grant permission to pray with those who have transgressed.” We want to be united with all *Klal* Israel, even with those who do not always come to synagogue. All this is in order for love, fraternity, and unity to reign among the entire Jewish people. We can completely repent in this way; we have the power to do it.

In addition, these two things – the principle of unity and Torah, the two foundations of Teshuvah – are alluded to at the beginning of Parsha Haazinu. There it is written, “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and may the earth hear the words of my mouth...” (*Deuteronomy 32:1*). The heavens are an allusion to the words of Torah, to the mitzvot between man and his Creator, for which Teshuvah must be made. The earth is an allusion to the mitzvot between man and his fellow, dealing with the entire subject of unity, for which Teshuvah must also be made. A person must not neglect any of these main components, and he should constantly think of how he can improve himself in these areas. It is only in this way that we can reach G-d and the Throne of Glory.

If we remain united and strengthen our Torah study, we will merit a good year filled with blessings and an inscription in the book of the righteous. Amen.

### ***How Great Are Your Works!***

Each day in the Morning Prayer we recite, “Who in His goodness renews each day, continuously, the work of Creation.” Every day Hashem renews the Creation that He brought into existence. However the language of this prayer seems to indicate that Hashem is not content with just renewing Creation each day. This in itself is something extraordinary: Day follows day, yet in His goodness Hashem is constantly renewing the work of Creation. Thus each day He does us this kindness.

Let us try and imagine what the world would resemble, and what we ourselves would be like, if Hashem had never renewed Creation. There’s no way to picture it! As a result, by the fact of renewing Creation each day, Hashem demonstrates His kindness to us. What is the nature of this kindness? In this week’s parsha, within the song *Haazinu*, we read of the great kindness and goodness that Hashem bestowed to His people Israel in comparison to the other nations. Among other things we read, “The Supreme One gave the nations their inheritance when He separated the children of man...for the L-RD’s portion is His people; Jacob is the measure of His inheritance... He discovered him in a desert land...He would suckle him with honey from a stone and oil from a flinty rock” (*Deuteronomy 32:8-10,13*). This proves just how much good Hashem does for us, just to what point He protects His people Israel, and just to what extent He loves us more than the other nations, for they do nothing but constantly irritate Him.

However in the final analysis, are we really thinking about what we are saying? Do we understand, be it just a little, the wonders and kindnesses that Hashem demonstrates to us each day, continuously and at each instant?

To our great regret and shame, there are many people who simply deny the reality of the Creator. They claim that all things are part of nature, that everything occurs on its own, and that the world has no ruler! Some believe that Hashem ascended to the heights and has no interest in what His creations do below, since to them everything happens by chance, as an everyday occurrence. Concerning such people the Gemara states, “One is allowed to follow the road he wishes to pursue” (*Makot 10b*). However we have more than enough to silence them.

We must realize that there is no reality to what people call “nature.” We are told in sacred writings that *hateva* (nature) has the same numerical value as *Elokim*. This means that nature itself was created by G-d. If we do not instill this realization into our hearts and minds, however, we will end up denying Hashem and all His works, for nature and Hashem are like two inseparable friends.

However there are two aspects to nature itself, and indeed to all of Creation, for all things were created in this way. There is mercy on one hand, since Hashem shows mercy to the Jewish people and guides the world according to kindness and mercy, and there is justice on the other. This means that when the Jewish people do not act as they should, Hashem guides the world according to the attribute of justice and is uncompromising. That being the case, no one can emerge innocent.

Justice and mercy are found with each separate individual. Sometimes we see that things are all working out for the best, such as when our work is flourishing, when we derive satisfaction from life, and so on. This is because at that moment the Holy One, blessed be He, is dealing with us according to the attribute of mercy. Conversely, we sometimes have the definite impression that “things aren’t right,” that everything is going wrong. Why does this happen?

As we have said, when things are going wrong, when the Torah is not penetrating our minds and we are facing problems and misfortunes, we must realize that the Holy One, blessed be He, is dealing with us according to the attribute of justice. Yet at the same time, we need to understand that we must still thank Him *regardless* of the attribute He uses in dealing with us. As our Sages have said concerning King David’s statement, “I will raise the cup of salvation and call upon the Name of the L-RD” (*Psalms 116:13*): “I found trouble and sorrow, but I called upon the Name of the L-RD” (*Berachot 60b*). We no doubt believe that to arrive at such a point, we must be at a certain spiritual level. Yet in reality, this is completely not true. In our parsha it is written, “When I proclaim the name of the L-RD, ascribe greatness to our G-d” (*Deuteronomy 32:3*). That is, at first the verse employs the Name that corresponds to the attribute of mercy, followed by the Name corresponding to the attribute of justice. From here we learn that even when justice prevails, we must nevertheless render homage to Hashem and thank Him.

We may still ask, despite all this, how we can thank and glorify G-d when we are struck by strict justice. That is, when things (in general and specifically) are not going

well, our minds find it hard to tolerate and our daily routine is disrupted. Therefore how can we thank Hashem during such times?

This is why we said at the outset that each day Hashem renews the work of Creation. Now just what is “the work of Creation”? Everyone must realize that “the world was created for my sake” (*Sanhedrin 37a*). Each person must be conscious of what the Sages said, namely that the whole world was created for the sake of the Jewish people. At the same time, we must also remember that the world was created for something else, since it was created for *two* things called *reshith* (“beginning”): Israel and the holy Torah. If the Torah would no longer be studied, the world would revert to chaos. Without Torah, there would be no reason for having a world. However with Torah, everything transforms into mercy.

How does all this happen? The Torah stems entirely from mercy, and when a person studies Torah he fully understands that everything emanates from G-d and that everything is very good – that even strict justice is a form of mercy – since by the Torah we can transform justice into mercy. It is precisely through the Torah that we may see how different we are from the other peoples, as stated in this week’s parsha: “He set the borders of the peoples according to the number of the Children of Israel” (*Deuteronomy 32:8*). When the Jewish people do G-d’s will, He does their will and sends them good in abundance. Parachat

## *Vezot Haberacha*

### *The Torah: An Elixir of Life for this World and the World to Come*

We can perceive a certain degree of redundancy in the blessing of Moses to Reuben: “May Reuben live and not die” (*Deuteronomy 33:6*). Since death spares no one, what did Moses mean by these words?

The Torah is an elixir of life for man’s entire body (*Eruvin 54a; Kiddushin 30b*). By engaging in the study of Torah, we literally become a part of it. It nourishes our 248 members and 365 sinews. It is *re’eu ben*: When we diligently study Torah and *ro’eh* (see only it), we become a *ben* (son) of the Torah.

This son of the Torah therefore lives for eternity, for as we know the *tzaddikim* are called alive after they have died. Indeed, they are even greater after death than in life. This is the meaning of the expression *vehi metav mispar* (“may his population be included in the count”), which can also be understood as: He will die after a set number of years and proceed to a world where everything is good. It is by intensive Torah study that we can appreciate the sweetness of the Torah and live in both worlds eternally.

Moses beseeched Hashem to let him live and bring him into the land of Israel. However Hashem did not approve. The Midrash recounts that Moses begged Him to let him enter as a bird or a fish, his two hands serving as fins. Hashem replied that if He did that, He would be transgressing His own oath (see *Devarim Rabba, Va’etchanan; Tanhuma ad. loc.*).

As an infant, Moses refused to nurse from an Egyptian because his mouth would later speak to the *Shechnihah*. As a man, Moses was the father of the prophets (*Vayikra Rabba 1:15*), a person who spoke to Hashem face to face, ascended to Heaven body and soul to receive the Torah, and reached levels of holiness that no other person ever had. Thus how could we possibly think that Moses had begged G-d to transform him into a bird or a fish, ready to consume grass or even insects that are forbidden to eat?

It is precisely because of his greatness that Moses appreciated life so much, for as long as a person is alive he can study Torah, fulfill *mitzvot*, and refine his character traits and deeds without end. It is in this way that we give satisfaction to our Creator. Yet after we die, we are exempt from having to study Torah and fulfill *mitzvot*. As we have seen, an hour of repentance and good deeds in this world has greater value than the entire World to Come. The Gemara recounts that upon Moses’ ascension to Heaven, the angels wanted to burn him with the breath of their mouth, for they disagreed with the idea that a man, born of woman, could be in their midst (*Shabbat 88b*). Jealous of him, they asked how a man, made of flesh and blood, could manage to control his evil inclination, ascend to Heaven, and remain alive. Thus they understood their insignificance, for their essence was completely revealed by the fact that they do

not possess an evil inclination, nor a body for that matter. They could not understand the presence of a mortal among them, one whose face shined with the brilliance of the sun. As for the angels themselves, when they descended to earth they took daughters from the land and sinned with them in the era of the generation of the flood (see *Niddah 61a*). Moses was therefore greater than the angels because of the Torah.

Having triumphed over the angels, Moses took hold of the Celestial Throne and asked them, “Do you have a right to be jealous? Does the evil inclination reside in you? If that were the case, you would not be able to resist it.” The angels then praised Hashem: “O L-RD, our Master, how mighty is Your Name throughout the earth” (*Psalms 8:10; Shabbat 88a*). They understood that to be able to master the evil inclination, the Children of Israel had to receive the Torah.

Having realized that it is only in this lower world, not in the Heavens, that one can serve G-d and constantly praise and exalt Him with divine aid, Moses expressed his desire to be transformed into a bird, if only he could remain alive, constantly serve G-d, and praise and exalt Him. Moses was even prepared to lose his status as a prophet of Israel.

During a visit to my great friend the Belzer Rebbe in Israel, he asked me how we can understand the prayer of the dog, a particularly insolent and crude animal, which nevertheless exclaims: “Come, let us prostrate ourselves and bow. Let us kneel before G-d our Maker” (*Psalms 95:6*). Does such an insolent creature have the right to pray before Hashem and praise Him?

It is here that we see the greatness of the dog, I told him, for although it is insolent and crude, and nothing shames it, it sincerely does whatever it is told. Being insolent and crude is no fault of its own, for it was in this way that it was created. Conversely, the dog has been endowed with a tremendous virtue: Its gratitude and absolute loyalty to its master. It also prostrates before G-d and submits to Him, inviting the entire world to express its gratitude to the Creator.

On the other hand, an insolent man cannot submit to G-d. It is therefore incumbent on every person created in the image of G-d, Who breathed into man the breath of life and gave him intelligence, to emulate His divine attributes and submit to Him through the study of Torah. He will then merit eternal life.

For Moses, life had exceedingly great importance. He yearned to live at all costs because he wanted to serve G-d. This is also why he began, just before his death, his discourse by the word *vezot*, which signifies the Torah, as it is written: “*Vezot* [And this is] the Torah” (*Deuteronomy 4:44*). This teaches us that whoever engages in the study of Torah, *Vezot Haberacha*, the Torah itself becomes a blessing for him. The world was created in six days precisely for the Torah (*Pesachim 68b*), which was given on the sixth day of Sivan. It is a blessing for all Israel.

As we have seen, the Midrash recounts that before Moses’ death, G-d hid the two trumpets in order to prevent him from summoning the people with them. G-d wanted

Moses to personally go to each individual among the Children of Israel in order to make them realize the value of life. He wanted Moses to encourage them to use all their time to study Torah, explaining to them that if he was rushing so much, it was because he no longer had much time remaining. Moses therefore prayed that his end would not come, thereby enabling him to continue serving G-d with all his heart and soul.

When King David learned that he was to die on Shabbat, he spent his final day studying Torah with the utmost strength and intensity. The question that arises is obvious: Did he think he was immortal? Did he ignore the fact that death spares no one? The answer is that he desired to live in this world in order to continue intensely engaging in Torah study. His goal in this was to bring satisfaction to his Creator, for life only assumes importance in this world when we can study Torah, the best remedy against the evil inclination. It is only in this world that we can praise and exalt G-d.

The Ohr Chadash cites a teaching of our Sages, according to which the Holy One, blessed be He, promised *Mashiach* the son of David that he must reveal himself at the earliest in our days in order to give him everything he wants, as it is written: "I am obliged to proclaim that the L-RD said to me, 'You are My son, I have begotten you this day. Ask of Me, and I will make nations your inheritance' " (*Psalms 2:7-8*). Seeing the death of *Mashiach* the son of Joseph, he said to Hashem: "Sovereign of the universe, I ask of You only the gift of life" (*Sukkah 52a*). The author explains that here we see that if *Mashiach* the son of Joseph had not been killed, then *Mashiach* the son of David would not have beseeched G-d to make him reach the greatest spiritual heights, as befitting the son of David. However the death of *Mashiach* the son of Joseph constrained all his requests, and He implored G-d to give him life, which is the greatest thing of all.

The death of *Mashiach* the son of Joseph contributed to putting the value of life in perspective. Is there, in fact, a greater gift than life? Is there a greater kindness or treasure than life? Life comprises all blessings, for at each instant we can attain sublime and eternal levels. When we have life we have everything, and we need nothing more.

Why did *Mashiach* the son of David ask for life? He will surely live to fulfill his mission of liberating the Jewish people! The answer is that after the death of *Mashiach* the son of Joseph, he will consider that rather than being a mortal *Mashiach*, it would be better to live without this title and not die, all in order to serve G-d and give Him satisfaction. For him nothing was worth as much as eternal life, in which we can engage in Torah study and endlessly develop our knowledge of G-d, wisdom, and fear of Heaven.

Why the mad dash to get rich, if we know that in the end we will die and leave all our goods to others (*Psalms 49:11*)? On this King Solomon said, "A live dog is better than a dead lion" (*Ecclesiastes 9:4*). As we saw earlier, the dog exalts his Creator and calls every person to submit to Him. When we address our prayers to Hashem, let us be content with imploring Him to give us life (as in the prayers of Rosh Hashanah), for in life we

can reach lofty spiritual levels. I have often noticed that people who hear a beautiful Torah lesson from a gifted speaker will continue to blithely follow their daily routine. Why were the impassioned words that they heard unable to penetrate their hearts, while at the same time they had a great impact on certain individuals, making them take to the right path?

The reason is that those who regularly go to synagogue are used to hearing Torah discourses from rabbis, and therefore their impact on them is limited. However if these same people were to carefully put these teachings into practice, they would certainly be infused in their hearts.

Furthermore, it is not enough to simply pray regularly. It is crucial to fix regular times for Torah study, for in the morning prayer we implore G-d to enlighten our eyes in His Torah and make our hearts cleave to His commandments. Since G-d hears our prayer and grants the first part of our request, how can we then refrain from opening a book and rejoicing in the sublime light of the Torah that was given to us as a gift from Hashem? How can we allow ourselves to use this light for our own frivolous purposes? Our punishment will be infinitely worse in that case, G-d forbid, because while profaning G-d's Name, we will have refrained from engaging in the study of Torah. Let us therefore concentrate for a few moments before prayer or Torah study in order that our service of Hashem should not become a daily routine to us. Let us plumb the depths of the Torah's holiness and carefully put what we have learned into practice. Otherwise what purpose will our lives have served?

### *The Breaking of the Tablets of the Law*

The Torah ends with the words "...and by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moses performed before the eyes of all Israel" (*Deuteronomy 34:12*), and it begins with, "In the beginning, G-d created the heavens and the earth" (*Genesis 1:1*). We must try and establish a link between the end of the Torah and its beginning.

Man was created only to adhere to G-d's will and give Him satisfaction (if we may express it as such) by engaging in Torah study and the performance of *mitzvot*. It is in this way that a person cleaves to G-d with the utmost degree of sincerity and devotion. Now just as a person who loves money is never satisfied by it (*Ecclesiastes 5:9*), one who truly loves G-d never tires; he is constantly trying to love G-d and cling to Him.

This deals with someone whose occupation is Torah study. Nevertheless a person who works in order to meet his needs, yet still fixes times for studying Torah, must also increase his hours of study and constantly be on the watch to embellish the *mitzvot* he performs, a concept embodied by the verse: "This is my G-d, and I will adorn Him" (*Exodus 15:2*). This is what essentially characterized our Patriarchs, who spoke little and did much (*Perkei Avoth 1:15*).

When the Children of Israel committed the sin of the golden calf, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: "Go, descend, for your people that you brought up from

the land of Egypt has become corrupt” (*Exodus 32:7*) Afterwards, as Moses approached the camp, he saw the calf and the people dancing. At that point his wrath blazed, and he threw down the Tablets of the Law from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain (*v.19*). Why did Moses not leave the Tablets of the Law in Heaven? He could have descended from Heaven empty-handed and reprimanded the Children of Israel for their wrongdoing, and then he could have beseeched Hashem to forgive them. Moses could have argued with Hashem that it was to him, not to the people, that He gave the prohibition against idol worship, after which he could have asked G-d to erase him from the book of life (*v.32*).

On the other hand, commenting on the last words of Deuteronomy (“in the eyes of all Israel”), Rashi explains that Moses was proud to have broken the tablets before the people, as it is written: “I smashed them before your eyes” (*Deuteronomy 9:17*). G-d also agreed with him, as it is written: “Like the first... which you shattered” (*Exodus 34:1*). The Gemara adds that G-d told Moses, “All strength to you that you broke it” (*Shabbat 87a*). What pride is there in this? Was the sin of the golden calf not serious enough to warrant such a response? Furthermore, why did G-d congratulate Moses for his deed?

The answer is that the love that Moses had for the Children of Israel was boundless. Thus even following the sin of the golden calf, after Hashem told him to descend from his lofty level (*Berachot 32a*), Moses felt pity for the Jewish people rather than accusing and hating them. More than ever, he felt that they needed to engage in the study of Torah in order to dominate their evil inclination, for without the Torah they could only get worse.

Thus Moses took the initiative and broke the Tablets of the Law (the holy writings list two other initiatives that he took). If he was proud of what he did, it was in the sense that he felt personally responsible for their misdeed. Moses therefore wanted them to repent and realize what they had lost on account of their sin. In fact after they saw with their very eyes that Moses was still alive and coming down from Heaven in order to give them the Tablets of the Law, they felt the need to do *teshuvah*. It was this repentance that contributed to their sin being forgiven on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and they showed the generations to come the power of repentance even for idol worship.

Moses took this initiative for the glory of G-d and to implore Him to forgive the Children of Israel. This is why G-d congratulated him. It was because of what Moses did, G-d said, that they could continue living in this world and engage in the study of Torah. If, G-d forbid, He had killed them, the world would have been destroyed because it cannot endure without the Jewish people and the Torah, as it is written: “If not for My covenant [the Torah], I would not have appointed days and nights, the decrees of heaven and earth” (*Jeremiah 33:25*).

The last letters in the expression *Bereshith bara Elokim* (“In the beginning G-d”) form the word *emet* (“truth”), which is the Torah (*Rosh Hashanah 3:8; Tanna D'vei Elyahu Zulah 21*). Hashem created all that exists for the sake of Torah, which is called Truth, as it

is written: “Purchase the truth and do not sell it” (*Proverbs 23:23*). Similarly, after Torah readings we recite the blessing, “Who has given us the Torah of truth” (see *Berachot 11b*). Thus because Moses broke the Tablets of the Law, the world continued to exist and the Children of Israel repented of the sin of the golden calf and returned to studying Torah (*reshith*). Moses showed them that their spiritual descent was meant only for their spiritual elevation. The Tablets of the Law and their fragments were placed in the Ark of the Covenant (*Berachot 8b; Bava Batra 14b; Bamidbar Rabba 4:19*) mainly so we could constantly be reminded of the results, which is that our hearts and bodies will be broken and bruised when we sin. We will then regret our wicked deeds and refrain from ever returning to them. After our *teshuvah*, we will return to *bereshith*, the beginning, a name carried by the *tzaddikim* and pious ones, as it is written: “Israel is holy to the L-RD, the first of His crop” (*Jeremiah 2:3*). It is also a name that designates those who do sincere *teshuvah*, for not only do they return to their initial state before having sinned, they also elevate themselves forever. On this subject our Sages teach that in the place where penitents stand, even the wholly righteous cannot stand (*Berachot 34b; Zohar I:129b*). This is what happens in the realm of Torah, meaning that what is really important is for us to constantly augment our Torah study. This is perhaps what our Sages were referring to when they praised the study of Torah that leads to action (*Kiddushin 40b*). As we have seen, diligence in Torah study is of capital importance.

The expression *nesav libo* in Rashi’s commentary alludes to Moses’ initiative in breaking the tablets in order for the Children of Israel to be called *reshith*, as well as to increase their Torah study and *teshuvah*. That is how they earned Yom Kippur, a day in which their sins can be forgiven and they can elevate themselves. At the end of the Days of Awe, when we finish reading the book of Deuteronomy, we deal with the breaking of the tablets, an incident which enabled the Children of Israel to bear the name *reshith*, as at the beginning of the Torah (*Bereshith bara*).

The Gemara cites the statement of Rabbi Joseph: “But for the influence of this day, how many Josephs would there be in the market place?” (*Pesachim 68b*). A great number are not influenced by it, and hence they fail to augment their Torah study. They bear the name of Joseph only, not Rabbi or Rav Joseph. Only a person who is constantly augmenting his Torah study (*Taanith 31a*), one who is growing in strength from day to day, is called Rabbi or Rav by Heaven. This is notably demonstrated by the case of Elazar ben Durdaya, who underwent a complete and sincere repentance, one from the depths of his heart, after having committed a very grave sin (*Avodah Zarah 17a*). A person who considers the Torah as being constantly new (*Pesikta Zutah, Va’et’chanan 6:6*) fills himself with the fear of Heaven and succeeds in his Torah studies. He proposes many novel Torah interpretations and infuses himself with the holiness of the very day in which the Torah was given. Such was the case of Rabbi Joseph, who organized a feast on that occasion.

This intensification in the service of Hashem follows a person even after death. For example, if he taught a person to abide by Hashem’s will, he will then have a share in

his deeds. Such was the case with Adam, who bestowed 70 years of his life to King David (*Zohar 1:55b,168a*). Now the Zohar teaches that it was Abraham, Jacob and Joseph who gave these years to David. Therefore we must ask what became of the years that Adam gave up.

The answer is that Adam repented after having given the 70 years of his life to King David, and he asked G-d to restore them to him. Although King David did not receive them, they were not returned to Adam. This is because it is forbidden for a person who has progressed spiritually to lower himself and regret his progress, for in that case he is liable to lose everything. With regards to Adam, if G-d had granted these years to David, Adam would have been spiritually elevated with every *mitzvah* that David performed. Nevertheless, G-d deprives no creature of his reward (*Bava Kama 38b; Nazir 23b*), and therefore Adam received the reward of his goodwill beforehand. What was this reward?

Commenting on the verse, “Now David was old, advanced in days” (*1 Kings 1:1*), the Chida asks in *Nahal Sorek* why the text describes King David as being old and *ba bayamim* (“advanced in days”). After all, David was only 70 years old at the time. The Chida explains that he was loaded with the days of Adam, who had lived 1,000 years. In fact the last letters in the expression *ba bayamim* (“advanced in days”) form the name Adam. King David’s reward was therefore to have completed the years of Adam. In reality David’s age was composed of the years he had received from Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, as we mentioned earlier. Why did Isaac not bestow any of his years to David? It was because he personified the perfect burnt-offering (*Bereshith Rabba 64:3*), and his entire life was devoted to Hashem. This teaches us that augmenting one’s Torah study increases a person’s merit in this world and in the World to Come.

# MOADIM

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## *Rosh Hashanah*

### *The Gates of Teshuvah*

It is written, “I lift my eyes to the mountain – from where will my help come? My help will come from the L-RD, Maker of heaven and earth” (*Psalms 121:1-2*).

When a person begins to look into his soul and realizes the seriousness of his sins before G-d, the harmful spiritual and material effects of his deeds, he will, as a result, come to realize the gravity of Hashem’s anger. Naturally, he will give in to despair and ask, “from where will my help come?”

He asks from where this strength, which is so necessary to modify his deeply engrained habits, will come from. How will he thus be able to do Teshuvah? And above all, how can G-d accept Teshuvah from his part? Actually, the term “where” in Hebrew is *mei’ayin*. *Ayin* also means “nothing”, for the existence of the person in question is void of meaning; he therefore cannot do Teshuvah by himself.

To this King David tells us that above all, one must not fall into despair, for despair by definition is the work of the Satan. The gates of Teshuvah are never closed before one of the Children of Israel, even if he is a sinner.

To illustrate this measure of Divine clemency, we may take the example of King Manasseh. Even though he introduced idolatry into the Beit Hamikdash, as soon as he did Teshuvah, G-d accepted him.

This leads to the second part of our phrase: “My help will come from the L-RD.” In other words, instead of succumbing to despair and thus remaining lethargic, on the contrary a person must wake up and recognize his sins and their destructive consequences. G-d will then accept his Teshuvah.

However our passage does not end there, for it specifies, “My help will come from the L-RD, Maker of heaven and earth.” Here we can clearly ask why King David specified that G-d is the Creator of the universe. Don’t we know this? Obviously we do.

Nevertheless, this fact is meant to bring another truth closer, which is the following: Because of our sins, heaven and earth undergo changes that continually threaten their existence. For its continued existence, the universe strictly depends on the study of Torah and the performance of mitzvot and good deeds. Now, in the same way that Hashem continually renews the universe, He also helps us to “renew” ourselves through Teshuvah.

Teshuvah itself is to be the fruit of our soul-searching. In reality, by his essence a human being does not want to sin. A person’s negative deeds are the result of his *Yetzer Hara* (evil inclination), which also tries with all its power to prevent him from making a spiritual “accounting” and in this way to come closer to G-d. King David says, “The

L-RD is your Guardian; the L-RD is your protective Shade at your right hand. ... The L-RD will protect you from every evil” (*Psalms 121:5,7*). Actually, when a person sins, he distances himself from his Creator, but as soon as he does Teshuvah, he is once again connected to Him, and He then protects him from everything.

Our father Jacob provides us a concrete example. When Abraham’s servant Eliezer went in search of Rebecca, he brought many gifts with him: Ten camels, a gold ring, two gold bracelets, and so on. On the other hand, when our father Jacob went to look for a wife among the same family, he brought nothing with him. Nevertheless, the Midrash states that Jacob did not lose hope, knowing that “my help will come from the L-RD, Maker of heaven and earth.”

Notwithstanding, Jacob felt hopeless for two reasons:

First, in his opinion Eliezer had succeeded in his mission thanks to the extravagant gifts that he gave, thus demonstrating the great wealth of his master Abraham. On the other hand, Jacob had arrived with the same intention (meaning, to marry one of Laban’s relatives) yet without bringing any gifts. How was he going to achieve his desire?

Second, Jacob thought of himself as inferior not only to his ancestors, but also to Abraham’s servant Eliezer. Proof of this is that when Laban tried to kill Eliezer, the latter disappeared by pronouncing the Ineffable Name. Thus Eliezer saved himself all while obtaining the reverence and fear of Laban, and he even freed him from idolatry. It was not the same for Jacob. When he was attacked by Eliphaz (Esau’s son), he was completely stripped of all his goods. Knowing that he was venerable, from then on Laban had no reason to fear, and he could even murder him. Hence Jacob’s increasing awareness that his merit was inferior to Eliezer’s.

In relating these events to our original passage, when our father Jacob said, “I lift my eyes to the mountain...”, it was a specific reference to his ancestors, since it was their merit that saved Eliezer and completely freed him from Laban. “Why then,” Jacob asked himself, “didn’t this merit also protect me?” The question, “from where will my help come?” becomes even more relevant after Jacob’s dream in Beth El, since Hashem clearly told him, “I will be with you, and I will protect you everywhere you go.” Are we in a position to infer that Jacob doubted this promise?

We return here to the vital subject of soul-searching that we mentioned earlier. When a person experiences suffering, he must first examine his actions to look for the source of his troubles. Like Eliezer, our father Jacob could pronounce the Ineffable Name and thus save himself from Eliphaz. Yet he didn’t do so because his primary concern was not to save himself, but to first understand the origin of these troubles – to find out why Eliphaz had attacked and stripped him of all his goods – since the occurrence of this event itself demonstrates spiritual weakness.

Even though Jacob could protect himself in the same way that Eliezer had done (by pronouncing the Ineffable Name), he did not do so. Actually, he wanted to prepare a

path free of all obstacles for his descendants. For that to happen, instead of yielding to despair, on the contrary a person must undertake a spiritual self-evaluation.

In the phrase, “From where will my help come?” the expression “from where,” as we have already mentioned, can also mean “nothing”. This is due to the fact that we become aware of our vanity in noting our distance from G-d as compared to our ancestors. At the same time, the expression *mei’ayin* (“from the void”) consists of the same letters that form the word *mei’ani* (“from myself”). In bringing these two meanings together, we reason that from myself, help is nothing. More specifically, the help that I can give myself is nothing, which is the reason that I should rely on G-d’s help.

Our father Jacob, despite being destitute, was able to marry Laban’s daughters even though Laban greatly cherished wealth. In the same way, a destitute person who wants to get married, yet is lacking the financial means to do so, should have faith in G-d, Who will know how to come to his rescue.

Eliezer was saved by pronouncing the Ineffable Name, while our father Jacob was saved from physical harm even without pronouncing it. It’s true that Eliphaz completely despoiled him, but contrary to the will of his father Esau, he left him alive, which is the essential thing.

It sometimes happens that G-d takes away a person’s material possessions in order to save his soul, for as the saying goes, “Charity saves from death.”

### ***The Blowing of the Shofar: Complete Repentance and Satan’s Bewilderment***

It is written, “Sound the Shofar at the moon’s renewal, at the time appointed for our festive day. For it is a decree for Israel, a judgment for the G-d of Jacob” (*Psalms 81:4-5*). It is from here that the Sages learn about Rosh Hashanah, the holiday that occurs at the time of the new moon (*Rosh Hashanah 8b*), and it teaches us that it is a day of judgment – “a judgment for the G-d of Jacob.”

We must ask why the Torah is content with *hinting* at the fact, rather than explicitly stating that Rosh Hashanah is a day of judgment. We shall attempt to clarify this point in light of the following teaching of the Sages: “Why do we blow the Shofar? It is to confound the Satan” (*Rosh Hashanah 16b*). Rashi explains: “It is so that he does not accuse, for when he will hear the Children of Israel cherishing the mitzvot, he will be reduced to silence.” This fully explains why Rosh Hashanah is not explicitly mentioned as a day of judgment, for we must surprise the Satan on this great day in order that he not bring accusations against the Children of Israel. This is part of G-d’s kindness toward His people.

The above point emerges from what the Holy One, blessed be He, said to the Children of Israel concerning the sacrifice that is brought and the rejoicing that is done on that day (*see Numbers 29:1-6*). It also emerges from the term *keseh* (“the “renewal” of the

moon, meaning when the moon is hidden), for everything is hidden from the sight of the evil inclination, and the judgment itself is hidden so that it will be unable to accuse. In addition, when it sees the Children of Israel rejoicing and dressed in white like the angels (*Tur, Orach Haim 581*), it will fear them. This is because the color white signifies that our sins have been forgiven, as it is written: “If your sins are like scarlet, they will become white as snow” (*Isaiah 1:18*), and that we are rejoicing because we are innocent. The evil inclination will therefore be unable to mention our sins and accuse us, for it only accuses when sins are mentioned, which is why Rosh Hashanah is hidden from it, without mentioning the fact that it is also confounded by the Shofar.

If we are correct with regards to this, we may ask why the judgment of Yom Kippur itself is not mentioned by allusion, rather than being spelled out in black and white (*Leviticus 23:28*). If Yom Kippur openly exists to atone for our sins, the evil inclination can prepare itself to accuse us during the 10 Days of Awe, aware of the arrival of the day of forgiveness – the day when the judgment is sealed – and which the Rambam says atones for sins in and of itself, as it written: “For on this day he shall provide atonement for you” (*Leviticus 16:30*). It would therefore seem that Yom Kippur should have only been mentioned by allusion!

There is something else that we must understand. The Sages have said, “Why do we blow into a ram’s horn? It is to evoke the sacrifice of Isaac. When we sound the ram’s horn the Holy One, blessed be He, considers it as if we ourselves had been tied up on the altar before Him” (*Rosh Hashanah 16a*). This is difficult to understand. Why must the sacrifice of Isaac be evoked, since everything is known and nothing forgotten before Him? G-d Himself recalls the sacrifice of Isaac every day, and since He can distance the Satan (who accuses us) and make him depart from His presence, why must we evoke Isaac’s sacrifice? Must we fear all year long that the evil inclination will not allow us to repent because there is no Shofar throughout the year? Is repentance not accepted throughout the year, but rather only on Rosh Hashanah when we blow the Shofar? Is such a thing possible?

We shall attempt to explain this as best possible. As we know, the primary thing that leads a person to sin is an absence of effort in Torah study and a lack of enthusiasm in the performance of mitzvot, for only the person who performs his duty wholeheartedly demonstrates his love and affection for G-d. This is why the Torah instituted the sounding of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah (the day when we repent of our sins). In fact, sounding the Shofar demands enormous devotion, for the one who sounds it almost chokes, and he becomes exhausted after having sounded it 100 times, corresponding to the 100 blessings that one must say each day, as several sources enjoin us to do. Now a person does not always recite these blessings wholeheartedly. There is also a connection between sounding the Shofar and everyday mitzvot, which we often perform without particular enthusiasm. The sounding of the Shofar therefore represents the correction of these faults, for the sounding is truly done with devotion, including the interruption to the breathing process (which is analogous to death). It has already been explained at length that a man repents through sighing, and when

he sighs he stops breathing, which resembles death. He therefore becomes like a sacrifice.

We therefore understand why G-d commanded us to evoke the sacrifice of Isaac on Rosh Hashanah. This consists of sounding the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah, which evokes a maximum of self-sacrifice, as did Isaac, who was tied up on the altar in an act of complete self-sacrifice. It also evokes the fact that love for G-d is whole in nature. The sounding of the Shofar should also repair a lack of devotion by evoking the sacrifice of Isaac, for it encourages a person to strengthen himself even more to improve his behavior and to put greater devotion into it. This is why we are joyful at Rosh Hashanah and dress in white, which alludes to the fact that all the mitzvot should be performed with joy, in purity, and without any trace of sadness or grief, for sadness is the reason for a lack of enthusiasm in serving G-d.

Let us assume that we now understand why it is *explicitly* stated that sins are atoned for on Yom Kippur. Therefore if a man performs his service with devotion, in joy and with complete repentance, when Yom Kippur occurs he will have nothing to worry about, for the Satan cannot accuse on that day, the day of atonement (*Yoma 29a*).

Hence we now understand why Rosh Hashanah was designated as a day for prayer, spiritual elevation, and repairing the sins between man and G-d and between man and man. We also know why it was designated as a day to perform mitzvot with joy and enthusiasm, a day when the evil inclination is brushed aside. On Rosh Hashanah we recite verses proclaiming G-d's kingship in order to establish G-d as our King (*Rosh Hashanah 16a, 34b*), and even if a person sins on that day, he has already expressed his belief that G-d is like a king to him and that he desires to serve Him with love, joy, and devotion, like Isaac when he was bound upon the altar. Consequently, this repentance and staunch resolve will prove useful throughout the year. Therefore even if the Satan comes and disturbs us during that time and tries to prevent us from repenting, he can only *try* to do so – he does not have the power to completely block our repentance. This is because a person has, at Rosh Hashanah, already demonstrated his belief that G-d is his king and that he will wholeheartedly serve Him. This is part of G-d's kindness to us, namely that He showed us how to return to Him at Rosh Hashanah by means of the Shofar, and how to conquer the evil inclination throughout the year.

Above all, we fully understand why we sound the Shofar uniquely on Rosh Hashanah, not the whole year round. As we have said, Rosh Hashanah was given in order to repair the blessings and mitzvot that were imperfectly carried out during the entire year, as well as to confound the Satan – on Rosh Hashanah and throughout the year – so that he becomes unable to find a reason to accuse us. True, a person should be vigilant not to give him a sin to use as a reason to accuse, however if he has already sinned he can repent by the power of the Shofar sounding on Rosh Hashanah. This is the meaning of, “they shall be a remembrance for you” (*Numbers 10:10*), meaning that during the entire year a person should recall the sounding of the Shofar that he heard

on Rosh Hashanah. This memory is so powerful that it has the power to confound the Satan throughout the year.

We see from this that G-d's actions are truly destined to benefit His creations. This is in order that they may completely repent without the Satan's interference, and that during the entire year they should be close to G-d and serve Him.

### *Let us Inundate the Satan with Problems*

In the Rosh Hashanah prayers we say, "This day the world was called into existence; this day all the creatures of the world will be judged." Although we know that Rosh Hashanah is the day of judgment for all the world's creatures, we must understand why the Torah never alludes to the seriousness of this terrifying day. Its meaning is hidden and concealed, as our Sages have said on the verse: "Sound the *shofar* on the new moon, in concealment for the day of our festival" (*Psalms 81:4*).

The answer is that the Holy One, blessed be He, was careful to hide this holy day from the eyes of the Satan and other accusers in order that they not mention Israel's sins. Throughout the year, the Satan impatiently awaits this time to see the Jewish people saddened and depressed, hoping in this way to testify against them. Yet we, on the contrary, wear white and surround ourselves with white, rejoicing and wholeheartedly confessing our sins so that the Holy One, blessed be He, will deal with us in mercy.

There is more. We must remember that in a few hours, the Holy One, blessed be He – Who probes both heart and mind – will judge man for all his sins. All his actions, all his deeds and thoughts, his tendencies and desires, will be weighed on the Creator's scale of justice, and as we say in our prayers: "For the remembrance of every created being comes before You – man's deed and his tasks, the actions and movements of a mortal, the thoughts of a person and his schemes, and the motives for the acts of a man" (*Musaf Amidah*).

It is obvious that we all want to win our case. How can this be achieved? The Gemara asks why we sound the *shofar* while seated, then while standing. It responds: "So as to confuse the Satan" (*Rosh Hashanah 16b*).

This is quite surprising. Is the Satan so "simple-minded" that the sound of the *shofar* confuses him to the point that he is incapable of speaking and can no longer accuse Israel?

The explanation is the following: The Sages have said that on Rosh Hashanah, the Holy One, blessed be He, is seated on His throne of justice with the books of life and death open before Him (*Rosh Hashanah 32b*). The decision as to who is destined for life and who for death is made in light of each individual's spiritual state. The Satan, who is aware of this, does not want to miss such an opportunity. This is why he prepares in advance by collecting massive cartloads of sins from all the Jewish people, impatiently waiting to place them before Hashem so as to make us lose our case and be condemned. Yet after he has put a tremendous effort into doing all this, the

Jewish people suddenly accomplish the mitzvah of sounding the *shofar* while seated, and once again while standing. Rashi explains: “The more meticulously the Jewish people perform the mitzvah of the *shofar*, the more they demonstrate their love for the mitzvot.” The wailing sound of the *shofar* then shakes the depths of our hearts as it cries out: “Improve [*shapru*] your deeds!” At that point the Jewish people immediately submit themselves to Hashem and repent of their sins. Not only do they repent because of fear, they repent because of love! The Sages have made us a tremendous promise regarding such repentance: “Premeditated sins are accounted as though they were merits” (*Yoma 86b*). This is the reason why the Satan is afraid to hear the sound of the *shofar*, for once he has put a great effort into bringing massive cartloads of sins and transgressions before Hashem, we surprise him by returning to G-d through love because of the *shofar*’s sounds of admonishment. The cartloads filled with destructive angels are then suddenly transformed into angels that work in our favor, meaning that all the Satan’s efforts have been in vain. Not only that, but it is the Satan himself who is responsible for having brought the merits of the Jewish people before the Holy One, blessed be He.

Thus a great opportunity is offered to each of us. Let us be craftier than the Satan; let us truly return to G-d through love. We will then merit being inscribed in the book of the righteous and pious for a good life and for peace!

### *Expressing Joy on the Day of Judgment*

In his book *Kovetz Sichos*, the great *tzaddik* Rabbi Nosson Wachtfogel *Zatzal* states that every holiday deals with a particular subject. On Passover we celebrate the exodus from Egypt, on Shavuot we commemorate the giving of the Torah, on Sukkot we observe the *mitzvah* of dwelling in a sukkah, and on Rosh Hashanah we experience fear and apprehension at the magnitude of the judgment. In fact in the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer we recite, “The angels quake with fear and trembling...for not even they are innocent in Your eyes!” The day of judgment is an awe-inspiring day, one that we have good reason to fear. Nevertheless, we read in Nehemiah’s proclamation: “Go, eat rich foods and drink sweet beverages, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, for today [Rosh Hashanah] is sacred to our G-d. Do not be sad. The enjoyment of the L-RD is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10). It is clear from the words of Nehemiah that Rosh Hashanah is a day of joy and celebration. We therefore need to explain how this could be in keeping with the fear of the judgment, which is among the duties of the day.

Let’s see how we can explain it. It may be compared to a person who committed an offense against a great king. The person constantly strives to meet the king in order to ask for his forgiveness, since he can no longer tolerate the pain of having disobeyed him. As for the king, he has absolutely no desire to meet with him, and therefore he completely ignores him. Thus the person’s sorrow grows each time he sees the king,

especially since he realizes that the king is still supporting him and enabling him to live expense free. Furthermore, his offense has still not been forgiven. However were the king to suddenly summon him, it is obvious he would be extremely happy. He would celebrate the fact that his monarch had finally called him to appear before him to give an accounting, for he finds it very difficult to live as a ward of the state. True, he would fear the outcome of the king's judgment, yet he would console himself with the thought that although he offended the king and irritated him by his actions, the king has still not punished him. In fact he still continues to ensure his sustenance! This is why, by preparing himself in terms of how to speak to the king and what supplications to offer him, there is still a good chance he may be acquitted.

The meaning of this parable is clear. Although we have often irritated the Creator of the world by our deeds and are therefore quite far from Him, He still does not hide Himself from us, the Jewish people. He acts mercifully with us and enables the Jewish people to live by the merit of their ancestors, for we have sinned so greatly that even our prayers no longer bear fruit in Heaven. When He finally summons us in judgment, we must remember and understand what Nehemiah said: "Go, eat rich foods and drink sweet beverages, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, for today is sacred to our G-d. Do not be sad. The enjoyment of the L-RD is your strength" (*Nehemiah 8:10*).

It is true that in one respect Rosh Hashanah is a terrible day of judgment, for who knows what our verdict will be? It is therefore appropriate for us to tremble at the magnitude of the judgment. However it is also appropriate for us to rejoice on this day. Why should we rejoice? It is because in the final analysis, we have remained alive all year long, thank G-d, and Hashem has shown us His goodness, even if it was hidden. Hence on this day, when He wants to meet us in judgment, it is a sign that He has no desire to reject us. Who knows, perhaps He will show us favor on this day! That is why we should rejoice, which is not inconsistent with the fear of the day.

We must bear in mind, however, that a ferocious war unfolds against our accusers on Rosh Hashanah, accusers that were created by our sins. We have reason to fear that on this holy day we might lose hope of being able to prepare ourselves for the judgment. This may happen because we know that we have nothing to stem their accusations and defeat them, for their case is solid and they are a thousand times stronger than us. This is especially true since they are justified in saying that we deliberately transgressed many *mitzvot*, that we have been negligent in studying Torah, and so on. The fact that we cannot counter these allegations fills us with great fear.

However it is precisely for this reason that we must rejoice on this day. In this way we will stymie all our accusers, for they will not understand what is happening to us, nor why we are rejoicing instead of weeping and worrying over our fate. In fact almost nobody takes our side, and even the Patriarchs are a little disappointed in our conduct throughout the year. Therefore all the angels of destruction and everything created

by our sins are shocked at our joy. Thus it is written: “When you go out to battle” (*Deuteronomy 20:1*) – to defend yourself on the day of judgment, which is Rosh Hashanah – “and see horses and chariots...you shall not fear them.” In other words, do not fear any of your accusers on this day, even if their very existence proves that you have sinned. Continue to confound them by your joy, for the more you persevere in your joyful service of Hashem, the more your accusers will be confounded. When the shofar is sounded, it above all else has the power to confound your accusers, and little by little they will be destroyed. All this will occur when the Satan sees that the Children of Israel are sometimes seated and sometimes standing during the sounding of the shofar, unable to understand what this all means. That is, if the sounding of the shofar has the goal of breaking our hearts, why do we remain seated, and if it does not have the goal of breaking our hearts, why do we stand? The answer is that when the Jewish people repent and all the angels created by their sins disappear, the Satan has no further reason to accuse them. This is truly an act of kindness on Hashem’s part.

As a result, whoever has a head on his shoulders will understand the meaning of all this. He will fear the judgment on one hand, while on the other hand he will rejoice over the fact that Hashem loves demonstrating kindness and doing good for us at all times, especially when our accusers are standing at the ready to accuse us. If we serve G-d in joy and with love, we will merit a year that is both good and blessed, and we will be inscribed and immediately sealed for a good year. Amen, may it be so!

## Sukkot

### *The Mitzvah of the Sukkah: Trusting in G-d*

We all know the famous question: Why did the Creator command us to perform the mitzvah of the sukkah during the month of Tishri, rather than Nissan, since it was during Nissan that we left Egypt?

The *Tur* (*Orach Chaim 625:1*) replies as follows: “Even if we departed during the month of Nissan, it was not at that time that He commanded us to make a sukkah, for that was the summertime, when people usually make shelters to provide themselves with shade. Building a sukkah during that time would therefore not have been seen as fulfilling the Creator’s commandment. We must do so during the month of Tishri, which is a time of rain, when people normally leave their shelters and permanently dwell in their homes. It is at that point that we leave our homes and enter the sukkah, so that everyone may see that we are fulfilling the commandment of the King.”

The very fact that we perform the mitzvah of the sukkah during Tishri, not Nissan, teaches us a great principle in serving G-d.

We know that a person is constantly assailed with trials that always seek to overcome him, and the work that he must do to perfect himself occurs year-round. In Nissan, the month of our deliverance, a person removes all *chametz* from his home (*i.e.*, all pride from his heart), and in this way he comes closer to G-d. He then continues to spiritually elevate himself during the month of Iyar, for these are the days when we count the Omer, a time when we must work to refine our character traits.

If that were not enough, during the month of Sivan a person elevates himself still more, for during that time he receives the Torah and thereby connects to Hashem. Arriving at the months of Tammuz and Av, he continues to improve himself, for everyone wants to rectify the sins that caused the destruction of Israel’s Temple, sins such as *Lashon Harah* and baseless hatred. A person returns to G-d especially during the months of Elul and Tishri, days of justice and mercy, when he is cleansed and purified of all sin.

Thus after all this, a person is susceptible of becoming proud. He may think, “I’ve now done all the work that I had to do on myself, and I have nothing more to rectify.” If he believes this, he is liable of losing everything he has gained.

This is why the Creator, in His great mercy to us, commanded that we should build a sukkah at precisely that point in time. We are to once again leave our homes and head out to the sukkah, placing ourselves under the shelter of His wings and the shadow of faith (*Zohar III:103a*), for the sukkah constitutes the shadow of faith. In this way a person’s heart will grow in faith and he will not stumble into trials again. In addition, during the holiday of Sukkot the Holy One, blessed be He, visits each person in the sukkah at the

same time as the seven faithful shepherds. What is the purpose of this? It is in order that these “guests” may bestow an abundance of blessing and success upon us, and we will therefore be able to overcome all trials. Furthermore, these holy “guests” stand by a person not only during Sukkot, but throughout the year, helping and supporting him to improve his Torah study, mitzvot performance, and character traits.

In examining this closely, we see that these guests are G-d’s sign that all our sins have been forgiven during the month of Tishri. This is like a person who committed a great number of sins against his fellowman, but then asked him for forgiveness. How will he know that his fellowman has actually forgiven him with all his heart and soul? If this friend comes to his home with a beautiful gift, he will then know that he has truly been forgiven.

The same applies to the Holy One, blessed be He. During the holiday of Sukkot, we invite the seven *ushpizin* (“guests”), and the Holy One, blessed be He, comes with them into our tiny sukkah. He thereby demonstrates and clearly proves to us that He has truly forgiven all our sins on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Not only that, but He also gives us a beautiful gift, namely faith, that we may believe in Him forever. We will thus know that all our sins have been forgiven. By way of allusion, we may add that the word *ichaper* (“he will forgive”) has the same numerical value as the word *shai* (“gift”), because the very fact of being forgiven constitutes a gift from Hashem.

For our part, we must learn to appreciate everything that G-d gives us. We must strengthen ourselves in faith, the fear of Heaven, and Torah study to become worthy recipients of all these gifts. This is why we build a sukkah, and furthermore we build it as soon as Yom Kippur ends, as stated in Halachah (*Rema, Orach Chaim 624:5*). This means that immediately after our sins have been forgiven, we want to become suitable vessels to receive the benefits that Hashem sends us. Therefore we immediately begin to build a sukkah.

This proves that we are so grateful to Hashem for all the good that He continuously does for us, and for the fact that He has forgiven us, that we want to come increasingly closer to Him. This is why, as soon as we are cleansed on Yom Kippur, we begin to build a sukkah, thereby preventing the Satan from entering and residing with us. Thus our entire body and soul will be filled uniquely with mitzvot, faith, and a love for Hashem. If we truly act in this way, we will thereby demonstrate our love for Him and His mitzvot.

### ***The Secret of the Four Species and the Seven Ushpizin***

The holiday of Sukkot is extraordinary. It is a holiday that contains more elements than can possibly be understood. In fact, there are many things that need to be clarified about Sukkot:

1. What is the secret of Sukkot?
2. What is the significance of the seven holy *Ushpizin* (“guests”) that we invite during Sukkot, rather than during Passover for example, or at any other time?

3. Why does the Torah command us to take these four species: *Lulav* (date palm leaf), *etrog* (citron) *hadass* (myrtle leaf), and *aravah* (willow leaf)?

4. Why do we celebrate Sukkot after the holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?

We shall attempt to explain all this as best possible. It is written in the Torah, “And you shall take for yourselves on the first day *pri etz hadar* [fruit of a goodly tree]” (*Leviticus 23:40*), and the Midrash adds: “Thus it is written, ‘You will make known to me the path of life, the fullness of joys in Your Presence, the delights that are in Your right hand for eternity’ [*Psalms 16:11*]” (*Vayikra Rabba 30:2*). What is the connection between these verses? The Satmar Rebbe raises the question in his work *HaKountrass*, namely what is the relationship between “And you shall take for yourselves...” and “You will make known to me...”? In my humble opinion, the key to a long life that we request of G-d occurs by the study of Torah and the performance of the mitzvot, for the Torah is an elixir of eternal life (*Avoth d'Rabbi Nathan 34:10*), as it is written: “It is a tree of life to those who grasp it” (*Proverbs 3:18*). Consequently the Holy One, blessed be He, asks the Children of Israel to take the etrog, for the numerical value of the word *etrog* (including the kollel) is the same as the word *torah*, such that taking hold of the etrog is equivalent to taking hold of the Torah. Through the lulav, whose numerical value is that of *chaim* (“life”), we will draw upon ourselves a long life of Torah. This is indicated by the verse: “It is a tree of life [=lulav] to those who grasp it [=etrog].”

In fact the Midrash speaks of the verse, “*U'lekachtem* [And you shall take] for yourselves on the first day *pri etz hadar*.” This alludes to the Torah, for the Torah is also called *lekach*, as it is written: “For I have given you a good *lekach* [teaching], do not forsake My Torah” (*Proverbs 4:2*). This is what constitutes, “You will make known to me the path of life,” for by taking the etrog and the lulav, we merit walking on the path of life. It is also what constitutes “the fullness of joys,” for the Torah gives us joy in abundance, as well as “in Your Presence,” for by the Torah we will be constantly before G-d. Thus we arrive at “the delights that are in Your right hand for eternity,” for G-d will always be at our side so that we refrain from sinning or do anything other than obey His laws.

To go into more detail, we may add that the four species allude to various degrees of Torah study and the service of G-d. As we have already said, the etrog alludes to the Torah, meaning to the written Torah (the word *etrog* evokes *tariag* – 613, the number of mitzvot in the Torah). The lulav in itself alludes to the life of Torah, and the word *hadass* has the same numerical value as *sod* (“secret”), which alludes to the secrets of the Torah and the oral Torah. Above all, the aravah alludes to the sweetness and appeal of the Torah. We thus fully understand why it is during Sukkot that we invite the holy Ushpizin (*Zohar III:103a*). It is because during the three months of Elul and the holidays of Tishri, we evoke the merit of the Patriarchs, awakening Divine mercy upon ourselves through their merit. Hence afterwards we do not forget them,

and during Sukkot we invite them into the Sukkah in order to show them that they defended us for good reason, since we accomplish what we have promised to do: We incline in the shade of the Sukkah, we take the four species, and we connect ourselves to the Torah and its appeal.

This is why we invite only seven Ushpizin, a number that corresponds to the seven days preceding Yom Kippur (between the end of Rosh Hashanah and the start of Yom Kippur). It may also be that this contains an allusion, for the word *Elul* plus the nine days of Teshuvah (outside of Yom Kippur itself, which is not included) has the numerical value of 76. Furthermore, the initials of the seven shepherds – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and David – also have the numerical value of 76. This is why we invite them to defend us and plead our case.

Concerning this subject, I saw in the *Chiddushei HaRim* of Ger that when a man enters the Sukkah, it is considered as if he has performed all the mitzvot of the Torah. This is quite understandable considering what we have said, for the Sukkah alludes to humility before G-d, and as we know the Torah is acquired through humility (*Perkei Avoth 6:6; Taanith 7a*). In addition, during Sukkot we take the four species – the etrog alluding to the 613 mitzvot, the lulav to life, the hadas to the secrets of the Torah, and the aravah to the Torah's sweetness. Therefore during Sukkot it's as if we took it upon ourselves to perform all the mitzvot of the Torah, for we take the etrog in our left hand, thus breaking the *kelipah* (impurity) found on the left, and we strengthen ourselves in the Torah and its 613 mitzvot.

The book *HaKountrass* by the Satmar Rebbe also asks why we take the lulav precisely during Sukkot, rather than during another holiday. Furthermore, if I may pose the question, why do we celebrate Sukkot precisely after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? In my humble opinion, it is because in our prayers we are primarily asking G-d to give us a long and good life, and that He forgives our sins. This is why He asks us, after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, to perform a deed that favorably evokes our memory before Him. This deed involves the Sukkah, for as we have said the Sukkah alludes to humility before G-d. Someone who sins during the entire year is as if he became boastful before G-d. Now as we know, G-d cannot live with such a person (Sotah 5a), as it is written: "Every haughty heart is the abomination of the L-RD" (*Proverbs 16:5*) and also, "One with haughty eyes and an expansive heart, him I cannot bear" (*Psalms 101:5*). This is why words and thoughts are not enough; repentance also requires action – an act of submission. Thus when we build a Sukkah and enter it, we demonstrate our humility before G-d.

This is the meaning of the Sukkah: When we leave our homes and enter into the Sukkah, we show that we are leaving our pride and moving towards humility, which brings about the forgiveness of our sins. If we also want a long life, G-d commands us to connect to the lulav, whose numerical value is that of the word *chaim* ("life") as well as to the other species, for even an ordinary person who is lacking integrity can

repent. This is why we attach the lulav to the Sukkah, and also why we shake it, for in this way we also shake our accusers and rid ourselves of them until Hoshana Rabba, when we are definitively inscribed for a good life.

In reflecting upon this, we understand the difference between Yom Kippur and Hoshana Rabba: On Yom Kippur we mortify ourselves by fasting, and on Hoshana Rabba we mortify ourselves by not sleeping (since we do not sleep on that night). Now as we know, food, drink, and sleep are great pleasures, ones that enable us to live. Thus when we distance ourselves from them, it's as if we annulled the physical for the sake of the spiritual, an act that draws us toward eternal life.

### ***The Mitzvah of the Sukkah: Faith in G-d and His Mitzvot***

We are familiar with the famous question: Why did Hashem command us to dwell in a sukkah during the month of Tishri instead of Nissan, when we actually departed from Egypt, as it is written: “That your generations may know that I made the Children of Israel dwell in booths when I took them from the land of Egypt” (*Leviticus 23:43*)?

The Tur (*Orach Chaim 625*) answers this question in the following way: Although we left Egypt during Nissan, we did not receive the order to build a sukkah at that time. This is because it was summertime, when everyone builds outdoor structures for shade. It would have therefore been impossible to know whether or not we were constructing it because of an order from the Creator. He actually commanded us to do this in Tishri, the rainy season, when most people leave their outdoors structures and live indoors fulltime. We, on the other hand, leave our homes and dwell in a sukkah at that time, thereby showing everyone that we are obeying the order of the King.

The very fact that we fulfill the *mitzvah* of dwelling in a sukkah during the month of Tishri, not Nissan, teaches us a great principle in serving Hashem. We know that people are constantly inundated with hardships, yet they always want to overcome them. In fact the time to overcome hardships and improve ourselves lasts all year long. How should a person go about doing this? During Nissan, the month of our deliverance, a person must remove *chametz* from his home (*i.e.*, his heart), thereby coming closer to Hashem. He should then continue to elevate himself during the month of Iyar, for that is when the *omer* is counted, a time to work on ourselves.

If that were not enough, a person should elevate himself even further during the month of Sivan, for it is then that he receives the Torah and through it cleaves to Hashem. He continues to work on himself during the months of Tammuz and Av, since everyone wants to rectify the causes of the Temple's destruction, sins such as *Lashon Harah* and baseless hatred. Above all, during Elul and Tishri, days of judgment and mercy, a person must return to Hashem, becoming pure and cleansed of all sin.

As a result of this, a person may end up becoming proud and telling himself, “I've corrected all my faults and now I'm complete, I'm perfect.” Such thinking may lead him to fall from the spiritual heights he has reached.

Since Hashem is merciful to us, it is precisely during this time – the month of Tishri – that we are commanded to build a temporary dwelling, to once again leave our homes and head out into a sukkah and shelter ourselves under the shadow of His wings. The sukkah is the shadow of faith (*Zohar III:103a*), and we are to dwell in it so that faith may once again grow in our hearts, so that we no longer succumb to trials. Furthermore, during the festival of Sukkot the Holy One, blessed be He, comes to visit people in their sukkah with the seven holy and faithful shepherds, the *ushpizin*. Why does this happen? It is in order for the *ushpizin* to pour out blessings and success upon people, since in this way they will be able to overcome every trial that assails them. Moreover, the *ushpizin* stand by people not only during Sukkot, but on every day of the year, helping them to fortify their Torah study, *mitzvot* observance, and personal work. In reflecting upon this, we see that the presence of the seven *ushpizin* is a sign from Hashem that all our sins have been forgiven during the month of Tishri. This is similar to a person who committed a tremendous offense against his friend, but later asks for his forgiveness. How can he know that his friend has truly forgiven him with all his heart? If his friend comes to his home with a beautiful gift, he will know for certain that he has been forgiven. The same applies to the Holy One, blessed be He. On Sukkot we invite the seven *ushpizin* into our sukkah, and Hashem also comes with them. This proves that He has forgiven all our sins on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. What's more is that Hashem brings us a beautiful gift, namely faith, in order that we may believe in Him forever. By this gift we know that all our sins have been forgiven. By way of allusion, we note that the word *ichaper* ("He will atone") has the same numerical value (310) as the word *shai* ("gift"), since the very fact of being forgiven constitutes a gift from Hashem.

For our part, we must appreciate the gifts that Hashem gives us. We must strengthen ourselves in faith, the fear of Heaven, and in Torah so as to become worthy vessels to receive such gifts. Hence on our part we build a sukkah, and not only do we build it, but we set up its posts as soon as Yom Kippur ends, as stated in Halachah (*Rema, Orach Chaim 624:5*). In other words, after our sins have been forgiven we demonstrate our desire to become vessels worthy of receiving Hashem's blessings, hence we immediately start building our sukkah. This proves that we are grateful to Hashem for all the good He does for us at every moment. It proves that we are grateful to Him for having forgiven us, and that we want to come even closer to Him. This is why, immediately after all evil has been eradicated on Yom Kippur, we begin to build our sukkah. We thereby prevent the Satan from sowing its seeds in us, and we fill our bodies and souls with only *mitzvot*, faith in Hashem, and love. By truly acting in this way, we demonstrate our complete love for Hashem and His *mitzvot*.

### ***The Connection Between Simcha Torah, Shemini Atzeret, and Sukkot***

G-d commanded the Children of Israel to carry out the mitzvah of the Sukkah on the fifteenth day of the seventh month (*Leviticus 23:24*). Why precisely on this date? As we

know, the Sukkah is the “shadow of faith” (*Zohar III:103a*), and we should therefore believe that the mitzvah of the Sukkah derives its power from the fact that it unifies G-d’s Name: The *yud-hei* to the *vav-hei*. When this Name will be perfected and complete, without any defect, we will attain perfection, for the “fallen Sukkah of David” (*Amos 9: 11*) will be raised, and we will draw closer to the Final Redemption.

Herein lies the explanation: We celebrate Sukkot on the fifteenth day of the month, which represents the Name *yud-hei* (numerical value: 15), and by the merit of faith, the Sukkah will be restored to perfection. This is because the word *sukkah* has the same numerical value (91) as the Tetragrammaton and the Name *Ado-nai* together. To the *yud-hei* of the fifteen of the month, we add the letters *vav* and *hei* of the word *sukkah* (thereby leaving it with its remaining letters *samech* and *caph*, which form the word *sach* – a designation for the Shechinah). It then follows that the Name of G-d becomes fully unified, to the point that the Shechinah will arise from the dust and salvation will arise, quickly in our days.

In reflecting upon this, we understand the nature of the holiday of Sukkot. After Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, days of prayer and tears, comes Sukkot, which is a holiday of joy, as it is written: “You shall rejoice on your festival” (*Deuteronomy 16: 14*). We move from mourning to celebration at that point, and although these days of Sukkot are devoted to rejoicing, they are apt for prayers to be answered, given that we behave with sanctity and believe that G-d actually forgives us. This is what we call the “shadow of faith,” and therein lies the potential of this holiday. A person sins during all seven days of the week, but he repents on the eve of Shabbat. Similarly, each of the seven days of Sukkot comes and repairs what was damaged on the corresponding day of the week during the whole of the year. The potential of the holiday of Sukkot is thus quite considerable.

From what we have said up to now, we fully understand why G-d commanded the Children of Israel to live in a Sukkah, which recalls the clouds of glory (*Sukkah 11b and Rashi*). When a person recalls that his holy ancestors were also surrounded by clouds of glory and protected from wild animals (seven clouds of glory corresponding to the seven days of the week), he then comes to recognize the wonders of the Creator. Faith then penetrates his heart, and thanks to this faith G-d hears his prayers each day. This idea is alluded to in the words *ananei kavod* (“clouds of glory”). In fact the word *ananei* evokes *ania* (“answer”) and may be read as *aneini* (“answer me”). The word *kavod* designates the Holy One, blessed be He, Who is the Glory of the world, and Who responds to our prayers by the merit of our faith in Him, which reverberates favorably upon all the generations.

To go a bit further, let us add that faith is not only the privilege of the Children of Israel; it also benefits all the nations of the world by the merit of Israel. How does that occur? In the Haftorah of the first day of Sukkot we recite: “It shall be that all who are left over from all the nations who had invaded Jerusalem will come up every year to worship the King, the L-RD, Master of Legions, and to celebrate the festival of Sukkot.

And it shall be that whichever of the families of the land does not go up to Jerusalem to bow before the King, the L-RD, Master of Legions, there will be no rain upon them” (*Zechariah 14:16-17*). This means that in the future, at the time of the Final Redemption, all the peoples will acknowledge Hashem and proclaim Him King, as it is written: “The L-RD will be the King over the land” (v.9) and all the peoples will believe in Him.

We must understand why G-d commanded all the peoples to come to Jerusalem, and why they must come precisely during Sukkot, rather than during another holiday. Moreover, we know that in the future all the holidays will be cancelled, Sukkot included (*Yerushalmi Taanith 2:2*), an idea that also appears in the writings of the Rambam (*Hilchot Megillah 2:18*). Consequently, how is it possible that in the future there will still be a holiday of Sukkot and that everyone will have to come to Jerusalem at that time?

We have already seen that Sukkot is called the “shadow of faith.” Consequently, the nations have certainly heard of all the miracles that G-d performed for the Children of Israel in the desert, as it is written: “Peoples heard – they were agitated” (*Exodus 15:14*). However the miracle that G-d did for the Children of Israel in the desert by surrounding them with clouds of glory – that, the nations did *not* witness. Even if they perhaps heard of that miracle, they did not believe it, for it was something that was beyond their comprehension. This is why G-d wanted, for the future – when there will still be the holiday of Sukkot (i.e., before the coming of Mashiach) – that all the peoples come to the Temple to see and believe that G-d surrounded the Children of Israel with the seven clouds of glory, similar to the way that He surrounded them in the desert. They will then recognize and certainly believe in Him, but if they do not come, this will mean that they definitely don’t believe in this. This is what the expression “shadow of faith” means: In the future, the Sukkah will make faith penetrate even into the peoples of the world.

Since we have arrived at this point, we may understand the connection that exists between Simcha Torah and Sukkot. Immediately after Sukkot, on Simcha Torah we must rejoice with the Torah, which is alluded to in the words *Hag Ha’atzeret* (Simcha Torah), which have the same numerical value as *Etz Torah* (“Tree of Torah”). Why do we rejoice with the Torah during Simcha Torah and not during the holiday of Shavuot? It is because after Rosh Hashanah (when through repentance we make G-d our King – Rosh Hashanah 16a) and Yom Kippur (the day of forgiveness), we immediately build a home for the Shechinah, in the spirit of the verse: “They shall make a Sanctuary for Me – so that I may dwell among them” (*Exodus 25:8*). Each person builds it according to his personal level, at the time following forgiveness, in order to never again return to his previous sins.

This is the theme of Shemini Atzeret. Once the Children of Israel have built a dwelling place for the Shechinah and rejoiced with the King for seven days, G-d asks them, “Stay with Me for one more day. Your leaving is difficult for Me” (*Sukkah 55a*). He wants us to rejoice with the Torah that He gave us, as it is written: “Now there on that day was one of Saul’s servants, *ne’etzar* [who lingered] before the L-RD” (*I Samuel 21:8*),

the meaning of the word *ne'etzar* begin that he himself had stopped in front of the Tent of Meeting to rejoice and study Torah. Hence through the intermediary of the holiday of Shemini Atzeret, G-d will enable us to benefit even more from His Shechinah, for then we are clean of all sin and in a position to welcome Him and rejoice during Simcha Torah.

## *Simchat Torah*

### *Simchat Torah: Strength for the Entire Year*

Shemini Atzeret was named by the Sages from the expression, “Women have been *atzurah* [united] to us [previously]” (*1 Samuel 21:6*). In fact the Holy One, blessed be He, is telling the Jewish people to unite (*la’atzor*) to Him for yet another day, “since it is difficult for Me to leave you.” In other words, Hashem has difficulty leaving us after the holiday ends.

We need to understand just how difficult this separation is.

The month of Elul, a time for mercy, has already passed. The days of Rosh Hashanah have also passed, and the same applies for Yom Kippur, the day of forgiveness; it is already behind us. We have built our sukkah and have benefited from the seven days of the holiday in the shadow of the holy *Ushpizin*. We have accomplished so many mitzvot during the month of Elul, but now the holidays are about to end. We feel a certain spiritual void after such great and holy days, and we again long for the holidays because we find it difficult to leave them. What shall we do until Chanukah? How are we going to again come closer to G-d? How are we going to again draw from the sanctity of the holidays, and how are we going to purify our souls?

This is why the Holy One, blessed be He, draws close to us and gives us the holiday of Simchat Torah, Shemini Atzeret. We are then able to unite ourselves to Him for one more day! We can thus firmly retain all the sanctity that we absorbed during the entire holy period that we have just lived through, prolonging our spiritual strength and closeness to G-d.

Each and every person, even one at the lowest spiritual level, can learn a lesson from this and realize that it is precisely the holiday of Simchat Torah, no other, that Hashem gave us last of all. It is the holiday of the Torah – when we dance with the Sefer Torah – as if to teach us that the energy we can draw from it for the remainder of the year comes directly through Torah study.

It is by studying the Torah that we connect ourselves to it, and consequently to the Holy One, blessed be He. This is why He tells us at the end of the holidays, “Gather yourselves to Me for one more day.” It is in order that we are not left with a feeling of emptiness that comes at the end of the holidays, but instead that we fill this void by Torah.

When we fill our entire beings with Torah, we can obtain the strength that we need for the entire year, for it renews itself each day (*Pesikta Zutah Va’etchanan 6:6*). This is why it is forbidden to think that we have completed the Torah and that everything is done.

Definitely not! The Torah renews itself each day and continues onward. It is a perpetually beginning. It is not without reason that at Simchat Torah we once again read, “In the beginning...” For the Jew, there is no end! There is always a start and renewal. There is always a “beginning,” a continuation that brings us to renewal and an increase in serving G-d, all while providing us with strength for the entire year.

This is why we say, “in the eyes of all Israel – In the beginning G-d created...” This means that all Jews should realize that there is only renewal, and that this renewal – this strength – is drawn from Simchat Torah.

In the final analysis, however, we must understand that instead of *us* telling the Holy One, blessed be He, that it is difficult to leave Him, it is the opposite that happens! It is *He* Who tells us that it is difficult for Him to leave us. How is that possible?

When we examine the month of Tishri, we in fact see that just as it is difficult for us to leave Hashem, it is also difficult for Him to leave us. During the entire month we have prayed, sounded the shofar, fasted, called upon the merit of the Patriarchs, built a sukkah, taken the lulav and etrog, and asked G-d for a good year. In this way we have shown Him that it is difficult for us to leave Him and His mitzvot. This is why He now comes and says to us: If you really want to purify yourselves, and if it is difficult for you to leave Me, then I also find it difficult to leave you! How can this connection maintain itself?

It will maintain itself through the Torah. The Torah is what connects Israel to its Father in Heaven. In fact the entire world was only created for Israel and the Torah. Without the Torah, the Holy One, blessed be He, would not have created the world (according to Jeremiah 33:25). This is why the Jewish people connect themselves to Hashem through the Torah.

In addition, the relationship between Israel and the Holy One, blessed be He, teaches us that the essential thing for each Jew is spiritually, not materiality. This is because during the entire month of Tishri we have used material objects to carry out the mitzvot, objects such as a shofar, a prayer book, a sukkah (which we built using pieces of wood and branches), a lulav, an etrog, etc. However when Simchat Torah arrives, everything is spiritual! There remains nothing but the Torah itself – nothing else in addition – thereby teaching us that we connect to G-d by spirituality.

If we are to connect ourselves to Hashem by the Torah, however, He should have given us a holiday of Simchat Torah that lasted *several* days, not just one! Yet as we know, “One day in a year is reckoned as a year” (Rosh Hashanah 2b), for the power of one day can sustain the entire year by giving it extra energy for Torah study and serving G-d. This is why we must all strengthen ourselves in Torah study. We must take hold of the power contained in the holiday of Simchat Torah and Shemini Atzeret, preserving the holiness of all the days of Tishri and elevating ourselves in Torah observance and study. This will be our reward for the entire year.

### *Everyone Becomes a New Person on Simchat Torah*

The holy Torah begins with the word *bereshith*, which is composed of the letter *beit* (having a numerical value of two) and the word *reshith*. This alludes to the present world and the World to Come, which can both be designated as *reshith* (“beginning”). The present world elevates man and makes a “beginning” of him – but only if he defeats his evil inclination – and the World to Come is also a beginning for man, since he continues to elevate himself even after death. This is because the Torah and its *mitzvot* continue to protect a person after his life on earth. Conversely, the holy Torah ends with an account of Moses’ death. However instead of mourning for him, we are overjoyed on Simchat Torah. This is due to the fact that the essential thing is not the end, but rather the beginning, the *bereshith*. Thus the Sages have said, “Happy is he... whose labor was in the Torah... and who grew up with a good name and departed the world with a good name” (*Berachot 17a*), since everyone is happy when he succeeds in rectifying everything. Hence a person must not waste his time in youth by failing to study Torah, which is called *reshith* (*Bereshith Rabba 1:1*). The Torah is also called truth (*Berachot 5b*), this being alluded to in the very first verse of the Torah, for the last letters of the expression *Bereshith bara Elokim* (“In the beginning G-d”) form the word *emet* (“truth”).

Hence instead of lamenting the fact that we are ending the Torah on Simchat Torah, we rejoice in having the merit to complete it. We also rejoice in being able to start it again from the very beginning, from *Bereshith*, for this will enable us to perceive still more amazing things in it. We will be able to renew our faith that Hashem is One and His Name is One, and that He will continue sustaining us in life in order to serve Him, given that we have studied His Torah and completed it. Therefore in us will be fulfilled the words of the Sages, “Learn it and learn it, for everything is in it” (*Perkei Avoth 5:21*). Without the Torah, people might fall without any chance of arising.

As a result, we must realize that the concept of an end does not exist for a Jew. The Holy One, blessed be He, does not even let a wicked person die immediately, but instead waits for him to repent, as it is written: “He devises means, that he who is banished should not be an outcast from Him” (*II Samuel 14:14*). Even if we feel that a person has an end, this is incorrect, for a new spark immediately begins to ignite, a spark of renewal (*bereshith*). Even before the flame of one flickers out, the flame of another begins to illuminate the darkness.

Therein lies the nature of Simchat Torah’s joy. Simchat Torah is also called the festival of Atzeret, as it is written: “The eighth day shall be *atzeret* [a closing festival] for you” (*Numbers 29:35*). At that time everyone is immersed in great joy because he has “restrained” (the root of *atzeret*) himself before Hashem for one more day. At this time of joy a person also connects to Hashem, as it is written: “You shall *ach* [solely] rejoice” (*Deuteronomy 16:15*). Since the word *ach* has the same numerical value (21) as the Name *Eh-yeh*, this means that one’s joy is due solely to Hashem’s presence. Hence in

spite of all the high holidays that a person observes, he does not experience weariness in the service of Hashem. On the contrary, it is precisely on this final day that he adds to his joy and forgets all his problems. Since he realizes that he is in Hashem's presence, he forgets all else as he dances before Him. He merits having Hashem connect his soul to that of Moses in a great act of renewal, thereby becoming a new person.

Nevertheless, everyone must realize that to properly prepare themselves for Simchat Torah and to be joyous before Hashem, they must begin by putting an effort into becoming a new person as early as the night of Hoshana Rabba. The word *rabba* is composed of the same letters as *bara* ("he created"). We can achieve this by connecting ourselves to King David, the *ushpizin* ("guest") of Hoshana Rabba, for King David said of himself: "How I love Your Torah! All day long it is my conversation" (*Psalms 119: 97*), as well as: "I considered my ways and returned my feet to Your testimonies" (*v.59*). In other words King David told the Children of Israel: I examined all the ways that are devoid of Torah and *mitzvot*, seeing if there is any advantage to them, or if they eventually lead to sin. I saw that all the nations err in their ways because they do not have the Torah. The only proper way is "to Your statutes" – Hashem's Torah – the holy Torah only.

In fact King David's great love for Torah makes him an example and symbol for all Jews. As Scripture tells us, he danced before the holy Ark with all his might despite the scorn of his wife Michal (*II Samuel 6:16*). King David also respected *the talmidei chachamim* and studied Torah with great humility (*Moed Katan 16b*). Furthermore, although he learned only two things from Ahitophel, he called him his teacher, his guide, and his mentor (*Perkei Avoth 6:3*). His only desire was to study Torah, which is why he merited being connected to Hoshana Rabba. Even in the future, King David will be chosen to recite the blessing over the cup in the great banquet for the *tzaddikim* (*Pesachim 119b*), for he is the symbol of Torah and joy. Hence when someone studies Torah during the night of Hoshana Rabba (which is similar to Yom Kippur) and recites Psalms written by King David, he is cleansed of all sin. This is just as the Sages have said: "If a man busies himself in the study of the Torah and in acts of charity...all his sins are forgiven" (*Berachot 5a-b*). In that case the Holy One, blessed be He, will certainly help him in becoming a new person, for one who desires to purify himself is given help to do exactly that (*Yoma 38b*). This is Hoshana Rabba: Hashem delivering a person from the evil inclination during the entire year.

After this holy day, when a person arrives at Simchat Torah, he merits standing next to the Creator with great joy. At that point in time, in that moment of divine favor, Hashem infuses him with the strength of King David, with the strength of Moses our teacher, thereby transforming him into a new person. The world owes its entire existence to such a person, since the entire world was created for his sake. Citing the Sages, the book *Beit Aharon* states that a person receives all these blessings from Hashem. Furthermore, Hashem restrains (*otzer*) all good things from returning to Heaven on the holiday of Shemini Atzeret, ensuring that they remain below to help

the Jewish people. This is due to the fact that on Simchat Torah, Hashem pours His blessings upon the Jewish people more than on any other day of the year. This is what constitutes the joy of Simchat Torah.

## *Hanukah*

### *The Miracle of Hanukah*

The miracle of Hanukah was one of the greatest miracles known by the Jewish people. It was so great that our Sages devoted a special holiday for it. It is a holiday in which we recite neither funerals eulogies nor supplications, and during which time we honor the daily Torah readings by reciting the passages dealing with the offerings of the leaders of Israel during the inauguration of the Altar in the desert.

It is fitting to take note of the miracle that took place during the era of the second Temple. The Greeks at that time had dominion over the Children of Israel, and obligated them to renounce their faith and to turn away from their practices. The Eternal came to their aid at a time of suffering. He gave strength and courage to the Children of Israel who had to fight a powerful army, an army of hundreds of thousands of men, soldiers that were battle-hardened and heavily armed. The Children of Israel, who were then weak and few in number, almost destitute of weapons, prevailed over their enemies. The Greeks suffered a terrible defeat and took to flight. As for the Children of Israel, they began to repent and applied themselves to observe Torah and mitzvot, to respect Shabbat and the laws of family purity, to wear Tefillin, and to publicly proclaim the holiness of Rosh Chodesh, without any shame or fear.

It was a great miracle, and we should well ask ourselves how it is that our Sages chose to celebrate Hanukah, meaning to say the inauguration of the purified Temple and the remembrance of the flask of pure oil, oil that had been miraculously found by the priests in the Temple and had allowed the Menorah to be lit once again. In fact, it is surprising to note that the Sages did not institute any festival to commemorate the extraordinary military victory of the Children of Israel over the Greeks. We may also be surprised to note that Hashem desired this miracle of the flask that burned eight hours instead of one. Was it not enough for the many to have been chased away by the few, the strong by the weak, and the impure by the pure? Did this last miracle not already constitute a great sanctification of G-d's name? Why then did Hashem perform for them the miracle of the flask of oil that burned eight days instead of one (eight days being the time required to prepare new oil to keep the Menorah lit)? Was this miracle so important that Hashem judged it useful to perform it in addition to the miracle of the military victory?

Moreover, because of the miracle of the flask of oil, the Sages gave no importance to the miracle of the military victory over the Greeks!

In addition, we should ask ourselves why this holiday is called Hanukah. Even if we recall that the word Hanukah (חנוכה) is derived from Hanu (חנו) and Kah (כה), כה having the numerical value of 25 – “they found rest (חנו) on the twenty-fifth (כה) of Kislev” – the question is not fully answered, for we plainly see that the other holidays (Passover Shavuot, Sukkot, Purim, etc.) are not named after their dates, but

rather by the events that they commemorate! Why then is this holiday the exception and designated by its date rather than by the event that it celebrates?

I have thought it appropriate to explain the following statement of our Sages, of blessed memory: “The ignoramus cannot be pious.” In effect, a man who has not studied Torah and who ignores its worth, even if he performs the Divine commandments, will not be able to perform them with love, as does someone who looks to accomplish the will of his Creator. In fact, when a man accomplishes the commandments in order to be relieved of his religious duties, he does so as taught. Yet come the day when he will not want to perform the commandments, and it will be then that he may transgress them without regret afterwards. In actuality, he is ignorant of the authentic value of these commandments, and for him they mean nothing.

For example, a man who understands the value of money and knows just how difficult it is to earn will automatically not waste any of it that was hard-earned, for he knows its worth. However for one who doesn’t understand the value of money, just as he has acquired it with ease, likewise will he squander it with ease.

The Children of Israel saw the great miracles that the Holy One, blessed be He, performed for them against the ungodly Greeks. The latter were very cruel, for they had killed hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people, and they tried to uproot the Jews’ faith in their Creator. They did this in order that the Jews become assimilated to their culture and live in ignorance of the Master and Creator of the world. Almost all the Children of Israel became Hellenized and influenced by Greek culture. They forgot that they were Jews and began to imitate Greek ways, for the Greeks had killed most of the righteous of that generation and left few remaining. Therefore there was no one from whom the Children of Israel could draw a spiritual example. At first, the rebellion against those ungodly men, who had strength on their side, consisted of a handful of righteous men. They fought the Greeks and eventually conquered them (as for the rest of the Greeks who survived, they fled from Jerusalem). Thus the Divine Name was sanctified among the Children of Israel, and the peoples of the earth and the entire world knew there was a G-d in Israel Who protects and guards them, as it is written: “The Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps.”

The Sages did not want to celebrate the miracle of the military victory because they feared that the Children of Israel would turn this solemn observance into a day that celebrates their strength against the Greeks. The Sages feared that the Children of Israel would forget that it was Hashem Who had come to their aid. Such a commemoration would only have led to mistaken concepts for the generations to come, for we would have surely forgotten even the essence of the miracle.

During the time of the Hasmoneans, the Children of Israel were entirely removed from Judaism. They were almost completely Hellenized. A holiday that would have commemorated military victories would have made them forget, after a few years, that it was Hashem Who had come and rescued them. Without doubt, they would have in the end attributed their victory to their own strength and intelligence. A man without

Torah doesn't understand the value of this. He doesn't realize that he owes all of his success to his Creator.

The Sages desired, therefore, that the celebration of this miracle be related to something spiritual, not material. This was done in order that credit for the victory be attributed to Hashem only, and also that its memory be perpetuated forever. In fact, had the Sages not related the holiday to a spiritual miracle, we would have ended up by forgetting the miracle of the military victory, or we would have attributed it to the strength and intelligence of the people. Because of what the Sages did, however, the remembrance of an entirely spiritual miracle that was performed solely by G-d will always remain indelibly engraved in the memory of the Jewish people. We will always remember that G-d is present, ensuring that the light of Judaism is never extinguished.

This is why the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the day when the Children of Israel rid themselves of their enemies (and above all, the rapid assimilation that threatened them), was proclaimed a holiday. Beginning from that day, even those among them that had become assimilated began to repent. The Hasmoneans began to purify the Temple, and through this action the hearts of the Children of Israel also became purified. The more the Hasmoneans cleaned and purified the Beit Hamikdash of the impurities and the idolatry found therein, the more the hearts of the Children of Israel came closer to Hashem and rid themselves of the assimilation that they had been impregnated with.

Hashem then saw the efforts of the Children of Israel and the difficulties of the Hasmoneans, who found themselves without oil to light the Menorah. The Hasmoneans realized that in the same way that the Temple had been purified, the Children of Israel had also, they themselves, reached the level of the Tzaddikim. Yet they still lacked a flame, meaning the Divine forces that irresistibly lead to Hashem. The Greeks had influenced them so much, and the people had been rendered so ignorant and so devoid of mitzvot, that the Hasmoneans feared that everything was but a burning ember that would extinguish itself soon afterwards. A man without Torah has great trouble in facing this world.

The Hasmoneans therefore looked for pure oil, oil that had the power to maintain this flame during the time that it took the Children of Israel to once again inculcate the Torah within themselves and face the trials of this world. Let us note that the word *Hashemen* – השמן (“oil”) – is composed of the letters as the word *Neshama* – נשמה (“soul”) – the same as the word *Shemona* – שמנה (“eight”) – which relates to the eight days of Hanukah.

The discovery of the flask of pure oil came and confirmed to the Hasmoneans that Hashem Himself ensured that the flame that had been lit in the hearts of the Children of Israel would never be extinguished.

Hashem, addressing Himself to the Children of Israel, said to them: “Open for me a door like the eye of a needle, and I will open for you doors as wide as those of a palace.” It is therefore by Divine will that on the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the Children of

Israel found true rest by the discovery of this flask of pure oil. This is why the holiday is called Hanukah, for on this day, the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the Children of Israel found a way that allowed them to advance with their own strength in the path of the Torah.

This is why the holiday of Hanukah was instituted for the generations to come, in order that from year to year we may arouse in ourselves an awakening against wicked thoughts and foreign influences that seek to overwhelm us.

By the merit of the light of Hanukah, the obscurity that attempts to take over man's heart will disappear. Thus, in publicly displaying our lights to the world, we will eliminate the influences of foreign civilizations from ourselves, as did our ancestors during the time of the Hasmoneans.

*May it be G-d's desire to always illuminate our path, in order that we may continually serve Him in reverence and with all our strength. Amen.*

## *Shabat Shekalim*

### *Shekalim and Crossbreeding Species - The Month of Adar Prepares for Nissan*

The Talmud teaches that on the first day of the month of Adar, we begin to remember the shekalim and the forbidden crossbreeding of species (*Shekalim 1:1*). Why do we not proclaim the beginning of the collection of shekalim and the prohibition of crossbreeding species on another month?

The reason is that the Tabernacle was erected on the first day of Nissan (*see Exodus 40:17*), and as we have read on numerous occasions, it symbolizes that man should serve as a sanctuary for his Creator, as it is written, “They shall make a Sanctuary for Me – so that I may dwell among them” (*Exodus 25:8*) and “I am the L-RD Who dwells among the Children of Israel” (*Numbers 35:34*). They are the work of the Holy One’s hands, for man possesses a soul that is part of G-d, and the Eternal seeks to rejoin this portion and dwell within him.

Great efforts are nevertheless demanded on the part of the one who desires to be imbued with the Divine Presence. Such a person needs Divine help in order to triumph over his own evil inclination, an inclination that constantly strives to make him sin (*Sukkah 52a*) and to prevent him from serving as a sanctuary for his Creator.

During the month of Adar (which prepares us for the month of Nissan) a man should therefore sanctify himself, diligently engage in Torah study, recite his prayers regularly, and perform as many mitzvot and good deeds as possible. As we have read, during seven days Moses raised and dismantled the Tabernacle, which took permanent form only on the first day of Nissan, an allusion to the progress and setbacks that a man may experience. We will therefore not get discouraged despite the falls that we endure during the seven days of the week (corresponding to the seven days of the inauguration of the Tabernacle). We will finish by elevating and imbuing ourselves with the Shechinah. The eighth day, which goes beyond the normal course of events (and which is above nature), meaning the first day of Nissan, resembles a new creation to us. All our sins will be atoned for, and we will fill ourselves with the Divine Presence, similar to the Tabernacle.

The month of Nissan carries the name “the first of months” because it assumes the aspect of the eighth day, during which the glory of G-d covered the Tabernacle. This is the month of the Final Redemption, as the Talmud teaches: “They were liberated in Nissan, and in Nissan they are destined to be liberated” (*Rosh Hashanah 11a*).

It is precisely during the month of Adar that we speak of the Shekalim. This is in order for man to remember that it is a time that is particularly conducive for Torah study and for improving one’s behavior by the preparations for the month of

Nissan. During the month of Adar, one can triumph over the evil inclination, this *har* (mountain), which has the same Gematria (205) as Adar (*Sukkah 52a*). It is a month when the Children of Israel once again received the Torah with a whole heart, and it is for this reason that it is a suitable month to elevate oneself in the study of Torah and reach the Final Redemption and the revelation of the Shechinah.

As we have seen, it was during the month of Adar that Haman brought an accusation against the Children of Israel, who had refrained from the study of Torah. This is because it is not enough to perform mitzvot. Rather, one must listen to the voice of the Torah, in underestimating somewhat the value of the Shekalim. A month of preparations is necessary for a person to elevate himself to the concept of the eighth day, to reach the month of Nissan, the month of the redemption.

We also recall the problems of the *Kilaim* (the prohibition of crossbreeding species), and we realize the fact that they have no value (*klum*: “nothing”). In fact, the main thing is to attain the Torah and to make the Holy One, blessed be He, rule over the entire world. Citing the Zohar (III:86b), the author of *Sefat Emet* (*Parsha Shekalim 634,637,653*) connects the word *Kilaim* to *beth kele* (“prison”), and explains that through the offerings, one liberates oneself from a spiritual prison and prepares oneself for Passover. One removes perversity from the heart by eliminating the power of the evil inclination. One leaves the fifty (*nun*) gates of impurity, which alludes to the word *Kilaim* (= *kele YaM*; *yud* + *mem* = 50).

Let us radically distance ourselves, therefore, from greed and rebuild ourselves during the month of Adar. With G-d’s help, we will reach Nissan (the aspect of the eighth day), which transcends nature. We will then resemble a new created being, permeated with the Shechinah just like the Tabernacle.

## Shabat Zachor

### *Removing all Traces of Amalek - A Source of Elevation for Israel*

G-d ordered King Saul to wipe out the descendants of Amalek from off the face of the earth, as it is written, “So said the L-RD, Master of Legions: ‘I have remembered what Amalek did to Israel – [the ambush] he emplaced against him on the way, as he went up from Egypt. Now go and strike down Amalek and destroy everything he has’” (*1 Samuel 15:2:3*). Thus the annihilation of Amalek comprises one of the three mitzvot that the Eternal commanded the Children of Israel for their entry into the Holy Land (*Sanhedrin 20b*).

Commenting on the verse that states, “Saul said to the Kenite, ‘Go, withdraw, descend from among the Amalekite, lest I destroy you with them’ ” (*1 Samuel 15:6*), the Zohar asks why the Holy One, blessed be He, was so merciless with regards to Amalek, even more so than with any other nation (*Zohar II:194b*). Rabbi Chiya responds: “Because the battle with Amalek took place from above to below and on every side.” Exactly what does this mean?

Everyone should constantly connect themselves to G-d, on every side, from above and below; this resembles “A ladder [that] was set earthward and its top reached heavenward” (*Genesis 28:12*). This is done in order to bind the supernal world with the lower world, so that the Eternal may “dwell in the midst of both” (*see Exodus 25:8*).

Following the example of Egypt, all the nations acted only with hate in regards to the Children of Israel. Yet they didn’t try to distance them from their faith in G-d. Amalek, on the other hand, tried to completely distance the Children of Israel from G-d, as much in the supernal world as in the lower one. At their departure from Egypt, they yearned with fervor to purify themselves from all their spiritual blemishes. They engaged themselves in the study of Torah, even while on route, as it is written, “you will speak of them [Torah matters] ... while you walk on the way” (*Deuteronomy 6:7*). Yet just as someone who wants to cool the waters of a hot bath (Tanhuma, Ki Tisa 9), Amalek came to chill their enthusiasm and to make them cross over the threshold of the fiftieth gate of impurity. He wanted to make them descend from the spiritual levels that they had ascended upon leaving Egypt and to prevent them from receiving the Torah. Over the course of the generations, there was thus never a worse enemy for the Jews than Amalek. His hatred for our nation has never been equaled in the history of humanity.

Amalek’s brazenness stunned and chilled all the nations that considered his actions as tantamount to an all-out war not only against the Holy One, blessed be He (and His Shechinah), but also against Israel. Amalek had not understood that he couldn’t triumph over them. He even ignored the fact that a powerful nation such as Egypt wasn’t able to defeat them. The workings of the Satan succeeded nevertheless: The

Children of Israel were terrified by him and began to abstain from Torah study. The forces of evil thus managed to defeat them in the supernal and lower worlds. Amalek, the descendant of Esau, knew perfectly well that as long as the voice of Jacob was not heard in the synagogues and yeshivas, he would triumph, as it is written, “when you are aggrieved, you may cast off his yoke from upon your neck” (*Genesis 27:40*).

The Eternal therefore ordered Saul to annihilate all the descendants of Amalek, who chilled the enthusiasm of the Divine service, spiritually weakened the Children of Israel, and brought forth accusations both in the supernal and lower worlds. Amalek’s fate is the fate of all those who follow in his footsteps, such as the Greeks, Haman, etc. For instead of encouraging them to engage in the study of Torah, he made them commit sins and prevented *shefa* (abundance, both spiritual and material) from descending into the world. In fact, in a manner of speaking, he prevented the Kingdom of G-d from descending into the world as well. Amalek and his group aimed at wiping out the creation of the Holy One, blessed be He. Thus His Name and His Throne will not attain perfection until all traces of Amalek are erased (Tanhuma, Ki Tisa, end). The Kingdom of G-d will then spread out and nothing, neither in the supernal nor lower worlds, will hinder Israel’s Redemption.

Having temporarily refrained from Torah study, the Children of Israel were attacked by Amalek and strengthened the power of the Kelipah. Moses then said to Joshua, “‘Choose men for us’ [*Exodus 17:9*] – ‘courageous and devout’ [Mechilta and Rashi] – who are not afraid of Amalek’s Kelipah. I will fight him from above, and you from below, and we will triumph over him.” However Saul did not act in this way, and that is why he was dethroned.

It is this that we recall on Shabbat Zachor, and all throughout the year. We see to it that we take the battle to Amalek and that we triumph over him in the upper and lower worlds. Shabbat, which constitutes a foretaste of the world to come, is a particularly appropriate time to destroy the serpent and the forces of evil. We must never forget what Amalek did to us when we left Egypt (*see Deuteronomy 25:17*).

“Then Esther summoned ... one of the king’s chamberlains ... and ordered him to go to Mordechai, to learn what this was about and why” (*Esther 4:5*). Esther wanted to know if accusations had been brought against Israel in the upper and lower worlds. Mordechai then told her what had happened (*v.7*), and even in fact that the death sentence had been pronounced against the Jews (on high as well as below) who had rejoiced in Ahasuerus’ banquet and had prostrated themselves in front of an idol (*Megillah 12a*), and who had seen the vessels of the Holy Temple in their splendor without lamenting over them. Instead of crying over the Temple’s destruction and the fact that its vessels were in Babylon since then, they rejoiced with the gentiles. Their religious observance had also grown cold, as during the time of Amalek. Esther then said to Mordechai, “Go, assemble all the Jews that are to be found in Shushan” (*Esther 4:16*). This is what Mordechai did, who assembled children in yeshivas to study Torah (*Esther Rabba 9:5*) in order to correct their remoteness from it. Thus when we remember throughout

the years, and in particular on Shabbat Zachor, these events in our history, we push ourselves to repair spiritual blemishes and to engage in the diligent study of Torah. These awakenings, below and above, eliminate all strict judgments and even bring redemption closer, as was the case during Mordechai's and Esther's era.

Even though the miracle was essentially due to Esther, her name is always preceded by that of Mordechai, who was the first to become aware of the accusations brought against the Children of Israel in the upper and lower worlds, and who preceded the rectifying punishment by refusing to bend the knee and prostrate himself before Haman (*Esther 3:2*), which is to say, before the descendant of Amalek and the forces of evil. On the other hand, Esther, who didn't know what attitude to adopt, was content to ask what this was all about and from where it originated.

Haman therefore hurried to prepare gallows from which to hang Mordechai. He did not want to wait for the death of the other Jews in order to kill him because Haman knew that Mordechai had knowledge of the formidable secrets of Kabbalah in order to eliminate all the accusations brought against the Jews in the upper and lower worlds. Yet he did not succeed, for it was precisely on that night that the king could not sleep (*Ibid. 6:1*). The Talmud reports that Mordechai could also not sleep that night (*see Esther Rabba 10:1*). In the book of records, it was found that Mordechai had saved Ahasuerus from certain death. Finally, it was Haman who was hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordechai (*Esther 10:2*), and the accusations against the Jews were abolished. They passed from darkness to light and were delivered from their oppressors. The Eternal therefore commanded that we remember what was done to us by Amalek, who wanted the kingdom of evil to dominate the world, and who was opposed to G-d's Name being complete. He commanded us to remember "from generation to generation," which is to say, from that of Moses to that of Saul, and from that of Mordechai to that of our Redeemer (Rashi).

Haman was therefore hanged during the month of Nissan, more specifically on the day after Passover. He was hanged on a tree – the gallows – to show all the generations what happens to one who attacks the tree of life (which is the Torah), and what happens to these who uphold it (*Proverbs 3:18*).

It not being enough to just recall this event, Mordechai prescribed that these days be made ones of feasting and rejoicing, ones during which we send food to one another, and during which we distribute gifts to the poor (*Esther 9:22*). In demonstrating kindness towards the poor, we recall that which the Holy One, blessed be He, did by saving us from the accusations which the serpent brought against us in the upper and lower worlds. Moreover, We should note with regards to this that the Kelipah bears the name *anyah* (poor) (*see Zohar I:13a; III:273b*). It draws its sustenance only in the remnants of holiness, like a dog that licks the scraps of its master (*ibid. III:197a*). Thus in occupying oneself with the *ani*, the poor, one weakens the power of the *anyah*, the Kelipah, and by this one strengthens the power of holiness in the world.

## *Pesach*

### *“And They Believed in Hashem” – Faith’s Positive Influence on the Entire World*

We find ourselves in the very midst of Passover. Everyone has removed *chametz* from their homes, from the depths of their hearts, and has joined with the Holy One, blessed be He, by eating *matzah*, the bread of healing, and by having performed the *mitzvot* of Passover. As we know, all this leads to a solid faith in G-d. We are approaching the seventh day of the holiday, which is a true foundation of faith. Now if we look closely, we will see that the faith of the Jewish people has an influence on the entire world.

This influence comes from the power of the Children of Israel’s faith that Hashem would produce a miracle for them by splitting the sea. In fact the Sages have said that the tribes of Judah and Benjamin zealously sprang into the sea (*Sotah 36b*), thereby attaining solid faith, as it is written: “They believed in the L-RD and in Moses His servant” (*Exodus 14:31*). Their faith was so great that the entire world was influenced by this miracle, to the point that not only Jethro converted, as the Gemara states (*Zevachim 116a*), but also the Egyptians themselves were affected and said, “Let us flee from Israel, for the L-RD fights for them against the Egyptians” (*Exodus 14:25*).

This requires an explanation, for did the Egyptians not realize before this point that Hashem fought for the Children of Israel in Egypt? Had the Egyptians forgotten that they themselves had said, “This is the finger of G-d” (*Exodus 8:15*) as well as, “The L-RD is righteous, and I and my people are wicked” (*ibid. 9:27*)? Furthermore, how many times did they fear the effects of the plagues they endured in Egypt, to the point that they even asked Moses to pray for them (*Exodus 8:4,24; 9:28; 10:17; Tanhuma Va’eira 33*)? Consequently, this means that they knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, fought for the Children of Israel in Egypt. Hence why is it only here, at the sea, that they admitted it? Does it mean that up to now they really did not believe it?

This can be fully explained in light of what we said above, for everything depends on the Jewish people. They needed to realize that all the plagues which the Holy One, blessed be He, heaped on Egypt was not for them, for He could have simply sent a single plague on Egypt that would have killed everyone. Instead, everything that happened was solely for the Children of Israel, in order for them to know and believe in G-d by what they saw there. However because the Children of Israel had already grown accustomed to all the wonders they witnessed in Egypt, and because their faith was fragile, they did not cause the Egyptians to have faith in the Creator of the world, as they should have. This is why the Egyptians always ended up forgetting what had happened to them, and it is why they still continued to have doubts in Hashem. The Egyptians did not know if the Holy One, blessed be He, was taking vengeance out on them, or whether He was doing everything for the sake of the Children of Israel.

Due to the fragile faith of the latter, Hashem hardened the hearts of the Egyptians to administer another plague so they would believe in Him even more, and also for the Children of Israel to awaken themselves to a perfect faith in Him. Proof of this lies in the fact that only one fifth of the Children of Israel actually left Egypt (*Tanhuma Beshalach 1; Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, beginning of Beshalach*), all due to the fragile faith of those who died in the plague of darkness.

However just before the sea split, as the Children of Israel found themselves being tested at the seashore, the great faith that they demonstrated by zealously springing into the water initiated a miracle, and thus the sea split for them. It follows that because of their incredible faith in G-d, Who would perform this miracle for them, they also incited a great awakening among the Egyptians, who had doubts prior to that time. The Egyptians were now affirming with certainty that it was the Holy One, blessed be He, Who had fought against them in Egypt, and not (as they had previously thought) that the Creator's existence was in doubt.

From everything that has been said, we may learn a lesson of paramount importance concerning the great influence exerted by a person who wholeheartedly studies Torah with passion and diligence for the sake of Heaven. This approach has the power to create a spirit of holiness that can influence others who do not share this view, bringing them closer to G-d and arousing their desire to learn Torah. How many good things does the Holy One, blessed be He, constantly shower upon us, solely through the power of this awakening! All this comes through the power of the person who diligently studies Torah. It is not without reason that before performing a *mitzvah* we say, "With fear and love, in the name of all Israel," for this awakens love in the hearts of others to perform the *mitzvah* as well. Unfortunately, the reverse is also true. When someone harbors doubts in his heart, this can cause others great harm, for he introduces a spirit of doubt in their hearts as well.

We may reason that if a Jew who harbors doubts about his faith is liable to harm the faith of other Jews like himself, then he is all the more likely to instill doubts in the hearts of non-Jews. Due to our sins, this may unfortunately lead to non-Jews hating us, for when we begin to have doubts with regards to the Torah and *mitzvot*, even non-Jews feel its effects, and their hatred for us increases.

This can be understood in light of what we have said. The Egyptians began to truly believe in Hashem, with a sincere and unhesitant faith, only when the Children of Israel themselves "believed in the L-RD and in Moses His servant" (*Exodus 14:31*). This faith led the Egyptians to start asking themselves some serious questions, prompting them to say: "Let us flee from Israel, for the L-RD fights for them against the Egyptians" (*v.25*). In addition, the Children of Israel incited the same fear among the nations of the world through the power of their faith, as it is written: "Peoples heard, they were agitated... all the dwellers of Canaan dissolved" (*Exodus 15:14-15*). All this was brought about by the Children of Israel's sacred service of G-d, for if we as Jews strengthen the purity of our faith, it will have an influence of holiness on the entire world.

## *Shavuot*

### *Torah Study: the Goal of Man and Foundation of the World*

When Moses ascended to Heaven, it is stated that the ministering angels said to the Holy One, blessed be He: “Master of the universe, what is this man, born of woman, doing among us?” (*Shabbat 88b*). It is difficult to understand what surprised the angels so much. Did they not know, or had they not heard that the Holy One, blessed be He, had given the Torah to Israel? Besides, they themselves were present when the Torah was given (*ibid.*), so what were they getting at by stressing the fact that Moses was the son of a woman?

It appears they were not trying to disparage Moses by calling him a “man, born of woman”; their aim was quite the opposite. In fact we know that at the giving of the Torah, the Children of Israel reached a higher spiritual level than the angels, for if angels carry out G-d’s will, it is because they have no connection whatsoever to the material world. They have neither a body nor an evil inclination to incite them to sin or ignore G-d’s will at every moment. On the contrary, the Children of Israel used the language of the angels and performed G-d’s will despite their material bodies and evil inclination. And since at the giving of the Torah they tried to spiritually elevate themselves to a level higher than they were capable of, their souls left them (*Shir Hashirim Rabba 6:3*). Hence at that point they were at a much loftier spiritual level than the angels.

It is said concerning our teacher Moses when he ascended to Heaven: “You ascended on high, you have taken captives” (*Psalms 68:19*). Now we know that when a person seizes captives, this demonstrates his strength and victory in battle. With our teacher Moses the victory was a double one, for not only did he conquer the angels, but what’s more is that he did it on their own territory, which is all the more difficult. This is why the angels said to the Holy One, blessed be He: “What is this man, born of woman, doing among us? He is at a greater spiritual level than us, and moreover he is seizing spoils! We beg You to get him out of here!”

This shows us the immense importance of Torah study, to the point that when a man studies, the Holy One drops, as it were, everything He is doing and focuses exclusively on him. This is the meaning of the verse, “I will turn My attention to you; I will make your fruitful...” (*Leviticus 26:9*), a verse that speaks of those who devote themselves to Torah study. At Creation the Holy One, blessed be He, left everything to look into the Torah and create the world (*Zohar II:161b*), which means that He was not concerned with anything at that point but the Torah. Similarly, He frees Himself from all other occupations to focus exclusively on the one who studies Torah. The reason for this is clearly understandable: We know that the Holy One, blessed be He, deals with a person measure for measure (*Sanhedrin 90a*), to the extent that when a person drops all his affairs to engage in study, G-d also “frees” Himself, as it were, to attend solely to him. This is the meaning of the Sages’ teaching, “Whoever is immersed in Torah study, the Holy One,

blessed be He, studies with him” (*Tamid 32a*). And if we ask how G-d, Who is the King of the universe, can drop everything to focus exclusively on such a person, risking the destruction of the universe, the answer is that whoever studies Torah becomes a partner of the Holy One, blessed be He, in Creation. Consequently, everything remains stable because of the merit of the Torah study performed by those whom G-d is focused on. This is what the Sages have said, “The world stands on three things: On Torah...” (*Perkei Avoth 1:2*). Thus on the contrary, those who study Torah *contribute* to the existence of the universe.

Nevertheless, even a person who studies Torah should pay extremely close attention to the schemes of the evil inclination. It is very possible that in the beginning, it will encourage him to study Torah and perform mitzvot so as put him off-guard and content with his spiritual state. His instincts can then easily take the upper hand and incite him to commit a sin. We encounter this idea concerning the one who studies while walking on the road and stops to remark, “How beautify is this tree! How beautiful is this plowed field! Scripture considers it as if he were guilty of a mortal sin” (*Perkei Avoth 3:7*). It may seem to us to be a mitzvah to contemplate the marvels of Creation, and yet it is like putting one’s own soul in danger, for this advice stems from the evil inclination, which tries to turn a person away from studying. A person can be greatly criticized for this, since if he finds an opportunity to listen to the deceitful advice of his evil inclination, why has he not found an opportunity to listen to the voice of the good inclination?

The Children of Israel experienced a great awakening in Egypt. Yet even though they believed what they had been told (“G-d will surely remember you and bring you up out of this land” [*Genesis 50:24*]), they were still far from a lofty spiritual level, and they certainly did not approach that of the angels. The reason for this is that they had an evil inclination that encouraged them to consider both good and evil as being absolutely equal. Thus on one hand they protected their native language, their manner of dress, and so on (*Vayikra Rabba 32:5; Pesikta Zutah Shemot 6:6*), but on the other hand they descended all the way to the 49th gate of impurity (*Zohar Chadash Yitro 39a*). Nevertheless the Holy One, blessed be He, did not punish or reprimand them, for this was not their fault. On the contrary, He helped them to uncover sparks of holiness. This is the meaning of, “They could not delay” (*Exodus 12:39*), for good and evil were equal in their eyes and they were about to breach the 50th gate of impurity, a gate that we know is impossible to escape from.

G-d said to the Children of Israel, “I recall for you the kindness of your youth ... your following Me into the wilderness, into an unsown land” (*Jeremiah 2:2*). This may seem surprising. Why is the fact that the Children of Israel accepted to leave Egypt called “kindness”? On the contrary, we should be the ones thanking the Holy One, blessed be He, Who very much wanted to take us out of Egypt, for in the opposite case we and our children and their progeny would still be slaves in Egypt!

Nevertheless, we can understand the statement in the book of Jeremiah according to what we have said about the Children of Israel’s spiritual condition in Egypt. In

other words, it was of a dual nature, meaning that they obeyed both their evil and good inclinations to the same degree, and apparently without any chance of choosing the good over the evil. Now if by exerting a superhuman effort the Children of Israel managed to leave Egypt in spite of everything, this demonstrates that they also succeeded in making the good inclination stronger than their evil one. It was for this reason that G-d glories in us and considers that event as a kindness on our part. That is what helped the Children of Israel to continue elevating themselves, to the point that when they arrived at the giving of the Torah they were already at a great spiritual level, for one mitzvah brings about another (*Perkei Avoth 4:2*).

### ***Education: The Foundation of Humility***

The Midrash asks, “From where does Sinai come?” (*Shocher Tov 68*). It comes from Mount Moriah, having been kneaded like *challah* from dough, from the place where Isaac was to have been sacrificed. Thus G-d said, “Since Isaac should have been sacrificed there, it would be good for his children to receive the Torah there.”

We may ask at least three questions on this passage:

1. If Mount Moriah is so important, why was the Torah not given on it (without having a portion taken from it and placed on Mount Sinai)?

2. What exactly does “having been kneaded” mean? Why did our Sages add, “Like *challah* from dough”?

3. What is the connection between the sacrifice of Isaac and the giving of the Torah? Did these two events have to occur in the same place?

The Torah commands: “Who is the man who has built a new house and has not inaugurated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war and another man will inaugurate it” (*Deuteronomy 20:5*). What exactly does “lest he die” signify? Everyone who goes out to war is exposed to danger. What is the meaning of, “Who has built a new house and has not inaugurated it”? It means that even the construction of a house implies the performance of several *mitzvot* that are inseparable from one another, from the *mitzvot* connected to the house itself (such as the *mezuzot* [*Deuteronomy 6:9*] and the fence on the roof [*ibid. 22:8*]) to the *mitzvot* that one performs within its walls (such as the laws of *kashrut*, family purity, being fruitful and multiplying). The precepts carried out within the home, and the *Shechinah* found therein, constitute the very foundation of the Torah. With regards to this, the Talmud teaches that if a man and his wife are worthy, the *Shechinah* dwells among them; if not, they are devoured by fire (*Sotah 17a*). A man performs *mitzvot* and good deeds in every corner of the house. He impregnates it throughout with holiness, and it is difficult to commit a sin there. The beams and walls of the house will witness against him if he commits a sin within it (*Taanith 11a*). In the same way that one educates one’s children, one educates and impregnates one’s home in the service of G-d.

If, as the Talmud relates (*Yoma 47a; see also Vayikra Rabba 20:11*), Kimchit had seven sons who all became High Priests, it was because the beams of her house never saw the braids

of her hair. She was careful to hide them even when she was alone in the house, doing so in order to impregnate it with holiness. Because of her modesty, she merited giving birth to seven High Priests.

Therefore if a person has built a house without having performed the *mitzvot* intended for it, he does not have the right to go to war. He will be judged for not having inaugurated it with *mitzvot* and good deeds. Moreover, Yonatan ben Uzziel translated the verse in question into Aramaic as follows: “If someone has built a new house, and has not affixed a *mezuzah* to it...” This is because the *mezuzah* and other *mitzvot* constitute the foundation of the Jewish home and generate humility in man, a guarantee that the Divine commandments will be carried out.

On Mount Moriah, our Patriarch Isaac was taught to fear Hashem and serve Him with the greatest of devotion (*Berachot 62b; Taanith 16a; Zohar III:53b*). Our Sages teach that when the Jewish people finds itself in distress, the “ashes” of Isaac rise toward the Holy One, blessed be He, and his merit saves them. Yet where, in fact, do these “ashes” come from? Isaac was never sacrificed! The answer is that his modesty and humility allowed him to reach the level of dust and ashes that wind scatters to the four corners of the earth. It is similar to the *challah* that we take from the dough: It is really bread, but when we burn it, it is literally transformed into ashes.

The Talmud teaches (*Taanith 16a; see also Bereshith Rabba 55:7*) that from Mount Moriah, an educational message was relayed to the Jewish people – one of modesty, submission, and the fear of Heaven. Just as Mount Moriah was uprooted, the Torah does not stay in one place; one finds it everywhere. We too must perform *mitzvot* everywhere, with the greatest humility – that is the essential thing. As we have seen, the Torah was given on Mount Sinai because it was the smallest of mountains, and it is part of Mount Moriah.

Desiring to impregnate the Torah and *mitzvot* within themselves in order to defeat the evil inclination, the Children of Israel settled in the desert, where the forces of evil fiercely raged, close to Sinai. They wanted to attain high levels of spirituality on this mountain, which *Meromem Y-H* (Moriah=*Meromem Y-H*), Hashem uplifts. Note the similarity in the numerical values of *Y-H* (Hashem) and *ga'avah* (pride), both equal to 15. By the study of Torah, we array ourselves in Hashem’s majesty alone.

This Torah portion carries the name Yitro because he, fleeing all honors, went to the desert to impregnate himself with the worship of Hashem and to fight the evil inclination.

This is also what the Children of Israel did. In fleeing from honors into the desert, they were then “pursued” by Mount Moriah, which elevated them and allowed them to reach sublime spiritual levels.

Commenting on the verse that states, “So shall you say [*ko tomar*] to the House of Jacob and relate [*vetaged*] to the Children of Israel” (*Exodus 19:3*), the Talmud explains (*Shabbat 87a*) that Hashem uses gentle language with the House of Jacob (that is, with

the women), and rough language with the Children of Israel (that is, with the men). Why two different ways of speaking? Furthermore, why does the verse mention the women before the men, which is contrary to the norm?

The answer is that a man learns the virtue of humility from a woman. If on Mount Sinai it was the Torah that reminded man to conduct himself with complete humility, who would remind him to do so in his home, if not his wife? The Midrash teaches that all while being strong, a woman is born with a discreet, modest disposition (*Bereshith Rabba 18:2*). This is why, in order to learn humility (which is the very foundation of the entire Torah), a woman needs *ko tomar* (“so shall you say”) and “I am the L-RD your G-d.”

### *Unity Brings About Torah Study*

Commenting on the verse that states, “And Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain” (Exodus 19:2), Rashi explains that the Children of Israel had journeyed to receive the Torah like a single man, with a single heart (*see Mechilta ibid.*).

Now as we have explained several times before, this was precisely the very goal of their departure from Egypt, as it is written: “When you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve G-d on this mountain” (*Exodus 3:12*). What, therefore, does this verse reveal to us?

It comes to teach us the importance of the unity of the Children of Israel. Due to the fact that the majority of mitzvot deal with relationships between man and his fellow, we can only accomplish them by impregnating ourselves with the virtues of peace, harmony, and love. Moreover, in revealing Himself to the Children of Israel as He gave them the Torah, Hashem used the singular: “I am the L-RD your G-d, Who has taken *you* [singular] out of the land of Egypt” (*Exodus 20:2*). The plural form is not used in Hebrew. The most complete harmony was to reign among the Children of Israel when they were to receive the Torah. They were to be guarantors (*arevim*) for one another (*zeh bazeh*), The latter expression has a numerical value of 26, equal to that of G-d’s Name (*Havayah*), meaning that if harmony reigned among them, the Shechinah would reside in their midst (*see Sanhedrin 27b*).

Consequently, only perfect unity allows for the study of Torah and the acceptance of the yoke of the mitzvot. Neither the evil inclination nor foreign nations will have any power over Jews if they refrain from committing sins (*Ketubot 66b*). If the evil inclination finds the slightest fault (*i.e.*, the least bit of disagreement) among them, the Shechinah will no longer abide with the Jewish people, and the evil inclination can then come and destroy all traces of holiness. However if harmony reigns among the Jewish people, they can very well find themselves “opposite the mountain” (an allusion to the evil inclination), all while triumphing over it.

Our Sages also teach that at the giving of the Torah, the evil inclination left the hearts of the Children of Israel (Shabbat 146a). This was due to G-d’s Name being found in their hearts because of their unity. They were then crowned with two crowns,

one for having proclaimed, “we will do,” and the other for having proclaimed, “we will listen” (*Shabbat 88a*). Although the evil inclination resides between the two parts of the heart (Berachot 61a), Rashi specifically asserts that the Children of Israel encamped before the mountain “with a single heart.” This is because harmony reigned among them at that point and the evil inclination no longer resided in their hearts. Thus their hearts were reserved solely for receiving the Torah.

Yet if so, then why did G-d have to threaten them by lifting the mountain over their heads like a barrel, thus *forcing* them to accept the Torah (*Shabbat 88a*)? Had they not proclaimed, “We will do and we will listen” (*Exodus 24:7*)? Did Hashem have any doubts concerning their sincerity? The Satan was no longer present, for it had left them from that point on.

Let us begin by recalling that the Greeks had forced the Jews to renounce Hashem and His commandments, such as the observance of Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh, and circumcision. They did not want to exterminate them *physically*, but rather *spiritually*. This is why the Greeks defiled all the oil in the Temple, for oil alludes to the soul (see *Zohar Chadash, Ruth 108a*). They also prohibited the Jews from lighting the Menorah, which alludes to the body. Thus the Greeks were content with defiling all the oil (*Shabbat 21b*), without completely breaking the flasks in which it was kept, for their primary aim was to desecrate the oil (*hashmen*), which is composed of the same letters as the word soul (*neshama*). They did not seek to destroy the flasks, which allude to the body.

A miracle nevertheless occurred, and there remained a small flask of pure oil, sealed with the stamp of the High Priest (*Shabbat 21a*). Why did there not remain two or three flasks, containing just enough oil to light the Menorah for eight days? That too was a miracle.

The reason for this is because the flask alludes to the unity of the Creator, Who blesses abundantly starting from one. The Holy One, blessed be He, wanted the Jews to understand that by sacrificing body and soul in order not to be defiled by the Greeks, they took on the aspect of Pinchas, son of Eliezer, the son of Aaron the High Priest. Pinchas “was jealous with My Jealousy in their midst” (Numbers 25:11), and many miracles were performed for him (*Tanhuma Balak 21*) because he wished to annul the strict sentence pronounced against the Children of Israel.

Furthermore, the flask alludes to the unity that reigns among the Jewish people, which enables miracles to be performed. The Divine Presence resides among Jews only when they are united, having one heart (soul) as a single body. This is why the miracle occurred with a single flask.

G-d *caphah* (forced) the mountain on them to show them the importance of unity. The letters of *cephyah* can be rearranged to form *pachyah*. In other words, Hashem (*Y-h*) united the Children of Israel in a single *pach* (flask) that, as we saw above, alludes to the body. He showed them how the Satan, which alludes to the mountain, is like a barrel without end, from which we cannot flee. Thus G-d told them: “If you accept

My Torah as a single man, with a single heart, you will be happy. If not, this mountain will become your grave. You will not be able to escape from the evil inclination [the mountain] that lives with you.”

We therefore see the importance of unity in the eyes of the Holy One, blessed be He. Before the creation of the world, the Children of Israel were a uniform whole (Bereshith Rabba 1:5), and G-d greatly desires that harmony reign in this world as well. Thus Hillel declared to a future convert: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man” (Shabbat 31a), and Rabbi Akiva added, “ ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ [Leviticus 19:18] is a fundamental rule [*klal*] of the Torah” (Yerushalmi Nedarim 9:4). It is only in this way that one can acquire the Torah. The Divine commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” embodies *kolel*, the Torah in its entirety, and the one who distances himself from this commandment puts the entire Jewish people at risk. Hashem turned the mountain upside down and held it over the Children of Israel like a barrel in order to frighten and dissuade them from leaving the *klal*, the people as a whole.

Regarding this subject, the Gemara cites the case of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Meir, whom the evil inclination desired to make sin (Kiddushin 81a). However G-d rebuked the Satan, which then left them. Yet Rabbi Yochanan, who was a High Priest for 80 years, nevertheless became a Sadducee near the end of his life (Berachot 29a), and Elisha the son of Avuya, one of the Tannaim, became a heretic (Hagigah 14b). This shows us just how the evil inclination strives at inciting sin. Only harmony allows a person to conquer the evil inclination and come closer to the Holy One, blessed be He. May Hashem help all of us to love one another! Amen!



