

Pachad David

Bamidbar

*With gratitude to Hashem,
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Bamidbar



Torah – A Priceless Gift

“Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt, saying”

(Bamidbar 1:1)

When one gives his friend a gift, he should first inform him (*Shabbat* 10b). Certainly, before bestowing the Torah upon Bnei Yisrael, Hashem notified them of its inherent value and great *kedushah* (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 6:5; *Beit Halevi*, *Mishlei* 2:1). This is the reason why He performed so many miracles for them in Egypt, demonstrating His might. It was all done in order to emphasize the glory of the Torah, which Bnei Yisrael were soon to receive, the purpose of Creation and the pillar upon which the world stands.

The world was created in six days only for the sake of the Torah, the covenant between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael (*Nedarim* 32a). This is expressed by the *Navi* (*Yirmeyahu* 33:25): “If My covenant with the night and with the day would not be; had I not set up the laws of heaven and earth.” Furthermore, Hashem used the Torah as the

blueprint for the Creation of the world (*Zohar* II, 161a). The wonders and miracles which He did for Bnei Yisrael established this understanding in their hearts. Studying these acts done on behalf of the Torah helps us comprehend just how great the Torah is.

Hashem wants us to realize that only through toil in Torah can a person come to true understanding of His existence. There is no greater proof of His Presence than the Torah (*Avodat Hakodesh* 3:65; see *Shelah Hakadosh, Shavuot, Torah Ohr* 7). One who truly exerts himself in Torah cannot help but arrive at the conclusion that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is the Manager of the world, directing it as He sees fit. When a person is remiss in Torah study, he is liable to become haughty and immoral (see *Sanhedrin* 24a). The danger is tremendous.

Parashat *Bamidbar* opens with the pasuk, “Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai.” This imparts an important message about the Torah, the gift Hashem bestowed upon Bnei Yisrael at Har Sinai. The word במדבר (in the Wilderness) can be divided into the two words במ דבר (speak in them). A person should always be occupied with the study of Torah, constantly speaking its words. This is expressed in the command (*Devarim* 6:7), “And speak of them (ודברת במ) while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you retire and when you arise.” Additionally, the word במדבר teaches that in order to retain *divrei Torah*, a person must make himself like the Wilderness, humble and submissive to a Greater Being (see *Eiruv* 54a).

The Torah stresses the point that Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai. Don't we already know where Moshe was? Wouldn't it have been enough to state that Hashem spoke to Moshe in the desert? The reason for the mention of Sinai is to teach us the importance of humility, a most vital trait for acquiring Torah wisdom. Hashem chose Har Sinai upon which to give the Torah

because of its humility (see *Megillah* 29a; see *Sotah* 5a). The phrase “in the Tent of Meeting” indicates that a person should establish his main residence in the Beit Hamidrash, a miniature Tent of Meeting. Only in this way will he be able to appreciate the significance of the gift Hashem has given him, the Torah.

Squandering the time that should be spent in Torah study opens the door to the *Yetzer Hara*, granting him access to tempt man to sin. We find that as soon as Am Yisrael slackened in *divrei Torah*, Amalek pounced upon them. Bnei Yisrael had declined to such an extent that they could not stand up to Amalek’s attack, even though Amalek was a relatively weak nation. This is hinted to by his name עמלק which is comprised of the words עמ קל (a weak nation). Bnei Yisrael had relaxed somewhat in their mitzvah performance, as they had not yet been commanded to keep all of the mitzvot. This posed enough of a laxity to give rise to Amalek’s attack.

Let us take this lesson to heart. Bnei Yisrael had received only a limited amount of mitzvot at that point, some of which they disregarded. Because of this, a weak and insignificant nation had the power to rise against them, nearly annihilating them. In our day, when the Torah is in our hands in its totality, if we would refrain from studying it, *chas v’shalom*, who knows what retribution would come?

Hashem made sure to inform Bnei Yisrael of the great gift He was bestowing upon them. He likewise notified them of the reward and punishment intrinsic in this gift.

Adam was created on the sixth day. Immediately afterward, he was awarded the day of Shabbat upon which to rest from the work of the weekdays. Similarly, Hashem bequeathed the Torah to Bnei Yisrael on the sixth day of Sivan, which was a Shabbat (*Shabbat* 86b), in order to hint to them that both of these items were granted

as gifts – the Torah and the Shabbat. The day of *Matan Torah* can be termed “the Day of Torah.” This implies that one is obligated to draw the *kedushah* and *taharah* of that day upon all the days of his life. Every day should be invested with Torah and *yirat Shamayim*, whether in spiritual or physical pursuits.

The initials of the words יום התורה (Day of Torah) spell Hashem’s Name יה-וה. The last letters, ה-ה, are numerically equivalent to the word אדם (man). The word תורם (donor) can also be found in this term. This teaches us that a person is required to donate of himself only for the sake of Avodat Hashem, so that His Name should rest upon him.

How does one go about devoting his life completely for Hashem’s sake? By living a Torah lifestyle, as the pasuk (*Vayikra* 18:5) adjures us to keep the commandments and “live by them – חיי בהם.” Conducting oneself constantly with an awareness of Hashem is the equivalent of offering a new sacrifice for Him daily, as was done in the Beit Hamikdash (*Vayikra* 23:16). When a person devotes himself completely to glorifying Hashem’s Name, through delving into the Torah and removing all physical lusts from himself, he merits Hashem’s Name resting upon him.

There is no gift as pleasant and beautiful as the *Torah Hakedoshah*, by means of which man ascends spiritually, becoming elevated to great heights, until he reaches the level of Adam Harishon before the sin (see *Rashi, Vayikra* 26:3; *ibid.* 26:13; *Bava Batra* 71a). But when a person does not seek ways to sanctify himself through this gift from Hashem, it quickly becomes a burden. He then seeks ways to rid himself of it. Woe to the person who conducts himself in this way – he loses out in this world, as well as in the World to Come (*Sifra, Bechukotai*).

There is a direct connection between the previous parashah, *Bechukotai*, wherein the pasuk (*Vayikra* 26:3) states, “If you will go

in My statutes,” and this parashah, *Bamidbar* (In the Desert). The main focus of keeping the mitzvot of the Torah is that a person should humble himself and nullify his own opinion before the dictates of the Torah, just like the desert is humble. But it is not enough to submit one’s ego to the Torah; he must accustom himself to nullify his own opinions to the opinions of others. When he realizes that he has made an error, he should be big enough to reduce his pride and admit to his mistake without embarrassment.

Often, we find a person who toils in Torah, yet does not feel satisfaction in his studies. He lacks the taste of pride and pleasure inherent in this wonderful delicacy called the Torah. I think the reason for this may be that although he is involved in Torah study, he does not nullify himself sufficiently before his fellow Jews, but relies on his own judgment without giving credence to the views of others. This man might receive respect for his novel insights or diligence in Torah study, but he will never feel innate joy and delight in it. This is expressed by the Mishnah (*Shmuel I*, 2:30), “For I honor those who honor Me, and those that scorn Me will be accursed.”

Why did Hashem command Moshe to ascend on High in order to receive the Torah, which almost cost him his life (see *Shabbat* 88b; see *Pesikta Rabbah* 20)? Surely Hashem could have given him the Torah while he was yet on earth. This teaches us that in order to acquire Torah, one must be willing to sacrifice himself for this spiritual pursuit. Yet, at the same time, he must remain humble and free of any vestige of arrogance.

We find this to be the case with Moshe Rabbeinu. He refrained from food and drink for the forty days and nights that he was in *Shamayim*. He was in grave danger, at the mercy of the Heavenly angels, who wished to consume him. And even after he triumphed over them, he remained humble (see *Shabbat* 89a). The Mishnah does not state that Moshe received the Torah from Heaven. Rather,

it states, “Moshe received the Torah from Sinai” (*Avot* 1:1). This emphasizes that he remained as humble as Har Sinai throughout.

Learning Torah in humility is a tremendous virtue. By doing so, one gains the maximum benefit from this amazing gift received from Heaven, and he strengthens the bond between Hakadosh Baruch Hu, the Torah, and Am Yisrael, which are essentially one (*Zohar* II, 90b; III, 4b).

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Chazal tell us that one must inform his friend upon giving him a gift. Hashem Himself did this before granting us the greatest gift of all: the Torah. All the miracles He performed in Egypt and the Wilderness were a prelude to *Kabbalat HaTorah*.
- ◆ “Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai.” The word **במדבר** (in the Wilderness) can be divided into the words **בם דבר** (speak in them). This is an allusion to *divrei* Torah, as the pasuk states, “**ודברתם בם** – And you shall speak in them.” Similarly, one who humbles himself like the desert merits that the Torah endures within him.
- ◆ Why does the pasuk emphasize that Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, as we already know where Moshe was? It hints to us that when a person humbles himself like Har Sinai, making himself low and insignificant, he merits attaining Torah. Likewise, it is only by means of Torah study that a person can sense the truth in it and attain true humility.
- ◆ When Bnei Yisrael weakened in the few mitzvot they had been given, Amalek attacked them. One who relaxes his Torah obligations will be easy prey for the *Yetzer Hara*.
- ◆ The day of *Matan Torah* can be called **יום התורה** (the Day of Torah), the initials of which spell Hashem’s Name **יה-וה**. The last letters, **ה-ה**, are numerically equivalent to the word **אדם** (man). The word **תורם** (donor) can also be found in this term. This teaches us that a person is required

to donate of himself only for the sake of Avodat Hashem, so that His Name should rest upon him.

- ◆ Why was it necessary for Moshe Rabbeinu to ascend to Heaven in order to receive the Torah? Wouldn't it have been preferable for Hashem to give it to him on earth, avoiding the peril he was placed in when in Heaven? This teaches us a tremendous lesson. The Torah demands that we should ascend in spiritual matters with *mesirut nefesh*. Additionally, Moshe nullified his physicality by fasting forty days and nights. This, too, shows us that we must be willing to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of the Torah.



Each One of Us Counts

“Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt, saying: Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers’ house, by number of the names, every male according to their head count”

(Bamidbar 1:1-2)

Hashem commanded Moshe to count all the members of Bnei Yisrael, from the leaders of the tribes to the heads of families, each according to his father's family, from the age of army conscription, twenty and up. The Torah records the names of the heads of the families of each tribe, without neglecting anyone.

Similarly, we find in parashat *Naso* a detailed list of the offerings brought by the heads of the tribes. The Torah writes this in a lengthy manner, instead of summarizing the offerings they brought.

This raises a strong question. The mitzvah of Shabbat and its prohibitions are learned from the work involved in constructing the Mishkan, for its construction was forbidden on Shabbat (*Shabbat* 49b). But these forms of work are learned only through allusion. Our *Chachamim* are the ones who inform us of what exactly is permissible and forbidden on Shabbat. Likewise, the festival of Pesach, so central to Judaism contains many important details, yet the Torah only succinctly mentions a few of the mitzvot regarding Pesach. The bulk of the Pesach commandments are discussed in *Masechet Pesachim*.

We would think the opposite would be more appropriate; the mitzvot are vastly more significant than the narrative. Surely they should take pride of place in the Torah, and be granted more space. Why are such monumental mitzvot merely mentioned by allusion, whereas the counting of the nation and the sacrifices of the *Nesi'im* are written at length?

In every generation, the nations rise up against Am Yisrael and desire to annihilate them. It is only through Hashem's intervention that we are spared (*Pesach Haggadah*). In the face of this bleak reality, in which the nations constantly seek devious ways of eradicating us, our morale is liable to weaken. We can become so dejected and dispirited as to forsake Hashem and His Torah, *chas v'shalom*. The little lamb among the seventy wolves (*Tanchuma, Toldot* 5) can easily fall prey to the clutches of despair.

This is why Hashem delineated the names of Bnei Yisrael at length and in great detail. It is in order to prove to them that they are His beloved children, whom He constantly watches over. The fact that

Bnei Yisrael are a hunted people should not break their spirit. On the contrary, Hashem acts only for our benefit. The hatred of our enemies ensures our survival as a nation. Anti-Semitism is the best deterrent against assimilation (see *Tanchuma, Chukat* 18).

Bnei Yisrael take solace from the fact that Hashem was not sparing in the pesukim counting them, mentioning them by their fathers' names. This is evidence of Hashem's love of them. They realize that the taunts and tribulations of the gentile nations are part of His plan of preventing the blaze of Judaism from becoming extinguished.

The Torah mentions only that which is a lesson for generations. A prime example of this is the following (*Bereishit* 37:22): When the brothers of Yosef threw him into a pit, Reuven had in mind to return later on and remove him without his brothers' knowledge. But when he came back, he was devastated to see that Yosef had already been taken out by the brothers and sold as a slave (*ibid.* vs. 29-30). The Torah values Reuven's sense of responsibility toward his younger brother, as well as the compassion he had for him. Therefore, this account is recorded, and he is given a place of pride in the Torah for it (see *Rut Rabbah* 5:6). If the Torah mentions merely a thought which Reuven had, it must mean that it commends such ways of thinking, and we should take a lesson from it. This is the case concerning everything written in the Torah. Therefore, since the Torah went to great lengths to mention the names of the tribes, it must mean that they are cherished by Hashem.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why does the Torah list in detail the names of the families of the tribes, just as it describes at length the sacrifices of the *Nesi'im* in parashat *Naso*? Conversely, we find that the stringent prohibitions of Shabbat are only alluded to in the construction of the Mishkan.

- ◆ The Torah is telling us that Hashem's nation is extremely dear to Him. They may never let themselves fall into the clutches of despair during the long years of exile. Suffering is not random; it is all designated by Hashem.
- ◆ The Torah extols Reuven for the good thought of desiring to rescue Yosef from the pit. This is to teach us that even a mere thought carries weight. All the more so, a noble act.



Yisrael, in Whom I Take Glory

“Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt, saying: Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers' house, by number of the names, every male according to their head count”

(Bamidbar 1:1-2)

Much emphasis is placed upon the details of the count of Bnei Yisrael. The time and place of the census are mentioned, as well. Usually, the Torah is short and to the point. Why is the census described in such detail, when this is seemingly unnecessary for understanding the subject?

The census poses another difficulty. Hashem commanded Moshe to count Am Yisrael by means of the half-*shekel* (*Shemot* 30:12). They were forbidden to be counted directly, in order to avoid an

ayin hara (*Rashi*, *ibid.*). Hashem obviously knew how many people formed the nation. Why was it necessary to count them with the half-*shekel* coins?

Let us preface by stating that Am Yisrael is different and unique among all the nations on earth. As soon as Am Yisrael received the Torah at Har Sinai, they became the Chosen Nation. Hashem's Name is sanctified through them, as He calls them, "Yisrael, in whom I take glory" (*Yeshayahu* 49:3). How is Hashem glorified by Bnei Yisrael? When they learn with joy and keep mitzvot with self-sacrifice. Learning Torah and performing mitzvot demand great personal sacrifice. One who is a Torah Jew cannot live as he pleases. He must calculate his every action. The question "Is it in consonance with the Torah?" should constantly be uppermost in his mind.

If we contemplate the life of a Torah-observant Jew, we will conclude that it is not simple in the least. He must arise in the morning with *Modeh Ani* on his lips, wash his hands as dictated by halachah, pray the Morning Prayer, and devote time to Torah studies. After that, his entire day revolves around the words of the holy Torah. He must be scrupulous with the kashrut of his food and protect his eyes from forbidden sights. Even after marrying, there are obligations. One may not approach his wife whenever he desires, but only when the Torah allows him. A Torah lifestyle demands self-restraint. Notwithstanding the beauty and blessings intrinsic to this way of life, there is much hardship involved. An example would be the case of a woman giving birth to a newborn. Specifically when the wife is weakest and most in need of her husband's help, they may not have physical contact. This condition may last a month or more, until the woman purifies herself of her *niddah* status.

David Hamelech describes the life of a Torah-true Jew in these words (*Tehillim* 147:20), "He relates His word to Yaakov, His statutes

and judgments to Yisrael. He did not do so for any other people.” No other nation of the world has a code of laws like the Torah. This is because the statutes of the Torah demand self-sacrifice. The nations do not have the ability to sacrifice themselves for their laws, as they wallow in the quagmire of materialism. For this reason, Hashem did not give them the Torah. This is expressed by Chazal’s statement (*Eichah Rabbah* 2:13), “If one states that there is wisdom among the nations, he may be believed. But if one states that there is Torah among the nations, he may not be believed.” As soon as Torah contradicts their understanding or their passions, they shake it off, feeling no need to overcome their desires.

This is why Hashem proudly calls His nation, “Yisrael, in whom I take glory.” Bnei Yisrael are a sanctified nation, who live by the creed of the Torah. They subject their desires to the will of Hashem without question, even though this type of lifestyle demands a high level of self-sacrifice.

A convert to Judaism once approached me and discussed religious topics. When I asked what her feelings toward the mitzvah of Shabbat were, she described in detail her favorite Shabbat foods. When I realized that her understanding of the holy day began and ended with the gastronomic aspects, I switched my approach. “What led you to join the Jewish nation?” I asked. She explained that she wanted to marry a Jew and had converted for this purpose. When I heard her response, I immediately understood why this woman had no connection to the spirituality of Shabbat, and all it included was meat, fish, and wine. Had she converted for altruistic reasons, she would have sensed the great spirituality inherent in Shabbat, due to the *neshamah yeteirah* placed within a person on this day (see *Zohar* III, 29a). But since she converted with ulterior motives, continuing to profane the Shabbat as before, she had no means by which to feel the *kedushah* and elevation which is Shabbat.

This lofty level of sanctity is accessible only to the Jewish nation, which stood at the foot of Har Sinai and with *mesirut nefesh* preceded “We will do” to “We will hear.” All the nations witnessed Hashem’s miracles. They saw how Hashem struck the Egyptians with plagues, released His nation from that country, and even split the sea for them most miraculously. In the Song of the Sea, we read (*Shemot* 15:15), “Then the chieftains of Edom were confounded, trembling gripped the powers of Moav, all of the dwellers of Canaan dissolved.” Why, then, did they refuse the Torah, when Hashem offered it to them?

The truth is that the nations did, indeed, desire to receive the Torah. But after they asked what was stated in it, Hashem withheld it from them. After observing all of His mighty miracles, they should have accepted the Torah immediately, no questions asked. Their query “What does it say?” proved that they were incapable of observing it. They did not have the mandatory *mesirut nefesh* required for Torah study and mitzvah observance.

In contrast, when Am Yisrael was approached with the offer of the Torah, they immediately proclaimed, “*Na’aseh v’nishma!*” (24:7). Before even knowing what the Torah involved, they embraced it with open arms, for they recognized Hashem’s Kingdom and greatness (see *Shabbat* 88a).

When Yaakov scuffled with the Angel of Eisav and defeated him, the Angel stated (*Bereishit* 32:29), “No longer will it be said that your name is Yaakov, but Yisrael, for you have striven with the Divine and with man and have overcome.” Yaakov had two names. The name *Yaakov* implies the heel (עקב), the lowermost part of man’s body (see *Nazir* 51a; *Tosefta*, *ibid.*). Yaakov submitted his own will for that of his Creator. On the other hand, the name *Yisrael* denotes honor and nobility (see *Radak, Melachim* I, 18:31). Yaakov acquired these traits through his toil in Torah. The Ben Ish Chai (*Shanah*

Rishonah, Ki Tavo) states that in the future, Am Yisrael will rise from the level of Yaakov to that of Yisrael. Yaakov alludes to the first rung on the ladder of perfection, as is borne out in the pasuk (*Bereishit* 25:27), “Yaakov was a wholesome man, abiding in tents.”

After polishing oneself at this level, attaining a perfect sheen, he is capable of achieving the status of Yisrael, as the pasuk (*Yeshayahu* 49:3) states, “ישראל אשר בך אתפאר” – Yisrael, in whom I take glory.” The word ישראל contains the letters of the word ראש (head), and the word בך (in whom) is numerically equal to twenty-two, the amount of letters in the Jewish alphabet, of which the Torah is comprised. Yaakov ascended to the level of being the head, a level of respect and reputation, because he sat in the tents of Torah, toiling in its twenty-two letters. This, then, is the glory which Hashem gains from His children. They delve into the Torah in self-negation and humility, without asking for descriptions of what is written in it. They call out with a full heart, “We will do and we will hear!”

Parashat *Bamidbar* begins with counting Am Yisrael, recording the date of the census and their numbers in great detail. Hashem demonstrated to them that already at this point, one year and one month after they had left Egypt, they were considered His nation. This is in contrast to all other nations in the world. Rome wasn't built in a day. Rather, it took many years until the Romans evolved from a band of people into a unified nation.

To demonstrate this unique quality of Am Yisrael, Hashem counted them. He did not need to count them in order to know their numbers, but wanted to show the world the difference between Am Yisrael and the other nations. Whereas the nations questioned the Torah, Am Yisrael accepted it willingly, without any questions, thus becoming a unified people soon after the Exodus from Egypt. By accepting the Torah at the foot of Har Sinai, they became unified

with it, since the Torah is comprised of the same amount of letters as the members of the nation. Thus Am Yisrael became one with the Torah and with Hashem (see *Zohar* II, 90b; III 4b).

The Torah emphasizes the date of the counting of Bnei Yisrael, as well as the fact that it took place in the Sinai Desert, to prove the following to all of mankind: Am Yisrael is the Chosen Nation, who brings pride to Hashem, as the pasuk states, “Yisrael, in whom I take glory” (*Yeshayahu* 49:3). This transpired in a very short span of time, the likes of which were never repeated in human history. This was in the merit of Bnei Yisrael accepting the Torah with *mesirut nefesh*, without asking questions or raising doubts.

Hashem commanded Moshe to count Bnei Yisrael by means of the half-*shekel* coins rather than simply counting each person. The commentaries explain (see *Rashi*) that the counting was done in this manner in order to prevent an *ayin hara* from ruling. I would like to suggest another reason.

It is well-known that Am Yisrael are distinctive among all of the nations for their *neshamah*, which comes from on High (see *Zohar* I, 20b; III, 219a). The sefarim relate that Hashem blew into man from Himself (*Ramban, Bereishit* 2:7). Just like a balloon is full of the air of the person who inflated it, so too, *l’havdil*, is man’s body inflated with the *neshamah* of Hashem’s spirit (*Nefesh Hachaim* 1:15). Therefore, a person’s *neshamah* is sacred and sanctified. The *neshamah* of Adam Harishon, which Hashem Himself blew into him, is the source of the *neshamot* of every Jewish person. We all derive from the same source and contain an element of Adam’s *neshamah* within ourselves (*Emek Hamelech* 5:43; 16:43; *Shelah Hakadosh, Assarah Ma’amarot, Ma’amar Sheini* 17). This is the reason why all of Am Yisrael are accountable for each other. Just as the parts of the body are all one unit, so too, the *neshamot* of Am Yisrael are

intertwined, enrooted in the source of Adam Harishon (*Eitz Hada'at Tov, Emor*).

Since Am Yisrael is comprised of one *neshamah*, it is not possible to count them individually. Each half-*shekel* combines with another to make one whole unit.

The word נשמה (*neshamah* – soul) is full of mystery. It can be divided into the two parts נ' שמה. The letter נ' spelled out as נון is numerically equivalent to 106. The letters of the word שמה can be transposed to spell השם (the Name of Hashem).

We will now venture to explain a most mystical concept. How was it possible for Hashem to blow of Himself into mankind; He is described as an all-consuming fire (*Devarim* 4:24)? Wouldn't man become scorched in the process, due to the extreme *kedushah*? The answer is that man was created in a most magnificent, supernatural way, imbued with tremendous levels of *kedushah* (*Tikkunei Zohar* 47; 84a). This is alluded to by the letter נ', which when spelled out as נון is numerically equivalent to 106. This hints to the one hundred *sefirot* with which man was created, plus the sixth day of the week, the day of his creation.

Am Yisrael are one cohesive unit, finding their original source in Hashem, Who is one and Whose Name is one (*Zechariah* 14:9). Just as it is impossible to count only one thing, so too, it is impossible to count Bnei Yisrael. Furthermore, the Zohar (see II, 90b; III, 4b) states that Hakadosh Baruch Hu, the Torah, and Yisrael are one. When Am Yisrael cleave to Hashem and His Torah, they become a single unit with them.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Why does the Torah describe the counting of Bnei Yisrael at length, when it is generally succinct with words? Likewise, why are Bnei Yisrael

commanded to be counted with the half-*shekel* coins? Hashem already knew how many members comprised the nation.

- ◆ Am Yisrael accepted the Torah upon themselves with *mesirut nefesh*, without asking what it says. Notwithstanding the beauty inherent in the Torah, it demands toil and travail. There are many obstacles to overcome in the journey on the road of Torah. Thus Bnei Yisrael merited the accolade “Yisrael, in whom I take glory” through accepting the Torah, no questions asked. Hashem chose them from among all of the nations to be His. Hashem certainly had no need to count them. He commanded that they be counted in order to demonstrate to the world how great they are in His eyes.
- ◆ Every nation takes numerous years to become unified. But Am Yisrael, shortly after leaving Egypt, was already a nation, for they willingly accepted the Torah. This is the reason for the detailed description of the counting of Bnei Yisrael, including the time and location of the census.
- ◆ Why were the people counted with the half-*shekel* coins, rather than by an individual head count? This was in order to ward off the *ayin hara*. We might add that all of the *neshamot* find their source in Adam Harishon. This is why they are accountable for each other. Since they are essentially one entity, it is not possible to count them individually. Each half-*shekel* coin combines with another to make a whole unit.
- ◆ The word נשמה can be divided into the two parts נ' שמה. The letters of the word שמה can be transposed to spell השם (the Name of Hashem). Man was created in a most magnificent, mystical way, imbued with tremendous levels of *kedushah* (*Tikkunei Zohar* 47; 84a). This is alluded to in the letter נ', which when spelled out as נוך is numerically equivalent to 106. This hints to the one hundred *sefirot* with which man was created, plus the sixth day of the week, the day of his creation. Am Yisrael is rooted in a common Source, Hashem Himself. Therefore, it is impossible to count them individually.



Torah Requires Toil

“Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt, saying: Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers’ house, by number of the names, every male according to their head count; from twenty years of age and up – everyone who goes out to the army in Israel – you shall count them according to their armies, you and Aharon”

(Bamidbar 1:1-3)

Bnei Yisrael are counted several times in the Torah. However, this is the only time that the Torah goes to such great lengths in describing the place and the date of the counting. Why does the Torah go into such specifics here?

This counting occurred after the Mishkan was erected for Hashem’s glory. Every Jew, likewise, became a miniature Mishkan in which Hashem housed His *Shechinah*. This is borne out by the wording of the pasuk (*Shemot* 25:8), “They shall make Me a Sanctuary – so that I may dwell among them.” Chazal explain (see *Nefesh Hachaim* 1:4) that the pasuk does not say *within it*. The words *among them* teach us that Hashem actually dwells within each and every one of us. Just as the Kohanim and Levi’im were anointed in order to work in the Mishkan, so too, all of Bnei Yisrael were appointed as His Chosen Nation, as it says (*Shemot* 19:6), “You will

be to Me a kingdom of ministers and a holy nation.” By the Jewish nation residing around the Tent of Meeting, each according to his *shevet* and flag, together with his family members, they connected to the *kedushah* of the Mishkan, and were influenced by it. The Torah describes this counting at length to emphasize its uniqueness; the uniqueness of Hashem counting His children in order to sanctify them to be His nation of priests and holy people.

In order for Bnei Yisrael to become a nation of Kohanim, they must first make themselves like the desert, subjecting their desires to the will of Hashem. Hashem spoke to Moshe from the Tent of Meeting to teach the nation that they must sacrifice their very lives in the tent of Torah. How does one merit residing in the tent of Torah? By removing from himself all physical desires and lusts. All of his aspirations should be directed to Hashem alone. The Torah mentions that Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert, although this was already known. The reason for this is to teach us that just as Har Sinai merited Hashem’s revelation with the Giving of the Torah due to its great humility (see *Megillah 29a*; *Sotah 5a*), so too, will Bnei Yisrael merit Hashem’s *Shechinah* resting upon them when they act with humility and submission.

The Torah states that Hashem appeared to Moshe in the second month after the nation left Egypt. This is the month of Iyar. We learn from this that this month is designated for personal introspection and improvement of one’s *middot*, in preparation for the month of Sivan, when the Torah came down to the world. The festival of *Matan Torah* was not a one-time occurrence. Every year, we celebrate this special day, in order to demonstrate our love of Torah. Just like parents celebrate their child’s birthday every year, displaying their joy at his birth, so too, throughout the generations, Am Yisrael celebrate the day they received the Torah, in the month of Sivan.

The Torah cannot reside within a person who has not properly prepared himself. One must first make himself into a vessel fit to contain the Torah. This is done by improving one's *middot*, acting with self-discipline, and strengthening oneself in *yirat Shamayim*. Only when one prepares himself properly, can the Torah endure within him and elevate him to untold levels of spirituality, lifting him up the ladder that reaches the House of Hashem. There is an important message here for Am Yisrael. At the *Chanukat Hamishkan*, they were all eligible for the *Shechinah* to reside in each one of them, by developing their *middot* and improving themselves.

The preparations before receiving the Torah in the first year after leaving Egypt cannot be compared to the preparations before Shavuot of the second year. When Am Yisrael left Egypt, they were sunk in the quagmire of the forty-ninth level of impurity (*Zohar Chadash*, beginning of *Parashat Yitro*; *Shelah, Pesachim, Matzah Ashirah* 33), only a hairsbreadth away from the fiftieth level of *tumah*. They had not yet received the Torah when they purified themselves of this filth, and were therefore susceptible to weakening their resolve in Torah. This invited the onslaught of Amalek, who were bent on annihilating them (see *Sanhedrin* 106a; *Rashi*, *ibid.*). Now, during their second year after *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, the Torah was already in their possession. They were considered a miniature Mishkan. Preparation for accepting the Torah this year was done with the heightened awareness of their exalted position. They were energized with the aspiration to reach perfection.

This is why the Torah makes note of the month and year when Hashem spoke to Moshe. Now, in the second year, the Torah was already theirs. The month of Iyar is emphasized to inform us that this month is most auspicious for preparing to receive the Torah anew. They had already acquired the Torah, and Hashem resided in their midst.

If Am Yisrael take these things to heart, walking the path of self-negation and disconnection from the fleeting pleasures of this world, they will merit being one with the Torah and sacrificing themselves for its ideals. Through humility, they will be elevated higher and higher, ultimately becoming the Chosen Nation and a kingdom of Kohanim, soldiers in the army of Hashem. And while the Kohanim do their Avodah, serving in the Mishkan, Am Yisrael as a whole do their *avodah*, toiling in Torah. The pasuk (*Bamidbar* 9:18) states, “According to the word of Hashem would the Children of Yisrael journey, and according to the word of Hashem would they encamp.” As they journeyed, they traveled the road of Torah. And as they rested, they slept in the tent of Torah.

The Torah describes in detail the preparations Bnei Yisrael made for receiving the Torah in the second year after the Exodus for the following reason: The nation had sinned with the *Chet Ha’egel*, which caused the smashing of the first set of *luchot*. They also experienced the attack of Amalek, who struck at them when they were weak in Torah and most vulnerable. Hashem, therefore, wanted to advise them at this point as to how to merit receiving the Torah anew, with renewed vigor and perfection, so that they would not fall into sin again.

The description of the second preparation for accepting the Torah provides instruction for future generations, directing them how to prepare properly for *Kabbalat HaTorah*. Each and every Jew should realize that this entails repairing any faults he may have between man and Hashem and between man and his fellow, through involving himself in Torah and mitzvot, humbly and with self-negation. He will be chagrined to discover that he did not prepare himself properly when he had the opportunity. Why would Hashem have any inclination to bestow the Torah upon a person who did not prepare himself appropriately, with love and

appreciation? A person who utilizes the festival of Shavuot merely for eating, drinking, and sleeping is reprimanded most severely: “My soul detests your New Moons and your appointed times; they have become a burden upon Me” (*Yeshayahu* 1:14).

This might be the reason for the reading of the Torah portions of *Behar*, *Bechukotai*, and *Bamidbar* during the days of preparation for *Kabbalat HaTorah*. This teaches that in order to merit the appellation of a “kingdom of Kohanim and a holy nation,” we must prepare ourselves fittingly. If a person truly works on himself, becoming a beautiful vessel, he will be worthy of housing the Torah and, eventually, he will become transformed into a miniature Mishkan.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why does the Torah specify the details of the counting of Bnei Yisrael here, unlike in other places where they were counted? This counting occurred after the Mishkan had been erected. The detailed counting points to the fact that it is unique, distinct from any other time the nation was counted. At this counting, Bnei Yisrael were appointed to become a kingdom of Kohanim and the holy nation of Hashem.
- ◆ The Torah emphasizes that Hashem revealed Himself to Moshe in the Sinai Desert for the following reason. It is to tell us that a person must make himself humble as the desert in order to merit receiving the Torah. Likewise, we are told that Hashem spoke to Moshe from the Tent of Meeting. This alludes to the fact that a person must sacrifice himself for the sake of Torah, thereby meriting Hashem’s Name resting upon him.
- ◆ The pasuk states that Hashem spoke to Moshe in the second month, the month of Iyar. Iyar is the month for preparing oneself to receive the Torah in Sivan. This was not a one-time occurrence. Rather, every year, one prepares himself to accept the Torah and receive it anew. The Torah emphasizes the fact that this took place in the second year after they left

Egypt. These preparations cannot be compared to their original preparations, during the first year after *Yetziat Mitzrayim*. Then, they had been at the abyss of the forty-ninth level of *tumah*. Now, in their second year after *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, they already possessed the Torah and Hashem rested within them. They were able to prepare for *Kabbalat HaTorah* with better tools at their disposal.



Character Refinement Precedes Torah

“Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt, saying: Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers’ house, by number of the names, every male according to their head count; from twenty years of age and up – everyone who goes out to the army in Israel – you shall count them according to their armies, you and Aharon”

(Bamidbar 1:1-3)

In the Sinai Desert, Hashem commanded Moshe to count all of Bnei Yisrael, each person who went out to the army, from the age of twenty and up, according to their families. The tribe of Levi was excluded from this counting, to be counted separately, as the pasuk (*Bamidbar 1:49*) states, “But you shall not count the tribe of Levi,

and you shall not take a census of them among the Children of Israel.” The members of Shevet Levi were counted from the age of one month, as the pasuk tells us (ibid. 3:15), “Count the sons of Levi according to their fathers’ household, according to their families, every male from one month of age and up shall you count them.” What was so special about the tribe of Levi that they were distinguished in this manner? Furthermore, the tribe of Levi was not counted by a head count, as were the rest of the nation. Why not?

The Torah commanded all of Bnei Yisrael to encamp around the Tent of Meeting (ibid. 2:2), “Each man by his banner according to the insignias of their fathers’ household.” Rashi explains that each *shevet* had its own distinctive sign by which to be recognized. This was a flag, of the same color as the stone that represented that *shevet* on the *choshen*. This raises an obvious question. Am Yisrael’s strength lay in the fact that they were united under one banner, the banner of brotherhood and accountability for each other. Why, then, did Hashem demand of each tribe to encamp by his own banner, instead of there being one banner for all of the tribes to rest under, uniting the nation? Having each tribe raise his own flag was liable to raise dissention and quarrel among the nation, as one tries to outdo the other by bragging about the beauty of his flag. Wouldn’t one uniting banner have avoided this sorry state?

The word דגל (banner/flag) is contained in the word גדלות (greatness). How did Am Yisrael reach greatness in Torah? By being organized around the Tent of Meeting, each tribe by his flag, according to his family. This orderliness is a facet of good character, as a person is aware of his place, and conducts himself accordingly. “Good character (*derech erez*) precedes Torah” (*Tanna d’vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 1). Therefore, Hashem commanded Bnei Yisrael to encamp according to their banners. This would train them to be punctilious with order and good character. Each person had a set,

defined place where he belonged, and no one encroached on another's position. By accustoming themselves to encamp according to their families, by their flags, *derech erez* became instilled within them. This is the cornerstone of Torah observance.

Torah study without good character is worth nothing at all. What is the value of learning Torah when the *middot* of hate, jealousy, and anger are rotting one's insides? Does a person think Hashem appreciates the Torah study of one who does not bear his friend's burden? A person who desists from training himself in good character is liable to fall into the clutches of sin. In contrast, Torah together with *derech erez* is the most praiseworthy form of Torah possible. It is capable of raising a person to the greatest heights, bringing him to the peak of perfection.

A person who is aware of his status and conducts himself in an organized manner will have a structured lifestyle. Since the life of a Torah Jew demands precision and order, habituating oneself in this area is most beneficial in one's Avodat Hashem. Chazal teach us (see *Tanchuma, Lech Lecha* 9; *Ramban, Lech Lecha* 12:2), "The deeds of the fathers are a portent for the sons." Encamping around the Mishkan in an organized fashion, according to the order of Hashem, educated future generations to live according to structure and set times, the basis for the life of a Torah and mitzvah observer.

One who is punctilious in living in an organized fashion is always neat and clean in his appearance. The Gemara (*Shabbat* 114a) states that a *talmid chacham* who has a stain on his clothing deserves death. Filthy clothing results in a *chillul Hashem*. Conversely, when a *talmid chacham* appears in public dressed neatly, he makes a *kiddush Hashem*. A fresh, tidy appearance can even result in drawing the hearts of lost Jews to their Father in Heaven. Those who are far from Torah may endeavor to make a fresh start when they see that

Torah observant Jews do not live in neglect and squalor. On the contrary, their clean appearance implies that they live a good life.

Another point alluded to by the flags is the following. A nation earns its flag upon gaining national independence. A flag, therefore, symbolizes freedom. When Bnei Yisrael encamped around the Tent of Meeting, according to their flags, each with his family in a pre-arranged order, the privacy of each tribe and family was maintained. The tents were positioned so that no doorway faced another (*Bava Batra* 60a). This provided each person with a degree of independence. Had Bnei Yisrael encamped in one large group, not by the flags, there would certainly have been mayhem and disorder, and this measure of *tzeniut* regarding the tent positions could never have been preserved.

Maintaining privacy is an essential part of developing good character. One must accustom himself to stay within his own bounds – not interfering with the lives of others or trespassing on private property. What is transpiring in someone else’s home is no business of his. This is not to say that people should sever all connection with others. On the contrary, one should always lend a helping hand when it is called for, and a listening ear when it is needed. But he should ensure help without prying into his neighbor’s personal affairs. Unfortunately, there are many people whose hearts are not filled with the best interests of others. Rather, it is curiosity and nosiness that motivate them to concern themselves with another’s concerns. Their desire to provide aid and assistance stems simply from snooping and spying.

Even the great rasha, Bilaam, praised Am Yisrael for their trait of modesty, demonstrated in the layout of their tents. He proclaimed (*Bamidbar* 24:5), “How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Israel.” He originally sought ways and means of cursing Bnei Yisrael. But his mind was changed when he noticed

their tents. He suddenly found himself blessing the people. What was it that gained his admiration? It was the fact that the entranceways to their tents faced away from each other. This system helped to preserve the nation's modesty and good character (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 771).

Let us return to our previous questions about the tribe of Levi: Why they were counted differently from the rest of the nation, from the age of one month, and why there is no mention of a head count. Perhaps we can clarify these questions in the following way. The Torah accords especial honor to Shevet Levi, for Hashem is their inheritance. Rashi states (*Bamidbar* 1:49), "The King's legion is worthy to be counted by itself." Levi maintained a distinct level of *kedushah*, above that of the rest of the nation. Therefore, they were counted from the age of one month. They entered the army of Hashem from birth. Chazal tell us (see *Rashi, Bereishit* 29:34) that when Levi, the son of Yaakov, was born, the angels carried him up to Hashem, where he was blessed by Him to serve in His Home. As a sign that Levi was blessed from birth, his children after him are all sanctified to Hashem, counted in the nation from the age of one month.

Owing to their sanctity, Shevet Levi is not described with the words *head count*. This is not a suitable expression for one who serves in the legion of the King. I thought of adding the following: The word גולגלותם (their head count) hints to the word גלגול (reincarnation). One who serves Hashem and is close to Him will have no need to return to this world in a reincarnation. Since the Tribe of Levi was chosen and anointed to serve Hashem in His Temple, they certainly had no need to be reincarnated. Their assignment was to bring the world to perfection in Hashem's Kingdom, through the Avodah in the Mishkan and the *korbanot*. For this reason, the word גולגלותם is omitted.

Just like the order of their encampment in the Desert taught Bnei Yisrael a lesson in good character traits, so too, the acclaim granted to Shevet Levi taught the nation how they had achieved greatness through their closeness to Hashem. This was heightened by the fact that the tribe of Levi encamped in the inner circle, closest to the Mishkan. Korach and his band, who abandoned the trait of good character and doubted the status of Moshe Rabbeinu, the chosen one of Hashem, met a terrible end. This incident should serve as an example to all that one must know his place and take joy in his position. He should not seek to become tall by standing on someone else's shoulders, when he is not fitting for the position. When a person conducts himself with good character, his Torah, too, is elevated, and he brings tremendous pleasure to his Heavenly Father.

One who truly aspires to acquire the Torah with *yirah* and perfection must first educate himself in the *middah* of *derech erez*, the basis for the upkeep of Torah, as the Midrash states (*Tanna d'vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 1), "Good character precedes Torah."

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why were the members of Shevet Levi counted from the age of one month, when the rest of the nation was only counted from the age of twenty? Also, why is the term *head count* not used when counting Shevet Levi?
- ◆ Why were Bnei Yisrael commanded to encamp according to their flags? Wouldn't one large encampment under one flag encourage a greater sense of unity, whereas different flags might foster dissention?
- ◆ The word **דגל** signifies greatness in Torah. Am Yisrael is capable of growing in Torah only when each person recognizes his status, and youngsters respect their elders. Encampment according to their flags by a precise arrangement trained the nation to adopt a lifestyle of order and timeliness, the foundation of a Torah lifestyle.

- ◆ The concept of a national flag indicates independence. Bnei Yisrael maintained the *kedushah* of the nation by encamping according to their flags, each tribe apart. This allowed them to keep their tents from facing each other. Bilaam, in his famous proclamation, “How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Israel” refers to this great level of *tzeniut*.
- ◆ The members of Shevet Levi had a special status as “the legion of the King.” This is why they were counted separately. To emphasize their importance, they were counted from the age of one month. From birth, they join the ranks of Hashem’s soldiers.
- ◆ The term *head count* is omitted in the command to count the tribe of Levi, because it is not fitting to state this about the chosen tribe. Furthermore, the word גולגלותם (their head count) hints to the word גלגול (reincarnation). Since Shevet Levi served Hashem in the Mikdash, they would surely be spared the pain of reincarnation.



Encamping According to the Flags

“The Children of Israel shall encamp each man by his banner according to the insignias of their fathers’ household”

(Bamidbar 2:2)

Hakadosh Baruch Hu commanded the tribes to encamp around the Mishkan, according to their flags (*Tanchuma, Bamidbar 12*). Moshe Rabbeinu told Hashem that if each *shevet* would have a separate flag indicating their designated places around the Mishkan, some closer and others further, it would likely be a cause of

dissention. Hashem responded that the tribes would encamp around the Mishkan in the same formation that Yaakov Avinu specified for them to stand when bearing his bier.

Why did Hashem want each *shevet* to have its own flag? The *Arizal* (*Pri Eitz Chaim, Tefillah*, Introduction) states that there are twelve gates in Heaven, corresponding to the Twelve Tribes. Each tribe has its own path to perfection. This is the reason why it is commendable that one should maintain his version of tefillah. It is understandable that each tribe needs its own space, just like they each have their separate gates in Heaven. But why was it necessary for each tribe to have its own flag?

Hashem desires that Bnei Yisrael should be close to the *Shechinah*. He wants, also, that there should be peace among His nation. The *avodah* of each tribe was to feel that even though there were those who encamped closer to the Mishkan, this was not an indication that they were better than the others. They were positioned according to Hashem's command. One should always recognize the virtues of his friend, and consider him greater than himself. The word דגל (flag) is contained in the word גדלות (greatness). Constantly considering one's fellow man on a higher level than oneself is a praiseworthy attribute, which ultimately unites the nation.

The Gemara (*Yevamot* 62b) relates that the disciples of Rabbi Akiva were punished because they did not display sufficient honor toward each other. They did not feel that their colleagues were greater than themselves. There is a limited amount of knowledge that one can gain from his teacher. But he lives together with his colleagues, and therefore stands to learn even more from them. This is the meaning of the words of Chazal (*Ta'anit* 23a), "Either friendship or death." One who has no companion whom he admires and from whom he can learn is like a dead man. The Torah was

given on Har Sinai because it considered itself small, looking up to the other mountains. It was for this reason that it merited receiving the Torah upon it (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:3). One is adjured to always see the greatness of his friend, even if he himself is more esteemed. One of the *Tanna'im* proclaimed (*Makkot* 10a), “I have learned much from my mentors, but even more from my colleagues; and from my disciples, most of all.”

On one of my trips to Brazil, I was hosted by a wealthy family. They were planning a weekend vacation, and I asked what their plans were. They told me that they owned a large home and they had all kinds of pleasurable activities scheduled for their stay there. They would spend their entire vacation in the house, detached from the rest of the world, enjoying themselves. An elderly relative, whose husband had recently passed away, bemoaned the fact that the weather would be cold, precluding a trip to the beach. I trembled at the thought that here was an old lady, whose husband had died a mere few months earlier, and all that occupied her mind was a trip to the sea. She was noticeably saddened at the prospect of losing the opportunity to bathe at the beach.

I asked the family if they had arranged any time for spiritual quests, like tefillah or a Torah *shiur*, in order to pay back something to Hashem for all of the good He has showered upon them. They had no response. The reason they were at a loss for an answer was because of their outlook on life. The more they spent on worldly pleasures during their vacation, the more they demonstrated their superiority over their peers. This ruled out any attention to their spiritual selves.

In the Wilderness, Hashem trained the nation to consider others greater than themselves. Moshe Rabbeinu feared that if the people would encamp according to an order, some tribes closer to the Mishkan and others, further away, this would arouse jealousy.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu told him not to fear. On the contrary, the arrangement according to flags would teach the people to respect one another, each aspiring to come closer to the *Shechinah*.

One who does not sense greatness in his fellow man, due to his own arrogance, does not have the tools to feel the greatness of Hashem (see *Devarim* 8:14; see *Sotah* 4b). Those tribes who rested closer to the Mishkan and the *Shechinah* had to work on appreciating the value of their comrades, who rested behind them. This was what allowed them to come close to the *Shechinah*.

A story is told about Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer, zt"l. He once opened the door to enter his home, but immediately closed it, remaining in the stairwell. When he was asked about his unusual behavior, he explained that there was a cleaning lady working in his house. She was humming to herself some happy tunes. If she would see him entering, she would stop instantly. He did not want to disturb her delight. Even though it was his house, he desisted from entering, affording her a few more minutes of personal pleasure. This incident shows us just how careful we should be to consider others and their interests.

The Midrash (*Tanchuma, Bamidbar* 12) states that Hashem instructed Moshe to tell Bnei Yisrael to encamp according to the order arranged by Yaakov when instructing his sons how to carry his bier. What is the connection between the two cases? There was no element of jealousy involved in how the tribes were positioned when carrying Yaakov's bier, as they were all in deep mourning over his loss. But here, the arrangement of Bnei Yisrael's encampment was liable to cause jealousy over who had the honor of camping closer to the Mishkan.

Hashem told Moshe that the task of the nation was to attain greatness. This would be possible only when there was no jealousy

among them, just as there was none when they carried Yaakov's bier. How would they be spared from the jaws of jealousy? By viewing their fellow men as greater than themselves. Hashem explained that this is the reason for their encampment around the Mishkan. The banners would remind them of their mission to ban all forms of envy from their hearts.

I was once walking with a well-to-do man. We saw a small coin on the ground, and the man bent down to pick it up. I asked him why he needed it; he was so wealthy. He answered that in his youth, he needed every penny he could get. That was why he did not make light of even the smallest coin. Our Sages (*Sanhedrin* 8a) tell us, "The value of one penny is equal to the value of one hundred." A small coin can yield a large dividend, therefore, every coin is important. Similarly, we should appreciate the great value of each and every Jewish person. The virtue of Bnei Yisrael in the Wilderness was that each one contemplated his friend's virtues.

Those who rested near the Mishkan felt that those further away were greater than they, and they themselves merited closeness only due to Hashem's order, not because of their own significance. And those who rested afar respected their peers who merited residing nearer to the *Shechinah*, constantly striving to come closer to Hashem.

The Virtue of Rashbi

In this vein, let us examine the virtue of Rashbi (Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai), which brings the masses to his grave on a daily basis. There were many other tremendous *Tanna'im*, who were highly renowned, yet we do not find any other grave visited by the thousands, like his. Also, on the day of his *hilula*, which is Lag ba'Omer, no one fasts. The Arizal writes (*Pri Eitz Chaim, Sefirat Haomer* 7) that Rashbi punished Rabbi Avraham Bruchim, of the

disciples of the Ari, who recited the prayer of *Nachem* on the day of Rashbi's *hilula*, as it is cited on Tishah B'Av. On the anniversaries of the deaths of the other *Tannai'm*, there are those who fast and mourn. For example, some fast on the 7th of Adar, the day of Moshe Rabbeinu's passing (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 580b). What is the secret behind Rashbi's greatness?

The Gemara (*Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin* 6a and b) relates that when Rabbi Akiva delivered a *shiur*, he seated Rabbi Meir up front, and Rashbi sat at the back. Rabbi Akiva later saw that Rashbi was depressed. Upon Rabbi Akiva's inquiry, Rashbi explained that it was because he sat at the far end of the room. Rabbi Akiva replied, "It is enough for you to realize that Hashem and I recognize your true worth." Did Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai wanted to sit up in front for the honor? This was certainly not the case. So what was the cause of his depression?

Perhaps we can answer according to our previous explanation, concerning the order of the encampment in the Wilderness. Rashbi desired to sit in the inner circle in order to have the opportunity to see the virtues of those in the outer ring. He would admire the merits of all of the disciples, since the ones sitting closer have the duty to feel that their station is granted to them only by decree of the Rav. It is their obligation to see their friends' qualities. This was Rashbi's wish. Rabbi Akiva therefore explained, "Hashem and I know that your pure intentions are to improve your *middot*. You are already considered as having overcome any negative inclinations."

Rashbi, too, was deserving of the praise (in the liturgy *Bar Yochai Nimshacta*): "Let us make man as said about you." Hashem created man with the words (*Bereishit* 1:26), "Let us make man." It was worthwhile to create all of mankind just for the sake of Rashbi. And although Adam Harishon sinned, Rashbi maintained the level of mankind before his sin.

Another aspect of Rashbi's character was the tremendous self-sacrifice he demonstrated in the face of the Romans, who forbade Torah study. With great *mesirut nefesh*, he defied their decree. Moreover, he fought the Romans, placing his life in danger. He spoke virulently against the Roman culture, and encouraged the public to study Torah. He dissuaded the Jews from imitating the ways of the Romans (see *Shabbat* 33b).

We are greatly influenced by what we see. We feel a need to acquire every new style that hits the market. I read a story about an *Admor* who entered the Beit Hamidrash with an ordinary hat instead of a *shtreimel*. All of his adherents looked at him questioningly. Had he taken leave of his people or of his senses? The *Admor* then explained, "I saw a gentile wearing a *shtreimel*. And even though he did it to mock us, I felt influenced by his deed. I was afraid that wearing the item worn by a gentile will cause me to behave like him." How great is the power of sight! This was what Rashbi was battling in his conflict with the Romans.

Rashbi was similar to the Chashmonaim, who fought Greek culture with the power of Torah. Rashbi fought the influence of the Romans, by studying Torah with *mesirut nefesh*. In the times of the Chashmonaim, there was a national victory. Therefore, the festival of Chanukah was established by Chazal. But Rashbi won a personal battle. He had been hunted down by the Romans and was rescued. There is no national holiday commemorating this. Instead, his *hilula* is celebrated, and masses make the yearly pilgrimage to his grave.

Everything a person sees influences him greatly, even if he does not realize it. Rashbi fought mightily against the evil effects of the Roman forces.

A man once confessed to me that he sinned tremendously toward his boss. He had no idea how he had reached such a level. I asked

him if he viewed forbidden sights in the newspapers and elsewhere. He answered in the affirmative. I told him that it was no wonder that he sank so low. Every improper sight weakens a person's Avodat Hashem. A room can be well-lit, but a curtain will curtail the light that comes in from the window. Each additional curtain will block off more and more light. So it is in spiritual matters. Every forbidden sight creates a *kelippah*, a partition separating one from Hakadosh Baruch Hu. This is a tremendous influence in cooling off a person's level of *emunah* in Hashem.

Darkness gradually descends upon the person, causing him to sin. This is why it is crucial to avoid all sin and every forbidden sight. If a person, *chas v'shalom*, stumbled, he should see to it to remove the blinds of *kelippah* that covers his eyes. He should immerse himself in the *mikveh* and increase his *tzedakah* to Torah scholars and paupers, before it is too late. Chazal (*Yoma* 86b) tell us that the more often one sins, the more permissible the sin become in his eyes. Rashbi was concerned that Bnei Yisrael would become influenced by the Romans without their even realizing. This was his great virtue.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The Midrash relates that Moshe was afraid that encamping according to the flags would raise dissention among the nation, for those residing closer to the Mishkan would feel superior to the others. Hashem mollified him by stating that Bnei Yisrael would encamp around the Mishkan in the same order that the Shevatim had carried the bier of Yaakov.
- ◆ Why did Hashem instruct each tribe to have its own flag? So that they should improve their *middot*. Those camping nearer to the Mishkan were meant to realize it was not in their own merit, but merely by Hashem's command. Those who stood at the back were to be considered greater,

for their sole desire was to come closer to the *Shechinah*. The word דגל (flag) is contained in the word גדלות (greatness).

- ◆ The disciples of Rabbi Akiva were punished because they did not accord each other sufficient honor. They did not consider their colleagues greater than themselves. This is the definition of the maxim, “Either a friend or death.” Without a friend from whom one can learn, life is worthless.
- ◆ What was the unique virtue of Rashbi, causing the masses to converge exclusively upon his grave every day? This can be explained based on the incident regarding Rabbi Akiva’s *shiur*. Rashbi sat at the back and became depressed. Rabbi Akiva consoled him by saying, “It is enough for you that Hakadosh Baruch Hu and I recognize your greatness.” Rashbi was certainly not looking for respect. He wanted to sit up front in order to have the chance to work on his *middot*, considering those sitting in the back as greater than himself.
- ◆ Rashbi sacrificed his life for the sake of Torah. He fought the Romans and spoke disparagingly about them. This was to ward off any influence they might have otherwise had on the Jews. The Chashmonaim behaved similarly during the time of the Greeks. Theirs was a national victory, warranting a festival in commemoration. Rashbi, on the other hand, gained a personal salvation from the hands of the Romans. Therefore, his *hilula* is celebrated every year.
- ◆ Every sin and every forbidden sight influences a person. Each additional sin increasingly veils one’s eyes, just like curtains that curtail the sunlight from entering a room. Therefore, it is crucial to rectify one’s sin immediately, so that he should never fall into complete darkness.



The Census of the Tribe of Levi

“Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon, saying: Take a census of the sons of Kehat from among the sons of Levi, according to their families, according to their fathers’ household; from thirty years of age and up, until fifty years of age, everyone who comes to the legion to perform work in the Tent of Meeting”

(*Bamidbar 4:1-4*)

In Parashat *Bamidbar*, the Torah specifies the assignments of the family of Kehat regarding the Avodah in the Mishkan. It describes at length their special service, which included assembling and dismounting the Mishkan and its vessels, throughout the nation’s journeys in the Wilderness. Further in the parashah, we find precise details of the tasks of the Gershon and Merari families, who carried the utensils of the Mishkan.

The Torah is known for its concise format. There are numerous halachot which we learn from mere hints, which are not written clearly in the Torah at all. An example of this is the thirty-nine halachot of Shabbat, with their various related laws (*Shabbat 49b*). Why, then, does the Torah go into great detail describing the Mishkan and its vessels, as well as the jobs of the sons of Levi?

Furthermore, the work of the Mishkan was delegated to that specific generation alone. Afterward, the two Batei Mikdash were built and subsequently destroyed. How can we understand that the work of *bnei Levi*, limited to the timeline of the Wilderness, is described in such detail, whereas the halachot of Shabbat, unrestricted to time or place, are merely mentioned by way of

allusion, learnt from the work which was done in constructing the Mishkan?

The Levi'im are the representatives of the Torah scholars (see *Rambam, Shemittah v'Yovel* 13:13). Shevet Levi was the only tribe who refused to serve the Golden Calf. They maintained their faith in Moshe and Hashem (*Shemot* 32:26). The Calf symbolized the fleeting pleasures of this world. While the entire nation followed this Egyptian abomination, the tribe of Levi stood staunchly at their post, never corrupting themselves with the pursuit of transience and futility.

The Torah describes this tribe at length in order to give eminence to the *bnei Torah*. Just as Shevet Levi numbered a small amount of people, being the smallest of all the tribes, so too, are true Torah scholars rare individuals. The detailed description of the work in the Mishkan teaches a person that he must prepare himself to become a Mishkan for Hashem. In this manner, the *Shechinah* will be able to rest within him. This is as the poet, Rabbi Elazar Azkari (*Sefer Chareidim*) states, "In my heart, I will build a Sanctuary."

This, then, is why the Torah emphasizes this subject, whereas seemingly more important topics are alluded to briefly. By focusing on the tribe of Levi and the Avodah in the Mishkan, the Torah indicates just how great *bnei Torah*, who are compared to Shevet Levi, really are. We also learn that each of us is adjured to build an inner Sanctuary for Hashem, just as Am Yisrael did in the Wilderness. The one who merits becoming a Mishkan for Hashem will feel that the Torah is inside him. By toiling in Torah, he will reveal the wonderful mysteries and miracles which are hidden within it.

Hashem told Moshe to command the nation to prepare for *Kabbalat HaTorah* for two days (*Shemot* 19:10-15). Moshe, of his own

accord, added a day, instructing the nation to prepare for three days (*Shabbat* 87a). Hashem agreed with his reasoning. There are two principles to learn here. The first is the superiority of Shevet Levi, for Moshe, who came from that *shevet*, received authorization from Hashem to add another day of preparation. This indicates that this tribe has a special power to add to the word of Hashem. Similarly, Moshe was capable of reversing the decree against the nation by his entreaties for forgiveness for the sin of the Calf. Hashem acceded to his request, as the pasuk states, “Hashem was comforted.”

Another important principle is the following: In matters pertaining to *yirat Shamayim*, there are no boundaries or limits. Praised is the man who constantly adds to his fear of Heaven. It was for this reason that Hashem acquiesced to Moshe’s plea to add another day of preparation. There is always room for a little bit more *yirat Shamayim*.

Every one of us is enjoined to erect a resting place for the *Shechinah* inside himself, as the pasuk (*Shemot* 25:5) says, “עשו לי – מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם – Make for Me a sanctuary, and I will dwell among them.” But it must be a (מקדש מעט) a “Mikdash/Mishkan Me’at” – a small Sanctuary. This means that we should humble ourselves and not be conspicuous. One should not allow his Torah study and mitzvah performance to bring him to arrogance. Torah remains only with one who humbles himself before it. At times, a person might think he is in charge, pulling the strings to accomplish things. But there is never a reason to get all strung up. When he makes himself into a miniature Mishkan, one understands that there is a Higher Being who runs the show, and we are all merely puppets, moving about as He sees fit.

“Moshe and Aharon were among his priests and Shmuel among those who invoke His Name” (*Tehillim* 99:6). Shmuel Hanavi was

equal to both Moshe and Aharon (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 18:8). How did he reach this elevated level? Through his remaining humble, even in his prestigious position. Shmuel never exploited his position to tyrannize or take advantage of the people. Before his passing, he testified that he never imposed upon the nation at all, or asked them for personal favors. He made sure to take care of his own needs by himself (*Shmuel I* 12:3; see *Nedarim* 38a). Because he made himself into a miniature Mishkan, he merited being considered as great as Moshe and Aharon.

At the opposite extreme, we find Korach. He had the privilege of bearing the Aron (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 18:3), but could not bear the fact that he did not hold first place in the ranks of the nation. He fell to the depths of sin because he was not wise enough to erect a Mikdash Me'at in his heart. Instead of a miniature Mishkan, he considered himself a major edifice. Since he believed that he was worthy of leading the nation, he fell into the abyss of impurity, and lost even the right to carry the Aron.

Unfortunately, the situation nowadays has spiraled to untold lows. People do not even bother trying to make themselves into a Mishkan for Hashem, neither a big one nor a small one. When the *Yetzer Hara* notices that a person does not exert himself to come close to his Maker, his sensors are alerted, and he pushes him lower and lower (see *Rashi, Vayikra* 26:14-15).

In the year 2010, wild pogroms and pandemonium broke out in the Muslim world, after their “holy book” was insulted in a prison in Cuba. The Middle Eastern world did not take this sitting down, and fiery fury broke out. In Indonesia alone, three hundred people were murdered in one day. When the United States saw the epic proportions of destruction that were being reached, totally out of control, they hurried to apologize. As a means of silencing the

disquiet, they donated millions of copies of the Koran to the Arab population.

But it is difficult to find someone who is willing to stand up for the honor of the Torah. Disrespect for Torah scholars is the order of the day, and no one protests it. Why is it that the Muslims are fanatical in their religion of depravity, taking up for its honor in the most gruesome ways, whereas we, unfortunately, continue in silence in the face of those who pierce their claws into the purity of Torah, mocking and deriding the religious Torah Jews?

Let us unite as a stone wall, stalwart and steadfast, to take up for the honor of Hashem and thwart the plans of those who wish to plant poison in the vineyard of Israel.

The Torah relates (see *Shemot* 19:8; *ibid.* 24:7) that Moshe conveyed Bnei Yisrael's reply of *Na'aseh v'nishma* to Hashem, stating that they were willing to accept the Torah. This is difficult to comprehend. Hashem certainly knew their response without Moshe's transmission; why was it necessary for Moshe to relay it to Him?

There are two kinds of positive responses. The first one reflects the inner belief of the heart, whereas the second is in direct contrast to what one truly feels. Moshe reported the nation's affirmative reply to Hashem, but his human vision was limited. He was not able to perceive whether or not their response reflected their true desire. Only Hashem, the Examiner of the heart, knows the inner will of a person and what lies behind his words.

The fact that Hashem revealed Himself to Bnei Yisrael at Har Sinai proves that their words were in consonance with their thoughts. Their response demonstrates, also, that they were of one mind. The Torah, therefore, was able to endure within them. This teaches the

greatness of the virtue of *achdut* for the sake of doing Hashem's will. Unity among fellow Jews has the strength to uplift a person to the level of building a Mishkan within himself.

The *Chatam Sofer* states that every Jew is enjoined to be like Shevet Levi, sanctified for Hashem. He must consecrate his time for the study of Torah. Whoever is not capable of spending all of his days in the tent of Torah should at least set aside fixed times for Torah study.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The Torah depicts the erection and dismantling of the Mishkan in great detail. Also described at length is the arrangement of the tribe of Levi, who carried its parts, as well as the details of the vessels. This demands explanation. All of the forms of forbidden labor on Shabbat, which apply to all generations, are learned only through allusions in the work of the Mishkan, which are not spelled out, whereas the details of assembling and dismantling the Mishkan, a provisional command applicable only for that generation, were described in detail.
- ◆ The Torah emphasizes the work done in assembling and dismantling the Mishkan because it was the assignment of the tribe of Levi, those who toiled in Torah and did not sin with the Calf. Even while yet in Egypt, they were involved in Torah study. Every person should learn from here the importance of building a miniature Mishkan inside of himself.
- ◆ Hakadosh Baruch Hu commanded Moshe to instruct the people to observe two days of preparation prior to *Matan Torah*. Moshe, of his own accord, added a day, instructing the nation to prepare for three days (*Shabbat* 87a). Hashem agreed with his reasoning. There are two principles to learn here. The first is the superiority of Shevet Levi, for Moshe, who came from that *shevet*, received authorization from Hashem to add another day of preparation. This seems to indicate that this tribe has a special power to add to the word of Hashem. The second is the

point of constantly adding to one's level of *yirat Shamayim* and acceptance of the Torah. Hashem concurred with this.

- ◆ One must build a miniature Mishkan within himself, in which the *Shechinah* will reside. But he must make sure to keep it miniature, rather than a source of self-aggrandizement. We find that Shmuel Hanavi was equal in stature to Moshe and Aharon. He merited that achievement due to his humility. In spite of his high position, he never took advantage of the people for his own personal interests. Instead, he would travel among the nation. In opposition, Korach is a prime example of someone who demanded greatness. He ended up truly diminished.
- ◆ Moshe relayed Bnei Yisrael's reply of *Na'aseh v'nishma* to Hashem. Hashem certainly knew their response; why was it necessary for Moshe to relay it? Moshe told Hashem that he knew their outward response, but Hashem is the only One Who knew what was going on in their hearts. By revealing Himself to them at Har Sinai, He was proving that their acceptance of the Torah was with a complete heart.



Gems on Parashat Bamidbar



The Connection between Bamidbar, Naso, and Beha'alotcha

“Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt, saying”

(Bamidbar 1:1)

I would like to suggest a hint which can be found in the juxtaposition of the parshiyot *Bamidbar*, *Naso*, and *Beha'alotcha*. A person who makes himself humble as the desert (*Bamidbar*), raising himself (*Naso*) above worldly lusts, merits becoming uplifted (*Beha'alotcha*). He climbs the ladder of Torah and *yirah*, ascending closer to Hashem.

The Gemara (*Bava Metzia* 85b) relates the following incident: Reish Lakish sought the place of burial of Rabbi Chiya, who was well-known for his self-sacrifice for Torah. But Reish Lakish was unsuccessful. In his distress, he turned to Heaven, asking why he was denied this. He thought that maybe he was not as sufficiently

erudite in Torah knowledge as Rabbi Chiya had been. He was answered that although he had become great in Torah, he did not propagate it through *mesirut nefesh* to the extent that Rabbi Chiya did. This was why he was denied access to Rabbi Chiya's grave.

This is difficult to comprehend. Reish Lakish was a tremendous *talmid chacham* and a true *ba'al teshuvah* (ibid. 84a). He dedicated his life to Torah. Yet there was a slight grievance against him for not exerting himself just a little bit more for the sake of Am Yisrael's Torah level, and not only his own.

The Gemara (ibid.) recounts that in order to teach Torah to the young children, Rabbi Chiya would plant fields of flax. He would weave nets from the flax that grew and catch deer with these nets. He would distribute the meat to charity and process the hides for parchment. On this parchment he wrote words of Torah, which he taught to the young Jewish children. This involved great self-sacrifice on the part of Rabbi Chiya, who did not seek to advance his own Torah study, but concerned himself with the spiritual future of the entire nation.

Anyone who shares his Torah knowledge with others humbles himself like the desert (see *Nedarim* 55a; *Chatam Sofer*, ad loc.). He neglects his own advancement in Torah for the sake of the public. Surely in the time it took Rabbi Chiya to prepare the Torah scrolls for the Jewish youth, he himself could have progressed in his *Avodat Hashem*, filling himself with the words of Torah. Yet he did not seek personal benefit, but only the benefit of Klal Yisrael. He made himself like the desert, chasing away the *middah* of laziness. In this manner, he elevated the children for Torah and *yirat Hashem*. As a result, he was rewarded greatly. The pasuk in Tehillim (119:126) states, "For it is a time to act for Hashem; they have voided Your Torah." Often, a person must void his personal advancement in Torah in order to spread Torah among the masses. Let us take a

lesson from the life of Rabbi Chiya, who negated his own interests for the sake of the Jewish youth. His deeds were so great in the eyes of Hashem that He testified that if not for Rabbi Chiya's deeds, the Torah might have been forgotten from Yisrael, *chalilah* (see *Sukkah* 20a).

The Torah is called upon Moshe's name, as the pasuk (*Malachi* 3:22) states, "Remember the Torah of Moshe My servant." Also, the Torah states (*Devarim* 33:4), "The Torah that Moshe commanded us." Moshe merited the Torah being called by his name due to his great level of *mesirut nefesh* on its behalf (see *Shabbat* 88b; see *Pesikta Rabbah* 20), when he ascended to Heaven to receive it. The angels wished to consume him, stating, "What is a human being doing among us?" (see *Shabbat* 88b). Upon descending, he observed Am Yisrael serving the Golden Calf, unworthy of receiving the Torah, and he broke the *luchot*. But he did not rest until Hashem was mollified for their sin, as it says (*Shemot* 32:14), "Hashem reconsidered regarding the evil that He declared He would do to His people."

Moshe's level of self-sacrifice for the sake of the Torah of the nation was tremendous. He was willing to forfeit his personal life for their benefit, as we find that he divorced his wife, Tzipporah, in order to be available to speak with the *Shechinah* at all times in *kedushah* and *taharah*. This earned him the merit of having the Torah being called by his name.



A Calculated Counting of Bnei Yisrael

“Hashem spoke to Moshe in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after their exodus from the land of Egypt, saying”

(Bamidbar 1:1)

The Torah goes to great length in describing the details of the counting of Bnei Yisrael. This was done by specifying where Hashem revealed Himself to Moshe and the exact date, including the year, when it took place. The numerous particulars indicate its significance, for one counts something which is close to his heart (see *Beitzah* 3b; *Rashi*, ad loc.). Hashem counted Bnei Yisrael time and again, to demonstrate just how dear they are to Him (*Rashi*, *Shemot* 1:1).

Unlike other times when they were counted, the Torah specifies the details of this counting. This is in order to indicate how far Bnei Yisrael traveled in their journey to become Hashem’s nation in the short time since their deliverance from Egypt. Bnei Yisrael were enslaved for decades, with no formal training or national rights. Their rehabilitation process should have taken a long time and been arduous and tiring. But because they were the Generation of Wisdom, they overcame all obstacles, following Hashem in the Wilderness with utter *mesirut nefesh*.

The *Sefat Emet* (*Shemot*, Bo 639) explains that when Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, they escaped the impurity of the *kelippah* and desired Hashem’s authority. This is as the *Navi* proclaims (*Yirmeyahu* 2:2), “I recall for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your

nuptials, your following Me into the Wilderness, into an unsown land.”

The emphasis on this counting indicates the high position that Bnei Yisrael reached at that time. They made every effort to remove the shackles of slavery from themselves, chaining themselves, instead, to Hashem and His Torah. When Hashem observed their *mesirut nefesh* for His sake, He gained great satisfaction, and they became more endeared to Him than before. He detailed their counting in order to inform them of their stature in His eyes.

When a Jew exerts himself in Avodat Hashem and sacrifices his life for the sake of the Torah, he merits Hashem’s closeness and especial protection.



The Gem of Torah Is Set in the Heart of Every Jew

“Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers’ house, by number of the names, every male according to their head count”

(Bamidbar 1:1-2)

Why did Hashem count the nation when it was obvious to Him how many they numbered? This announces to the entire world that every Jew is unique and privileged, for he accepted the Torah. The

counting also emphasizes to each member of Am Yisrael that he became unique from among all of the nations by accepting the Torah upon himself. Although a Jew might find himself estranged from the Torah, he is still a Jew. All of the “holy waters” sprinkled upon him will never douse the flame of Judaism which burns in his heart. And even though a Jew may be given courses in foreign faiths, Jewish blood will continuously course through his veins. He is unique, and will forever remain unique to Hashem, Who counts His children time after time to demonstrate how endeared they are to Him.

What is it that distinguishes Bnei Yisrael from among all the nations? It is the Torah, which is within each and every one of us. This is the truth, even if, at times, it is not apparent. The spark of Torah burns in the heart of every single Jew, as it says (*Tehillim* 40:9), “Your Torah is in my innards.” The day will come when that hidden spark will be fanned into a roaring flame, publicizing to all that this man belongs to the Chosen Nation.

The Gemara (*Chagigah* 3a) relates that two of Rabbi’s disciples were mute. They would arrive daily to hear the *shiur* from their mentor. When Rabbi noticed how they thirsted to learn Torah, not allowing their handicap to impede their quest for Torah knowledge, he prayed to Hashem to heal them of their impediment. Hashem acquiesced to his request, and they were able to speak. It was then that everyone realized just how great in Torah they were. Despite their physical disability, they had drunk thirstily of their teacher’s Torah, never missing a single word.

This is a great lesson for us. These disciples so yearned for words of Torah that they succeeded in overcoming their physical handicap, and against all odds understood and absorbed the Torah of their teacher. If their desire to learn Torah was so strong, why

did Hashem create them as mutes, eventually healing them of their disability?

The explanation is based on the pasuk in Tehillim (147:19), “He relates His word to Yaakov, His statutes and judgments to Israel.” Our roots reach all the way back to Yaakov Avinu. The same Torah revealed to our Avot was given to Am Yisrael on Har Sinai. It continues throughout the generations. We might say that Hashem created Rebbi’s students as mutes in order to teach us that the Torah is found inside each and every Jew. Even though they could not physically repeat what they had heard, their greatness was eventually revealed, since the Torah was imbedded deep within them.

With the Torah inside the *neshamah* of each Jew, no physical barrier can block him from studying more and uncovering its secrets. Hashem healed these disciples in order to demonstrate this point. At times this is concealed, and at times it is revealed. Although it seemed that these pupils were not involved in what was going on around them, this was far from the truth. Their greatness in Torah was ultimately revealed, from a place deep within them.



The Numbers of the Nation

“Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers’ house, by number of the names, every male according to their head count”

(Bamidbar 1:1-2)

Hashem commanded Moshe to count Bnei Yisrael according to their families. The Torah is known for its brevity and uses each letter most sparingly. Yet here, when Bnei Yisrael were being counted, the Torah changes from its usual course and describes each and every *shevet* in great detail, not sufficing with conciseness.

Concerning numbers, we know that seven is a number distinct in Jewish consciousness. For instance, there are seven days in the week, seven years until the *Shemittah* year, seven *Shemittah* years until *Yovel*, seven days in each festival, and seven clean days until a woman becomes pure (see *Vayikra Rabbah* 29:11). Why, then, do we have only five Chumashim? Why didn't Hashem command Moshe to divide the Torah into seven segments, the number familiar to us all?

The number five is used for the Chumashim, for when it is added to the number seven, alluding to Hashem Who created the world in seven days, it equals twelve, an allusion to the Twelve Tribes. We learn from this that Am Yisrael, Hashem, and the Torah are one (see *Zohar* II, 90b; III, 4b). This is the reason the Torah goes to great lengths in counting Bnei Yisrael. It is in order to strengthen the bond between the Torah and Bnei Yisrael, who are interdependent.



The Pure Light

“Those who encamp to the front, at the east, shall be the banner of the camp of Yehudah according to their legions – and the leader of the children of Yehudah is Nachshon ben Aminadav”

(Bamidbar 2:3)

The Torah states the order in which Bnei Yisrael encamped around the Mishkan, specifying that three tribes rested on each side. The beginning of the parashah relates that on the eastern side, the *shevatim* of Yehudah, Yissachar, and Zevulun rested. They took the lead when the nation traveled.

Why were these three tribes honored by encamping in the east, the most important side? Additionally, why did they merit being the first to travel, with the rest of the nation following behind?

These three tribes represent the three pillars upon which the world stands – Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut chassadim*. This is borne out in the Mishnah in Avot (1:2), “The world depends on three things – on Torah study, on the service [of Hashem], and on kind deeds.” Shevet Yehudah is compared to a lion cub, who overpowers his inclination in order to serve his Master. Yehudah represents the pillar of Avodah. Shevet Yissachar are men of wisdom (see *Divrei Hayamim* I, 12:33). They therefore symbolize the pillar of Torah (see *Tanchuma, Vayechi* 11; see *Yoma* 26a). The tribe of Zevulun

contributes from their wealth to support the Torah scholars, signifying the pillar of *chessed*.

The initials of the names יהודה יששכר זבולון are numerically equivalent to the word זך (pure). Their last letters are numerically equivalent to the word הניר (the light). The phrase הניר הזך (the pure light) refers to the pure mitzvot, compared to lights, as it says (*Mishlei* 6:23), “For a mitzvah is a candle, and Torah is light.” In order to acquire the pure, unadulterated mitzvot, one must first possess these three foundations of Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut chassadim*, upon which the world stands and by which it is nourished.

Therefore, these three tribes were chosen to lead the way in the Desert. We should also follow the path forged by Yehudah, Yissachar, and Zevulun, emulating their exalted qualities in order to attain the pure light of mitzvot.

Naso



Greatness and Humility

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Take a census of the sons of Gershon, as well, according to their fathers’ house, according to their families”

(Bamidbar 4:21-22)

The word נָשַׁב (take a census, or count) can also mean to uplift. Hashem ordered Moshe to count the tribe of Levi separately from the rest of Klal Yisrael, in order to indicate their superiority over the rest of the nation. The fact that they warranted their own counting and the individual countings of each of the sons of Levi, Gershon, Kehat, and Merari, who dealt with the vessels of the Mishkan, signifies their elevated stature. A person who counts a smaller group separately from the larger group of which it is a part, shows that the smaller group is more elite. This was the case with Shevet Levi.

Parashat Naso (נָשַׁב) continues with the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im*, which were voluntary offerings. The word *Nasi* (נָשִׁיב), likewise, alludes to their elevated status above the rest of the nation. They

were called *Nesi'im* in order to provide the tribe of Levi with the lesson that they should not be arrogant in light of their greater position and their lofty role as bearers of the holy vessels. Every tribe had its great men; *bnei Levi* were not the only dignified members of the nation. They had no reason to brag.

There is a lesson here, too, for each and every one of us. With hard work, anyone can reach great heights, warranting special status in Hashem's eyes. The *Nesi'im* were not distinguished because of their lineage, but due to their efforts to do Hashem's will. The Rambam (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 5:2) states that every single person has the potential to reach the level of Moshe Rabbeinu, if he only applies himself. Chazal (*Sotah* 48b) inform us that Shmuel Hakatan was worthy of receiving the same level of prophecy as those who lived in the times of Moshe Rabbeinu, but the generation was not deserving.

The word נשיא (*Nasi*) contains the letter ׀, which is missing from the word נשא. This letter refers to Hashem, as it is the first letter in the Name יהוה-וה-י. His Name of אדני begins with the letter א, which includes one letter ׀ at the top and one at the bottom. The letter ׀, the smallest of the letters, teaches us about Hashem's humility. If Hashem humbles Himself, how could the *Nesi'im* lord over the nation? The letter ׀ contained in their name is a constant reminder of Hashem, the King of Kings, Who both appointed them to their posts and is the symbol of humility.

Conversely, the parashah depicting the Levi'im is נאסו (*Naso*), without the letter ׀ in the word. The involvement of the Levi'im with the Mishkan and the holy vessels is a continuous reminder of Hashem's Presence. This was meant to prevent them from entertaining feelings of haughtiness. Therefore, it was not necessary to add the letter ׀ to their name. The *Nesi'im*, on the other hand, were not involved in the Mishkan, but came into contact with the

nation, and were in need of this reminder, in order to protect them from arrogance.

At the beginning of parashat *Beha'alotcha*, Rashi asks why the passage dealing with the kindling of the Menorah is next to the passage dealing with the contribution and offerings of the *Nesi'im*. He answers that when Aharon saw the contributions and offerings made by the princes at the inauguration of the Mishkan, he felt bad, for neither he nor his tribe were included in these offerings. The Holy One, Blessed is He, said to him, "I swear by your life! Your role is greater than theirs, for you kindle and prepare the lamps."

Aharon's entire life revolved around offering *korbanot* in the Mishkan, serving Hashem in the Inner Sanctum. Why was he saddened by the thought that the *Nesi'im* were making a greater sacrifice in Hashem's service than he? This can be compared to a person who always makes a profit in various business deals. One time, he is deprived of a specific deal. He doesn't lose any money; he just doesn't make a profit. But he is devastated nonetheless. This reaction seems somewhat exaggerated.

Furthermore, what type of consolation is it to Aharon, who did not participate in the offerings of the Levi'im, that he would light the Menorah in the Mishkan? Aharon was not jealous of the fact that the *Nesi'im* brought *korbanot* to Hashem, but of the fact they carried Hashem's Name within theirs. This provided them with the constant reminder to remain humble. Aharon was prepared to sacrifice the honor of bringing the *korbanot* in the inauguration ceremony, despite their significance in Hashem's eyes, as long as he would merit Hashem's Name within his, obviating any feelings of haughtiness. When Hashem saw Aharon's strong desire to distance himself from feelings of pride, He honored him with the privilege of lighting the Menorah every day. This would remind him of Hashem's

Presence, as Mishlei states (6:23), “A mitzvah is a lamp, and Torah is light.”

The Gemara (*Horiyot* 10a) relates the following narrative. Two *Tanna'im* were offered positions in the Rabbinat. They declined the offer, stating that they were afraid they would become arrogant. They were then told, “You think positions in the Rabbinat will transform you into leaders. On the contrary, you will become servants of the people. The burden of the public will sit like a grindstone on your shoulders. All of your personal interests will grind to a halt, as you will have no free time to pursue them. There is no reason to suspect that you will become arrogant in your new posts.”

Hashem told Aharon (*Bamidbar* 8:2), “When you kindle the lamps, toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light.” The word *יאירו* (shall cast light) begins with the letter *י*. This alludes to the fact that Aharon, so to speak, brought along a *י* of his own, a constant reminder of Hashem’s Presence in the world, in order to preclude him from harboring any feelings of arrogance. Additionally, Hashem told him, “Your role is greater than theirs.” The Menorah burned constantly, 24/7. Aharon’s *י*, then, was perpetual, whereas the *Nesi'im*, who contained Hashem’s Name within theirs, were not guaranteed to always bear their name with pride. A prime example was the sin of the spies, where the *Nesi'im* failed woefully, losing the right to their exalted names.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Hashem ordered Moshe to count the tribe of Levi separately, signifying their importance among Bnei Yisrael.
- ◆ The root of the title *נשיא* (*Nasi*) is *נשא*. This was to teach the tribe of Levi that they should not lord over their fellow Jews; the *Nesi'im* were

also exalted above the rest of the nation. Additionally, there is a lesson for the entire nation here. By improving one's character, everyone is capable of reaching the greatest heights in Avodat Hashem.

- ◆ The word נשאי (*Nasi*) has an added ך, not present in the word נשו (*Naso*). This alludes to Hashem's Name, which begins with the letter ך. Just as it is the smallest letter, so too, does Hashem reduce His honor, acting with humility. The *Nesi'im* were enjoined to adopt this trait, remaining humble throughout their career. The parashah describing the Levi'im is called נשו, without the letter ך. The fact that the Levi'im served in the Mishkan served as a steady reminder of Hashem's Presence, and kept them humble.
- ◆ Aharon was constantly involved in offering sacrifices. Why, then, did he feel envious of the *Nesi'im*, who brought *korbanot* without him? How was the honor of lighting the Menorah any form of consolation? Aharon's jealousy stemmed from the fact that the *Nesi'im* contained the letter ך in their name. Hashem mollified him with the lighting of the Menorah, a hint to the "Light of the world."
- ◆ Hashem told Aharon (*Bamidbar* 8:2), "When you kindle the lamps, toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light." The word יאירו (shall cast light) begins with the letter ך. Aharon, too, merited this special letter. But his was perpetual, indicated by the fact that the Menorah remained constantly lit. Conversely, the *Nesi'im* maintained their letter ך only as long as they walked in Hashem's ways, losing the rights to their exalted names after they sinned.



The Connection between Parashat Naso and Shavuot

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Take a census of the sons of Gershon, as well, according to their fathers’ house, according to their families”

(*Bamidbar 4:21-22*)

Parashat *Naso* is read close to the festival of Shavuot. We will try to understand the connection between them. But first, let us ask the following question: Why does the Torah use the phrase, “Take a census of the sons of Gershon,” instead of simply saying, “Count the sons of Gershon,” or something similar?

The word נשא has a double meaning. It can hint to שנאה (hatred) or התנשאות (pride). This teaches the following lesson: If we truly wish to cleave to Hashem and His Torah, we must despise everything that has the slightest scent of materialism. *Kedushah* cannot stomach mundane matters, which emit the stench of physicality. We stand a chance of becoming elevated to a place of pride in Avodat Hashem if we but stand up to the pleasures which pull at us from all sides and ignore them, concentrating on coming closer to Him.

By distancing himself from physicality, one becomes elevated in Torah and *yirah*, meriting great reward from Heaven. This is the connection between Parashat *Naso* and Chag HaShavuot. Whoever wishes to accept upon himself the yoke of Torah must first and foremost renounce materialism. The name of the family גרשון (Gershon) has the same root as the word גרוש (chase). Only by

chasing away mundane matters can one achieve greatness in Torah and *yirah*.

Chazal (*Ta'anit* 26b) tell us that *Matan Torah* was a wedding between Hakadosh Baruch Hu and Am Yisrael, the Torah acting as the *ketubah* (see *Shemot Rabbah* 46:1). Just as a married couple celebrates their anniversary every year, so are we adjured to celebrate the festival of Shavuot, year after year. This announces to all that we came into a covenant of marriage, as attested to by our marriage contract, the Torah. Every man who marries must provide his wife with sustenance and support. Likewise, Hashem obligated Himself to sustain us. And we obligated ourselves to be faithful to Him and His Torah, until the end of generations. A marriage between husband and wife is a miniature model of our relationship with the Creator. The relationship between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael was solidified by means of the Torah, the *ketubah* which connects Am Yisrael to their Intended.

There are various types of Jews. Some are *chareidi*, which means that they “tremble at the word of Hashem.” They are scrupulous with all mitzvot, easy as well as difficult. In contrast, there are those who consider themselves “traditional.” They have a warm place in their hearts toward their tradition, but they do not feel it obligates them in any way. When it is convenient to keep the mitzvot, and they seem pleasant in their eyes, they agree to observe them. But when observing mitzvot demands exertion or concession, they forgo them, preferring their personal comfort over fulfilling the will of Hashem.

To these people who call themselves “traditionalists,” I would like to state the following. The service of the Levi'im regarding the Mishkan was a burden. Still, in spite of the hardship involved, they bore the yoke of carrying the parts of the Mishkan most loyally. They did not look for the easy way out. On the contrary, they sought

to serve Hashem in the most complete and honorable way. Due to their *mesirut nefesh* to fulfill Hashem's desire, Shevet Levi merited the protection offered by the Mishkan, from all forms of suffering and travail. They were lifted above all troubles, as the Gemara (*Sotah* 35a) states, "The Aron carried its carriers." The Torah specifies the details of the service of the Levi'im, each family and its mission, to teach us the following: Every person is considered a miniature Mishkan. As such, he is obligated to carry Hashem in his heart and exert himself to maintain this condition, just as the Mishkan obligated great toil and exertion to maintain it.

In general, the Torah is sparing with words. In many instances, mitzvot are merely hinted at in the Written Torah, and their details are specified in the Oral Law. But here, the Torah describes the work in the Mishkan and the tasks of *bnei Levi* in great detail. This is in order to awaken us to our personal service of the Mishkan. Hashem resides within the heart of each and every Jew, as we are taught from the pasuk (*Shemot* 25:8), "They shall make a Sanctuary for Me, so that I may dwell among them" (see *Nefesh Hachaim* 1:4).

Our Sages tell us (see *Bamidbar Rabbah* 4:17) that when the Levi'im dismantled the Mishkan in order to continue journeying, they covered the Mizbeach while the fire was still blazing on it. By a miracle, the covering did not burn and spread the fire all around. This is an allusion to man's *neshamah* inside his body. It is a burning flame on the Altar, yet, in spite of its tremendous sanctity, it is prevented from consuming his body. The fire that burned on the Altar was never extinguished. Yirmeyahu Hanavi hid it from us, due to the sins of the generations (*Josephus* 3). In the future, this fire will blaze before us once again.

Just as this fire was never doused and still burns, even after the *churban* (although we cannot see it), so too, within each and every Jew, there is a *neshamah* from on High, burning bright in his heart,

a spark of Divinity. And even if, at times, this fire is covered, prevented from shining forth and warming its environment, still, it continues to burn. In the future, all the *neshamot* of Am Yisrael will return to their Source, revealing the previously concealed light.

Hashem wants us to prepare for the holiday of *Matan Torah* in order to accept the Torah in all its glory. A couple on the cusp of marriage will prepare feverishly so that their wedding will be as beautiful as possible. If for a regular wedding so much preparation is necessary, all the more so is it necessary to make appropriate preparations for the wedding between Hakadosh Baruch Hu and Am Yisrael. In this manner, we will arrive worthy and ready to accept the gift Hashem wishes to bestow upon us – the *Torah Hakedoshah*. This is the connection between parashat *Naso* and *Matan Torah*. We must arouse ourselves to prepare for *Kabbalat HaTorah* by removing the covers that obscure the *neshamah*, making it deserving of accepting the Torah.

Let us picture the following scenario. A *chatan* is standing under the chuppah, proclaiming, “You are sanctified unto me.” He notices that his *kallah’s* thoughts are far away. After the wedding, the new couple arrives home and the *chatan* confronts his *kallah*, asking what she was thinking as he was placing the ring on her finger. The *kallah* has no recourse but to tell the truth. Precisely as he was sanctifying her, she remembered a previous *shidduch* she had been involved in. There is no need to describe the *chatan’s* wrath at hearing this. Already the next day, he divorces his wife.

In order not to come to the sorry state of being involved in nonsense when Shavuot comes, we must prepare ourselves for the exalted moment of *Kabbalat HaTorah*, in order that Hashem should not chase us away, *chas v’shalom*.

In Summary

- ◆ What is the connection between Parashat *Naso* and the festival of Shavuot? The word נשא hints to שנאה (hatred) and התנשאות (pride). By loathing physicality, one is able to elevate himself in Avodat Hashem; a status of which he can truly be proud.
- ◆ The festival of Shavuot is similar to a wedding ceremony, the Torah being the *ketubah*. Just as the new husband is obligated to support his wife as long as she is faithful to him, Hashem promised to sustain us as long as we are loyal to the Torah. Those who view the Torah as a burden should consider the burden of the Levi'im. Although they were commanded to carry the parts of the Mishkan, they did not shirk their duty, but carried it out devotedly. The Torah describes their tasks at length, to teach us about our personal mission in our miniature Mishkan.
- ◆ When the Levi'im dismantled the Mizbeach, they would cover it while the fire still burned on it. But none of the covers became singed. This fire still burns, even after the *churban*, but it was hidden by Yirmeyahu. This fire kindles a connection with the *neshamah* which burns in man's heart. Although at times it is concealed, it will be revealed in all its glory in the future.
- ◆ Parashat *Naso* is read close to Shavuot. This is to teach us about the appropriate preparations we must make in honor of the upcoming wedding between ourselves and Hashem – *Chag Matan Torah*. We prepare for this auspicious occasion by removing the coverings of the *neshamah*.



The Severity of Slander

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Command the Children of Israel that they shall expel from the camp everyone with tzara’at, everyone who has had a zav-emission, and everyone contaminated by a human corpse”

(Bamidbar 5:1-2)

The Torah describes the encampment of our nation in the Wilderness (see *Bamidbar* 1:52-53, *ibid.* 2:2). There were three camps: the camp of the *Shechinah*, the camp of *Leviyah* (the tribe of Levi), and the camp of Yisrael. The Mishkan was in the center. Rashi (*ibid.* 5:2) explains that the *Shechinah*, too, was in the center. Around it rested the tribe of Levi, and around that, on all sides, Yisrael encamped, according to their flags.

Hashem impressed upon Moshe the urgency of maintaining the *kedushah* of the camp. Anyone who had any of the above-mentioned impurities had to distance himself from the rest of the camp, in order not to spoil this *kedushah*. There are different levels of defilement. The more severe the *tumah*, the more camps one had to separate from. Rashi informs us that the person with *tzara’at*, a very severe form of impurity, was sent out of all three camps. He had to sit in isolation, as the pasuk (*Vayikra* 13:46) states, “He shall dwell in isolation; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” In contrast, the *zav* was sent only from the camps of the *Shechinah* and *Leviyah*, but was allowed to remain in the camp of Yisrael. One who was contaminated by a human corpse had the lowest level of impurity, and was therefore sent out only of the camp of the *Shechinah*. He was allowed in the camps of *Leviyah* and Yisrael.

An obvious question comes to the fore. This was the second year

after they had left Egypt. They had already received the Torah, at which time all sicknesses were healed (*Mechilta*). From where, then, did anyone with *tzara'at* appear?

Chazal (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:8) tell us that with the *Chet Ha'egel*, all of the sicknesses returned. We might add that those who had *tzara'at* were being punished for the sin of *lashon hara* which adhered to them. This is a sin which is, unfortunately, quite prevalent in our generation. Even though the entire nation was healed at *Matan Torah*, a sizeable number of people succeeded in contracting *tzara'at*, due to the sin of *lashon hara*. The gravity of this sin can be proven by the incident with Miriam Haneviah. Even though she spoke only a few negative words about her beloved brother, Moshe, and she had good intentions, she was smitten with *tzara'at* and had to sit outside the camps.

The Torah narrates what transpired (*Bamidbar* 12:1; *Rashi*). Miriam confronted Aharon, demanding to know why Moshe had divorced Tzipporah, the most beautiful of women, who possessed the most noble character (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shmuel* II, 157). If we say it was because of the honor of the *Shechinah*, her rejoinder was that Hashem spoke to Aharon and herself, as well, yet they remained married to their spouses (*Bamidbar* 12:2). Miriam spoke on behalf of her sister-in-law, Tzipporah, as well as all of Am Yisrael. A king or prince of a nation sets a personal example for everyone to follow. Miriam was afraid that if Moshe remained separated from his wife, the nation would take a lesson from him, divorcing their wives, as well. Miriam knew that the Torah does not want couples to divorce wantonly (see *Gittin* 90b). On the contrary, Hashem desires peace and harmony between couples (see *Makkot* 11a). Therefore, she turned to her brother, Aharon, who loved peace and pursued it (*Avot* 1:12), asking him to explain Moshe's actions.

Miriam's words rang with righteousness. She was concerned with

the welfare of the nation. Nevertheless, she was punished. She should have confronted Moshe directly, speaking to him personally, and not included Aharon in her thoughts. Unburdening herself before Aharon sparked an indictment against her in Heaven, resulting in her being afflicted with *tzara'at*.

A statement may be the unadulterated truth, but if it contains an element of negativity, it may not be related. If a narrative is not the truth, relating it is a much more severe offense, called *motzi shem ra* – character defamation (*Chofetz Chaim* 1:1). If Miriam, who meant well, and only told over the unvarnished truth, was punished so acutely, having to sit in isolation for seven days, all the more so will one who speaks untrue words of degradation, with no purpose whatsoever, be harshly punished.

If someone has a grievance toward his friend, he should confront him directly. Speaking behind his back will only trigger words of *lashon hara*. So severe is this sin that Chazal instruct against excessively praising someone, for these words can result in derogatory speech (*Bava Batra* 164b). Likewise, one should never laud a person before his enemy, for the listener will quickly find something negative to say about the subject (*Chafetz Chaim* 9:1).

After the Mishkan was erected, Hashem commanded Moshe to distance all of those stricken with *tzara'at* on account of *lashon hara*. This demonstrated to Bnei Yisrael that the *Shechinah* cannot tolerate those who spark feuds by speaking *lashon hara*. In order to ensure the *kedushah* of the camp and that Hashem's *Shechinah* would rest upon the Ohel Moed, the entire nation had to be clean of this severe sin. The name **נשא** hints to **שנאה** signifying the hatred we must have toward anything that hinders our Avodat Hashem and our relationships with our fellow Jews. The sin of *lashon hara* is included in this injunction, for it separates a person from his friends and from Hashem.

Parashat *Naso* specifies the details of the *korbanot* of every *Nasi*. Although they each brought the exact same offering, the Torah repeats each one, describing it separately. This signifies the importance of Am Yisrael, and each *shevet* individually, in the eyes of Hashem. Since we are so beloved by Hashem, He cannot tolerate someone speaking negatively about His children. One who does so is required to sit outside the camp, in order not to defile that camp of which Hashem is an integral part.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ At the time of *Matan Torah*, all who were sick became healed. How could there be anyone afflicted with *tzara'at* among the nation in their second year in the Wilderness? Because *lashon hara* was rampant, there were people who contracted this disease as a punishment. In order to demonstrate the severity of *lashon hara*, these people were compelled to sit in isolation, outside all three camps.
- ◆ Miriam was stricken with *tzara'at*, even though she spoke about Moshe with good intentions. She understood that Moshe was an example for the nation. Divorcing his wife might cause others to do likewise. In spite of her good intentions, she was smitten with *tzara'at*, for she should have taken Moshe aside to rebuke him, instead of speaking to Aharon.
- ◆ If Miriam, who meant well and spoke the truth, was punished so severely, all the more so will retribution be brought upon one who speaks untruths about his fellow man.
- ◆ The Torah, usually sparing with words, describes the *korbanot* of each *shevet* at length, even though each *Nasi* offered the exact same *korban*. This demonstrates just how beloved we are to Hashem. Therefore, the *korbanot* are described at length. Similarly, because Hashem loves us so much, He cannot tolerate *lashon hara* and severely punishes those who speak ill of His children.



Becoming a Nazir – Atoning for Arrogance

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: A man or woman who shall dissociate himself by taking a Nazirite vow of abstinence for the sake of Hashem; 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”

(Bamidbar 6:1-3)

The passage concerning the *nazir* is juxtaposed to the passage of the *sotah*. Rashi explains that this teaches that a person who saw a *sotah* in her disgrace should accept upon himself to abstain from wine by becoming a *nazir*, for inebriation can lead to adultery.

The *kedushah* of the *nazir* is very great. This is borne out by the fact that when he ends his period of abstention, he is commanded to bring a sin-offering, even though he did not sin at all. The reason for the offering is that he volunteered to become sanctified above the required amount. He erected extra fences as protection, and these brought him closer and closer to Hashem.

While he was a *nazir*, he exchanged the joy induced by wine with the joy of *divrei Torah*. Through Torah, he was able to reach such an elevated level of bliss that he no longer had a need for the soothing qualities of alcoholic beverages. However, once he has ended his days of *nezirut*, the Torah no longer provides him with the

full dosage of joy needed to serve Hashem. He needs the strength of wine so that he can enter a state of joy once again. Because this is viewed as a spiritual descent, he must bring a sin-offering, so that he does not, *chas v'shalom*, decline spiritually as a result of ceasing his *nezirut* (see Ramban, *Bamidbar* 6:11).

In light of this, it is difficult to understand Rashi's words. He states that one who sees a *sotah* receiving her punishment should distance himself from alcohol. But a person can become a *nazir* due to the desire to come closer to Hashem, even without the spur of the *sotah*. There were many *nezirim* in our history, for instance, Shimshon Hagibor. They took this status upon themselves even without being impelled by seeing a *sotah*. Hashem had commanded Shimshon's parents to bring him up as a *nazir*.

Unfortunately, nowadays, when a person hears about a disloyal wife who has had relations with a strange man, instead of decrying this state of affairs, weeping for the disgrace of Am Yisrael, the incident evokes no response at all. Our hearts are so hardened to any sensitivity that instead of feeling sympathy for the man whose wife betrayed him, and the suffering of the *Shechinah* which is driven out of their home, people laugh and make light of the whole situation.

A far cry from this sorry state is the reaction of the Torah. One who observes a *sotah* in her disgrace must afflict himself by abstaining from wine. This small measure of pain will cause him to consider Hashem's suffering at the abomination taking place among His holy nation.

Abstaining from wine also prevents a person from becoming conceited, averting any feelings of superiority he may have over the suspected woman. Had she possessed a measure of fear of Heaven, she would have desisted from such deeds.

There is a well-known story regarding a *sotah* whose husband suspected her of illicit relations. When he expressed his desire to bring her before the Kohen, she switched places with her sister, who resembled her, and sent her in her stead, to drink the *sotah* waters. As her sister was clear of all sin, the waters had no negative effect on her. When the sisters met once again, they kissed each other. This turned out to be the kiss of death, for the waters entered the sinful woman's innards, killing her instantly.

This *sotah* did not have an ounce of *yirat Shamayim*. Had she feared Hashem in the slightest, she would have accepted the atonement offered by the *sotah* waters. By sending her sister in her stead, she added iniquity to her already sorrowful state.

One who observes the *sotah* in her disgrace is enjoined to become a *nazir* for another reason. He might feel pride at not being on the low level to which this woman has stooped. Why, then, should he feel anguish at her plight? However, he himself might have rebelled against Hashem or one of his fellow Jews. Where, then, is there room for conceit? Therefore, one who witnessed her disgrace is enjoined to distance himself from wine, which could make him feel complacent in his Avodat Hashem. Abstention sanctifies a person, distancing himself from the abominable. Wine can bring a person to immorality; abstaining from it is a good way to keep on the straight and narrow.

The Gemara (*Nazir* 4b) states, in the name of Shimon Hatzaddik: Only once did I partake of the offering of an impure *nazir*. A most handsome man from the South approached me. His hair was thick and curly. I asked him why he desired to destroy it by cutting it all off (at the end of the *nezirut* period). He explained, "I was a shepherd for my father's flocks. Once, while drawing water for the sheep, I noticed my reflection. I felt overwhelmed by my *Yetzer Hara*,

which wanted to drive me out of this world. I responded, ‘Fool! Why are you so proud of a world which is not yours?! Your end is nothing but a pile of worms.’ I decided then and there that I would consecrate my hair to Heaven.” I kissed the man on his head and told him, “May there be more *nezirim* like you among Bnei Yisrael. About people like you the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 6:2) states: ‘A man or woman who shall dissociate himself by taking a Nazirite vow of abstinence for the sake of Hashem.’”

What did Shimon Hatzaddik find so unique about this *nazir*, warranting that he kissed him?

The main reason for a person to become a *nazir* is to subdue his *Yetzer Hara* through abstaining from physicality. When this *nazir* felt his *Yetzer Hara* get the better of him, attempting to cause him to sin, he took upon himself the ritual of *nezirut*. But after a time, he felt that this condition itself would cause him to become arrogant. He therefore purposely defiled himself, rendering himself ordinary once again. He then brought a sin-offering and started the process from the beginning.

This teaches us an important principle. Precisely when a person seeks to sanctify himself, coming closer to his Creator, the *Yetzer Hara* creeps into his heart and injects feelings of conceit. He makes this person feel as though he is greater in *middot* and *yirat Shamayim* than well-known tzaddikim. When a penitent has the impression that he has attained perfection, he should go to a tzaddik, who will enlighten him as to what he still needs to work on.

True *nezirim* know when to practice abstinence in order to protect themselves from immorality and the like, and when to cease their *nezirut* due to feelings of haughtiness, which can be compared to acts of immorality.

In Summary

- ◆ Rashi explains the connection between the parashah describing the *sotah* and the parashah of the *nazir* in the following manner. One who witnesses a *sotah* in her disgrace should abstain from wine, which has the potential to cause immoral behavior.
- ◆ The *nezirut* period elevates the *nazir*. Therefore, when it ends, he must bring a sin-offering, in order to prevent his spiritual decline.
- ◆ One can become a *nazir* in order to elevate himself in *kedushah*. Why does Rashi make *nezirut* depend upon seeing a *sotah* in her disgrace?
- ◆ The Torah commands one who witnessed the *sotah's* punishment to abstain from wine in order to bring him to participate in the pain of the *Shechinah* over the abomination which had occurred.
- ◆ Furthermore, one who observes a *sotah* in her degradation might have become conceited, feeling that he would never stoop as low as she did. For this reason, the Torah commands him to abstain from wine. This will remove all thoughts of pride from his heart.
- ◆ Shimon Hatzaddik kissed the *nazir* who defiled himself, thereby nullifying his *nezirut*. He proclaimed, “May there be more like you in Yisrael.” A *nazir* may feel a sense of condescension toward other people. Since the main aspect of *nezirut* is submission and self-negation, one is obligated to terminate his *nezirut* so that the losses do not outweigh the gains.



The Berachah of Peace

“May Hashem lift His countenance to you and establish peace for you”

(Bamidbar 6:26)

Hashem told Moshe to tell Aharon and his sons the *berachah* with which they should bless Am Yisrael. The wording of the pasuk is (*Bamidbar 6:23*), “So shall you bless the Children of Israel, say to them.” Rashi explains, in the name of the commentaries, that the word אמור (say) is written in full, to imply that they should not bless them in haste and distraction, but rather, with concentration and a complete heart.

The Midrash (see *Bamidbar Rabbah 11:5*) expounds that the sons of Aharon included many blessings in this *berachah*. They mentioned that Hashem should bless the possessions of the Jewish people and protect them from highwaymen and bandits. Hashem is the only One Who can bestow a gift upon a person and also protect it for him. Thus, He is the only One Who grants complete gifts. The Kohanim further blessed the nation that Hashem should shine His face upon them, granting them favor. He should overcome His anger and not punish them immediately. Our *Chachamim* add (see *Uktzin 3:12*; see *Bamidbar Rabbah 11:7*) that the greatest blessing that Hashem conferred upon His sons is the gift of peace, one of the pillars upon which the entire world stands. Hashem’s Name is peace, and His signature is peace.

The Torah itself was granted to Bnei Yisrael only after they became unified, as the pasuk (*Shemot 19:2*) states, “And Yisrael encamped there, opposite the mountain.” The word *encamped* is written in its singular form, to indicate that they rested “as one man

with one heart,” in mutual harmony (*Mechilta*). In lieu of the special significance of peace among the nation, even after the *churban*, the Kohanim continue blessing Am Yisrael daily (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim* 879; *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 128:44). This blessing contains a prayer that Hashem should continue spreading His peace upon us. Similarly, it is a Jewish custom to bless one’s household every Shabbat Eve with this blessing (see *Yosef Ometz* 79). This gives us an understanding of the greatness of this *berachah*, whose major feature is peace and harmony.

True peace is not a superficial matter. It is a deep-seated feeling of responsibility and love toward one’s fellow man, being concerned with him and caring about him. This is the case even when his friend is miles apart and cannot reciprocate. Chazal state (*Pesikta Derech Eretz* 31; see *Divrei Hayamim* I, 22:9) that Shlomo Hamelech was called by this name as an allusion to the peace which reigned in his time. The world שלמה is similar to שלום (peace). They go so far as to say (*Tanchuma, Acharei Mot* 1) that in the days of Shlomo, there was blessing even in the money. Because the people lived in such absolute harmony, they had no qualms about leaving their money outdoors, for no one would imagine stealing from his fellow man. The level of peace at that time reached such a pinnacle that their coins were regarded as stones in the street (see *Melachim* I, 10:27). Just as stones are found in abundance, and no one is afraid of anyone stealing them, so too, did no one fear that others would desire his money. They therefore left it abandoned outside and were not worried over it in the least.

The Torah (*Vayikra* 19:18) commands us, “You shall love your fellow as yourself.” Through mutual love, peace is increased in the world. Since peace is one of the principle pillars of the world (*Avot* 1:17), love for one’s fellow man adds stability to the world. The

following narrative regarding King Achav will illustrate just how beloved is the quality of peace before Hashem.

Chazal (*Sanhedrin* 102b) explain that the name of Achav is a combination of the words אב-אח (brother-father). The following description elucidates the meaning of this unusual name. Achav was a tremendous idolater. There was not one furrow in the field that he left empty of *avodah zarah*. Whatever was valuable was immediately commissioned for the service of idolatry. Chazal (*Megillah* 11a) state that Achav ruled the entire world. How can we understand that grandeur was granted to this man who had written on the doors in Shomron: “Achav has no portion with Hashem?” Additionally, his soldiers always returned from battle unharmed. This is mind-boggling. This atheist should have been dealt doom and failure, yet instead, he ruled over the entire world, and his soldiers were always successful in battle.

Chazal tell us (See *Yalkut Shimoni, Melachim I, 207*) that Achav was married to Izevel, daughter of the king of Tyre. She was notorious for her wickedness and hatred of the Torah and its scholars, *rachmana litzlan*. Achav respected his wife, as she was of noble lineage. He therefore obeyed her requests and executed her evil designs. He heeded her command to kill all of the prophets of the generation. Only one hundred prophets were spared, whom the *Navi* Ovadiah managed to hide in a cave (*Melachim I, 18:4*).

Achav’s soldiers were well aware of these hidden prophets, sustained by the king’s kitchen (*Devarim Rabbah* 5:9). But they never revealed this to the king. In this way, the prophets stayed alive. Because Achav’s men were punctilious regarding *shemirat halashon*, never speaking negatively about anyone, they merited special protection and were always victorious in battle.

Now we might understand the meaning of Achav’s name. On the one hand, he trained his men to act in a brotherly fashion, being

careful not to speak *lashon hara*, but on the other hand, he was at odds with his Heavenly Father, constantly serving foreign gods. The fact that they were victorious in battle teaches us that Hashem is willing to forego His own honor, but not the honor of His sons. Although Achav was a terrible sinner, his vigilance against *lashon hara* granted him unlimited authority and security for his soldiers. His name אב-חא (father-brother) indicates that he was far from his Father in Heaven, but trained his men to be brotherly toward one another.

The Gemara (*Yerushalmi, Pe'ah* 8:6) relates the following incident. A rabbi returned home one day, and asked his wife whether there had been visitors to their home. She answered in the affirmative. He then asked if they had left any message, to which she replied, "They blessed you that Hashem should shield you." When the rabbi heard that, he expressed displeasure. On a different occasion, the rabbi came home, and once again asked his wife whether they had had visitors. When she answered in the affirmative, he once again asked if they had left a message. She told him, "This time, they didn't bless you at all. On the contrary, they cursed you and spoke in a defaming way." When the rabbi heard this, he breathed a sigh of relief, and said, "Baruch Hashem."

Ba'alei mussar (see *Zichron Moshe* 43) try to unravel the tangles of this story. Why was the Rav elated when told that the visitors had cursed him, yet unhappy at the blessing? They resolve the issue with the following. The rabbi desired to reach the highest level of *tzedakah* and love toward his fellow Jew. Often, one does a favor for a fellow Jew in the hope of receiving something in return, or at least hearing words of gratitude and praise. When he has no hope of receiving such recompense, he refrains from doing good deeds for his fellow man. For this reason, the rabbi was happy to hear the curses, for this meant that the hospitality which had been offered

to them was genuine, without any expectation of remuneration. Loving a fellow Jew simply for the reason that this is the Torah's command is the highest form of brotherliness.

Giving for giving's sake is the greatest form of loving one's fellow man. This is the reason why burying the dead is considered a true *chessed* (*Rashi, Bereishit 47:29*; see *Tanchuma, Vayechi 3*). Those who are involved in burial do so for the sake of the mitzvah, without any thought of compensation. The deceased has already gone; he will never be able to pay back for this service.

The usage of the word "fellow" in the injunction to love one's fellow Jew as oneself, strikes me as odd. Why doesn't the pasuk state, "Love your friend as yourself"? The word רֵעַ (fellow) can also be read רַע (bad). One is enjoined to love his fellow Jew even when his friend is nasty toward him, not only when he shows him love and friendliness.

What, in essence, is unity, and what is demanded of us to maintain it? There is a story about Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, the disciple of the Vilna Gaon. He was once informed that one of his students had passed away. When he received the sad news, he wanted to escort him on his final journey, and ask him for forgiveness if there were any times that he had not explained the Gemara precisely. When Rabbi Chaim arrived at the funeral, he stood before the casket, prepared to ask his forgiveness. Imagine his surprise to find his student alive! The student explained that he owed money to a friend. Since he had not yet paid up, he was denied access to Gan Eden. He asked his mentor to agree to pay on his behalf, in order that he could rest in peace.

This episode teaches that unity is not a matter of everyone sharing everything with no measure of privacy. Whoever borrows an item is obligated to return it. Our Sages are very strict regarding

using others' property without permission. One who uses his friend's item without obtaining permission, assuming his friend allows him to use it, is considered a thief (*Bava Metzia* 22a). Taking an item in this manner, even if one is certain that his friend would agree, is similar to stealing (*Shach* 358). How careful we must be with other people's possessions! Chazal (*Avot* 2:12) enjoin us, "Let your fellow's money be as dear to you as your own." In spite of the harmony and mutual responsibility which should be prevalent among our nation, each individual has his own private domain, which should be respected by others. One who does not respect his friend's privacy is an out-and-out thief.

I always tell myself that wherever I find myself, and whichever situation I am in, is preordained to teach me a lesson. Many highways throughout the world demand a toll in order to ride them. Each highway is divided into lanes. Drivers must pay according to the number of roads that they travel. I was once traveling on such a highway in New Jersey with my companion, Rabbi Moshe Mirali. After a few kilometers of traveling, we were stuck in a traffic jam. We suddenly heard loud shouting and found out that a man was short ten cents for the traffic toll. He was denied access to the highway, causing a backup. When I discovered the cause of the ruckus, I asked Rabbi Mirali to go over to the man and give him ten cents so that we could continue driving. All the cars were backed up for want of ten cents!

This incident gave me pause to think. In this world, we are constantly traveling on a highway, in the direction of the World to Come. We have to pay our way, by means of mitzvot and good deeds. The Torah contains 613 mitzvot, many of which are impossible for each individual to perform. For example, the mitzvah of divorce is one which no one wishes upon himself. How, then can the Torah command us to fulfill all of its mitzvot? This is exactly why

the Torah emphasizes the concept of unity so strongly. Even when one individual does not perform a specific mitzvah for one reason or another, but another Jew does perform it, then, by means of extension, he can be considered to have done it. Mutual responsibility allows the fulfillment of mitzvot by one Jew to be considered as it had been performed by others. One who gives *tzedakah* in Lyon, for example, can very likely save the life of a fellow Jew in faraway Australia.

After 120 years, we will arrive at the World of Truth. Hakadosh Baruch Hu will ask us for a detailed report of all our deeds in this world. How great will be our humiliation if we will be missing a slight amount of merits, denying us access to Gan Eden! The command to be unified with our fellow man prevents this situation. We can each influence our fellow positively. But when Am Yisrael are not united, they are incapable of influencing each other by means of their mitzvot. How, then, can they expect to face the Heavenly Tribunal?!

The daily blessing of the Kohanim is a constant reminder to Bnei Yisrael of their mutual accountability (*Bamidbar* 6:25-27). It ends with the blessing of peace, for peace is pivotal.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ The word אמור (say) is used in its full form when describing to Moshe how the Kohanim should bless the nation. This word teaches that they must bless the people with full intention, not mere lip service.
- ◆ The main aspect of the blessing of the Kohanim is the blessing of peace. Therefore, even after the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed, they continue blessing us with this blessing. Parents, likewise, have the custom to bless their children with this *berachah*.
- ◆ The name Shlomo derives from the word *shalom* (peace). It is a hint to the tranquility which reigned during his time. People were not afraid to

leave their possessions out in public, for no one suspected his fellow man of touching what was not his. In light of the peace that rested among the populace, their holdings increased. They were so wealthy that coins were considered stones in the street. No one had reason to envy his friend's lot.

- ◆ Achav, an avowed sinner, ruled over the entire world, and his men returned safely from battle. How can we understand this? They received this great protection due to their strict adherence to the laws regarding *lashon hara*. They never revealed to Achav that the one hundred prophets were hiding in a cave. The name Achav is a combination of the words אב-אח (brother-father). He trained his men to be brotherly to one another, but he was distant from his Heavenly Father.
- ◆ The greatest level of giving is when one gives without any thought of remuneration. A prime example is burying the dead, termed “true *chesed*.” Therefore, the Torah uses the word אָהַב in the command to love one's fellow man. This word can also be read אָהַב. Even when one's fellow Jew does not behave in a brotherly fashion, he should still love him.
- ◆ Many of the 613 mitzvot cannot be fulfilled by every single Jew. Therefore, Hashem enjoins us to be united with one another and mutually accountable. Our combined efforts will enable us to fulfill all the precepts of the Torah.



Sacrifice in Serving Hashem

“The leaders of Israel, the heads of their fathers’ household, brought offerings; they were the leaders of the tribes, they were those who stand at the countings. They brought their offering before Hashem; six covered wagons and twelve oxen – a wagon for each two leaders and an ox for each – and they brought them before the Tabernacle”

(Bamidbar 7:2-3)

On the day that Moshe finished erecting the Mishkan, he anointed and sanctified it and its utensils. Moshe also anointed the Mizbeach and its utensils. The Torah details the method of the inauguration of the Mishkan. The *Nesi'im* offered sacrifices of their own accord, without being commanded. They were led to do so out of love for Hashem. Their ecstasy at having the *Shechinah* reside among them inspired them to volunteer an offering of their own volition.

Everything which is recorded in the Torah is for the benefit of future generations. Incidents which are not relevant to future generations are not mentioned. The Mishkan was temporary, used only during the years in the Wilderness. Why, then, do we find that the Torah describes the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im* at length?

The Torah is succinct. Yet it goes into detail describing accounts that have far-reaching effects. For example, the Torah describes the lives of our Avot in great detail. This is in order to teach us good character traits, the foundation for Torah study. I can attest to the fact that every year, when we read the parshiyot dealing with our Avot, I become impressed anew at their greatness, which is above

our level of understanding. As I plumb the depths of their deeds, something changes inside me, until I feel I am no longer the same David Chananya of a year ago. Year after year, I merit uncovering new secrets in their deeds, which teach me wisdom and *mussar* and help me hone my own deeds.

While it is clear why the Torah detailed the deeds of our forefathers, it is difficult to comprehend why the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im* are recorded at length. It would seem that the Torah wants to teach us just how great their deeds were. Although the *Nesi'im* were not commanded to bring sacrifices, a spirit of munificence inspired them. With the desire to sanctify Hashem's Name, they offered a generous donation of offerings on the Altar.

Man must sacrifice what is his for the sake of Hashem, without being asked, and with no expectations of recompense. Just as the Mizbeach is the place where sacrifices were offered, a person must make himself into an altar for the *Shechinah*, offering himself for the will of Hashem and the sake of His Torah.

Many mistakenly believe that *mesirut nefesh* means giving up one's life for *kiddush Hashem*. True *mesirut nefesh* requires living for the sake of *kiddush Hashem*. While only a select few merit to sanctify Hashem's Name in their death, many are capable of sanctifying it with their lives. This is done by sanctifying one's thoughts, speech, and general behavior. Those who observe a person doing this will also be influenced to live a life of teshuvah and closeness to Hashem.

The Torah (*Shemot* 25:8) states, "They shall make a Sanctuary for Me, so that I may dwell among them." Chazal (see *Nefesh Hachaim* 1:4) expound that the phrase *among them* is used, and not *in it*. Every person is enjoined to make himself into a fitting vessel to contain the *Shechinah*. How? By making himself into a Mizbeach.

When he sacrifices his personal desires for those of Hashem, he indicates that he wishes to be a fitting vessel for the *Shechinah*. In this merit, he becomes one.

Chazal (*Yevamot* 61a) declare, “You are called Man, but the nations of the world are not called Man.” The letters of the word אַתָּה (you) can be transposed to spell אמת (truth). Thus, Chazal’s statement can be interpreted in the following way: “The truth that is within you, i.e., the Torah, is what fashions you into Man, who was created in the image of Hashem” (*Berachot* 5b). Only the Jewish nation possesses the Torah. The gentiles might have a degree of wisdom, but one should never believe that they contain a level of Torah (*Eichah Rabbah* 2:13). Torah demands a level of *mesirut nefesh* alien to the gentiles. They are so stooped in their physical pleasures that they are not prepared to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the Torah.

Indeed, when Hashem wished to bequeath the Torah to the nations, He offered it to each nation individually. As soon as they heard of the stringencies and efforts involved in a Torah life, they hurried to decline. They simply did not have the wherewithal to sacrifice their lives for its sake. In contrast, Am Yisrael hastened to proclaim, “*Na’aseh v’nishma!*” (*Shemot* 24:7; see *Shabbat* 88a). This statement expressed their innate yearning to sacrifice their very lives for the sake of the Torah.

The Torah focuses on the subject of the inauguration of the Mizbeach, as it was a primary vessel in the Mishkan. The Mizbeach represents the inner essence of man, the self-sacrifice demanded in Avodat Hashem. Outer trappings are liable to trap us in the net of externality. One should place his focus on the interior, as Avot (4:20) states, “Do not look at the vessel but what is in it.” Of course, “clothes make the man.” Respectable outer appearance is commended in Judaism. But when the inside is rotten, there is no

point in good looks. The Torah describes the inauguration of the Mizbeach in detail, in order to emphasize the real place of focus – on man’s inner essence, for from there his actions come forth.

The generation which witnesses an abundance of assimilation, *rachmana litzlan*, is demonstrating a defect in its inauguration of the Mizbeach and *mesirut nefesh* for the Torah. When a person is not prepared to sacrifice his life for the Torah, since its tenets might clash with his personal interests, he is liable to abandon Torah completely. From there, the path to assimilation and intermarriage is dangerously short. Strengthening one’s *mesirut nefesh* for mitzvot is relevant to every person, at every stage. Woe to the one who claims he has reached old age and can relax a little from the exertions of life, loosening his connection with Torah. These words are nothing but nonsense, rooted in error. I have met many people who, precisely in their golden years, spiraled downward spiritually. They had always been punctilious in mitzvah observance, but they lowered the bar once they reached old age. This laxity during later years can cause a person to lose everything he amassed during his lifetime. It is only to his benefit to keep himself in check, sacrificing himself for the sake of Torah, never slackening in this area. This will avert a humiliating experience after 120 years, when he stands before the Heavenly Court.

Every person should aspire to reach the level of (*Vayikra* 16:1) “When they approached before Hashem, and they died.” His death should be through closeness to Hashem, and not *chalilah*, the opposite.

Chazal inform us (*Megillat Ta’anit* beginning with the words, “The twenty-fifth of Kislev”) that the days of Chanukah, when we remember the *Chanukat Hamishkan*, are celebrated for eight days, corresponding to the eight days in which the Mizbeach was dedicated. This poses a difficulty. Why were eight days needed to

build the Mizbeach; wasn't one day sufficient? The word eight alludes to the eighth day after a baby boy's birth, when a *brit milah* is performed. The letters of the word שמונה (eight) are the same as the letters of the word נשמה (soul). The message is that man who contains a *neshamah* is similar to the Mizbeach. Building oneself demands sacrifice. Much effort must be expended to build up one's character. Constructing one's character is the project of a lifetime. The *Ba'alei mussar* state (*Ohr Yechezkel, Darchei Ha'avodah* 182) that it is easier to learn the entire Shas than to change one negative character trait.

The eight days of Chanukah correspond to the *neshamah* (see *Ner Mitzvah* pg. 22; *Tiferet Shlomo, Mo'adim, Chanukah*). In the days of the wicked Greek empire, the Greeks attempted to defile the pure Jewish soul, but they were unsuccessful. As a token of appreciation to Hashem, Who kept the Jewish spark alive, we light the Chanukah lights for the duration of eight days, which allude to the light of the Torah and the *neshamah*.

Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai differ in their views as to how one should light the Chanukah lights. Beit Shammai claim that one should begin with lighting all of the lights, and decrease one light each subsequent night. Beit Hillel, in contrast, state that one should add another light each night, for we are enjoined to increase in matters of *kedushah* (*Shabbat* 21b). We accept the ruling of Beit Hillel (*Rambam, Chanukah* 4:1). We increase one light each night, concluding the holiday with eight lights on the last night.

The pasuk (*Bamidbar* 7:11) states, "Hashem said to Moshe: One leader each day, one leader each day shall they bring their offering for the dedication of the Altar." The *Nesi'im* could easily have brought all their offerings on the same day. Why did Hashem command them to bring their offerings on separate days? This could be an allusion to the opinion of Beit Hillel, who states that one

should always ascend in his Avodat Hashem. Hashem Himself told the *Nesi'im* not to suffice with bringing the offerings on one day, but rather, add an offering each day. Every day, one is adjured to offer of himself in the service of Hashem. In this manner, he will ascend the mountain of Torah and *yirah*. Adding on to one's service of Hashem accustoms a person to be connected with his Maker. The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim 873*) states, "If you abandon Me for one day, I will abandon you for two." One can never stand still on the ladder of Avodat Hashem. Either he is going up or he is going down.

David Hamelech proclaims (*Tehillim 57:8-9*), "My heart is steadfast, O G-d, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and I will make music. Awake, my soul, awake O lyre and harp, I shall awaken the dawn." Every night, at midnight, a northerly wind would blow on the strings of the harp that hung over David's bed. This would awaken him to another day of Avodat Hashem, which he began with song and praise. One of the commentaries asks a basic question. How could David rely on this northerly wind? Certainly, there were nights when no wind blew. Did he sleep in on those nights, and refrain from praising Hashem? The northerly wind (צפוניית) actually refers to the spirit of purity, hidden (צפונה) in the heart of man. This is what awakens him to serve his Master. When a person wishes to increase his level of Avodat Hashem, he is filled with a spirit of purity, which awakens him to His service.

After reading this account, I endeavored to see if it would hold true for me, as well. One night, after returning home from a very long flight, I went to bed, planning to awaken at 7:00 a.m. in order to deliver a *shiyur* at 8:00, after Shacharit s. Wonder of wonders! In spite of my overwhelming tiredness the night before, I woke up exactly at 7:00. I felt invigorated and went with renewed energy to deliver the *shiyur*. The Gemara (*Yoma 38b*) guarantees: "He who comes to be

purified is assisted.” Whoever desires to ascend in his level of Avodat Hashem is given the boost of a pure spirit, which energizes him in his chosen path.

The sefer *Kedushat Halevi*, written by the holy Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, zy”a, states that the holidays of Pesach, Purim, and Sukkot fall in the middle of the month, when there is a full moon. The holidays of Chanukah and Shavuot fall at the end and at the beginning of the month, when the moon is barely discernable. Why is this so?

The moon reflects Am Yisrael’s position in this world. Its disappearance and reappearance signify that Am Yisrael is above *mazal* (see *Shabbat* 156a). Although the nations of the world attempt to strike us, time after time, Hashem conceals us from them. Even at those times when it seems that our nation has been completely annihilated, as in the Holocaust, the world is quick to discover that we are like the moon, hidden for but a short time, but destined to shine forth in full glory.

Rabbi Lugasi, shlita, explains why the moon is hidden during the festivals of Chanukah and Shavuot. These are holidays when we celebrate receiving the Torah (on Shavuot), and receiving the *neshamah* (on Chanukah) once again. The moon is not full, for there can never be a feeling of fullness in spirituality. Considering this will motivate a person to increase his level of Avodat Hashem.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The Torah is sparing in its wording and writes only that which is necessary for future generations. Why, then, does the Torah expound on the subject of the Mishkan, which was temporary, and, in particular, the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im*? The *Nesi'im* volunteered offerings without being commanded. The Torah records this for all generations to teach us the greatness of an act that demonstrates closeness to Hashem.

- ◆ A person should learn from the act of the *Nesi'im* to sacrifice of himself for Hashem's sake, even if it is not demanded of him. He should do this without thoughts of recompense. Additionally, *mesirut nefesh* does not mean only dying for His sake. It also, and mainly, means to live one's life sanctifying His Name.
- ◆ Chazal state, "You are called Man, and the nations of the world are not called Man." The letters of the word **אתם** (you) can be transposed to spell **אמת** (truth). The Torah, which is the ultimate truth, is what bestows upon us the title Man. One should never believe that the gentiles possess Torah, for they do not have the *middah* of *mesirut nefesh*, which is essential for observing the Torah.
- ◆ The Torah records the inauguration of the Mizbeach in detail, for the Mizbeach depicts the inner essence of a person. This teaches that one's main focus should be on his inner being, which directs how he will act.
- ◆ The festival of Chanukah is celebrated for eight days, corresponding to the eight days when the Mizbeach was erected. The letters of the word **שמנה** are the same as the letters of the word **נשמה**. The Mizbeach corresponds to the *neshamah* of a person. Just as the Mizbeach was not erected in one day but needed time and effort in order to become fitting for the *Shechinah*, so too, does the construction of man's *neshamah* demand much toil.
- ◆ Hashem instructed Moshe to tell the *Nesi'im* to offer one *korban* a day. I thought this might be an allusion to the opinion of Beit Hillel, which states that every day of Chanukah, one should add a light. One is enjoined to increase his Avodat Hashem bit by bit, ascending the ladder of Torah and *yirah* gradually.
- ◆ On the holidays of Shavuot and Chanukah, the moon is hardly seen, whereas on the other holidays, it shines in its full glory. The moon indicates Am Yisrael's position in the world. We are not relegated to *mazal*. Although our enemies attempt to annihilate us, we rise up once again. Shavuot and Chanukah are festivals of the soul, celebrated when the moon is small. In matters of spirituality, one should never consider

himself complete. There is always more to achieve in our Avodat Hashem.



The Connection between Naso and Beha'alotcha

“Take a census of the sons of Gershon, as well, according to their fathers’ house, according to their families”

(Bamidbar 4:22)

“When you kindle the lamps, toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light”

(*ibid.* 8:1-2)

In parashat *Naso*, Hashem commanded Moshe to count the families of Shevet Levi and then to appoint them to their jobs. Shevet Levi was the only tribe denied a portion in Eretz Yisrael, for Hashem is their inheritance (*ibid.* 18:20). In order to compensate them, Hashem elevated them above the rest of the nation by appointing them to do the work in the Mishkan. They were designated to assemble and dismantle the parts of the Mishkan and carry it on their journeys in the Wilderness.

The word נשא means *count*. But it is also related to the word התנשאות, meaning *loftiness*. The word בהעלותך means *when you become elevated*. Aharon was told to ascend the three stairs that led

to the Menorah and then to kindle it (*Menachot* 29a). Let us ponder the words נשא and בהעלותך, for, although they are similar in meaning, there is a subtle difference between them.

There are two levels in Avodat Hashem. The lower level is to ascend in one's service of Hashem. The higher level is to effect a makeover in one's inner self, in order to come closer to Hashem. When one utilizes the means at his disposal in order to serve Hashem, he definitely rises spiritually. But when one expends efforts to serve Hashem above and beyond the tools he was given, he reaches a higher level of closeness to Hashem. Exerting oneself beyond his natural abilities and seeking ways and means of cleaving to Hashem will bring one to a completely different plateau in Avodat Hashem.

Let us use the following example to clarify. A wealthy man buys himself a pair of quality tefillin. He is walking the road of Avodat Hashem. In contrast, a penniless pauper puts together his pennies to purchase a pair of quality tefillin. His act is certainly superior, for he has sacrificed so much for the mitzvah. This is not to detract from the value of the rich man's mitzvah. But the blood, sweat, and toil involved in accomplishing a mitzvah raise it to an entirely new level.

The tribe of Levi rose to a level in Avodat Hashem above the rest of the nation. They were instructed to serve Hashem in the Wilderness without any thought of recompense in the form of a portion in Eretz Yisrael. They were deprived of an inheritance in the Land; still, they accepted the boundaries of their positions as servants of Hashem and did the Avodah in the Mishkan admirably. They exerted themselves to serve Him faithfully, above and beyond their meager means. In contrast, Aharon was given the tools with which to light the Menorah, affording him the opportunity to come close to Hashem. Notwithstanding his elevated stature among the

people, Shevet Levi served in the Mishkan with greater exertion and were therefore considered loftier.

The word נִשָּׂא , then, alludes to exertion beyond what a person is normally capable of. This is in contrast to the word בְּהַעֲלוֹתָךְ, which refers to elevation in service of Hashem through the tools at one's disposal. Every person is required to serve Hashem by means of these tools, i.e., the skills and resources give to him. Nevertheless, a loftier level of serving Hashem is through extra exertion and effort, beyond what is naturally expected. Fortunate is he who merits attaining this level.

A person who accustoms himself to dedicate his abilities for Hashem's sake to the point of self-sacrifice will eventually rise to the heights of Avodat Hashem. He will merit reaching the loftiest levels possible.

Shevet Levi internalized the concept that Hashem is their inheritance. They considered this a responsibility as well as a privilege. They were the only tribe exempt from servitude in Mitzrayim, because they were involved in Torah study. The fact that they spent their days in the House of Study provided them with protection from the yoke of bondage.

The connection between these two parshiyot is the following. A person is obligated to serve Hashem, using the means at his service. But more than that; he must go further than his natural capabilities for the sake of Avodat Hashem. If Shevet Levi, lacking materialism, managed to serve Hashem with *mesirut nefesh*, all the more so must those who have the financial means exert themselves in Avodat Hashem, always aspiring to rise ever higher. Righteous converts obligate us in a similar way. Despite their gentile upbringing, they have come close to Hashem. They thereby obligate us, who were born Jewish, to make the extra effort to reach ever higher.

We find a similarity with the *nazir*. Due to his deep desire to come close to Hashem, he abstains from alcohol and otherwise permissible pleasures (see *Seforno, Bamidbar* 6:2). This teaches a powerful lesson. Even a person who is of unlimited means should limit himself from an overabundance of materialism. One might have the means to allow himself the purchase of expensive items to beautify his mitzvah performance, nevertheless, severing all ties with physicality will spur a person to greater heights in his Avodat Hashem. This will prove a method of coming closer to the core, his spiritual side which is connected to Hashem. Chazal (*Yevamot* 20a) tell us, “Sanctify yourself through that which is permitted to you.” Confining oneself by means of making fences between himself and those things which are legitimately permitted will provide a person with only one direction. He will automatically ascend closer to Hashem.

The Zohar (see 121a, 121b) writes the following on parashat *Naso*, “Fortunate is the person whose sins are not considered sins.” How can a person avoid prosecution due to his sins? By constantly seeking ways and means of rising in Avodat Hashem. If such a person slips at times, Hashem does not deal him the strict hand of justice. He is judged beyond the letter of the law, with compassion.

The *Shelah Hakadosh* states (*Chulin* I, *Derech Hachaim* 29:2), “Fortunate is the one who connects the day with the night.” The *kelippah* gains control with nightfall (see *Zohar* I, 230; *Eitz Hada’at Tov* 21). The reason why one does not recite Tehillim at night is in order not to arouse the *Middat Hadin*, which is liable to tilt the scales against us (*Sha’ar Hamitzvot, Va’etchanan* 43). Our Avot established the Minchah and Ma’ariv prayers as forces of *kedushah* to counteract the impure forces of the night. The *kelippah* begins fading away at midnight (*Eitz Hada’at Tov Bo*). Therefore, it is permissible to say Tehillim from midnight onward (*Kaf Hachaim*

237:9). We find giants of Jewry, throughout the generations, who would arise at midnight to study Torah. David Hamelech proclaimed (*Tehillim* 119:62), “At midnight I arise to thank You.” Since the *kelippah* leaves then, David took advantage of the opportunity to awaken at that time and serve Hashem, thereby increasing his own merits, as well as the merits of the entire nation.

Now we can understand the words of the Zohar, regarding connecting the night with the day. One who arises at midnight to begin his day of Avodat Hashem connects the night with the day. This is a means of increasing his merits. Hashem, in turn, does not consider his sins so severely.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The word נשא literally means *count*. But it can also allude to elevation in Avodat Hashem. There are two methods of serving Hashem, as alluded to in the names נשא and בהעלותך. When a person utilizes the tools he was given to serve Hashem, he is on the proper path, alluded to in בהעלותך. But when he transcends his nature in order to serve Hashem, he is on a completely different plane, indicated by נשא.
- ◆ Parashat *Naso* is dedicated to Shevet Levi, who accepted Hashem as their portion in lieu of a legacy in the Land.
- ◆ The connection between these two parshiyot is that one should serve Hashem by both means. One who earnestly strives to serve Hashem will attain self-sacrifice in his service. Shevet Levi, lacking materialism, ascended in their Avodat Hashem. All the more so should a person gifted with money serve Hashem to the best of his ability.
- ◆ The Zohar explains that one who always aspires to reach higher levels in serving Hashem will be dealt with compassionately by Him, beyond the strict letter of the law.



Gems on Parashat Naso



Chasing Away the Yetzer Hara

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Take a census of the sons of Gershon, as well, according to their fathers’ house, according to their families”

(Bamidbar 4:21-22)

The word נשא (take a census or count) is included in the word שנאה (hatred). And the name גרשון is similar in spelling to word לגרש (to chase away). A person should chase out any form of hatred from his heart. This will give him a boost on the ladder that reaches to Hashem. The Zohar Hakadosh (II, 82b) states that the entire Torah is a book of good advice on how to behave in this world. This pasuk informs us that if we wish to ascend in levels of Torah and *yirah*, we must first chase animosity out of our hearts. Only then, can we aspire to cleave to Hashem.

Someone once insulted the tzaddik, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, zt”l. After he was informed of Rabbi Yisrael’s identity, the man rushed to

his house in shame, begging forgiveness. Rabbi Yisrael replied, “For my part, I forgive you implicitly. But in order to make 100% sure, I would like to do you a favor. Only then can I rest assured that I forgive you with a full heart.”

The way to eradicate enmity from one’s heart is by doing acts of kindness for the person. Giving to another erases all feelings of animosity, replacing them with goodwill and affection. This is alluded to in the Torah. The Kohanim served in the Beit Hamikdash by offering the *korbanot* of Bnei Yisrael to Hashem. On Yom Kippur, the Kohen Gadol would sacrifice his life for the nation by entering the Inner Sanctum to obtain forgiveness for them. The Kohen thereby served Hashem, as well as Bnei Yisrael. If we truly desire to become sanctified like the Kohanim, we must first remove any vestige of hatred from ourselves. We should do deeds of kindness with our fellow man, just as the Kohanim did for Am Yisrael. This will help us love others perfectly, without the shadow of jealousy and other negative traits.

Man’s most powerful enemy lurks inside him. It is his *Yetzer Hara* (see *Chovot Halevavot*, *Yichud Hama’aseh* 5). When the *Yetzer Hara* realizes that a person wishes to ascend in spiritual matters, he stands before him, cooling off his zeal for spirituality. Chasing away the *Yetzer Hara* is the way to reach heights in Avodat Hashem. The words “Take a census of the [heads] of the sons of Gershon” can mean the following. The word “head” is a reference to the Satan. We are enjoined to hate the Satan, the *Yetzer Hara*, to the extent that we eradicate him completely. Moreover, the Satan is called a snake (see *Zohar* II, 262). The only way to kill a snake is by cutting off its head. The Satan must be so despised that we obliterate him, as though we are literally decapitating him.



The Virtue of Shevet Levi

“Take a census of the sons of Gershon, as well, according to their fathers’ house, according to their families”

(Bamidbar 4:22)

Rashi explains (ibid. 1:49) that since Shevet Levi was in a special category, as they served Hashem directly, it was appropriate to count them separately from the rest of the nation. This can be compared to an airplane. Every flight has economy class and first class. Those who travel first class have to pay a higher price, but they receive many more conveniences than the average economy class traveler. In exchange for a more expensive ticket, the first class traveler receives special service.

Similarly, the tribe of Levi was deprived of the support offered by a portion in the Land. They depended upon the people, who provided the gifts of *Kehunah* and *Leviyah*. But they were compensated by being the chosen tribe, counted separately. This signified their significance in Hashem’s eyes.

The Rambam (*Shemittah V’Yovel* 13:13) writes that every person who exerts himself in Torah study is given a status of significance. The word לוי is derived from the word ליווי (accompaniment). The job of Shevet Levi was to escort Hashem in the Beit Hamikdash, so to speak. Together with their musical accompaniment, they served Hashem by serving the Kohanim. I would like to suggest that whoever walks with Hashem by serving Him merits the appellation *ben Levi*, a member of the tribe of Levi, with all of its inherent virtues. He merits, too, Hashem’s escort everywhere.



Attachment to Hashem through Detachment from Physicality

“Take a census of the sons of Gershon, as well, according to their fathers’ house, according to their families”

(Bamidbar 4:22)

“This is the work of the families of the sons of Merari according to all their work in the Tent of Meeting, under the authority of Itamar, son of Aharon the Kohen”

(ibid. vs. 33)

“These are the countings of the Kohatite families, all who work in the Tent of Meeting, whom Moshe and Aharon counted, at the word of Hashem, under the authority of Moshe”

(ibid. vs. 37)

The essence of the sons of Levi, who were chosen to be involved in the Mishkan, is alluded to in their names. This essence is what made them unique above the rest of the nation, granting them the *zechut* to be occupied with the holy vessels.

The name גרשון (Gershon) is related to the word גירושין (divorce). The family of Gershon divorced themselves from all materialistic pleasures, sanctifying themselves for Avodat Hashem. The name קהת (Kehat) is similar to the word קהה (dull). Kehat dulled their personal desires for the sake of Hashem’s will. The name מררי (Merari) is related to the word מרירות (bitterness). Merari

considered all things secular as bitter, in order to protect themselves from being lured after them. This allowed them to immerse themselves completely in Hashem's service.

These names should serve as models for our own behavior in serving Hashem. Whoever truly desires to cleave to Hashem should distance himself from the frivolities of this world. He should reduce his wishes in favor of Hashem's, and associate materialism with bitterness, so that he should not come close to desiring it.

Parashat *Naso* is the longest parashah in the Torah. Perhaps this is because of the messages it imparts. It is read near the holiday of Shavuot in order to teach us important lessons regarding accepting the Torah and serving Hashem to perfection.

David Hamelech was born and passed away on the festival of Shavuot (*Rut Rabbah* 3:2). King David, the sweet singer of Israel (*Shmuel* II, 23:1) is the model servant of Hashem. He personified the three traits of the sons of Levi. David distanced himself from all forms of materialism (as hinted in the name גרשון). The constant chases of his pursuers dulled his desires and need for creature comforts (as hinted in the name קהת). And his lot was bitter due to his constant hardships (as hinted in the name מררי). But David never let his shattered conditions crush his spirit. He took his trials and tribulations and used them as a springboard to reach greater heights in Avodat Hashem. In spite of his afflictions, he proclaimed (*Tehillim* 119:97), "O how I love Your Torah! All day long it is my conversation."



Work in the Mishkan and Toil in Torah

“This is the work of the Gershonite families: to work and to carry”

(Bamidbar 4:24)

Exertion in Torah can be a burden. In order to implement this task successfully, one must make himself like the family of Gershon, in order to chase away those things that waste his time from his ultimate purpose. When a person feels that he wishes to remain at home, relaxing in bed instead of going to the Beit Hamidrash, he should literally chase himself out of his house, carrying his legs to the Beit Hamidrash, where he will bear the burden of the Torah.

The Avodah of the sons of Gershon was to carry the curtains of the Mishkan, the Ohel Moed and its coverings, and the beams of the courtyard. This load was extremely heavy, but they never slackened in their Avodat Hashem, serving Him with diligence and joy. This teaches us that we, too, should carry the burden of the Torah with diligence and joy. Whenever the *Yetzer Hara* attempts to seduce us, we should chase him away and clear the path for attachment to Torah.



The Avodah of Learning Torah

“This is the work of the Gershonite families: to work and to carry. They shall carry the curtains of the Tabernacle and the Tent of Meeting, its cover and the tachash cover that is over it from above. And the screen of the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, the lace-hangings of the Courtyard and the Screen of the entrance of the Tent of Meeting”

(Bamidbar 4:24-25)

In parashat *Naso*, the Torah details the services of each family of Levi. Generally, the Torah is sparing with words. For example, Shabbat, a paramount mitzvah, is mentioned in merely a few pesukim, from which our Sages deduce the halachot of this mitzvah.

Similarly, only the events which contain a message for future generations are recorded in the Torah. The Mishkan was a temporary arrangement which lasted only as long as Bnei Yisrael were in the Desert. Why, then, does the Torah take pains, so to speak, to detail at length the Avodah of Shevet Levi and the job of each family in the Mishkan?

Every place where the *Shechinah* feels welcome is actually a miniature Mishkan. All of the yeshivot, kollelim, Batei Kenesiot, and Batei Midrashot where Torah and tefillah take place, are included in this category. Likewise, one who is engrossed in the Torah is considered a Levi in his Avodah. This, then, is why the Torah details the work of Shevet Levi in the Mishkan. Describing their work at length teaches us just how much Hashem values Torah study.

Whoever learns with dedication and enthusiasm is considered a Levi at work in the Mishkan.

At my son's Bar Mitzvah ceremony, one of the rabbis approached me and said, "What a *galut!* Here we live right near each other, yet we haven't met in two years. It's a good thing there are happy events from time to time. Otherwise, who knows when we'd ever meet!"

I thought that there is a strong message contained in his words. True *galut* is when a person never meets up with his Creator. When a person goes through life without remembering Hashem, he is truly in exile. Therefore, one must set aside fixed times to "meet Hashem" in the Beit Hamidrash. He should reserve a portion of his day when he is detached from his mundane obligations to attach himself to Hashem, by means of the Torah. Just as joyous occasions provide a chance for family and friends to halt their daily routine and be in touch with each other, going to the Beit Hamidrash and learning Torah connects a person with his Creator, reminding him he has a Father in Heaven, Who is supervising and waiting for him to be in touch.

If we internalize these concepts, desiring with all our hearts to learn Torah, we will be considered sanctified like the work of the Levi'im in the Mishkan.



Hashem's Shining Countenance

“May Hashem illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you”

(Bamidbar 6:25)

Hashem shines His face upon Bnei Yisrael with a special light. He has promised us (*Vayikra* 26:12), “I will walk among you; I will be G-d unto you.” He will rest His *Shechinah* among us. Where there is *Shechinah*, there is overt revelation of Hashem's guiding hand (see *Rabbeinu Bachya, Bereishit* 18, Introduction). Even when we are mired in the muck of our sins, He guides us with a shining countenance and testifies (*Vayikra* 16:16) “that [He] dwells with them amid their contamination.” In Eretz Yisrael, especially, we feel Hashem's supervision on a daily basis. Our enemies seek to annihilate us, but Hashem rescues us from their diabolical plots. This is nothing short of the illumination of His countenance of the first degree!

But we also experience concealment of His face. Swine is sold in Eretz Yisrael, and no one protests. The *churban* of the second Beit Hamikdash began when a pig stuck its claws into the walls of Yerushalayim. The entire Land trembled at this open demonstration of defilement of the Holy Land. All the more so should there be an outcry when swine is brought into the country for sale.

The Torah (*Devarim* 31:18) tells us, “But I will surely have concealed My face on that day.” How can we resolve these seemingly conflicting behaviors of Hashem? On the one hand, He hides His face behind the suffering which we endure, and on the other, He shines His face upon us, countenancing our faults.

Let us preface our remarks with explaining why Hashem hides His face when we are in *galut*.

In Tefillat Shacharit (*Vehu Rachum*), we cry out, “Until when will Your might be in captivity?” When Hashem’s strength is imprisoned, so to speak, the *Shechinah* is greatly distressed. It is therefore concealed from us. But there is a way to attain illumination of His countenance. We can uncover the veil which conceals the *Shechinah* by bringing joy to Hashem and glorifying Him. Tehillim states (68:35), “Acknowledge invincible might to G-d.” Hashem’s glory, so to speak, leaves its *galut* and suffering, and Hashem rises above His sorrow, illuminating His countenance toward us. This is the reason that we experience open miracles even in *galut*.

When His might is in the captivity of *galut*, Hashem’s face is concealed. Illumination of His face occurs when we praise Him and glorify His Name. We do this through learning Torah and keeping mitzvot, as the pasuk (ibid. 36) says, “It is He Who grants might and power to the people.” Torah is the true might of our nation.



Lessons from the Kohanim and Levi'im

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to Aharon and his sons, saying: So shall you bless the Children of Israel, saying to them: May Hashem bless you and safeguard you. May Hashem illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you. May Hashem lift His countenance to you and establish peace for you. Let them place My Name upon the Children of Israel, and I shall bless them”

(Bamidbar 6:22-27)

Birkat Kohanim (the Priestly Blessing) contains wonderful secrets.

Before the Kohen ascends to the pulpit in order to bless the congregation, a Levi washes his hands. Why were the Levi'im specifically chosen for this task?

I would like to answer, based on the words of the Rambam (*Hilchot De'ot* 6:1). A person develops according to his environment. If a person lives among men of good character, he will conduct himself in a like fashion. In contrast, one who lives in a neighborhood of self-centered people will behave like them. For this reason, Chazal (*Avot* 1:7) enjoin us, “Distance yourself from a bad neighbor.” The traits of those with whom one rubs shoulders will rub off on him. Therefore, the Midrash (*Tanchuma, Bamidbar* 12) states, “Woe to the rasha and woe to his neighbor.”

Am Yisrael was divided into three camps: *Kehunah*, *Leviyah*, and *Yisrael*. The Kohanim and Levi'im were the best neighbors that Bnei

Yisrael could have wanted. They taught Bnei Yisrael good character. By observing them, Am Yisrael were awakened to behave like them.

A person is naturally drawn to what he sees others do. When a person in the street lifts his eyes heavenward, everyone suddenly looks upward to see what he's looking at. Hashem knows that this is a human trait. Therefore, He made sure to place the Kohanim and Levi'im near the ordinary people, so that they would have a good effect on the nation.

The Kohanim teach us love for our fellow Jew, a trait which should be engraved in our hearts. The Kohanim are not satisfied with praying for themselves. They ascend to the pulpit in order to pray on behalf of the entire nation. The Levi'im, for their part, teach us the *middah* of *chessed*, as portrayed by washing the hands of the Kohanim. Not only that, but they illustrate submission, by subjecting themselves to the Kohanim in serving them. This is in spite of their own intrinsic importance, as the pasuk (*Devarim* 33:10) states, "They shall teach Your ordinances to Yaakov and Your Torah to Yisrael." Through the act of the Levi'im washing the hands of the Kohanim, the message of how a true Torah Jew should behave flows forth to the entire nation.



Yissachar – There is Reward

“On the second day, Netanel son of Zuar offered, the leader of Yissachar. He brought his offering: one silver bowl, its weight one hundred and thirty [shekels]; and one silver basin of seventy shekels in the sacred shekel; both of them filled with fine flour mixed with oil for a meal-offering”

(*Bamidbar* 7:18-19)

We find the wording “he brought his offering” regarding the offering of the leader of Yissachar, and not by that of any other *Nesi'im*. Rashi explains that Netanel ben Zuar, the prince of Yissachar, originated the idea of offering sacrifices to Hashem. The others followed his example. Since it was his idea, he is praised with these words.

The name יששכר can be divided into the words יש שכר (there is reward) (*Tanchuma, Shemot* 3). How did Yissachar merit reward? By constantly thinking about Hashem. His sole desire was to increase His glory. The Torah compares Yissachar to a donkey, as opposed to a horse. For although both are beasts of burden, the horse neighs in discontent when loaded down with a heavy weight, whereas the donkey bears its burden in silence, never protesting.

Yissachar does not complain about the yoke of Torah he carries on his shoulders. On the contrary, he considers this his purpose in this world. He will eventually reap much reward for increasing Hashem’s glory, as will all those who follow in his ways. The Gemara (*Kiddushin* 39b) tells, us, “There is no reward for a mitzvah in this world.” Perhaps we can say that Yissachar “has *s’char* – reward” in

this world by influencing others to sacrifice and dedicate themselves to Hashem's service, as is hinted by the words of the pasuk, "He sacrificed his offering."

There are three groups of servants of Hashem. There are those who study Torah, those who financially support the Torah scholars, and those who encourage the Torah scholars. Each will receive their due reward. But they will also be called to task if they played a lesser role than that which they were capable of. One who merely influenced others to learn when he was able to financially support Torah study, or one who supported its study when he himself could have spent time learning, will be held culpable.



The Nesi'im in Nisan

"The leaders of Israel, the heads of their fathers' household, brought offerings"

(Bamidbar 7:2)

The *Nesi'im* brought their offerings for the Mishkan on each day of Nisan, beginning on Rosh Chodesh and ending on the 12th of the month. Therefore, the *Shelah* states (*Pesachim, Ner Mitzvah* 6), "It is appropriate to read each *Nasi's* offering on the corresponding day." Why, though, do we remember the *Chanukat Hamishkan* and the offerings of the *Nesi'im*, and not the other inaugurations, such as the *Chanukat Hamikdash* in the days of Shlomo Hamelech?

Chazal (*Rosh Hashanah* 11a) teach us, "In Nisan, they were redeemed [from Egypt] and in Nisan, they will be redeemed." The

galut caused a diminution in the glory of the *Shechinah*. When the nation finished erecting the Mishkan, the *Shechinah* descended upon it. We read the section of the *Chanukat Hamishkan* as an indication of our desire for the *Shechinah* to return to us once again. Hashem considers our thoughts as deeds. Reading about the offerings of the *Nesi'im* is therefore considered building the Mishkan. All that is lacking, then, is the *Shechinah* among us.

As long as Amalek endures, the *Shechinah* is incomplete. The pasuk (*Shemot* 17:16) states, “For the hand is on the throne of G-d (י-ה): Hashem maintains a war against Amalek.” In contrast, we read in *Tehillim* (122:4), “The tribes of G-d (י-ה), a testimony for Yisrael.” The tribes of Bnei Yisrael will rectify the damage wrought by Amalek.

This was accomplished in the Wilderness with the erection of the Mishkan (see *Moreh Nevuchim* 1:9). By reading the portion of the inauguration of the Mishkan, we are considered to have built the Mishkan, the counterforce to Amalek. Whoever strikes at Am Yisrael is waging war against Hashem (*Tanchuma, Beshalach* 16). We decry this state of affairs in the Shacharit Prayer (*Vehu Rachum*), “Until when will Your might be in captivity?” We hope that very soon, we will regain the glory of the *Shechinah* in our midst, as it says (*Zechariah* 14:9), “Hashem will be King over all the land; on that day Hashem will be One and His Name will be One.” His Name (י-ה), until then written in its abbreviated form, will finally be complete (י-ה-ו-ה).



Beha'alotcha



When You Kindle the Lamps

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to Aharon and say to him: When you kindle the lamps, toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light”

(Bamidbar 8:1-2)

The word *Beha'alotcha* begins with the letter 'ב to teach us the following lesson: One should never remain stagnant in his level of Avodat Hashem. On the contrary, he should constantly be on the move from point A to point B, or, as hinted to in this pasuk, from point 'א to point 'ב. And from there, he should move further. In Avodat Hashem, one who stands stationary slides downward. In Judaism, there is no such concept as sitting still (see *Shemot Rabbah* 41:7). One must constantly move forward, continuously progressing.

The letter 'ב also alludes to Hashem's House, the House of Study, as Yeshayahu Hanavi proclaims (56:7), “My house (ביתי) will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.” The *gematria* of the letter 'ב is two, for a person is enjoined to learn together with a study partner. Learning with a *chavruta* sharpens one's mind and is

much more productive than studying alone. After a sleep of many years, Choni Hama'agal awoke to find that nobody recognized him, nor did anyone believe he was Choni Hama'agal. He felt an overwhelming feeling of loneliness, and asked to die. Rava declared, regarding him (*Ta'anit* 23a), "Either a companion or death." Shlomo Hamelech says (*Kohelet* 4:9), "Two are better than one."

My teacher, the gaon, Harav Binyamin Zev Kaufman, shlita, asked why Yosef did not ask for a *berachah* for himself from his father, Yaakov, when he brought his sons, Menashe and Ephraim, to be blessed by him. Rav Kaufman answers, based on the Rashbam (*Bereishit* 48:15): The greatest blessing a person can receive is that his children surpass him in Torah and good *middot*. The *berachah* which Yaakov bequeathed to Yosef was that his children should be blessed, and they should multiply like the fish of the sea (see *Bereishit* 48:16). Yosef had no need for a separate blessing. Similarly, we find that Benayahu ben Yehoyada blessed David (*Melachim I*, 1:37) that his son Shlomo should outshine him in greatness and wisdom. The Midrash (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 776) states that there is no greater blessing than this. A father never envies his son's success. On the contrary, he takes pleasure and feels personal pride in it. It is a merit to him that his son progresses from level 'א to level 'ב.

But only one who truly values the worth of Torah can appreciate the spiritual successes of his son. A person who emphasizes materialism will not be satisfied with his son's success in Torah and *yirat Shamayim*.

A wealthy individual once came before me, complaining about his bright and talented son. After hearing one of my lectures in New York, this son left all worldly pursuits, and dedicated himself solely to Torah study. The father became the scorn of the scoffers, who claimed that his son was whiling away his life on nothingness,

rachmana litzlan, instead of developing his father's businesses and continuing in the tradition of material success.

I told this man that it is a crying shame that he doesn't appreciate his son's return to his Source. This, in reality, is the biggest *nachat* a son can give his father. This man was originally of humble means. Hashem had brought him from rags to riches. In addition, his wife had fully recovered from a devastating illness. Where was there room for complaint against his son, who chose to follow the path of Torah and mitzvot? Those far from a Torah lifestyle cannot properly appreciate the fact that their children are greater than they in spiritual matters. But Yosef, one of the cherished tribes of Hashem, saw his sons' ascent as a personal blessing. Therefore, there was no need to ask for a *berachah* for himself.

The word *Beha'alotcha* teaches us another lesson. When a person receives a *chessed* from Hashem or experiences an open miracle, he should not keep the matter to himself. Rather, he is adjured to spread the word, telling others about the wonderful things Hashem has done for him. This will bring them, as well, to recognize Hashem's awesomeness. Likewise, if one studies Torah but does not share its lessons with others, his learning will not remain with him. This is why Rabbi Akiva's disciples died in an epidemic. They did not disseminate the Torah teachings that they had learnt, thereby depriving their fellow students of elevation in Avodat Hashem.

A singer was once asked to perform for an event. The afternoon before the event, he called to inform the organizers that he was laid up with a stiff back, and he wouldn't be able to appear. He asked me for a *berachah* that he recover and make the show. Pained by his plight, I asked my son, Rabbi Refael, to light candles. I prayed for his recovery.

(I specifically asked my son, Rabbi Refael, because I have found, in the past, that just like the Angel Refael, who is appointed to heal

the sick, my son has special healing powers. These were demonstrated in the recovery of the Chief Rabbi of France, Rabbi Yosef Sitruk, shlita. Originally, I had laid the staff of my grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zt"l, over his eyes. He immediately awoke from his coma. He was capable of moving his entire body, save for one leg, which remained paralyzed. After a number of weeks, I returned with my son, Rabbi Refael, and I asked him to place the staff on the paralyzed leg. I hoped that the merit of the greatest tzaddikim of the world, together with the Angel Refael, would come to his salvation. From that time on, Rabbi Sitruk has been able to move his leg as before.)

Afterward, I asked my daughter to take care of some errands. Suddenly, I felt my entire body become extremely heavy, unable to move at all. After about three minutes, it resumed to its former state. A short while afterward, the singer called me up, stating that his back was better, and he was able to perform. When I related to him what had happened to me, he told me that exactly during those few moments, his back had returned to normal. From Heaven, he was shown that Hashem was taking care of him.

When a person experiences an open miracle, he may not remain silent. He is obligated to publicize it, in order to inspire others. If you merited having a positive experience and were elevated by it, share it with others, so that they may merit growing from it, as well. Yitro was awakened to come under the protection of the *Shechinah* in the wake of the miracles done for Bnei Yisrael in the Wilderness. They did not keep these experiences to themselves; they publicized them to the surrounding nations. If not for this, Yitro would never have merited converting. In Avot (5:18), we read that Moshe Rabbeinu was meritorious and brought merit to the public. Therefore, the merit of the public is ascribed to him.

When Bnei Yisrael sinned with the Golden Calf, Hakadosh Baruch Hu told Moshe (*Shemot* 32:7), “Go, descend, for your people has become corrupt.” Chazal explain (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 391), that Hashem told Moshe to step down from his elevated level, for all of his greatness came only in the merit of learning Torah and passing it on to Bnei Yisrael. Once they sinned with the Calf, forfeiting their merit to receive the Torah, he was no longer worthy of remaining at his lofty level. From this we understand the urgency of learning Torah in order to teach it to others. Otherwise, one does not have sufficient merit to grow spiritually. In order to reach the level of *Beha’alotcha* (rising), true and worthy ascent, one must first “descend” to the people, i.e., include others in his novel Torah insights. Only afterward, is it possible to merit rising ever higher in spiritual spheres.

Hashem told Aharon, “When you kindle the lamps.” *Lamps* refer to the mitzvot, as the pasuk in *Mishlei* (6:23) states, “A mitzvah is a lamp.” Hashem incorporated all of the mitzvot in this category, without differentiation. A person should not distinguish between mitzvot, preferring one over the other. All mitzvot are important in Hashem’s eyes. Often, it is the mitzvot that a person tramples and considers insignificant, which are actually superior. For example, a poor man’s penny donated to charity might weigh more on the Heavenly scales than the large contribution of the wealthy magnate. For this small coin was obtained with great toil, in contrast to the streams of money which flow freely from the rich man’s pockets.

Similarly, the Torah (*Devarim* 7:12) tells us, “וְהָיָה עִקֵּב תִּשְׁמָעוּן—This shall be [the reward] when you hearken.” The word עִקֵּב (when) can also mean a heel. This pasuk indicates that one should be especially careful regarding the mitzvot which people normally tread upon, i.e., take lightly (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim* 758). Therefore, Moshe enjoined Bnei Yisrael to be as punctilious with

fulfilling easy mitzvot, just as with difficult ones. In this manner, they would merit the light of the seven lamps of the Menorah. The word seven alludes to the seventy years of man's life. If a person observes all of the mitzvot, without exception, he will merit having their light shine his way to eternity.

The pasuk states, "Aharon did so." Would we suspect Aharon of disobeying Hashem's command? Why does the Torah mention this? I thought of the following explanation. Aharon understood the requirement to regard all mitzvot as important and fulfill them without discrimination. One should perform the seemingly small mitzvot as though they are of great consequence, which they are. A person who comes to pray after a minyan has already been formed may feel superfluous. He might not perceive this mitzvah to be as grandiose as the act of Yosef in fleeing the wiles of Potiphar's wife, escaping her clutches by a hairsbreadth. The words "Aharon did so" teach us that Aharon recognized the lesson in Hashem's words and was scrupulous in doing each and every mitzvah with utmost dedication.

The holy Rabbi Yaakov Abuchatzzeira, zy"l, expounds on this pasuk (*Pituchei Chotam* 250-251) as follows: Hashem commanded Moshe to tell Aharon that when he would light the lamps, he would see a great light rising heavenward. By means of this light, abundance of blessing would rain down on this world. Aharon did not understand this concept. Nevertheless, he fulfilled Hashem's will, constantly lighting the lamps as he was told to. He did this only because Hashem ordered him to.

Aharon employed tremendous willpower to believe that lighting the Menorah in this world brings light to the Upper Worlds, bringing down rays of blessing. Much self-negation and faith were necessary to reach this point. This is why he merited Hashem's promise that

his portion would be greater than that of the rest of the *Nesi'im* (*Rashi, Bamidbar 8:2; see Tanchuma, Beha'alotcha 5*).

I heard an amazing story about Maran HaRav Shach, zt"l. He once walked into the Beit Hamidrash on a Shabbat morning, completely shaken. He asked his disciples if they had an idea of the suffering of Gehinnom. When asked what he meant, he explained. On Friday night, he had sat down with a sefer of the Rambam, prepared to study it. Suddenly, the lights went out, and he couldn't continue his learning. He felt such anguish that he thought this must be the agony of Gehinnom. See how great is the level of the tzaddikim, who constantly strive to grow and ascend in Torah! As soon as they are deprived of this privilege, they are grief-stricken, feeling as though they are experiencing the tortures of Gehinnom.

As we mentioned above, Aharon, too, was pained at not having a part in the offerings of the *Nesi'im* (*Tanchuma, Beha'alotcha 5*). His suffering might be explained in the following way. When the *Nesi'im* brought their offerings, *ruach hakodesh* descended upon them. Aharon HaKohen, who was perpetually in a state of purity and holiness and merited the revelation of the *Shechinah*, was pained at the added level of *kedushah* that might have been his, had he joined the rest of the *Nesi'im* in their *korbanot*. When will our actions reach the level of those of our forefathers?!

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ The word *Beha'alotcha* begins with the letter 'ב. This is to teach us that we must constantly move forward, never remaining rooted to our original spot. The letter 'ב is numerically equivalent to two. It is better to learn with a *chavruta*, since “two are better than one.” Therefore, it is said regarding Choni Hama'agel, “Either a companion or death.”

- ◆ Yosef Hatzaddik was satisfied with the *berachah* that Yaakov conferred on his sons, not asking for a separate blessing for himself. In Yaakov's blessing to his sons, Yosef saw a blessing to himself, as well. There is no greater blessing to a father than the *nachat* at seeing his son outshine him. When a father recognizes the greatness of Torah, he will never envy the success of his son in spiritual matters.
- ◆ The word *Beha'alotcha* hints that one should publicize the miracles which he experiences, in order to sanctify the Name of Hashem. One who studies Torah without the motive of teaching it to others will not meet with success. The disciples of Rabbi Akiva, who did not share their Torah knowledge with their peers, were punished most severely. Similarly, Hashem told Moshe to descend from his glorious state because after *Chet Ha'egel*, the nation was not worthy of learning Torah from him.
- ◆ "When you kindle the lamps" refers to the mitzvot, shining forth in the darkness. Mitzvot, therefore, must be performed without distinguishing between the seemingly greater ones and the smaller ones. One who fulfills the mitzvot in this manner will merit the fulfillment of the end of the pasuk, "Toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light." Seven alludes to the seventy years of man's life. One who performs mitzvot throughout his life will merit having them light up his way to eternity.
- ◆ The words, "Aharon did so" attest to the fact that he understood the underlying message in the Menorah. He was punctilious in the performance of all mitzvot, without differentiating between them.



The Merit of the Public

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to Aharon and say to him: When you kindle the lamps, toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light”

(Bamidbar 8:1-2)

Rashi asks why the passage dealing with the kindling of the Menorah is written next to the passage dealing with the contribution and offerings of the *Nesi'im*. He explains that when Aharon saw the sacrifices of the *Nesi'im*, he was pained, for neither he nor his tribe was included with them in these *korbanot* offered at the inauguration. The Holy One, Blessed is He, said to him, “I swear by your life! Your role is greater than theirs, for you kindle and prepare the lamps.”

When Hashem observed Aharon’s pain at not participating in the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im*, He gave him the honor of lighting the Menorah and told him that his role was greater than theirs. The *Nesi'im* merely brought a one-time offering, whereas Aharon would light the Menorah on a daily basis (see *Tanchuma, Beha'alotcha* 5). Aharon would be the agent for the abundance of blessing upon all of mankind, for by the light of the Menorah, spiritual brilliance would descend upon the world. [See the sefer *Pituchei Chotam* (251), which explains the words “Aharon did so.”]

It is difficult to understand why Aharon felt pained at seeing the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im* at the *Chanukat Hamishkan*. He himself was the Kohen Gadol, responsible for all of the Kohanim in the Mishkan. Moreover, his tribe of Levi camped closest to the Ohel Moed and all of the Avodah of the Mishkan was done by them. His tribe was so

beloved by Hashem that its members were counted from the age of one month, as they were Hashem's army.

Although it is true that the *Nesi'im* brought a one-time offering at the inauguration of the Mishkan, nonetheless, we read about it every year on Chanukah, as well as at the beginning of the month of Nisan. (Ashkenazim read this parashah during the month of Nisan, mentioning the names of the *Nesi'im*.) Aharon saw all this in *ruach hakodesh*. Although it was a one-time event, it is remembered forever, even after the destructions of both Batei Mikdash. Throughout the generations, as Am Yisrael take note of the *Nesi'im* and their *korbanot*, there is a great awakening in *Shamayim*. In the wake of that sanctified scene of each tribe presenting his offering, abundance of blessing and *kedushah* rains down on that *shevet*. The inauguration ceremony, thus, continues before Hashem, bearing fruits for each *shevet* forever.

Aharon therefore was saddened that his tribe was denied this bounty. He was pained by the thought that his tribe was excluded in the Torah's listing of the *Nesi'im* who offered sacrifices at the *Chanukat Hamishkan*. This prevented his tribe from being blessed with *kedushah* from on High, on the exalted days when we mention and praise the day of the *Chanukat Hamizbeach*.

Shevet Levi certainly merited added closeness to Hashem when they were appointed to carry the holy vessels. But after the *churban*, their service was ceased, and with it, their extra closeness to Hashem. Therefore, Aharon requested that at least they should be mentioned together with the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im*. This would effect blessing and abundance from Heaven, as this parashah is read every year.

Chazal (see *Rut Rabbah* 5:6) tell us that had Reuven known that the Torah would record his efforts to rescue Yosef, he would have

exerted himself all the more. This is so that he would be remembered forever in the Torah, which is eternal. We have a tradition (*Zohar* II, 90b, 124a; *Ramban*, Introduction to the Torah) that the Torah is a compilation of the Names of Hashem, by which He created the world, as it says (*Zohar* II, 161a), “He looked into the Torah and created the world.” Thus the parashah of the *Nesi'im* is a compendium of the Names by which the world was created. The *Nesi'im* became partners in the Creation of the world by bringing their sacrifices.

Based on this, we can empathize with Aharon’s sorrow, when his tribe was denied this privilege. Hashem mollified him by granting him the honor of lighting the lamps of the Menorah. This portion is read together with the parashah of the *Nesi'im*, bringing blessing upon Shevet Levi. Just as the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im* have the power to shower physical and spiritual sustenance upon their respective tribes, so too, can the lighting of the Menorah effect blessing on Shevet Levi and all of Am Yisrael.

Hashem guaranteed Aharon that his role was greater than that of the rest of the *Nesi'im*. Aside from the fact that theirs was a one-time offering and kindling the Menorah was a daily service, Aharon received an additional promise. In the days of the second Beit Hamikdash, his descendants, the Chashmonaim, would be the ones to inaugurate the Temple after its defilement by the Greeks. They would offer sacrifices and light the Menorah from the flask of pure olive oil still sealed by the Kohen Gadol (*Ramban*, *Bamidbar* 8:2). The light of the Menorah would ascend higher and higher and draw down abundance of *kedushah* and *berachah* upon the tribe of Levi.

Chazal (*Yoma* 21b) tell us that the *kedushah* of the second Beit Hamikdash did not match that of the first. During the first Beit Hamikdash, the glory of Hashem was evident in the Cloud resting upon it. This was a manifestation of Hashem’s Glory, and the people

literally perceived the *Shechinah*. In contrast, during the second Beit Hamikdash, Hashem's Kingship was concealed. For this reason, Hashem swore to Aharon that although the *Shechinah* would not be revealed in the second Beit Hamikdash, He would perform a miracle with His sons by means of the flask of oil. This proved that Hashem's *berachah* was still with them, even when they could not perceive the *Shechinah*.

This is alluded to in the word *בהעלותך* (*Beha'alotcha*). It begins with the letter 'ב', which has the *gematria* of two. This refers to the second Beit Hamikdash. In the future, a great miracle would be performed for the Chashmonaim, descendants of Aharon HaKohen. They would merit returning to the Beit Hamikdash and purifying it, lighting the Menorah with the flask of pure olive oil. A double miracle would take place at that time. Not only would they find a sealed flask, but the oil would last for eight days, even though naturally it was enough for only one day (*Shabbat* 21b). This is hinted at in the pasuk, "Toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light." It can be read to mean that beyond the "face of the Menorah," i.e., the first day, "shall the seven lamps cast light," for another seven days. Although it would seem that the miracle occurred only the last seven days, we celebrate Chanukah for eight days, because the very fact that they found the flask of pure oil was a miracle in and of itself, enlightening us to Hashem's wondrous ways, for which we thank and praise Him.

Aharon had the *zechut* to light the Menorah and have his sons inaugurate the second Beit Hamikdash in the days of the Chashmonaim. Moreover, the awakening to do teshuvah among the people in the days of the Greeks is attributed to him and his *shevet*. When Am Yisrael witnessed the great miracles which Hashem performed for them, together with the brilliance of the Menorah, they were immediately aroused to return to their Father in Heaven.

They abandoned Greek culture completely. This was in fulfillment of Hashem's promise to Aharon, "Your role is greater than theirs." Since Aharon wished to be remembered in the Torah and be a catalyst to bring spiritual blessing upon his tribe, he merited that and more. His descendants, the Chashmonaim, lit the spark of spirituality in the heart of the nation by kindling the lights when they rededicated the Beit Hamikdash.

Chazal established the reading of the inauguration of the Mishkan and the details of the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im* on all the days of Chanukah. This indicates that the *Nesi'im* were the ones accredited with the *berachah* which came upon Am Yisrael. The *Nesi'im* had the goodness of heart to volunteer offerings on the day of the dedication of the Mizbeach, even though they were not commanded to do so. Because their hearts were stirred to bring pleasure to Hashem, Aharon admired them, and merited receiving reward.

The sefarim state (*Pri Eitz Chaim* 208, *Chanukah U'Purim* 4) that during Chanukah, the *sefirah* of *hod*, which is the eighth *sefirah*, was rectified. This was through the strength of the eight days during which the lights of the Menorah in the Beit Hamikdash miraculously burned. These lights ignited the spark of reconnection between Am Yisrael and their Heavenly Father. The common thread, weaving its way through Chanukah, is that the eighth *sefirah* of *hod*, attributed to Aharon (*Eitz Chaim* 32:6), was reinstated during the eight days of this festival. Similarly, Moshe Rabbeinu, whose *sefirah* is *netzach*, represents Torah, which is eternal. Tehillim (99:6) states, "Moshe and Aharon were among His priests." During the days of the Chashmonaim, Am Yisrael returned to the Torah. In the merit of Moshe and Aharon, the Torah remained with their descendants.

The *Nesi'im*, in bringing their offerings, were the catalysts for this *tikkun* of *sefirat hod* and *sefirat netzach*. They inadvertently caused Aharon to feel anguish, resulting in Hashem's promise to give him

an even greater role. We can learn a tremendous lesson from this. When a person does a mitzvah, he has the ability to affect all those in his environment. When someone is aroused to perform a mitzvah in the wake of his fellow Jew's mitzvah, this mitzvah is attributed to the one who originally performed the good deed. This person thereby receives double reward: One for the mitzvah he himself did, and one for the mitzvah he inspired his fellow man to do. The *Nesi'im* inspired Aharon and were therefore doubly rewarded. Their offerings are mentioned twice a year, in Nisan and on Chanukah. This is besides for the tremendous reward they gained from Am Yisrael's spiritual salvation from the claws of the Greek empire in the times of the Chashmonaim.

Another example of this is Pesach Sheini. When those who were contaminated by a human corpse came before Moshe to seek their verdict, the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 9:6-7) states, "There were men who had been contaminated by a human corpse and could not make the Pesach offering on that day... Those men said to him, 'Why should we be diminished by not offering Hashem's offering in its appointed time among the Children of Israel?'" Moshe did not know how to respond and conferred with Hashem. He instructed him to offer them a second chance to bring the *korban* Pesach. These people, who were saddened at the prospect of being deprived of the opportunity to bring the Pesach offering, effected the revelation of the halachah of Pesach Sheini, which was previously unknown. Aside from the personal *zechut* of meriting bringing the *korban* Pesach with all its inherent qualities, they are the ones who generated *zechut* for all future generations. The lessons of Pesach Sheini will always be ascribed to them.

Had Aharon not felt saddened at the prospect of not being included in the offerings of the *Nesi'im*, he and all future generations would have lost out immeasurably. But because he sought

closeness with Hashem, he attained merit and brought merit to his people. In the same way, those who were impure and thus unable to bring the *korban* Pesach conferred merit on all future generations by revealing the previously unknown halachah of Pesach Sheini.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Aharon was appointed as Kohen Gadol, and his tribe was the army of Hashem. Why was he pained at not offering *korbanot* with the rest of the *Nesi'im*?
- ◆ Aharon realized that this act of the *Nesi'im* would be recorded for posterity, even after the Beit Hamikdash would be destroyed. The Shevatim would receive Heavenly bounty in the merit of this act. In contrast, the tribe of Levi merited extra closeness with Hashem only while the Beit Hamikdash stood. Aharon therefore asked that his tribe should at least be remembered with the others, meriting blessing in the merit of the voluntary offering of the *Nesi'im*.
- ◆ The parashah of the *Nesi'im* is a compilation of Hashem's Names, by which the world was created. By bringing their *korbanot*, the *Nesi'im* literally became partners with Hashem in Creation. This evoked Aharon's envy.
- ◆ The parashah of the *Nesi'im* is recorded together with the parashah concerning the Menorah to console Aharon that by kindling the Menorah, he too could draw blessing upon his tribe.
- ◆ Hashem told Aharon, "Your role is greater than theirs." The *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im* was a one-time event, whereas kindling the Menorah took place daily. Likewise, Hashem hinted to Aharon that his descendants, the Chashmonaim, would light the Menorah from the flask of pure oil, spreading blessing upon the entire tribe of Levi. This is alluded to in the word בהעלותך (*Beha'alotcha*). The letter 'ב' refers to the second Beit Hamikdash, wherein the miracle occurred. The words "toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light" allude to the added seven days that the lights of the Menorah continued to burn.

- ◆ The *sefirah* of *hod* was rectified on Chanukah. This is the eighth *sefirah*, and is attributed to Aharon. His sons, the Chashmonaim, would bring a great light into the world on Chanukah.
- ◆ On Chanukah, too, Am Yisrael returned to the Torah of Moshe, symbol of *sefirat netzach*. They succeeded in rectifying both *sefirot* of *hod* and *netzach*. This *zechut* is ascribed to the *Nesi'im*, whose original deed spurred tremendous arousal. Their double deed brought them double reward. They are therefore mentioned in two separate Torah readings.



The Mystery of the Menorah

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to Aharon and say to him: When you kindle the lamps, toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light”

(Bamidbar 8:1-2)

Rashi explains that Aharon felt great anguish when the *Nesi'im* brought *korbanot* for the inauguration of the Mishkan, yet his tribe of Levi did not. Hashem pacified him by giving him the mitzvah of lighting the Menorah. This was a daily mitzvah, as opposed to the one-time offering of the *Nesi'im*.

However, as Kohen Gadol, Aharon was constantly involved in offering sacrifices. Why was he so aggrieved at his lack of involvement in this one-time offering of the *Nesi'im*?

Aharon exemplified peace and unity. All his life, he was occupied in bringing people closer and establishing harmony between them

(*Avot* 1:12). He knew that the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im* were more than regular offerings. They represented the unity among the Twelve Shevatim. The fact that Shevet Levi did not bring a *korban* resulted in a deficiency that was liable to affect the entire nation. This was the reason for Aharon's distress.

Additionally, Aharon feared that he was being denied participation in the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im* due to his part in the *Chet Ha'egel*, even though his intentions had been good. Hashem, therefore, bestowed upon him the merit of kindling the Menorah. He thereby demonstrated that He felt no anger toward him at all. The fact that the Menorah was fashioned from one piece of gold hinted to Aharon how greatly he was valued on High for his efforts in unifying the nation.

Hashem appeased Aharon with the words, "Your role is greater than theirs." The *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im* was a one-time event, whereas kindling the Menorah was a mitzvah performed daily, constantly transmitting the message of the importance of unity.

The pasuk (*Bamidbar* 8:3) states, "Aharon did so." Rashi explains, "To tell the praise of Aharon, in that he did not deviate." Rabbi Yaakov Abuchatzeira, author of *Pituchei Chotam* (250-251) asks, "What was the great virtue of Aharon? Would we suspect him of deviating from Hashem's command?" He explains: By kindling the Menorah, the Kohen Gadol was drawing blessing upon this world from on High. The praise of Aharon was that although he did not discern this abundance of blessing, he did as Hashem commanded, kindling the Menorah daily.

This *zechut* of bringing down blessing upon the world was the greatest proof that there was no indictment against Aharon for his role in the *Chet Ha'egel*, as his intentions had been *l'shem Shamayim*.

The pasuk states, “Toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light.” The author of *Shiurei Hamitzvah* asks an obvious question: The Menorah was made of one central stem, with three branches on either side. It would have been more accurate to state, “Toward the face of the Menorah shall the six lamps cast light.” I thought of adding the following question: The Menorah alludes to the unity of the nation, and there is nothing that represents this unity more clearly than the Twelve Tribes dwelling peacefully together. Why, then, didn't the Menorah contain twelve branches, corresponding to the Twelve Shevatim?

We might answer both questions together. Each branch that came from the central lamp of the Menorah represented two *shevatim*. Leah gave birth to three sets of *shevatim*, symbolized by three branches on the Menorah. Rachel, for her part, had one set of *shevatim*, warranting one branch on the Menorah. Each of the maidservants, too, bore one pair of *shevatim*, granting each a branch on the Menorah. From Yaakov's four wives, six sets of *shevatim* came forth. But Shevet Levi was in a different category. Aside from being included in the sons of Leah, he had his own portion in the central stem of the Menorah, as well. This, then, was what Hashem was referring to in telling Aharon, “Your role is greater than theirs.”

“Toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light.” Each of the *shevatim* cast light upon one another, influencing each other through the *middah of achdut* that they possessed. Therefore, the central stem, corresponding to Shevet Levi, received from the light of the other *shevatim* and reflected it back to them. In this way, their *achdut* was complete, and they attained perfection.

The word מנורה itself hints to *achdut*. The first and last letters are מ"ה, numerically equivalent to the word אדם. This is a reference to Adam Harishon. The letter ו' represents the sixth day of Creation, when he was created. The letters ו' and ר' form the word נר hinting

to the lamps which were lit in the Mishkan, and alluding to man's *neshamah*, as the pasuk (*Mishlei* 20:27) states, "A man's soul is the lamp of Hashem." The word מנורה thus teaches us the following: Adam Harishon, created on the sixth day, contained all of the *neshamot* of Am Yisrael throughout the generations (see *Emek Hamelech* 5:43). This teaches the paramount importance of *achdut* and brotherliness among Am Yisrael. We are all sourced in the *neshamah* of Adam Harishon.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Aharon was constantly involved in offering sacrifices. Why was he distressed in not having a part in the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im*? Additionally, what is meant by the statement, "Your role is greater than theirs"?
- ◆ Aharon was afraid that the fact that Shevet Levi did not participate in the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im* indicated a deficiency in the unity of the Twelve Shevatim, ultimately resulting in a breach in the *achdut* of Am Yisrael as a whole. Furthermore, he was afraid that lack of inclusion in the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im* indicated Hashem's displeasure for the part he had played in the *Chet Ha'egel*.
- ◆ Aharon merited the singular *zechut* of kindling the Menorah daily. The Menorah, made of one piece of solid gold, depicted *achdut*. Therefore, he was told, "Your role is greater than theirs." The offering of the *korbanot* of the *Nesi'im* was a one-time event, whereas Aharon was granted the merit of kindling the Menorah every day. He understood this to mean, also, that there was no condemnation against him for his part in the *Chet Ha'egel*.
- ◆ "Toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light." Why doesn't the pasuk say "...shall the six lights cast light," since the seventh was the middle stem? Also, why weren't there twelve stems, as the Menorah corresponded to the Twelve Tribes? The explanation is that each branch represented one pair of *shevatim*. Each lamp received light

from the others. The middle stem, corresponding to Shevet Levi, received light from the six branches and reflected its own light back to them.



Diligent Devotion to Hashem

“Aharon did so; toward the face of the Menorah he kindled its lamps, as Hashem had commanded Moshe. And this is the workmanship of the Menorah, beaten out gold, to its base, to its flower, it is beaten out; according to the image that Hashem showed Moshe, so did he make the Menorah”

(Bamidbar 8:3-4)

Hashem instructed Moshe to command Aharon to light the Menorah in the Mishkan. Aharon hastened to do as he was told, as the pasuk testifies, “Aharon did so.” Only afterward does the Torah describe the Menorah. It relates how it was made and how it looked. It seems that it should be the other way round: the description of the Menorah should be written first, and only afterwards the fact that Aharon lit it. Similarly, when a person wants to build himself a new home, the first step he takes is to prepare a blueprint. Only afterward does the contractor construct the home according to its specifications.

With this in mind, perhaps we can elucidate this point in the following way. By the Torah’s report of “Aharon did so,” we are told

that Aharon preceded *na'aseh* to *nishma*, just as Bnei Yisrael did at *Matan Torah*. Their desire to hear Hashem's word was so strong that they were ready to fulfill it even before knowing what it entailed. Similarly, Aharon first demonstrated his desire to fulfill Hashem's command, and only afterward did he learn about the details of the Menorah. Aharon Hakohen bequeathed to us the following message: A Jew must always be prepared to perform Hashem's command. Only afterward, may he ask questions and clarify what exactly it is that Hashem wants from him.

When a person is prepared to fulfill Hashem's commands, his previous questions often resolve themselves, obviating the need to clarify the details. David Hamelech adjures us (*Tehillim* 34:9), "Taste and see that Hashem is good." Merely tasting of the Torah, i.e., fulfilling the mitzvot, gives a good taste. The sweet flavor tempts one to taste more of it, no questions asked. Once a person digests *divrei Torah*, he relishes the thought of more.

At first, mitzvot may seem difficult and hard to comprehend. With time, they become easier to accept. This is the benefit of the force of habit. By accustoming oneself to do mitzvot, he finds them easier to fulfill. Eventually, they become second nature, and one does not feel the need to seek reasons for keeping them.

Perusing the parashah shows us Aharon's alacrity at fulfilling Hashem's word. As soon as he received the order to light the Menorah, his swiftness showed that he accepted Hashem's command. The juxtaposition of the pesukim, "Speak to Aharon and say to him: When you kindle the lamps, toward the face of the Menorah shall the seven lamps cast light," and, "Aharon did so" teach us a luminous lesson. The Menorah was lit with pure olive oil, pressed for illumination. The Kohen used the first drop that came out of the olive (*Rashi, Shemot* 27:20), the most superior oil. This drop represents the highest form of Avodat Hashem, done with

alacrity and self-sacrifice. In all areas of life, a person is enjoined to demonstrate dedication and diligence in his service of Hashem, to the degree that his *neshamah* resembles that first pure drop of olive oil, pressed with alacrity and self-sacrifice for the sake of kindling the Menorah in the Mishkan.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why is the Menorah described only after we are told that Aharon lit it? This is like a builder who builds before being handed the blueprint. The explanation is that Aharon sacrificed himself on the altar of Hashem's command, by preceding *na'aseh* to *nishma*. He demonstrated that he was prepared to do all he was commanded, before even knowing what that was.
- ◆ We should take a lesson from this narrative and be prepared to obey Hashem's word, no questions asked. This willingness will most likely preempt all previous questions one had.
- ◆ The first drop of olive oil denotes alacrity and self-sacrifice in Avodat Hashem. A person is enjoined to be diligent in all mitzvot, prepared to sacrifice himself for them.



Man's Inner Essence

***“And this is the workmanship of the Menorah,
beaten out gold”***

(Bamidbar 8:4)

Rashi writes, in parashat *Terumah* (*Shemot* 25:31), that because Moshe was perplexed by the way in which the Menorah was to be made, the Holy One, Blessed is He, said to him, “Throw the *kikar* of gold into the fire and it will be made by itself.”

In various countries, there are wax museums that have models of famous and important people. Many parks have statues of people modeled from various metals. It is no great feat to take a piece of metal or wax and fashion it into the form of a person. Why, then, did Moshe have such difficulty in fashioning the Menorah?

A statue is a mere form of a person; it does not depict his inner essence. In contrast, the Menorah that Hashem commanded Moshe to fashion was not simply a hunk of gold. Moshe found it difficult to grasp how he could inject the outer form of the Menorah with inner spiritual qualities. Hashem finally told him to cast the gold into the fire, and the Menorah emerged on its own.

The Menorah was imbued with inner essence, as it represented the Torah. It was located at the south of the Mishkan. Chazal (*Bava Batra* 25b) state, “He who wishes to become wise, should go south.” This means that one who wants to ascend in Torah should pray to the south, where the Menorah, referring to the Torah, was located. Torah demands inner content. Bnei Yisrael did not merit receiving the Torah until they were “as one man with one heart” (*Rashi, Shemot* 19:2). Only after they acquired inner perfection, did they merit arriving at Har Sinai. The *luchot* were also infused with

spiritual essence, as the pasuk (*Shemot* 32:16) says that the Ten Commandments were “engraved on the Tablets.”

Just as the Menorah was fashioned on its own, so does man have the power to build himself. By means of the Torah, a person has the ability to conquer his *Yetzer Hara* and perfect his inner self. Chazal (*Kiddushin* 30b) tell us, “I created the *Yetzer Hara*; I created the Torah as its antidote.” Furthermore, “If not for Hashem’s help [in surmounting the *Yetzer Hara*], he would not be able to do it.” Torah is the best ammunition with which to fight the *Yetzer Hara*. Torah provides a person with the means to repair his inner essence, since the Torah is comprised of Hashem’s Names (*Zohar* II, 90b). Casting oneself in the furnace of Torah will result in a perfect structure from within and without, just like the Menorah, which emerged from the flames whole and beautiful.

A person’s inner essence is what defines him. Let us cite a few examples to illustrate:

The second Beit Hamikdash was destroyed on account of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza (*Gittin* 55b). They hated each other deep within their hearts. Aharon, in contrast, was joyous over Moshe’s appointment as leader of the people (*Shemot* 4:14). Therefore, he merited kindling the Menorah, the symbol of pure inner essence.

The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 105b) states that if a Rabbi is beloved by his congregation, it is an indication that he does not sufficiently reprove them. He demonstrates, by his passivity, that their misdeeds do not aggrieve him. This denotes a blemish, and is inappropriate in one who is called a Rabbi.

Yeravam ben Nevat merited ruling over Yisrael because he did not hesitate to rebuke Shlomo Hamelech when he saw the need. He chastised Shlomo for building a royal palace which obstructed the

way of those ascending to Yerushalayim on the festivals (see *Sanhedrin* 101b). Yeravam demanded, “How can you concern yourself with your honor before worrying about the glory of Hashem, by making the way easier for those going up to the Beit Hamikdash?!” Yeravam was eventually punished, because he rebuked Shlomo Hamelech in public. This seems contradictory; at first, he was rewarded for rebuking him, and then he was punished for that same act!

Chazal (ibid.) explain that Yeravam was correct in rebuking Shlomo, but was held accountable for doing so in public. He was led into a *nisayon* that he did not manage to overcome. Yeravam himself eventually obstructed the path of those who desired to ascend to Yerushalayim on the festivals. He brought them, instead, to sin, by serving idols which he placed at strategic intersections. The people challenged him, “How did you dare reprimand Shlomo Hamelech for not paving the road to Yerushalayim, while you obstruct our path by placing idols along the way?! Aren’t you aware of the dictum (*Bava Metzia* 107b), ‘Adorn yourself first, and only after, adorn others’? Obviously, when you reprimanded Shlomo, your intentions were not sincere.”

There are halachot which must be adhered to when reproofing our fellow man. If a person is not perfect in the area in which he wishes to chastise his fellow, he has no right to do so (see *Chafetz Chaim, Lashon Hara* 10:3). One of the laws of giving reproof is that it must be done in a pleasant way, which will be accepted by the listener (*Magen Avraham, Orach Chaim* 156:2). One who is not perfect in the matter at hand, will just be told, “Look who’s talking.”

Once, while I was delivering a *shiur*, a man burst into the Beit Hamidrash and began denigrating me. Immediately, the listeners stood up in order to silence him with shouts and arguments. I left

the room, but they called me back to continue my lecture. I asked my audience, "Why did you humiliate him like that?"

They replied, "On the contrary, we stood up for the glory of the Torah and the Rav's honor."

I answered, "There are ways to reprove others. The best way to reproach another person is pleasantly and with peace of mind, not with antagonism and angry words, as I witnessed here a short while ago." The inner essence of a person is an essential element in the mitzvah of giving rebuke (*Vayikra* 19:17). One must be perfect before chastising others.

The Mishnah in Avot (5:17) testifies that Korach and his followers were not sincere in their dissention with Moshe. Korach's essence was infected with feelings of jealousy and the quest for honor.

The Gemara (*Eiruvin* 65b) states that a person's nature is recognizable by how he behaves when he is angry. When a person becomes enraged, his inner essence rises to the fore, revealing who he really is.

When Shmuel Hanavi was instructed to anoint one of Yishai's sons, Hashem told him to examine each one individually, and He would inform him which one was worthy of royalty. The tall, good-looking sons passed before him. But Hashem refused them, saying their essence was rotten, and they were therefore unfit to rule. Then David, the youngest son, came before Shmuel. He was a ruddy shepherd. Shmuel took one look at him and assumed that he certainly was not fit to be king. He had a red complexion, an indication of his nature to shed blood. The Gemara (*Berachot* 4a) relates that Hashem told Shmuel not to be deceived by David's looks, as it says (*Shmuel* I, 16:17), "Man sees what his eyes behold, but Hashem sees into the heart." Hashem adjured Shmuel to anoint

David. His ruddy complexion denoted the great warrior he would become, defeating his enemies. He would also be involved in halachic rulings regarding the blood of women after birth. Yishai's older sons were rejected for royalty, for their inner essence was found lacking. Conversely, although David did not look the part, he had inner beauty, granting him the necessary qualities of sovereignty.

One who observes how the Rosh Yeshiva of Mir, HaRav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, zt"l, dedicated himself to deliver *shiurim*, even in the midst of his debilitating disease, will be struck by the tremendous love he displayed toward the Torah. We can only imagine how he displayed his love for Torah while he was yet well.

The Menorah symbolizes our task in this world. If we will ignite ourselves with the fire of Torah, we will become a solid piece of pure gold, inside and out.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu could not comprehend how to make the Menorah from one piece of gold. Therefore, Hashem fashioned it for him.
- ◆ What was the difficulty that Moshe encountered in sculpting the Menorah from a piece of gold?
- ◆ Moshe did not have difficulty in understanding how to physically sculpt the gold. What he found daunting was imbuing the Menorah with spirituality. This demanded Hashem's help.
- ◆ The Menorah required inner purity as well as outer beauty, for it represented the Torah, which demands wholeheartedness. Just as one requires Hashem's help, as well as the Torah, to battle the *Yetzer Hara*, Moshe needed Hashem's help in fashioning the Menorah.
- ◆ The second Beit Hamikdash was destroyed on account of a lack of inner harmony between Kamtza and Bar Kamtza. This indicated an overall

deficiency in the area of mitzvot between man and his fellow man.

- ◆ A Rabbi who does not protest an iniquity does not deserve to be called a Rabbi. His apathy indicates a defect in his Avodat Hashem and a fault in his essence.
- ◆ Yeravam ben Nevat merited becoming king because he did not hesitate to rebuke Shlomo Hamelech for not paving the roads for those ascending to the Beit Hamikdash. On the other hand, he lost his kingdom for defaming the ritual of ascending on the festivals. This proved that his previous words were not genuine.
- ◆ Hashem preferred David over his brothers, in spite of their regal appearance. “Man sees what his eyes behold, but Hashem sees into the heart.”



Korban Pesach in the Wilderness

“They made the Pesach-offering in the first [month], on the fourteenth day of the month, in the afternoon, in the Wilderness of Sinai; according to everything that Hashem had commanded Moshe, so the Children of Israel did”

(Bamidbar 9:5)

Hashem commanded Moshe to teach Bnei Yisrael the mitzvot regarding Pesach. Bnei Yisrael conducted themselves as they were commanded. Chazal (*Sifri, Beha'alotcha 9*) tell us an interesting fact. Am Yisrael observed the mitzvah of Pesach only once in the Wilderness, during the first year of their Exodus from Egypt. The

next time they observed this mitzvah was after they entered Eretz Yisrael.

Bnei Yisrael did not observe the mitzvah of Pesach throughout their years in the Wilderness because one of the prerequisites of eating the *korban* Pesach is circumcision. Bnei Yisrael refrained from circumcising their sons all the years in the Wilderness, due to the dangers involved (*Yevamot* 71b). Just as soon as they entered the Land, they reinstated this mitzvah among the nation.

It is well-known that throughout their sojourn in the Desert, countless miracles were performed on behalf of the people. The pillar of cloud smoothed the road before them (*Tanchuma, Bamidbar* 2) and caught the arrows thrown at them (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 233). The pillar of fire lit the darkness. They were fed manna and *selav* directly from heaven. The well of Miriam accompanied them on their travels, quenching their thirst. Their shoes and clothing never wore out (*Devarim* 29:4), and they had no need to relieve themselves of waste products (see *Yoma* 75b). Why, then, didn't Hashem make an additional miracle, that of healing the newly-circumcised, protecting them thereby from the travails of their travels? This would have made it possible to bring the *korban* Pesach while yet in the Wilderness. Furthermore, what is the connection between *brit milah* and *korban* Pesach?

Brit milah sanctifies man's physicality. By means of removing the foreskin, the power of lust is weakened, thereby granting greater holiness to the body. Gentiles, who do not circumcise their offspring, are much more involved in lustful tendencies than those who have a *brit milah* (see *Rabbeinu Bachya, Bereishit* 17:13). The passions of the nations pave their path to purgatory. The essence of *korban* Pesach is creating harmony among the nation. By partaking of the sacrifice according to their families, their hearts became united, fostering unity and peace. This gathering must take

place with *kedushah* and *taharah*, a gathering of unity *l'shem Shamayim*.

Unfortunately, throughout history, we have witnessed nations that signed treaties to be united in creating death and destruction. The earliest case of this is the Generation of the Dispersal. They were united in untying the ropes of connection with Hashem. Therefore, He saw fit to disperse them by confusing their languages.

Now we can understand the connection between the mitzvah of *brit milah* and *korban Pesach*. *Brit milah* signifies purity, by means of removing the layer of *kelippah*, and with it, the power of passion. The *korban Pesach* symbolizes *achdut*. Hashem ordered the males to circumcise themselves before partaking of the Pesach offering, so that they would unite in purity. Since they were prevented from performing the mitzvah of *brit milah* in the Wilderness, they did not observe the mitzvah of *korban Pesach* either.

Hashem did not make a miracle of healing them immediately after their *brit milah*. The purpose of the *korban Pesach* was to instill *achdut* among Am Yisrael. By accepting the words of the spies regarding Eretz Yisrael, Bnei Yisrael fell into the trap of *lashon hara*. They thereby became disunited, for derogatory speech is the antithesis of unity. As long as they were affected with this malady, they had no access to this mitzvah. Only after Bnei Yisrael repented from this sin would they be worthy of observing the mitzvah of Pesach in purity, as it was meant to be kept. *Lashon hara* destroys *achdut*; until it is eradicated, the Pesach offering is lacking in flavor.

Forty years of wandering in the Wilderness were required to atone for their sin. During these years, all those who had accepted the derogatory words about the Land perished. Just as a fetus is formed in forty days, likewise, our nation became a new entity in forty years, prepared to circumcise themselves and able to celebrate the Pesach holiday fittingly.

In Summary

- ◆ Bnei Yisrael observed the mitzvah of Pesach only once during their sojourn in the Wilderness. This was because they were uncircumcised and therefore forbidden from partaking of the Pesach offering. They were afraid to perform *brit milah* due to the dangers of the road. Hashem performed numerous miracles on their behalf; why did He not make a miracle that they become instantly cured after performing the *brit*?
- ◆ What is the connection between *brit milah* and *korban* Pesach?
- ◆ The essence of Pesach is unity. Families partake together of one offering. *Brit milah* removes the foreskin, granting added sanctity to a person. Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael to gather under conditions of sanctity, bringing their *achdut* to a higher level.
- ◆ The sin of the spies obviated an open miracle being performed to heal the people after having a *brit milah*. Only after repenting the sin of *lashon hara*, would they be worthy of observing the mitzvah of Pesach, so closely intertwined with the trait of unity.



The Essence of Pesach Sheini

“There were men who had been contaminated by a human corpse and could not make the Pesach offering on that day; so they approached Moshe and Aharon on that day. Those men said to him: We are contaminated through a human corpse; why should we be diminished by not offering Hashem’s offering in its appointed time among the Children of Israel?”

(Bamidbar 9:6-7)

During the second year following the Exodus from Egypt, some of the people were impure and thus could not celebrate the Pesach festival fittingly. Chazal (*Sukkah* 25a) relate that these people had been occupied with burying Yosef’s bones. They came before Moshe, asking why they should be deprived of the mitzvah of bringing the *korban* Pesach. Isn’t one who is involved in a mitzvah exempt from another mitzvah? They simply refused to be denied this once-a-year mitzvah. Apart from the actual offering of the *korban* Pesach, there was special symbolism attached to the act. Burning the chametz represented eradicating the *Yetzer Hara* from one’s heart, and “passing over” it. Hashem commanded Bnei Yisrael in Egypt (*Shemot* 12:21), “Draw forth and take for yourselves one of the flock.” The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 178) explains, “Draw your hands from *avodah zarah* and take for yourselves a *korban* Pesach, which will increase your merits.”

Moshe presented their case before Hashem. He agreed to their request, and they were granted a second chance to celebrate

Pesach. This day was called Pesach Sheini (*Pesachim* 67a). The mitzvah of Pesach Sheini was revealed to the nation in the merit of these people (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 271).

Pesach Sheini was given to those who could not partake of the *korban* Pesach on time, either because they had become defiled through a dead body, or because they were too far away from the Beit Hamikdash on Pesach. Why wasn't this opportunity for a second chance mentioned in the Torah originally? Why was it brought to our attention only after these people became defiled?

Furthermore, why do we still celebrate Pesach Sheini in our time, desisting from saying *tachanun* then (see *Sheilot U'teshuvot, Orach Chaim* 131:19)? And what did the rest of the nation do that year in the Wilderness? Did the ones who were pure on Pesach celebrate Pesach Sheini together with those who had been defiled, or was it the sole celebration of those who were involved in Yosef's burial?

The Torah purposely omits the mitzvah of Pesach Sheini in order that it should be initiated by those who came to Moshe. They taught us a tremendous lesson which might have otherwise been lost. The Torah demands sweat and toil. In order to observe the Torah properly, it is necessary to search for it. Since these people demonstrated their strong desire to fulfill the mitzvot, they merited introducing this mitzvah to the nation. This day was transformed into a holiday for all generations. How great it is to seek out mitzvot, and how wonderful is its reward!

I was once in New York on a fundraising mission for our institutions. But due to overwhelming weakness, I couldn't manage to collect for our cause. Toward the end of the week, I met an acquaintance and asked him, by the way, how his father was faring. This man was so touched by my concern that then and there he pledged to donate a sizeable sum, which was the entire amount I

would have succeeded in raising had I been in top form. Look how significant it is to ask after someone's welfare! From Heaven, I was given the merit to make someone feel good by asking about his father, thereby receiving a generous donation for our establishments.

The Gemara (*Berachot* 21a; *Tosafot*, *ibid.*) teaches, "If the time elapsed, the offering is void." If the specified time for offering a sacrifice has passed, the animal cannot be used for a *korban*. But this was not the case with the Pesach offering. If one was not capable of bringing this *korban* on time, he had another chance, on Pesach Sheini. It was considered as though he brought the sacrifice in its proper time. Hashem saw how fervently those who were defiled by the remains of Yosef wanted to fulfill this mitzvah. He therefore granted them another chance.

The *korban* Pesach alludes to the three pillars of the world: Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut chassadim* (*Avot* 1:2). From the day of offering the *korban* Pesach, Bnei Yisrael began counting Sefirat Haomer, toward *Matan Torah*. The *avodah* of the *korban*, with all its details, brought merit to its master. One who brought a *korban* saw first-hand what should have happened to him. This was meant to bring him to teshuvah (*Ramban*, *Vayikra* 1:9). The aspect of *gemilut chassadim* was apparent in the fact that all who were needy were invited to partake of the *korban*. Whoever could not afford to purchase an animal was allowed to join another family and participate in their *korban*.

Since the *korban* Pesach included aspects of the three mainstays of the world, those who bore Yosef's bones felt a tremendous need to be a part of it. Apart from the technical mitzvot of the *korban*, there was a more symbolic act in the deed. It was the aspect of upholding the world through this deed. Merit is conferred upon those who are worthy. Therefore, Hashem allowed them the *zechut*

of originating the halachah of Pesach Sheini. It was all in the merit of their concern to come closer to Him.

For this reason, Pesach Sheini is still a special day, until today. We do not say *tachanun* on it. Acceptance of the Torah is a precondition for the preservation of the three foundations of the world: Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut chassadim*, each of which is connected with the *korban* Pesach.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Those who had become defiled through involvement with Yosef's remains were prevented from bringing the *korban* Pesach. They asked Moshe for a solution. Hashem gave them a second chance in the form of the mitzvah of Pesach Sheini. Why did Hashem wait until these people presented their case in order to teach the nation about this holiday? Also, what is so significant about Pesach Sheini that until today we celebrate it by desisting from saying *tachanun*?
- ◆ Why were these people so adamant about getting another chance to bring the *korban* Pesach? They were occupied with Yosef's remains, and one who is involved in a mitzvah is exempt from other mitzvot. They displayed such tremendous love for Hashem's mitzvot, even those they were exempt from keeping, that they felt deprived by not offering the *korban*. Because of this, Hashem waited until they requested to fulfill this mitzvah before He revealed the details of Pesach Sheini to the people.
- ◆ These people truly wished to perform the mitzvah of Pesach. For, aside from the fact that this *korban* severs a person's connection with *avodah zarah* (as the sheep had been the deity of Egypt), and attaches a person with Hashem, it alludes to the three mainstays of the world: Torah – this *korban* heralded the Sefirat Haomer, the days of counting up until *Matan Torah*; *avodah* – the service involved in bringing the sacrifice; and *gemilut chassadim* – offering a share of one's offering with those less fortunate.



Habit – Precursor of Sin

“Those men said to him: We are contaminated through a human corpse; why should we be diminished by not offering Hashem’s offering in its appointed time among the Children of Israel? Moshe said to them: Stand by and I will hear what Hashem will command you”

(Bamidbar 9:7-8)

The *korban* Pesach had to be brought in purity (*Pesachim* 79a). Those who had become defiled at the time of the offering were denied the right to partake of it. After the Pesach holiday, a group of people gathered before Moshe, demanding compensation. Although they had been defiled through contact with a corpse, it was out of their control. They had been involved in supervising Yosef’s remains in the Wilderness (*Sukkah* 25a). They came before Moshe, asking why they should be deprived of bringing the *korban* in its time.

Moshe did not know how to respond. He asked them to wait while he asked the *Shechinah* how to proceed. Hashem replied that these people would be awarded a second chance to bring the *korban* Pesach, one month later, on the eve of the 14th of Iyar, Pesach Sheini. Because they so desired to offer this sacrifice, the mitzvot involved in this *korban* were initiated by these people.

This raises an obvious question. It is well-known (*Berachot* 26a; *Tosafot*, *ibid.*) that “after the time has elapsed, the offering is invalid.” One cannot go back in time; if he missed the opportunity to bring a *korban*, he missed the boat, so to speak. Why were these people so adamant, then, about getting a second chance? Also, what

is meant by the words of Moshe, “Stand by and I will hear what Hashem will command you”? Can it be that Moshe didn’t know the relevant halachot? The entire Torah was written by him! How could it be that he forgot these halachot?

The Torah was spread before Moshe like a set table. Far be it from us to consider that he did not know the halachot relevant to Pesach Sheini. Moshe wanted to impart an important lesson to us. A person should always accustom himself to ask advice from those who are more knowledgeable. He should never be ashamed to say, “I don’t know,” even when he feels he does know. Moshe Rabbeinu, leader of the nation, was not reluctant to ask advice from Hashem. He was not worried about his public image. All the more so, are we obligated to ask the opinion of our Torah leaders in important matters. Let us not fool ourselves into thinking we have all the answers.

The word פסח (Pesach) is derived from the word פסיחה (passing over, skipping) (*Rashi, Shemot 12:11*). This *korban* offered the following message. The nation is enjoined to “skip over” aveirot, and instead, cleave to the Creator alone. *Korban* Pesach is called by this name, as opposed to “*korban* of the springtime,” or “*korban Yetziat Mitzrayim*” to teach us its essence. That is to “pass up” on all things material and focus on the true fabric of life.

The greatest spiritual danger is to sin out of habit. Our *Chachamim* (*Yoma 86b*) warn us that habit becomes second nature, even making the prohibited seem permissible, *rachmana litzlan*. The sin-offering is offered in order to bring a person to teshuvah as soon as he commits a sin, averting the possibility of the sin finding a haven in his heart, becoming, with time, permitted.

It is human nature to become used to everything, the good as well as the bad. We find that Hashem performed numerous miracles for

Am Yisrael in the Wilderness. He split the sea, sent food from the heavens, supplied the well of Miriam, etc. Yet the nation complained, and even intimated their desire to return to Egypt. They remembered the foods they had eaten there (*Bamidbar* 11:5), longing for the land where they had been oppressed for so many years. How can we understand that they were prepared to exchange Hashem for the bondage of Egypt in order to once again eat cucumbers, onions, and watermelons?! They were not missing a thing, for the manna had the taste of anything they could want (see *Yoma* 75a). Yet Bnei Yisrael did not appreciate Hashem's kindness and asked to return to Mitzrayim.

As we read of their journeys in the Wilderness, we find that Bnei Yisrael sought excuses to complain (*Bamidbar* 11:23). This was because they had become accustomed to Hashem's kindnesses with them and took them for granted. This dulled their senses to perceive His great kindness, which guided them at every step of their way.

This idea helps us understand the following. Why did Hashem smite the Egyptians with ten *makkot*, instead of punishing them in one fell swoop? Some commentaries (see *Ramban, Shemot* 7:3; *ibid.* 10:1) explain that Hashem wished to demonstrate to the entire world that His power is limitless. He has the ability to punish those who deserve it, in various ways. The Egyptians assumed that Hashem would punish them through water, for He punishes measure for measure (*Sotah* 11a), and they had sinned by drowning the baby boys. By employing a host of punishments, Hashem proved that He is All-mighty. He is the Creator, and He rules over all, doing as He wishes.

As mentioned above, a person becomes used to his circumstances, for better or for worse. Had Hashem smitten the Egyptians with one devastating plague, they would have become

accustomed to their new situation and learned to live with it. Its impact would have been completely lost on them. Since Hashem wanted to deal the Egyptians the severest form of justice, which they duly deserved, He renewed His punishment with each additional plague. This would avert their acclimating to the new situation, as the new situation changed repeatedly, with the plagues arriving in quick succession.

In light of this, we can understand why those who had been impure at the time of the *korban* Pesach were so desirous of the opportunity to make up for it. They recognized the tremendous strength of the *korban*, which arouses a person to do teshuvah and remove his cloak of sin. Through bringing the *korban*, they wished to remove any sins that they might have harbored in their hearts. By means of the *korban*, they would also be able to “pass over” their previous iniquities, doing complete teshuvah.

The Ramban (*Vayikra* 1:9) explains that the objective of the *korbanot* was the following. The person would watch what was being done to the animal and understand that it was in place of himself. As he observed its blood being spilled, he realized that his own blood should have been sacrificed, but Hashem granted him the opportunity to do teshuvah by means of the sacrifice. The word דם (blood), adding one for the word itself, is numerically equivalent to the word אדם (man). The blood of the animal is offered in place of the person, who was saved in the merit of teshuvah.

Nowadays, we have no *korbanot*. The mitzvah of *tzedakah* is our atonement instead. Money is termed דמים, which literally means blood, because man invests all his life forces into earning a living. Instead of sacrificing the blood of an animal, man is adjured to offer part of his money to charity. Yeshayahu Hanavi (1:27) proclaims, “And those who return to her through righteousness (*tzedakah*).” The way to return to Hashem is by means of the mitzvah of

tzedakah. Mishlei (10:2) states, “Charity rescues from death.” Dispensing one’s assets to charity protects him from death (*Shabbat* 156b). His blood, sweat, and toil were already donated to a good cause. In the liturgy *Unetaneh Tokef*, recited on Rosh Hashanah, we declare, “Teshuvah, tefillah, and *tzedakah* abolish the evil decree.”

The purpose of the *korbanot* was to prevent habituation to sin. By hurrying to do teshuvah, a person would remove sin from his heart, not allowing it to find a comfortable resting place there. Nowadays, the way to be protected from aveirah and its punishment is through the mitzvah of *tzedakah*, which is similar to offering one’s lifeblood. Although the *korban* Pesach itself was not offered as atonement for sin, those who were impure did not want to be deprived of it.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ After its allotted time has elapsed, an offering is invalid. Why, then, did those who had become defiled with the remains of Yosef request to celebrate Pesach? Additionally, how do we understand that Moshe forgot the halachot of Pesach, to the extent that he had to confer with Hashem? Moshe wished to teach us that we should never be ashamed to ask those who are greater than ourselves, even when we feel we know the answer.
- ◆ The *korban* Pesach hints to “passing over” materialism. In order to not become accustomed to sin, the Torah commands us to bring a *korban* Pesach, with its intrinsic nuances. Am Yisrael defy Hashem’s word when they become accustomed to His miracles.
- ◆ Hashem specifically smote the Egyptians with ten separate plagues. He did not want them to become accustomed to the punishment, for this would mitigate its impact, since a person naturally becomes used to his circumstances.
- ◆ Those who had become defiled by the remains of Yosef recognized the power of the *korban* Pesach, and its essence of “passing over” aveirot, in order that they not take root in man’s heart. This is why they begged

to be given a second chance. They longed for the chance to do teshuvah. Therefore, the halachot of Pesach Sheini were initiated by them.

- ◆ The Ramban says that a person should perceive everything being done to the *korban* as an exchange for what should have been done to him. This will bring him to complete teshuvah. Nowadays, the mitzvah of *tzedakah* takes the place of sacrifices, for one donates that which he sacrificed his blood to obtain.



Pesach Sheini – A Lesson for Generations

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, saying: If any man will become contaminated through a human corpse or [will be] on a distant road, whether you or your generations, he shall make the Pesach-offering for Hashem. In the second month, on the fourteenth day, in the afternoon, shall they make it; with matzot and bitter herbs shall they eat it”

(*Bamidbar 9:10-12*)

Moshe Rabbeinu taught the nation about the mitzvah of Pesach Sheini. Whoever was defiled by a corpse or was too far away and could not bring the Pesach offering on time, was given another opportunity, one month later, on the 14th of Iyar.

Our Sages (*Berachot 26a*) teach, “Once its time has elapsed, the offering is invalid.” It is impossible to make up for lost time by

bringing a *korban* at a later date. This is like someone who forgot to lay tefillin. He cannot decide the next day to put on tefillin twice, in order to compensate for his forgetfulness. It is already too late. Had it been paramount to him, he would have made sure to take care of it. One who missed a mitzvah demonstrates that it was not all that important to him, because we do not forget something of significance. Why, then, does the Torah veer from its standard course and allow those who were unable due to mitigating circumstances to bring the *korban* on the eve of the 14th of Nisan to bring the *korban* one month later?

It is true that the clock cannot be turned back. Nevertheless, every Jew, as long as he is in this world, has the chance to repent and repair his actions. There are cases, throughout history, of absolute resha'im who made a complete turnabout moments before their deaths. They merited accepting the yoke of Hashem's Kingship. About them, the Gemara (*Avodah Zarah* 10b) states, "There is one who acquires his world in but a moment." Likewise, every single Jew, no matter how far-removed from Torah and mitzvot, is considered a member of our nation. We never know when the spark of *emunah* will be ignited within him, returning him to his Father in Heaven.

An example of this is Zimri ben Salu. He sinned with a Midianite woman in front of the entire camp, and even had the chutzpah to speak brazenly toward Moshe. He challenged him with the statement that he had no right to forbid him from taking a Midianite, as he himself (Moshe) had married Tzipporah, daughter of Yitro, the priest of Midian, a stranger to the Jewish nation (*Bamidbar* 25:6). He did not bother to consider that Tzipporah was a righteous woman, who had converted according to the exactness of halachah, even though the Torah had not yet been given. Still, the Torah (*ibid.*) calls Zimri "a man of the Children of Israel." In spite of his iniquities, he

was regarded as a Jew. [See *Ohr Hachaim, Bamidbar* 25:14, which explains that no matter how low a Jew has fallen, he will always be a part of the Jewish nation.]

In parashat *Emor* (*Vayikra* 24:10-11), the incident of the son of Shelomit bat Divri is related. He blasphemed the Holy Name of Hashem after receiving a guilty verdict by the Beit Din. (He was prohibited from pitching his tent together with the rest of Shevet Dan.) Notwithstanding his terrible offense, the Torah calls him “the son of an Israelite woman.” He was considered a member of Am Yisrael, in spite of his disgraceful deeds.

The Torah wishes to imbue us with an understanding of the value of every Jew. Each is a gem in Hashem’s eyes. This is in order that none should be lost. Pesach is the festival, above all others, that symbolizes faith. It was then that Am Yisrael followed Hashem blindly into the Wilderness, no questions asked. The *korban* Pesach signifies severance from *avodah zarah* and the frivolities of this world, for the sake of connection with Hashem. On the words (*Shemot* 12:21) “Draw forth and take for yourselves one of the flock,” Rashi expounds (*ibid.* 12:6), “Draw your hands away from idols and take for yourselves instead a sheep of mitzvah.”

Due to the underlying meaning in the *korban* Pesach, which connects the Jew with his Maker and instills within him pure faith, Hashem granted his children another opportunity to sacrifice this offering. This would enable them to sever their connections with the frivolities of this world and from their personal idolatry, connecting only with Hashem.

The letters of the word אייר (Iyar) are an acronym for the phrase אני יי רופאך (I am Hashem, your Healer). Hashem granted us the opportunity to heal our souls, removing any vestige of the malady of idol worship, by means of offering the *korban* Pesach Sheini on

the 14th of Iyar. Due to the joy we have through offering this *korban*, we do not say *tachanun* on this day.

The *hilula* of Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes is on the 14th of Iyar, the day of Pesach Sheini. Chazal (*Sanhedrin* 86a) tell us that any Mishnah not ascribed to a source, is attributed to Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes. His actual name was Nehorai, but he is called Meir (מֵאִיר) for he lit up (הֵאִיר) the eyes of our Sages in Torah (*Eiruv* 13b). Pesach Sheini reminds a person that there is a type of impurity which can be purified by means of the *korban* of Pesach Sheini and connecting to the symbolism of that *korban*. Nowadays, we have no Beit Hamikdash. We cannot purify ourselves by means of the sacrifice of Pesach Sheini. Therefore, Hashem arranged for Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes' *hilula* to take place on that day. He epitomized Torah and sanctity. By celebrating his *hilula* on the 14th of Iyar, Am Yisrael learn that in order to rid themselves of the *kelippah* of *tumah*, they must attach themselves to Torah, as depicted by his name Meir or Nehorai (in Aramaic). About Torah, it is said (*Yerushalmi, Chagigah* 1:7), "Its light will bring them back to the proper path."

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why were those who were unable to bring the Pesach offering on time given another chance? Usually, once the time of an offering has elapsed, it is usually too late to make it up.
- ◆ The *korban* Pesach has deep meanings. It is the holiday of faith. It also represents withdrawing from all forms of idolatry in order to serve Hashem.
- ◆ Pesach Sheini is in the month of Iyar. This is an acronym for the phrase, "I am Hashem, your Healer." By means of the *korban* Pesach, Hashem heals a person's soul from sin.

- ◆ We have no *korban* Pesach nowadays. But the 14th of Iyar is the anniversary of the death of Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes, who enlightened Bnei Yisrael with his Torah. This should inspire us to reach great heights, in place of the *korban* of Pesach Sheini.



Cracking the Bones – Breaking One's Desires

“They shall not leave over from it until morning nor shall they break a bone of it; like all the decrees of the Peach offering shall they make it”

(Bamidbar 9:12)

This pasuk is referring to Pesach Sheini. Those who had been defiled by the bones of Yosef were distressed about being deprived of a portion of the mitzvah of *korban* Pesach. When Moshe observed their anguish, he asked Hashem for His verdict. Hashem replied that since they were so sincere in their desire to fulfill His command, wishing to become greater via the Pesach offering, the halachot of Pesach Sheini were initiated by them. The nation learned that there is a second chance to bring the *korban* on the 14th of Iyar.

Moshe instructed these people to bring the *korban* Pesach in the same way as the original *korban* had been brought in Nisan (see *Bamidbar* 9:12; *Pesachim* 95a). However, Pesach Sheini is not a festival in the full sense of the word, and one may possess chametz on it. The *korban* must be roasted toward evening and eaten together with matzah and maror. No bone of the animal may be

broken, and none of the meat may be left over. Although chametz may be found in one's possession, it may not be consumed together with the *korban* (*Rashi, Bamidbar 9:10*; see *Meshech Chochmah, Bamidbar 9:11*).

Two questions come to the fore. First, what is the reasoning behind the prohibition of breaking a bone of the sacrifice? Second, why is the prohibition against chametz on Pesach so stringent? We find that if a drop of milk fell into a meaty dish, and it is less than one-sixtieth of the entire dish, the food is permissible for consumption (*ibid. Ma'achalot Assurot 9:8*). However, this does not apply to the prohibition of chametz (*Rambam, Chametz U'matzah 1:5*). Chametz is strictly forbidden, even in the smallest amount. On Pesach Sheini, although one may have chametz in his possession (*Pesachim 95a*), he may not eat it together with the *korban*. This is a further indication of the severity of chametz on Pesach.

The leavening agent that renders a food chametz symbolizes conceit, precursor of all lusts. The act of breaking the bones while consuming the *korban* Pesach expresses a pull toward pleasure. A person thus indicates that he is not satisfied with the meal itself; he is seeking to suck out as much pleasure from the food as he can. Breaking the bones is the peak of gastronomical pleasure. Likewise, chametz symbolizes physical pleasures, contradicting the entire essence of the *korban* Pesach. This is why chametz is never annulled, even when it is less than one-sixtieth of a mixture. Once a person has allowed lustfulness to enter his heart, it can rise like dough, without him even realizing. There is no concept of partial passion, or less lust. Therefore, passion must be categorically removed, completely subdued. This is hinted to by the injunction (*Shemot 12:19, 13:17*) that chametz may neither be seen nor found. It is not enough that a person does not see chametz; it may not even

be found in his quarters. The *korban* Pesach is eaten with matzah and maror, illustrations of humbleness and self-effacement.

Even a seemingly small and insignificant lust may not remain hidden in man's heart. One day, it may erupt into something big and ugly, taking control of him until it drives him out of this world entirely. Great men fell in this way. Elisha ben Avuyah and Yannai Kohen Gadol are examples of Torah giants who succumbed to their inclinations and were ruined (*Berachot* 29a).

At the end of parashat *Chayei Sarah*, the Torah describes the death of Yishmael (*Bereishit* 25:17), "These were the years of Yishmael's life... when he expired and died, and was gathered to his people." Immediately afterward, parashat *Toldot* begins with the words (*ibid.* 25:19), "And these are the offspring of Yitzchak, son of Avraham." The Ba'al Haturim (*ibid.* 25:18) explains the connection in the following way. Am Yisrael, the descendants of Yitzchak, will live in peace only after Yishmael is completely obliterated from this world. The strength of his fist is felt every day. The Zohar states (II, 32a) that we suffer the most from the Arab nations. They never cease to harass us. When they will finally be obliterated, we will rise up.

Why is it that all the nations of the world were dealt a blow after their uprising, and we never heard from them again, whereas the Arab nations, descended from Yishmael, constantly oppress us? The reason for this is that Yishmael did teshuvah at the end of his life (*Bava Batra* 16b), based on the above pasuk (see *Rashi*, *ibid.*). In what area did Yishmael do teshuvah? He overcame the passions of his heart by honoring Yitzchak, even though he was the older son (*Rashi*, *ibid.* 25:9). He recognized Yitzchak's superiority and respected it. In this merit, his sons succeed to persecute us today.

Although Yishmael himself repented and overcame his nature, his descendants do not follow his example. They continue living

lustfully, and only strengthen their passions. Chazal (*Kiddushin* 49b; *Tosafot, Ketubot* 36b) state that the nation of Yishmael is immersed in immorality. They likewise thirst for blood, relishing in it for no other reason than watching it flow.

This is the basic difference between Eisav and Yishmael. Eisav ascribes to atheism, an iniquity of the mind, whereas the Arab nations, descendants of Yishmael, have the lust for immorality coursing through their blood. Many righteous converts have joined our nation from the descendents of Eisav. Examples are Shemaya and Avtalyon, from the family of Sancheirev, as well as Onkelos the *ger* (*Gittin* 57b). But we do not find *talmidei chachamim* of note who came from Yishmael. Atheism is relegated to the mind; it is not a hereditary trait. Avraham Avinu is the perfect proof of this. He was the son of Terach, an avowed idol worshipper. Yet he chose to serve Hashem instead of following his father's perverted practices. In contrast, passions pass through the blood, bequeathed from father to son. Since the sons of Yishmael did not learn from their patriarch to break their passion, it continues flowing in their bloodstream and boiling inside them.

Lustfulness is a destructive force which damages man's heart and inflames his *Yetzer Hara*. This act demonstrates a pull to physical pleasures. Therefore, Hashem forbade our nation from breaking a bone of the *korban* Pesach. Likewise, the mitzvah of not allowing chametz to be found on our premises indicates the severity of chametz, a symbol of lust and the source of all bad traits.

On Pesach, the festival of our liberation, when we became the Chosen Nation, we are instructed to unite around Hashem and the Torah, through humbleness and subservience. We are adjured to remove all lusts and passions from our hearts, making room to coronate Hashem as our King and serve him wholeheartedly.

In Summary

- ◆ Why is it forbidden to break the bones of the *korban* Pesach? Why is seeing or having chametz in one's possession on Pesach so severe, to the extent that it is not nullified by being less than one-sixtieth of a food mixture, as we find to be the case with milk and meat?
- ◆ Breaking the bones is a demonstration of added gastronomic pleasure, bordering on lustfulness. Chametz, too, represents arrogance, the precursor of all passions. The *korban* Pesach was eaten with matzah and maror, denoting humbleness and self-negation. It is in direct opposition to chametz and bone-breaking. Chametz is not nullified if there is less than one-sixtieth of a mixture, for there is no concept of partial passion. If passion has found a place in one's heart, it is capable of bringing the person to the lowest levels.
- ◆ The Torah connects Yishmael's death with the story of Yitzchak and his progeny. The Ba'al Haturim explains the connection as follows. Yitzchak's offspring cannot truly live as long as Yishmael exists. What is Yishmael's power over us? It is the strength of the teshuvah that he did at the end of his life, overcoming his passions, that grants his progeny the power to rule us.
- ◆ Eisav was essentially an atheist. Since atheism is a sin of the mind, it is not an inherited trait. Therefore, many righteous converts were able to come forth from him. In contrast, the nation of Yishmael is immersed in immorality, a trait passed from father to son. They therefore did not merit having righteous converts who joined our nation.
- ◆ Chametz is forbidden to be found in one's possession over Pesach. This shows us the severity of lust that it represents.



By the Word of Hashem

“According to the word of Hashem would the Children of Israel journey, and according to the word of Hashem would they encamp”

(Bamidbar 9:18)

All of the travels and encampments of Bnei Yisrael in the Wilderness were by the command of Hashem. Bnei Yisrael were constantly at the ready to pick up and go or set camp when they received the signal. Often, they camped for just a short amount of time before they were instructed to collect their things and set off again.

Let us picture the scenario of Am Yisrael in the Wilderness. They were surely loaded down with the spoils of the sea, as well as their own possessions. Even though obeying Hashem's word regarding their allotted times of travels and encampments demanded sacrifice, they did it whole-heartedly, fully trusting that Hashem would lead them on the right path. Yirmeyahu Hanavi (2:2) declares, “I recall for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, your following Me into the Wilderness, into an unsown land.” Although they were tired and parched, their thirst for Hashem's closeness was paramount. They traveled by His word, even when they had hardly any time to rest beforehand.

The Torah does mention incidents when Bnei Yisrael complained, meriting punishment for their lack of faith. But on the whole, they walked with Hashem with *mesirut nefesh*. For this, they were greatly praised.

We should take a lesson from this period in our history. We, too, must live our lives by the dictates of Hashem and His Torah. Even

when it is more convenient to act according to our personal interests, we must place Hashem's will above all else. In his endeavor to cause a person to sin, the *Yetzer Hara* attempts to persuade him to behave in a certain manner, claiming it is Hashem's desire. He blows up the act, until it seems like a mitzvah of magnitude. But if the person would investigate the matter, he will realize it is nothing but a bunch of hot air, in complete contradiction to Hashem's word.

The case of the spies is a perfect example. They went to scout the Land with Hashem's permission, but against His desire (*Sotah* 34b). Bnei Yisrael should have believed with perfect faith that Hashem would bring them to the land of milk and honey, the best and sweetest of all places. But when the nation demonstrated weakness in their faith, doubting His word, He allowed them to send the spies (see *Bamidbar Rabbah* 16:7). The end of the story testifies to the fact that it began with improper intentions. The spies had feelings of haughtiness in their hearts from the very start. Chazal (*Avot* 4:2) teach us that one sin leads to another. These feelings of haughtiness led them to speak ill of the Land. Had the spies realized that they were not going with Hashem's blessing, they surely would have desisted. The entire episode would not have taken place, along with its accompanying heartache. But because their personal pride stood before them, they were blind to Hashem's true desire that they not take this trip.

There are many instances of Torah prohibitions which are waived in cases of *pikuach nefesh*. In such instances, a person is commanded to desecrate Shabbat or eat forbidden foods. This is in order to maintain his life and his health. One who desecrates Shabbat in order to provide for a dangerously ill man is acting according to the will of Hashem. Conversely, one who acts

stringently in such matters is termed a foolish *chassid*. And his behavior will earn him severe retribution.

Whatever happens to us in this world is by the word of Hashem. Chazal (*Chulin* 7b) go so far as to say that a person does not stub his finger in this world unless it is decreed Above. It would be most beneficial for us to internalize this message. We will then understand that our success is not attributed to our cunning and skill, and our failures do not denote our inadequacy. Everything is only as Hashem wills it to be. When a person truly internalizes this concept, he will never become haughty over his successes. Conversely, when he is down and out, he will not attribute his lack of luck to various causes, but will trust fully that this is as Hashem has decreed. Maybe it contains a message for him to search through his deeds and do complete teshuvah (see *Berachot* 5a). The pious Jews of Morocco used to say, "Everything is from Hashem Yitbarach; He already prepared it all."

Once, on a trip to Hong Kong, an elderly Jewish woman approached me, asking for a blessing that she die. When I heard her strange request, I explained that premature death is not a blessing, but a curse. I asked her the reason for her request. She replied that she saw no purpose to her life and was utterly disgusted with it. Therefore, she wished to end it. After speaking with her for some time, I learned the following. She was fantastically wealthy and even owned a private jet. How incredible! This woman was living the cushy life of comfort and indulgence, yet she wished to end it, for she saw no meaning in it at all.

This woman did not observe mitzvot. I suggested she undertake to bake *challot* for Shabbat. I thought this would inject some substance into her lackluster life. She looked at me quizzically, stating that she didn't even prepare her own coffee; how would she bake *challot*? I explained to her that she was depressed because she

had never accustomed herself to work. She was simply sick and tired of a life of wanton pleasure. Freedom from responsibility is a fantasy freedom. This would never provide her with true happiness. After some time, this woman phoned me, stating that the unbelievable occurred. As soon as she began baking *challot*, she undertook to keep Shabbat, as well. And lo and behold! Life became colorful, not as bleak and black as in the past.

This woman's story has a lesson for us all. When a person sheds off the shackles of slavery to Hashem, he seems to be liberated of all worry and burden. But this is not the case. The *neshamah* is spiritual; it therefore seeks the yoke of the spiritual: Torah and mitzvot. Bereft of them, it has no point in remaining in this world and prefers to return to its source in the World of Truth. All those who think a life of flippancy and frivolity will bring them true happiness will come to the conclusion that the real thing is living according to Hashem's dictates. Only this lifestyle will grant them true, everlasting pleasure.

The following case was brought to my attention. A Jewish woman gave birth to a baby boy. In spite of all her husband's requests, she refused to have the baby circumcised, with the excuse that circumcision is an act of cruelty. All of his cajoling fell on deaf ears, and the baby remained uncircumcised. After a while, the baby developed an infection, and the doctor stated that in order to heal him, it was necessary to remove the foreskin. When the mother heard this, she agreed immediately, not deeming it an act of cruelty at all. As it turned out, this did not provide his cure, but it did show the mother that when a person refuses to fulfill Hashem's command, He has His ways and means of making it happen, sometimes painfully. The wise man will do Hashem's will out of love and joy of the mitzvah, without waiting for difficult and painful reminders.

Our Sages (*Shabbat* 112b) tell us that the previous generations were not like later generations. “If the earlier ones are like angels, we are but people. And if the earlier ones are like people, we are but donkeys. But not like the donkey of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair.” In what way was Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair’s donkey distinct? In that it refused to eat from stolen straw, and ate only that which was kosher (*Bereishit Rabbah* 60:8). One day, highwaymen captured this donkey. Rabbi Pinchas was very concerned over its fate, for he knew it was scrupulous to eat only kosher food. What would be its fare when living with non-observers? A few days later, Rabbi Pinchas heard his donkey braying outside his house. He found it gaunt and haggard. He realized that the robbers had simply returned it, as they saw no point in keeping an animal that refused to eat.

The difference between previous generations and ours is in their cleaving to Hashem’s will (see *Berachot* 20a). The lives of our forefathers revolved around Hashem’s word. All of their aspirations were directed toward Him alone. Even their animals absorbed this attitude and took pains not to partake of stolen food. We find another example proving this (*Ritva, Yoma* 9a). A cow of one of the *Tanna'im* was so used to keeping Shabbat that after he sold it to gentiles, it refused to do work on Shabbat, the day it was used to resting.

“According to the word of Hashem would the Children of Israel journey.” Let us learn from the Generation of Wisdom to travel by the word of Hashem. We should use the Torah as our guiding light, directing us on the correct path in life. “According to the word of Hashem would they encamp.” We should also rest by the word of Hashem. This is to refrain from doing that which is forbidden. When a person intends to do the will of Hashem, he receives *siyata di'Shemaya* to understand what Hashem wants, and to conduct himself accordingly.

In Summary

- ◆ In the Wilderness, Bnei Yisrael encamped and traveled by the word of Hashem. This was done amidst great self-sacrifice to fulfill Hashem's will. We, too, must act according to Hashem's word.
- ◆ The spies scouted the Land against Hashem's wishes. They ended up speaking derogatorily about the Land and even toward Heaven, *rachmana litzlan*.
- ◆ There are instances in which it is imperative to transgress a mitzvah in order to save a life. In this case, this is Hashem's will. One who does not behave correctly is acting in contradiction to what is demanded of him.
- ◆ "One does not stub his finger below unless it was decreed Above." Whatever happens to us in this world is according to the will of Hashem. One who constantly contemplates this idea will not fall into the sin of arrogance, on the one hand, or the clutches of despair, on the other.
- ◆ The previous generations were superior to us in that they clung tenaciously to the word of Hashem. Even their beasts bore the yoke of Heaven.
- ◆ May we always travel by the word of Hashem, by means of performing the positive commandments. And may we encamp by the word of Hashem, by means of refraining from transgressing the negative commandments. Then, we will certainly receive Divine assistance.



Orderliness – Precondition for Unity

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Make for yourself two silver trumpets – make them hammered out, and they shall be yours for the summoning of the assembly and to cause the camps to journey”

(Bamidbar 10:1-2)

Hashem commanded Moshe to form two trumpets of silver, each made of one piece of hammered-out metal. Moshe Rabbeinu had difficulty understanding the fashioning of the Menorah, which was also made of one piece of hammered metal. Hashem Himself had to demonstrate how it should be done (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 15:10). Why, then, did Hashem ask him to create a new utensil from one piece of metal? Additionally, why was it necessary for the trumpets to be made of one piece of silver only?

The trumpets were used to gather the *Nesi'im*, as well as to alert the people to begin traveling. Rashi (*Bamidbar* 10:4) explains that one long blast would call the *Nesi'im* together to the Ohel Moed, whereas blows from both trumpets signaled that it was time to move on. The *shevatim* on the east would be the first to travel. Those on the south would follow, etc., as detailed in the Torah.

Am Yisrael encamped in the Wilderness in a most orderly fashion. The Mishkan was in the center, surrounded by the tribe of Levi, who served there. Around the Kohanim and Levi'im were the rest of the tribes, each in its designated position, according to its level and task. Imagine what pandemonium would be produced by everyone getting ready to travel, all at once, when the signal was given! Therefore, Hashem commanded that those on the eastern side

would get ready first. These were the tribe of Yehudah, representing kingship (*Bereishit Rabbah* 99:7), and Yissachar and Zevulun, the symbol of Torah (ibid. 8-9). Since Torah and royalty are paramount to our nation, they were chosen to take the lead.

By instructing Moshe to fashion each of the trumpets out of one piece of silver, Hashem was referring to the unity of Am Yisrael, which they symbolized. The order of encampment was liable to cause jealousy and dissention amongst the *shevatim*. Their layout implied that some tribes were more respected than others. But the secret of Am Yisrael's success lies in their unity. When is unity achieved? When there is clear order and distinction. Each person knows his place, his job, and his destination. He is prepared to pay homage to those greater than he. This is the lesson sounded by the trumpets.

Unity does not mean equality. On the contrary, unity is demonstrated when there is distinction between the ranks. Instead of displaying jealousy, everyone is aware of his place in society and respects his fellow man, even he who has a higher position. Unity can exist only on this condition. It was specifically the trumpets which were used to gather the *Nesi'im* together, the elevated ones among the nation. They were also used to herald the traveling, giving the right to lead to the more respected tribes. Hashem therefore wanted the trumpets to be made of one piece of silver, for when we take pleasure in our friend's honor, unity is achieved, and has the potential to bring us to greater heights.

We do not find that Moshe had difficulty creating the trumpets, as he did the Menorah. This was because he understood the secret of unity contained within the fashioning of the trumpets from one solid piece of silver. Conversely, when the Menorah was fashioned, Moshe had not yet learnt the secret inherent within it, and understood it only after Hashem showed him a Menorah of fire.

In Summary

- ◆ Why did Hashem tell Moshe to form the trumpets out of one piece of silver, after he had difficulty fashioning the Menorah out of one piece of gold?
- ◆ The trumpets were used to gather the *Nesi'im* together, as well as to signal the time to travel, according to the nation's encampment around the Mishkan. Bnei Yisrael encamped according to rank. The trumpets testified to their unity. Even though they are all part of one nation, there are different levels of distinction. But this should not take away from their unity. Unity reigns supreme when each *shevet* recognizes his place, and at the same time, respects the other *shevatim* for their virtues.
- ◆ Moshe had difficulty fashioning the Menorah, for he had not yet learned the great secret hidden within it. Only after Hashem explained it to him, did he understand. But Moshe understood the message of the trumpets immediately, and therefore did not have difficulty with fashioning them. For they alluded to the virtue of unity among the nation.



Rectifying the Root of Rotten Character

“The rabble that was among them cultivated a craving, and the Children of Israel also wept once more, and said: Who will feed us meat?”

(Bamidbar 11:4)

“Moshe heard the people weeping in their family groups, each one at the entrance of his tent, and the wrath of Hashem flared greatly; and in the eyes of Moshe it was bad”

(ibid. vs. 10)

Chazal (*Yoma* 75a; *Rashi*, *Bamidbar* 11:10) explain that Moshe heard them weeping “over the matter of families, over illicit relationships, which had been forbidden to them.” At first, Bnei Yisrael developed a craving for meat, bemoaning the fact that they were deprived of it. They eventually mourned the fact that they were forbidden from illicit relationships. I read a sefer (*Yesod Yosef* 8:8b) that states that the lust for food causes the iniquity of wasting seed. Every passion grows from rotten roots implanted within a person. If these roots are not weeded out and completely destroyed, they grow and spread, reaching epic proportions. Eventually, the cancerous craving for food will lead to the craving for women.

I once knew a young man who was diagnosed with cancer. He went for chemotherapy sessions to halt the illness. Unfortunately, after the treatment was thought to have been successful, he had a relapse. The doctors had not successfully removed all the roots of the cancerous cells. These cells multiplied until they eventually killed this young man. This account illustrates how an illness must

be uprooted from its source. Illnesses of the spirit, too, must be eradicated completely, in order that they should not spread and wreak havoc on the entire system. Negative character traits must be completely cleaned out of one's being.

At the beginning of parashat *Shelach*, Rashi asks (*Bamidbar* 13:2), "Why was the passage of the spies placed next to the passage of Miriam? For she was stricken over matters of speech... and these wicked ones... did not take a lesson from her." Miriam was punished for something small which she had said about her brother, Moshe Rabbeinu, and was stricken with *tzara'at* for seven days (*ibid.* 12:15). The spies did not take a lesson from her and eventually spoke *lashon hara* about Eretz Yisrael. Calev ben Yefuneh, on the other hand, did learn from the incident of Miriam and went to pray at the graves of the Avot, in order to be strengthened in *emunah* and not be ensnared by the plot of the spies (*Sotah* 34b).

It is possible that the other spies did learn a lesson from what transpired with Miriam, but they did not take the lesson to heart, correcting the rotten roots embedded therein. After some time, these roots sprouted forth, causing them to sin terribly by speaking *lashon hara* about Eretz Yisrael. This sin necessitated a sojourn of forty years in the Wilderness, until it was completely corrected.

The way to correct the rotten roots of bad character and lusts is by strengthening one's *emunah*. I learned this principle from an incident which I witnessed on a visit in Argentina. After the Morning Prayers on Tishah b'Av, the Rav asked me to escort him to visit a sick man. I entered the house to be met by a young man writhing on his deathbed. His entire body was in agony, but his *neshamah* refused to depart. His family sat beside him, expecting him to expire at any moment. But the moment did not come. As I sat there waiting with them, his mother approached me. She asked if I would still be in Argentina the next day. I told her I was scheduled to return to

Israel immediately after Tishah b'Av. She told me, most painfully, what a shame it was, for had I stayed on another day, I could have blessed her son with a complete recovery (after Tishah b'Av ended).

I looked at her in astonishment. Did she really have any hopes of her son recovering? She certainly did. "I constantly pray and recite Tehillim, knowing that at any moment, Hashem can reverse the decree." I was truly amazed at her pure faith. I left the house praying for a miracle.

The following year, I found myself once again in Argentina, where I delivered a *shiur*. Rav Mizrachi, shlita, the rabbi of the community, approached me after the *shiur*, together with a young man. He asked me if I recognized him, to which I answered in the negative. He then told me this was the boy we had visited last Tishah b'Av, when he was near death. He was now standing before us, totally healthy. I couldn't control myself. I fell upon his neck, hugging and kissing him emotionally. I told him, "You should know that your life was returned to you from Hashem as a gift in the merit of the pure faith and hope of your mother." I came to the realization that if the power of *emunah* can bring a person back to life, it is certainly great enough to uproot a bad *middah* from its source.

The rabble of the nation expressed their passion for specific foods and began fighting over their menu. This demonstrated a deficiency in their *emunah*. They doubted Hashem's ability to give them what they wanted. But instead of correcting this character flaw, they continued complaining. Their passions swelled as they were overcome by the passion for immorality, strictly forbidden by the Torah. After they remembered the Egyptian foods that they were lacking in the Wilderness, they remembered that certain relationships were also prohibited to them now.

In Summary

- ◆ Bnei Yisrael desired meat, which was not on the menu. This led to their desire for forbidden relationships.
- ◆ The *sefarim* state that lust for food causes wasted seed.
- ◆ When the root of lust and bad *middot* is not corrected, it spreads to other prohibited matters, such as illicit relationships. This is like a cancerous cell, which spreads to all parts of the body if not eradicated in time.
- ◆ The spies observed Miriam's punishment on account of speaking *lashon hara* about her brother, Moshe, but they did not learn a lesson from her. This led to them speaking *lashon hara* about Eretz Yisrael.
- ◆ *Emunah* can correct the roots of all bad character traits. For this reason, Calev ben Yefuneh visited the graves of the Avot, representatives of pure faith in Hashem. He realized the efficacy of praying there to be spared from the sin of the spies.



A Menu of Materialism

“We remember the fish that we would eat in Egypt free of charge; the cucumbers, and the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic”

(Bamidbar 11:5)

How could Bnei Yisrael mourn over the morsels of cucumbers, melons, onions, and garlic that they had eaten in Egypt? Hashem sent them down the manna, which contained all tastes (*Yoma* 75a; *Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 735). Furthermore, Am Yisrael had been enslaved in Egyptian bondage and had most probably been denied all the foods mentioned, left to watch the Egyptians partake of them.

Why, then, were they bemoaning their fate, crying over food that they themselves had not even tasted? Did they not appreciate the difference in their present situation, especially now that they received their sustenance directly from Hashem? What more could they ask for?!

“Moshe heard the people weeping by their families” (*Bamidbar* 11:10). Rashi expounds, “Over matters of families, i.e., over illicit relationships, which had been forbidden to them.” This is quite surprising. Am Yisrael in the Wilderness was the Generation of Wisdom, which merited witnessing Hashem’s glory first-hand, as our Sages (*Mechilta, Parashat Hashirah* 3) tell us that even a maidservant at the sea merited seeing revelations which the *Navi*, Yechezkel ben Buzi, did not. How could they have sunk so low as to bewail the prohibition of forbidden relationships?

Hashem considers a good thought as a good deed, but a wicked thought is not considered as a wicked deed (*Kiddushin* 40a). Nonetheless, a wicked thought can sometimes be even more dangerous than the wicked deed itself. When a person sins, he is aware of his wrongdoing, and his heart is aroused to do teshuvah, for he is afraid of the punishment he deserves. On the other hand, since merely thinking about sinning is not considered an act of sinning, one has no inclination to remove this thought from his mind. The thought festers in his heart, swelling more and more, until there is no room for good thoughts and mitzvot.

Rabbeinu Yonah writes in *Sha’arei Teshuvah* (see *Sha’ar* 1:31; *Sha’ar* 2:18) that a person should make sure to remove from himself all forms of physical lusts, for they are liable to expand in his heart, leaving no place for spirituality and *kedushah*. Nature does not allow sanctity and lustfulness to co-exist. One who relishes thoughts of pleasure and passion repels *kedushah*.

When Am Yisrael began consuming the manna, they became

spiritually elevated by this divine food, which contained no admixture of physical ingredients. But when Moshe transmitted the laws of forbidden relationships and explained the prohibitions of certain marriages, they immediately became filled with longing for them. They then cried over their fate of being resigned to abstain from such associations.

With these thoughts consuming them, they no longer had the ability to contain the spirituality afforded by the manna. These thoughts grew to gargantuan proportions, eating away at the refinement of the manna and its inherent holiness. They griped over the cucumbers and melons of Egypt, even though they themselves had never tasted them. This is the power of passion. It completely devours a person's senses until he sinks to the lowest level possible. He scorns spiritual matters which he had previously attained, just as Bnei Yisrael disdained the manna which provided them with so much.

Hashem punished Am Yisrael in a most fitting way. He had Am Yisrael remain in the Wilderness for forty years and did not allow them immediate entry into Eretz Yisrael. The purpose of traversing the Wilderness all that time was that they learn Torah and internalize it, to the point that they could say (*Tehillim* 40:9), "Your Torah is in my innards." As long as they were in the Wilderness, their food was delivered to their doorsteps (*Yoma* 75a) and it had no waste products (*ibid.* 75:2). This was all in order that they not waste any time from Torah study in order to tend to their physical needs. The message was that the purpose of food is solely to sustain the body and not to feed their physical passions.

What will we say, after 120 years, when we face the Heavenly Tribunal? How will we stand straight, knowing that we are full of tainted thoughts and numerous forbidden notions? If Am Yisrael, in

spite of their status as the Generation of Wisdom, stumbled in the sin of illicit thoughts, we should take a lesson for ourselves. How much must we strengthen ourselves to steer clear of lustfulness, lest it take us over completely, leaving no room for spirituality. Let us energize ourselves like a lion in Avodat Hashem and hurry to remove any tinge of improper thoughts, nipping them in the bud before they blossom into unwieldy weeds, completely covering us in unsightly undergrowth.

On Erev Pesach, before the holiday enters, it is customary to recite the passage of *bitul* chametz, aside from clearing out all vestiges of chametz from one's property (see *Pesachim* 6b). We proclaim that we nullify all the chametz in our property, whether it can be seen or not. Similarly, we should see to it to nullify all improper thoughts from our minds. There are certain days when Hashem is especially close to those who call out to Him sincerely. One who fears Heaven would do well to take advantage of these days and use them for teshuvah. He should genuinely repent for all sinful thoughts. Let him make every effort to correct his ways well in advance, so that he does not arrive at the awesome Day of Judgment with inappropriate thoughts, comparable to chametz on Pesach. This would be like immersing in a *mikveh* while holding an impure creature in his hand (*Sha'arei Teshuvah* 1:11).

When Bnei Yisrael returned from the war with the Midianim before entering Eretz Yisrael, they wished to donate jewelry to the Mishkan, as atonement. Moshe was surprised, for only one who sins is obligated to bring an offering. Why did they all feel the necessity to bring a sacrifice when they never sinned (regarding taking a beautiful woman from the enemy camps)? They replied that although their hands were free of sin, their minds were not. True, they did not stumble in actual sin, but their minds were sullied with sinful thoughts (*Shabbat* 64a). They therefore desired to bring a

korban in atonement for these thoughts which had filled their hearts.

As they stood on the threshold of Eretz Yisrael, they took a lesson from their forefathers, realizing how serious and severe are thoughts of sin. Observing that entire generation denied entry into the Promised Land, they took to heart the message that they should seek atonement for tainted thoughts of the heart. They felt the need to offer a sacrifice, even though they had not done any act of sin.

The way to repent for serious sins is through purging the mind of improper thoughts. Once this is done, the road to recovery from actual sin itself is that much easier. This is why Hashem tells us (*Bakashah L'Tashlich LaChidah*; see *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:3), "Open for Me the opening of a needle-hole, and I will open for you the opening of a banquet hall." This means that a person should do teshuvah for the seemingly small things, which are just thoughts of sin. Then he is guaranteed that Hashem will open for him an aperture the width of a banquet hall, helping him to purify himself of all serious sins.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Bnei Yisrael complained to Moshe about the manna, remembering the foods that they had eaten in Egypt. But they were slaves then, and most likely had no access to fine foods. What was it that they lacked in the manna, which contained every conceivable taste? Moreover, how could the Generation of Wisdom bewail the prohibitions of specific relationships?
- ◆ Improper thoughts wield great power in a person's mind. But he does not realize just how severe they really are. After a person does an aveirah, he does teshuvah. But an improper thought can fester in one's mind and bring him to sin terribly. This was what happened to the

Generation of Wisdom. They allowed themselves to dwell excessively on what they were eating. This led to them being consumed by illicit thoughts.



Physical Food and Spiritual Sustenance

“We remember the fish that we would eat in Egypt free of charge; the cucumbers, and the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our life is parched, there is nothing; we have nothing to anticipate but the manna”

(Bamidbar 11:5-6)

Bnei Yisrael approached Moshe with the complaint that they were tired of the manna. They were aroused with a longing for the good old food of Egypt: cucumbers, garlic, and onions. How can we understand that Bnei Yisrael, called the Generation of Wisdom (*Vayikra Rabbah* 9:1), who had merited seeing the *Shechinah*, were repulsed by the spiritual sustenance of the manna and preferred physical food instead? Furthermore, they made it a point to tell Moshe that they remembered the fine foods of Egypt, which they had eaten when they were in bondage. Generally, when a person is rescued from his suffering, he does not want to remember any detail of his previous tribulations, including the fare he was served then. How, then, could Bnei Yisrael yearn for the foods they ate in bondage? How could they exhibit such ingratitude toward Hashem, Who filled their every need in the Wilderness by bringing them down food from the heavens, with no effort on their part?

Let us imagine that one day, the Torah giants begin complaining that a specific type of food is not available. This is extremely difficult to envision. So too, it is extremely difficult for us to understand how the Generation of Wisdom could complain about their food. This is compounded by the fact that they did not have to work to acquire this heavenly food, and it had any taste they could want (*Yoma* 75a; *Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 735). Why did they have such a strong desire to eat cucumbers and garlic, when they could have tasted every spiritual taste possible?

The Midrash (*Tanchuma, Beshalach* 20) states, “Torah was given only to those who ate the manna.” Just like the manna was clean and pure, with no waste product (as they collected just enough for one day’s needs, and none was left over in their blood or in their vessels), so too, is Torah clean and pure. It was specifically this perfect food that disgusted them. How can this be?

The reason is that they did not search for perfection in the manna. Their *neshamot* did not aspire to cling completely to holiness. They wanted a taste of physicality, as well. Chazal (*Sukkah* 52a) tell us that the greater a person, the greater is his *Yetzer Hara*. This is in order to hinder him in his quest for spiritual heights.

Am Yisrael in the Wilderness were on an extremely high spiritual level. Their *Yetzer Hara*, not able to tolerate their level of *kedushah*, tried in every way possible to take them down a peg or two. Am Yisrael did not suffice with the spiritual sustenance they were getting from heaven. And although the manna contained any taste they desired, they wanted to eat physical food. How great is the power of the *Yetzer Hara*! He is capable of blurring man’s mind, causing him to walk crooked paths and act illogically. Bnei Yisrael preferred the extra work involved in preparing ordinary food themselves to the instant spiritual sustenance of the manna.

“For I have given you a good teaching, do not forsake My Torah” (*Mishlei* 4:2). Torah is the best gift in the world. The Torah is compared to the manna that fell from heaven. Just as the manna had no waste products, so too, are the words of Torah pure and true, containing no flaw or fault. Hashem intended to convey this message with the manna. Just as the manna was perfect, so too, is the Torah perfect. Bnei Yisrael did not accept the Torah willingly, and Hashem had to place Har Sinai above their heads like a barrel (*Shabbat* 88a). Similarly, they fled Har Sinai like a child escapes from school (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 729). When did Bnei Yisrael finally accept the Torah out of love? In the days of Mordechai and Esther, as the pasuk (*Esther* 9:27) states, “The Jews confirmed and undertook upon themselves” (*Shabbat* 88a; *Rashi*, *ibid.*)

I would like to suggest that the reason why Bnei Yisrael did not originally accept the Torah out of love, constantly afraid that Moshe Rabbeinu would burden them with more commandments, was because they did not completely understand the Torah and internalize it. Likewise, they did not fully appreciate the concept of the manna, which is compared to Torah. This led to their disdaining it. This is the answer to our question of how they could exchange spiritual sustenance from on High, ready and waiting for their consumption, for mere physical food. Had they understood the perfect nature of Torah, they would have comprehended the wholeness of the manna, not seeking morsels of materialism instead. Escaping Har Sinai indicated a lack of full knowledge of Torah. As a direct result, they did not sufficiently appreciate the spiritual sustenance that descended from heaven, eventually finding it disgusting.

When Torah is not at the forefront of man’s consciousness, and he does not understand it perfectly, cravings for the material and mundane steal into his heart. So strong is the pull toward

materialism that a person becomes blind, and he demands that which up until then was abhorrent to him. Bnei Yisrael so craved physicality that they became irrational, even demanding the food of Egyptian bondage.

“One sin leads to another” (*Avot* 4:2). Halting in one’s climb upward will bring him to fall to the depths. Originally, Bnei Yisrael asked for some physical food. But once materialism crept into their hearts, it found fertile ground there. Their request for ordinary food grew into a complaint against Moshe, who had relayed to them the commandments forbidding illicit relationships, as the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 11:10) states, “Moshe heard the people weeping by their families.” Rashi expounds, “Over matters of families: over illicit relationships, which had been forbidden to them.” Their eyes were cast toward materialism. They therefore became steeped in it and wished to cast off of themselves all prohibitions which Moshe transmitted to them from Hashem.

I came across the following point (*Ginzei Yerushalaymi, Bava DiShisha* 7:110; *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 608:4; see *Mishnah Berurah*, *ibid.* 18). Sharp foods such as garlic and onions strengthen the sperm, as well as physical lust. (Advice for those who are barren is to increase their intake of such foods.) I would like to venture that Bnei Yisrael specifically desired these foods for this reason. Physical passions found a place in their hearts. They wanted to eat these foods in order to fortify these lusts within themselves, to the extent that they bemoaned the fact that certain relationships were forbidden.

Chazal (see *Kiddushin* 30b) tell us that the way to escape the intricate web of the *Yetzer Hara* is only through Torah. Torah is the remedy for the ills of the *Yetzer Hara*. The *Yetzer Hara*’s strength is expressed by his immeasurable shrewdness. He will never come to someone and convince him to transgress the prohibition of

immorality, eat non-kosher foods or publicly desecrate Shabbat. He begins with the seemingly small things. He says one may glance at women, or eat foods with a questionable kashrut symbol. He also talks him into keeping only the Torah-mandated halachot of *Shemirat Shabbat*, but being lax in the Rabbinic laws. Through being lax in minor matters, a person will stumble in serious sins (*Sefer Chassidim* 78; *Sha'arei Teshuvah* 1:38). The Torah knows human nature and therefore commands (*Devarim* 7:12), “היה עקב תשמעוֹן” – This shall be [the reward] when you hearken to these ordinances.” Rashi explains that this is a command to be careful in mitzvot which one usually takes lightly, since the word עקב can also mean “heel,” referring to the minor mitzvot. If a person will find leniencies in the seemingly small mitzvot, he will eventually find leniencies in the major ones, as well. Who knows what will be his end?

To successively live in this lust-laden world of physicality we must harness much inner strength and constantly work on our *middot*. If a person finds it difficult to surmount the obstacles of his *Yetzer Hara*, he would do well to ask a friend or family member to learn with him words of *mussar* once a day. There is nothing like this to stabilize a person's character and help him overcome his negative character traits. One should not view this as a shameful act, for the words of the *Navi* (*Yeshayahu* 41:6) “Each man would help his fellow and to his brother he would say, ‘Be strong!’” are relevant also in matters of spirituality. On the contrary, when a person helps his friend in his spiritual quest, the elevation gained thereby is attributed to him, for he provided the power needed to grow.

I remember that when I once visited my father, zy”a, in Morocco, he asked for a glass of pomegranate juice. Father suffered from diabetes and was therefore very limited in his diet, which prohibited this drink. Mrs. Amar, who was there at the time, made sure to bring him this juice. When I took note of this, I told her that it could harm

him, and it would be better if she took it back. Father had nearly begun to make the blessing, but hurried to replace the glass. "Take it away," He instructed me, "It's a *Yetzer Hara* for me." Sometimes, even great people need the help of others in order to overcome temptation. It is not shameful in the least. On the contrary, when a person considers himself imperfect and admits his weaknesses, asking for the help of others to surmount his inclinations, it demonstrates his greatness, as well as his humility.

In previous generations, many of our *gedolim* smoked cigarettes in order to quiet the pangs of hunger, for food was scarce. One day, Rav Shach, zt"l, wished to smoke, but he discovered that he didn't have any matches. He later figured out that it had taken him a total of three-quarters of an hour to obtain matches. Then and there, he took upon himself to abstain from smoking, in spite of his dire hunger. If the innocuous-seeming cigarette could consume so much precious time from Torah study, he felt obligated to part from it so that this incident would never repeat itself.

This is the deed of one who places Torah on a pedestal. The word of Hashem is his top priority, and he is willing to break his habit for its sake, even at the expense of going hungry. He will not allow his habit to interfere with his Torah study. A person should always aspire to be submissive to Torah, and not, *chalilah*, to his materialistic pursuits. Once a person allows his lusts to lead him, he quickly falls into the quicksand of lustfulness. By virtue of their desire for physical food, Bnei Yisrael were consumed by the desire for immorality. But when a person subjects himself to the dominion of Torah, breaking his bad habits for its sake, he has attained greatness.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ How could Bnei Yisrael desire physical food when they were being supported by spiritual sustenance? Furthermore, they remembered the

food they had eaten in Egypt, the land of their oppression. Bnei Yisrael did not have to exert themselves in the least regarding the manna, for it was immediately ready to eat. How could they demand food that needed preparation?

- ◆ “Torah was given only to those who ate manna.” Torah is compared to manna. Just as the manna was the perfect food, completely absorbed by the body, so too, is the Torah perfect and whole. Bnei Yisrael fled from Har Sinai as a child flees from school. Their inability to recognize the perfection of Torah blurred their vision to the perfection of the manna, eventually causing them to become disgusted by it.
- ◆ The *Yetzer Hara* recognized the greatness of Bnei Yisrael. Therefore, he injected into them the passion for the physical. How great is the power of the *Yetzer Hara*, who blinds the eyes of the wise. Bnei Yisrael demanded food which needed prior preparation and they had eaten as slaves, all because they had fallen into the web of the *Yetzer Hara*.
- ◆ “One aveirah leads to another.” At first, Bnei Yisrael requested physical food. Once this desire took root in their hearts, they bewailed the prohibition against certain relationships.
- ◆ The Chida states that sharp foods arouse passions and strengthen the sperm. Bnei Yisrael asked for garlic and onions in order to further arouse their physical passions.
- ◆ The Torah is the antidote against the wiles of the *Yetzer Hara* and all physical lusts, as Hashem states, “I created the *Yetzer Hara*; I created Torah as its antidote.” It is to a person’s benefit to immerse himself in the study of *mussar*, and he should not be ashamed to ask for his friend’s assistance in overcoming his passions.



Forbidden Relationships between Relatives

“Moshe heard the people weeping by their families”

(*Bamidbar* 11:10)

Rashi expounds, “Over matters of families: over illicit relationships, which had been forbidden to them.”

Until the time of *Matan Torah*, there was no prohibition against marrying one’s blood relatives. Bnei Yisrael had the same prohibitions as all the gentiles. Kayin and Hevel married their sisters, Yaakov Avinu married two sisters, the *shevatim* married their sisters, and Amram married his aunt, who bore him Moshe. Now they received the command that they were forbidden from all of these types of relationships, and they had difficulty accepting it.

Our holy Avot observed the entire Torah, even before it was given (*Kiddushin* 82a; *Vayikra Rabbah* 2:10). They constantly sought ways in which to serve Hashem. This was in spite of the fact that they lived in generations of heresy and idol worship. They went against all odds, sanctifying Hashem’s Name in public.

When Avraham Avinu traveled with his wife, Sarah, to Egypt, he noticed her reflection in the river. He told her (*Bereishit* 12:11), “See now, I have known that you are a woman of beautiful appearance.” The Midrash (see *Tanchuma, Lech Lecha* 5) asks the following: Did he not know until now that she was beautiful? She was called יסכה (Yiska) – because everyone spoke of her beauty (*Megillah* 14a). The Avot were so holy that their minds were miles away from such matters. We find, too, that Lavan swindled Yaakov by switching Leah for Rachel. Could such a thing occur nowadays, that a man does not recognize whom he is marrying? The Avot were

so far removed from impurity that marrying one's close relatives was not forbidden.

Regarding the incident with Yehudah and Tamar, we find that an angel pushed Yehudah to do this act (*Bereishit Rabbah* 85:8), bringing about the birth of twins. According to one opinion, Yehudah desisted from further relations with Tamar (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 734). Our forefathers had no inclination for immorality and had marital relationships as though they were forced into it, according to the words of Rabbi Eliezer (*Nedarim* 20b). They acted solely *l'shem Shamayim*, for the purpose of upholding the world.

Moshe Rabbeinu, too, was not involved in these matters. The pasuk (*Bamidbar* 12:1) states, "Regarding the Cushite woman he had married." Rashi expounds, "This tells us that everybody admitted to her beauty, just as all admit to the darkness of a Cushite." Nonetheless, as soon as he began receiving prophetic visions, he separated from his wife, so that he might always be in a state of purity (see *Yevamot* 62a).

In contrast, the Generation of the Wilderness, who had been enslaved in Egypt, the disgrace of the world and hotbed of immorality (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Vayikra* 586), needed this prohibition. It was a very difficult commandment for them to accept. They were accustomed to observing the illicit relations of the Egyptians. The Torah specifically prohibits one from marrying his close relatives, because relatives are in constant contact and can easily fall into transgression (see *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:49).

Unfortunately, the sin of immorality has reached epic proportions in our times. This is our generation's most difficult test. We have no *Yetzer Hara* for *avodah zarah*, but the inclination for immorality is posted on every billboard and signpost. Provocations prevail all

over the streets. One must be extremely vigilant upon leaving his home and try to avoid these problems as much as possible. At many happy events, too, there is intermingling. One who cares about his soul will do well to keep away.

The Gemara (*Kiddushin* 81a) relates an incident involving Rav Amram Chassida. A group of girls who had been redeemed from captivity was stationed in his home. Suddenly, Rav Amram's disciples heard him screaming, "There's a fire in Rav Amram's home!" They rushed over to him, asking for an explanation, seeing that there was no fire anywhere. Rav Amram explained that he was referring to the fire of passion. "It is preferable that I be shamed in this world than in the World to Come." This is most surprising. Would any of us imagine for a moment that a tzaddik of his caliber would fall prey to sinning with these girls? The Gemara seems to say just that. I would like to add that even if he would never have stumbled in such sin, he wanted to teach a lesson for all time. Every single person must be punctiliously careful, for the *Yetzer Hara* has his eyes on each of us. Whoever is greater than his friend also has a greater *Yetzer Hara* (see *Sukkah* 52a).

When man and woman marry according to Torah law, they combine the letters ' and 'ה, drawing the *Shechinah* into their midst (see *Sotah* 17a). But the Satan does not like this. He therefore introduces foreign thoughts into people's minds by pushing them to sin with others. His goal is to keep these letters as far apart as possible, by having husband and wife separated. He thereby contributes to the extension of the *galut*.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Chazal relate that Bnei Yisrael bewailed the prohibition of illicit relationships. We find that our ancestors, who kept the entire Torah even before it was given, married their close relatives. What, then, is the reason for this prohibition?

- ◆ In the times of the Avot, the main thrust of the *Yetzer Hara* was on *avodah zarah*. Our Avot were completely detached from all forms of immorality. Avraham was unaware of Sarah's beauty until they went down to Egypt, and Lavan succeeded in swindling Yaakov into marrying Leah without Yaakov's knowledge. There was no need for a prohibition against marrying relatives.
- ◆ Nowadays, the thrust of the *Yetzer Hara* is in the area of immorality. One should be as vigilant as possible in this area.



Words Can Harm, Words Can Heal

“Miriam and Aharon spoke against Moshe regarding the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman”

(Bamidbar 12:1)

Rashi expounds that if Miriam, who did not intend to speak negatively about Moshe, was punished with *tzara'at*, all the more so does one who speaks disparagingly of his fellow deserve punishment.

Many commentaries stress the fact that Miriam had no negative intentions in her words. On the contrary, she greatly admired Moshe. She spoke only out of concern for him. There are some who go so far as to say that Miriam spoke to Aharon in front of Moshe. Why, then, was her speech considered *lashon hara*, causing her to be punished and isolated from the camp for seven days? In general, speaking *lashon hara* in front of the subject is more severe than speaking behind his back, for it contains an element of brazenness.

But this case was different. Miriam's speaking in front of Moshe indicated that there was nothing negative in what she related.

We might say that although Miriam spoke in front of Moshe, she knew that because of his humility, Moshe would never respond or explain himself. Rather, he would remain silent. Therefore, it was considered as though she spoke behind his back. This is a serious sin.

There are those who are of the following opinion. Miriam was taken to task for the power of her words. They might very well have negatively affected Moshe, which would have affected his leadership qualities. This might have caused his guidance of Am Yisrael to become somewhat flawed.

I can testify the following about myself. Many seem to concern themselves with my welfare. They say things like, "Rabbi David, how can you leave your home for such long periods of time, constantly flying from country to country? From where do you have the energy to deliver speeches all day and approach philanthropists for funds? When do you ever get a chance to rest? Aren't you concerned about your health? One day, it might catch up with you." When I hear words like these, they inject a weakness into me. These people have only my benefit at heart. Nevertheless, were they to know how damaging their statements are, they would find other ways to show their concern.

Once, when I was in Argentina, a woman approached me. She said that after her son had heard me speak at one of our gatherings, he made a changeover in the house. He insisted on separating milk and meat, keeping Shabbat, etc. She came to me with grievances. How dare I brainwash her son into keeping Torah and mitzvot when it disrupted their lifestyle?!

After some time, I found out that this son, who had made such strides in his Judaism, abandoned everything. He spiraled lower and lower, until he eventually married out. His casting off the yoke of Torah and mitzvot was his mother's doing. She constantly rebuked and reprimanded him for his mitzvah observance, until it completely weakened his resolve. He finally could tolerate it no longer and threw away his tradition. How great is the power of words! On the one hand, words can encourage and inspire, bringing one ever closer to Hashem. On the other hand, words filled with hate and venom can draw a person further and further away from his Father, until his Jewish identity is completely blurred.

A man who used to visit me was in the habit of belittling Torah scholars who are supported by others. Instead of going out to work, he claimed, these parasites shine their trousers on the bench, shaking all day long before the stender. They are nothing but a public burden. Finally, after hearing his diatribe one time too many, I told him the following. He should be most careful about speaking against Torah scholars, for it is their study that upholds the world. Who knows if his disparaging comments will not harm him personally? Not long afterward, this man returned to me, completely broken. He told me that he had been diagnosed with a serious illness in his head. I could not help but point out to him that his derogatory comments were at the root of his ailment.

The pesukim continue with Moshe praying for the recovery of his sister, as it states (*Bamidbar* 12:13), "Moshe cried out to Hashem, saying, 'Please, G-d, heal her now.'" Rashi expounds, "Why did Moshe not pray at length? So that Yisrael should not say, 'His sister is in a state of distress, and he stands and prays a great deal.' Alternatively, Moshe did not pray at length for Miriam so that Yisrael should not say, 'For his sister, he prays at length, but for us, he does not pray at length.'"

These explanations are difficult to understand. Couldn't Moshe have gone off to the side and prayed a long tefillah for his sister's recovery? Why didn't he stand apart from the people and pray as he felt was necessary, away from the scrutiny of the nation?

Moshe understood that the right thing to do was to pray a short prayer in front of the people. Moshe devoted all his time to fill the needs of his nation. He did not have the time to supplicate at length for his own sister. The fact that he kept his prayer short was in response to Miriam and Aharon's derogatory speech against him. The brevity of his prayer demonstrated that Moshe was Hashem's agent, sent to serve Am Yisrael with every fiber of his being. Thus, he did not have the time to supplicate at length for his own sister. It showed the nation that if Moshe found it fitting to separate from his wife, obviously this was Hashem's will, in order that he would be able to lead them in the best way possible. He sacrificed his entire being for the sake of Klal Yisrael.

Chazal (*Avot* 1:11) tell us, "Scholars, be cautious with your words." Often, one has good intentions and his words seem well-placed. Nevertheless, it would behoove him to study the matter on a deeper level, and consider whether or not there will be benefit from his words. They can, *chalilah*, have the devastating effect of weakening the resolve of those who are involved in sacred work.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Miriam was punished with *tzara'at* for speaking *lashon hara* about her brother, Moshe. Some commentaries explain that Miriam meant well, even speaking in front of Moshe. Why, then, was she punished so severely?
- ◆ Miriam knew that Moshe, in his humbleness, would not respond to her harsh words. Therefore, it was considered as though she spoke behind

his back. Furthermore, although her intentions were good, she should have realized that her words were liable to weaken Moshe's resolve, thereby detrimentally affecting his sacred work.

- ◆ Rashi explains that Moshe did not pray at length for his sister's recovery, so that the nation should not claim that he prayed only for his own sister. Why didn't he, then, move to a private spot, out of the eyes of the public, and pray as he saw fit? Moshe was constantly involved in the needs of the nation and therefore had to cut his prayers short. His brief prayer presented a response to Miriam. He demonstrated with it that his time was dedicated to the needs of his people. His separation from his wife, too, was for the benefit of the nation.
- ◆ Chazal state, "Scholars, be cautious with your words." One should weigh his words well, so that no harm emerges from them.



Moshe's Modesty

"Miriam and Aharon spoke against Moshe regarding the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. They said: Was it only to Moshe that Hashem spoke? Did He not speak to us, as well? And Hashem heard. Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth!"

(Bamidbar 12:1-3)

Miriam told Aharon that their brother, Moshe, had divorced his wife, Tzipporah. The commentaries state that Moshe was present

when she spoke. The transgression of *lashon hara* is to speak derogatorily about someone behind his back. Speaking about Moshe in front of him proved that she did not have negative intentions. Why, then, was she punished with *tzara'at*?

Additionally, why does the Torah describe Tziporah as a Cushite? The Torah could have simply stated, "Regarding Tziporah, the woman he had married."

And finally, what is the connection between the phrase "Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth" and the subject at hand? It is understandable that the Torah wanted to praise Moshe, emphasizing his noble character, but why specifically here, after the narrative of Miriam's relaying to Aharon that Moshe divorced the Cushite?

Miriam *Haneviah* was held accountable for speaking *lashon hara*, even though she spoke in front of Moshe. She should have known that in his great humility, Moshe would accept her words without responding, for he was the most humble man in the world. His distinguished character is stressed by the word *אִישׁ*, meaning *the man*. Miriam surely knew that Moshe would not reply, yet she still chose to speak against him. Because Moshe was silent, it was as if Miriam spoke behind his back, constituting *lashon hara*, which warrants *tzara'at*.

Thus, the Torah mentions Moshe's humbleness here and praises him for it in order to explain the reason for Miriam's punishment.

Before his death, David Hamelech turned to his son, Shlomo, and said (*Melachim* I, 2:1), "Be strong and become a man." The commentaries expound (see *Avodah Zarah* 19a), "Who is worthy of being called *man*? One who overcomes his inclinations and chooses to remain silent, not being quick to respond to those who mock

him.” David Hamelech was imparting to his son the message that if he wished to succeed in his position as king and maintain peace among the people, he should constantly strive to be a *man*, clinging to the trait of silence, which elevates a person to great levels.

In light of this, we can understand why the Torah writes, “Now the *man* Moshe was exceedingly humble” instead of “And Moshe was exceedingly humble.” The use of the word *man* teaches us that Moshe’s humility was expressed by his silence, not seeking to justify himself before those who spoke against him. Silence is golden. Moshe became tremendously wealthy by virtue of his sterling qualities.

Let us return to our previous question, as to how the Torah could call Tzipporah a Cushite. There are those who claim that the word Cushite is referring to a second wife of Moshe Rabbeinu, the daughter of the king of Cush, whom he did not have contact with for forty years (*Ibn Ezra, Bamidbar 12:1; ibid. Chizkuni, ibid. Da’at Zekeinim MiBa’alei Tosafot*). Rashi (*ibid.*) says that the word כושית (Cushite) is numerically equivalent to the phrase יפת מראה (beautiful-looking). Everyone agreed that Tzipporah was a most beautiful woman. The Torah calls her Cushite in order to ward off *ayin hara*, just as a father would call his son by a derogatory name for that reason. Additionally, the word Cushite is used to describe Tzipporah, for just as everyone admits to the black skin of the Cushite, so did all admit to her beauty. Rashi continues that the Torah mentions the word Cushite twice to emphasize that she was not only externally beautiful, but her deeds were pleasing, as well. There are women who are outwardly charming, but have rotten insides. Some are righteous, but externally unattractive. Tzipporah combined both inner and outer beauty.

The Torah makes note of this for a very solid reason. We should not, for a moment, think that Moshe divorced her because he found

a deficiency in her. She was perfect, inside and out. Moshe's motive in separating from her was for one purpose only: to ascend to the level of the angels. Since Moshe remained silent in the face of Miriam's claims, the Torah spoke up for him. The Torah spares no words in describing Tziporah's beauty, both inner and outer. This testifies for all time that Moshe divorced his wife with altruistic, elevated intentions, and not, *chalilah*, due to any deficiency on her part.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why was Miriam punished so severely for speaking in Moshe's presence when this does not constitute *lashon hara*? Also, why is Tziporah called a Cushite, a derogatory term? And what is the connection between the pasuk, "Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble" and the narrative concerning Miriam and Aharon?
- ◆ Miriam was held accountable for her account, for she knew that Moshe would not react to her narrative. He was the humblest of all men, as the Torah testifies. His remaining silent placed him in the category of not being there at all. Thus it was as if Miriam spoke behind his back.
- ◆ The word *man* denotes strength of character, rooted in the trait of silence. David Hamelech told his son that if he wished to find success in his reign, he should be a *man*, i.e., cling to silence. Moshe was skilled in the craft of silence and deserved to be called a *man* by the Torah.
- ◆ The word כושית (Cushite) is numerically equivalent to the phrase יפת מראה. Everyone agreed that Tziporah was a most beautiful woman. The Torah calls her a *Cushite* in order to ward off an *ayin hara*. Rashi explains that this word is repeated in order to describe her inner beauty as well as her outer beauty. This teaches us that Moshe did not divorce her for any flaw he found in her, but due to a desire to reach greater heights.



Nullifying Oneself before the Torah

*“Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble,
more than any person on the face of the earth”*

(Bamidbar 12:3)

How could Moshe, who wrote the entire Torah, be charged with writing this pasuk about himself? The pasuk is self-contradictory, because praising one’s own humility is a form of haughtiness. But we don’t we find that Moshe was opposed to writing this of himself for posterity. Why not?

In a similar vein, we find that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai testified that his portion was with the elevated people (*Sukkah* 45b). He also announced that the power of his Torah study could save the entire world from the strict hand of justice (*ibid.*). How could Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai speak this way about himself? His words seem to smack of arrogance and conceit. It is self-understood that if one of the Torah leaders of our generation would state that he had the ability to save the world from the *Middat Hadin*, we would take exception to his words, and possibly mock him for his brazen attitude.

Moshe exemplified the Torah of truth. Therefore, his entire essence was the perfect, unadulterated truth. He was thus capable of writing about himself, “Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble.” He did not write these words from a place of haughtiness, *chalilah*, but from his inner essence, which was truth. Moshe Rabbeinu knew that in order for the Torah to endure within a person, complete self-nullification is demanded. Who merits upholding the Torah within himself? Only the one who nullifies himself before it. The Torah is called by Moshe Rabbeinu’s name,

for he sacrificed himself for it, as the pasuk (*Malachi* 3:22) states, "Remember the Torah of Moshe, My servant." His humility was the attribute which allowed him to attain this tremendous acquisition.

Moshe's words of self-praise do not contain any trace of arrogance, *chalilah*. They all derive from a place of purity. They come from the truth of Torah, which is acquired through self-negation. If we want to achieve greatness in Torah as Moshe did, to the extent that the Torah itself is called his, we must cleave to the trait of humility, the key to Torah acquisition.

Likewise, it is fitting to state that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's self-testimony came from a place of pure truth, and not, *chalilah*, from arrogance. The pasuk (*Vayikra* 7:37) states, "זאת התורה לעולה" – This is the law of the burnt-offering." The word עולה has the same root as the word עליה (elevation). The Torah elevates a person. Rabbi Shimon imparted the lesson that a *ben Torah* is a *ben aliyah*. His Torah study elevates him to great heights. Rabbi Shimon added that even if there were no other *ben Torah* in the generation, his Torah was capable of both elevating himself, as well as upholding the entire world.

Rabbi Shimon's power to nullify the power of the *Middat Hadin* was not attributed to himself. With his words, he intended to raise appreciation for Torah, through whose power he was capable of abolishing harsh decrees. He ascribed his powers to the merit of his Torah knowledge. He wished to convey the message that Torah is all-important, to the degree that difficult decrees dissolve in its merit.

The way to acquire Torah is to completely negate oneself before it. But this self-negation must not impact, in the slightest, the honor we should accord one who is immersed in the waters of Torah, familiar in all fields of Shas and Poskim. A Torah leader once walked

into a packed hall. As soon as he walked in, the entire assemblage stood up and began singing in his honor. When he noticed this, he waved to the people. When the Rav's son saw the goings-on, he asked how he felt at being given all this honor. The Rav replied that it was all in honor of the Torah, and not for his personal honor whatsoever.

The Rav accepted the cheering and singing, for he sincerely felt that people were honoring the Torah he had amassed. He accepted the honor with equanimity, with no feelings of pride or prestige. He saw only the glory of Torah before him, and not, *chalilah*, his personal honor.

I remember a time when I was invited to speak before a very large audience. When I entered the hall, I was immediately moved by the throngs of people gathered there. For a moment, the thought crossed my mind that they had come to honor me. As I stood up on the stage, my mind suddenly turned blank. I became confused, and didn't remember what I had planned to say. I realized that maybe the thought of arrogance that had previously entered my mind obstructed the flow of the ideas I had prepared to speak about. I decided then and there to humble myself in atonement for the thoughts of arrogance. I took my hat and wore it askew. I watched as the crowd erupted into laughter. Amazing! As soon as I mocked myself, my clarity of thought returned, and I recalled my planned speech.

Torah is acquired through total self-negation. Only in this manner can a person merit having the Torah find a comfortable home in his heart. We are light-years away from Torah giants such as Moshe Rabbeinu and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, whose attachment to the unvarnished truth granted them the clarity to see their great stature, without the suspicion that this understanding would inject feelings of arrogance into their hearts.

Torah is acquired through humility and self-negation. It elevates those who are involved in it. When a person forsakes his personal pursuits, and instead, joins ranks with those in the Beit Hamidrash, he will merit discovering Torah novellae.

We are commanded to be constantly immersed in Torah. It should be our paramount topic of conversation (see *Yoma* 19b). But this runs the risk of falling into routine. Something that is repeated on a daily basis is liable to become second nature. The way to remove the danger of habit is by renewing one's Avodat Hashem. One's service of Hashem today should not resemble that of yesterday. He should always attempt to insert a new dimension of progression into his life's mission. Without novelty and renewal, *chalilah*, one is likely to slip and stumble. In matters of Avodat Hashem, there is no standing still. Either one is on the uphill climb, or he is precipitously sliding downward. I thought of adding the following point. When a person is careful to continually work on nullifying himself before Hashem's will, this itself is a form of renewing his level of Avodat Hashem.

My teacher and mentor, Rabbi Chaim Shmuel Lopian, zt"l, would constantly point out the difference between our generation and that of the *Ketzot Hachoshen*. With a smile on his face, he would describe a man who goes to the Beit Hamidrash nowadays. First, he takes a detour through the Beit Hamidrash kitchen to prepare himself a coffee. There are those who add to this mitzvah and light a cigarette, as well. Then he glances around, checking to see who came today. He searches for someone with whom he can review the current events of the day. An entire half-hour goes by without his opening a sefer! When he finally finishes hashing over the news, he gets up in order to find a sefer from which to learn. He turns the pages this way and that, until he has found something that arouses

his interest. He has hardly sat down to learn, when his cell phone rings. Various thoughts rob him of his concentration.

“And how did the *Ketzot Hachoshen* learn Torah?” he asked me. “He would take the Gemara into his hands, and cry loudly, ‘Wicked one, to what purpose do you recount My decrees?’ (based on *Tehillim* 50:16). In this manner, he merited producing great Torah novellae.”

Rav Shach, zy”a, delivered a *shiur* every Tuesday to the yeshiva students. He worked very hard preparing for this *shiur*. One Tuesday, as Rav Shach began his delivery, before he even got into the thick of the discussion, one of the students asked an incisive question. Rav Shach became quiet. When he realized that this question refuted the entire structure he had based on the *sugya* at hand, he closed his sefarim and ended the *shiur*. He retired to his room to prepare another discourse. When Hashem observes how the Torah giants negate themselves before the Torah, being unashamed to admit their mistakes, He opens wide the gates of knowledge so that they can produce tremendous Torah insights.

This is the connection between parashat *Behar*, depicting Har Sinai, the symbol of humility, and parashat *Bechukotai*, which teaches the importance of exerting oneself in Torah, thereby renewing one’s Avodat Hashem. Self-negation is the foundation for growth in Torah.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ How could Moshe write about himself “Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble,” when this writing itself contradicts the trait of humility? Similarly, how could Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai state that he was among the elevated people, and that his Torah knowledge was effective in nullifying harsh decrees?

- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu exemplified the Torah, whose trademark is truth. All that he wrote therein is rooted in the pure, unadulterated truth, far from any trace of arrogance. Moshe taught us that the way to acquire Torah is through humility. Rashbi's words, as well, stemmed from the truth of Torah.
- ◆ “זאת התורה לעולה – This is the law of the burnt-offering.” The Torah elevates a person. Based on this, Rashbi stated that he was included among the men of elevation, i.e., those who pursued Torah studies. He continued that he had the power to nullify harsh decrees through the power of the Torah, which elevates man.
- ◆ The way to acquire Torah is by means of nullifying oneself before it. This will enable a person to produce novel Torah insights. This is the connection between parshiyot *Behar* and *Bechukotai*. Parashat *Behar* describes Har Sinai, the symbol of humility, and parashat *Bechukotai* discusses exertion in Torah, which produces novelty.



At the Image of Hashem Does He Gaze

“Mouth to mouth do I speak to him, in a clear vision and not in riddles, at the image of Hashem does he gaze. Why did you not fear to speak against My servant Moshe?”

(Bamidbar 12:8)

Moshe Rabbeinu gazed at the image of Hashem. But we know that Hashem has no form or image (*Rambam, Yesodei HaTorah* 1:7-8). How can the pasuk state that he saw Hashem?

These words are not meant to be taken at face value. Rather, Moshe Rabbeinu felt a deep inner feeling of, “I have set Hashem before me always” (*Tehillim* 16:8). He was so attuned to Hashem’s Presence that the Torah considers it as though he gazed at Hashem’s image.

Moshe Rabbeinu felt Hashem’s Presence everywhere, as the pasuk (*Yeshayahu* 6:3) states, “The whole world is filled with His glory.” The more a person intensifies his awareness of Hashem’s Presence in his life, the more heightened is his *yirat Shamayim* (see *Rema, Orach Chaim* 1:1). As his life revolves around the axis of the maxim (see *Berachot* 28b) “Know before Whom you stand,” it is shaped by halachah, and he constantly strives to bring satisfaction to his Maker.

Not long ago, the gaon and tzaddik, Rabbi Refael Yisrael, zy”a, of Sarcelles, France, passed away. When I was sixteen years old, he taught me the halachot of *shechitah*. We used to stay up until the late hours of the night, delving into the intricacies of the halachot regarding blisters and blemishes on animals. Rabbi Refael was also a good friend, and always had a listening ear. He suffered terribly for twenty years. I am certain that after being called up to the Heavenly Court, he is gazing at the image of Hashem and is resting under the wings of the *Shechinah*. All his life, he strengthened the feeling of seeing Hashem constantly before him. In the World of Truth, he is certainly enjoying the splendor of the *Shechinah*, fulfilling the statement, “At the image of Hashem does he gaze.”

How many times would my father, zy”a, turn to me, with his inimitable tune, and say, in Arabic, “Aren’t you afraid of Hashem?” The truth of the matter is that we are all obligated to make a detailed accounting of whether we fear Hashem sufficiently and feel His image with us always. Or are we, *chalilah*, fearful of physical frivolities of this world? It is common that a man is afraid to come

home late, for fear of the welcome his wife will give him, yet coming late to tefillah doesn't frighten him in the least, and does not fill him with trepidation. Regrettably, there are only a few individuals in our generation who are true *yerei Shamayim*, always concerned lest they stumble into prohibitions that are apt to anger their Creator.

The Gemara (*Mo'ed Katan* 21b) relates the following incident. When Rabbi Akiva's sons died, everyone came out to pay their last respects. After his sons were buried and a tombstone was erected on their graves, Rabbi Akiva asked for a bench to be brought before him. He stood up on it and faced the crowds. "I know that everyone who came to escort my sons on their final journey did so for my sake, for I am great in Torah. You didn't come to pay tribute to my wisdom or wealth, for there are wiser and wealthier men than I. Your entire objective was to give honor to my Torah knowledge, which has brought merit to the multitude."

Why did Rabbi Akiva specify that a bench be brought before him, and not a table or a chair?

A bench alludes to the Beit Hamidrash, where a person sits and immerses himself in Torah study. Rabbi Akiva requested a bench in order to testify how greatly he exerted himself in Torah study. I know of many tzaddikim who were buried in caskets built of the wooden benches and tables upon which they had learned Torah. These items would testify on their behalf in the Heavenly Court, stating how greatly they delved in Torah.

Rabbi Akiva had tremendous humility and therefore did not assume that the honor accorded him was for himself. He constantly lived with the feeling of "I have set Hashem before me always." This derives from a person fulfilling "At the image of Hashem does he gaze." He attributed all of his positive qualities to the *zechut* of Torah. I have seen it written in sifrei Kabbalah (see *Sha'ar*

Hagilgulim, Introduction 36) that Rabbi Akiva was a reincarnation of Moshe Rabbeinu, the symbol of humility. It was this humility that empowered him to say that all of the multitudes that accompanied his sons on their final journey came in honor of the Torah. Moshe inherited this exalted trait of humility from Hashem Himself, Who is humble and modest. He always had Hashem's image before him. Therefore, Hashem's traits were passed on to him.

Chazal relate that Moshe sinned in minor matters and corrected his iniquities. They specify his sins (*Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim* 821) and include the following among them. He told Hashem (*Shemot* 5:23), "From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he did evil to this people, but You did not rescue Your people." Moshe's words implied an element of opposition toward Heaven, and Hashem was angered by this. Moshe Rabbeinu, in his greatness, realized that his words were not in place, and although Hashem did not say anything, he sought ways to rectify his deed. Chazal (*Shemot Rabbah* 23:3) state that he indeed corrected his act in the *Shirat Hayam*. The pasuk there states (*Shemot* 15:1), "אז ישיר משה – Then Moshe chose to sing." The word אז is used here, alluding to the previous pronouncement of "ומאז באתי אל פרעה" – From the time I came to Pharaoh."

This teaches us that whoever says *shirah* is forgiven for his sins (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 254). Bnei Yisrael, too, who joined Moshe in his song, received atonement for their sins. From where did Bnei Yisrael know this song, which burst forth from them spontaneously? In what merit were they able to know these words prophetically, when they did not yet have the merit of Torah to stand by them?

Moshe Rabbeinu, in his tremendous humility, wished to correct his flaw, although he had not even received punishment for that deed. By gazing at Hashem's image, he was spurred to do teshuvah. In the merit of his personal merit, he brought merit to the masses.

Bnei Yisrael merited attaining a level of prophecy and praised Hashem through song, together with the *Shechinah* in their midst.

I would like to add the following point. When a Rav delivers a *shiur* before his disciples and one of them points out a mistake in his reasoning, the Rav has two options. He can allow his arrogance to get the better of him and rebuff the disciple's disputation, or he can admit his mistake and confess that his disciple is correct. I am sure that the Rav who admits to his failings will merit bringing *zechut* to the public. In the merit of his strength of character, he is dealt special *siyata di'Shemaya* to help his pupils understand the *sugya* on a deeper level. Because Moshe Rabbeinu admitted to his mistake and said *shirah* at the sea, he bequeathed to Am Yisrael special strengths. They themselves prophetically said *shirah* at the sea, even before they had the merit of the Torah.

A woman once approached me, asking that I bless her regarding a certain problem which gave her untold anguish. I explained to her that if she wanted my *berachah* to take effect, she would have to cease an inappropriate practice to which she was accustomed. As long as she was involved in it, the *berachah* would be repelled. But she stood her ground most stubbornly. Although she suffered terribly from this problem, she refused to correct her misdeeds. Her pride blocked her vision, giving her the impression that she was 100% fine and there was no need for improvement whatsoever.

One who exerts himself in Torah study gazes at Hashem's image and feels his Presence. When I read a map and see names of various cities, I absorb the *kedushah* of the tzaddikim who resided there. For example, the city Essaouira, or Chevron, the city of the Avot, as well as certain places in Russia, arouse feelings of warmth on account of the tzaddikim who called those places home.

I once participated in a Shabbat Bar Mitzvah at one of the most

elegant hotels in the country. The Shabbat was most elevating, combining the best in spirituality and materialism. As I was preparing to leave my room for Minchah, I suddenly noticed an insect crawling out from under the bed I had just occupied. At this sight, I was filled with nausea and fear. The first thought that entered my mind was, “Either it or me.” After I calmed down somewhat, I told my good friend, HaRav Moshe Mirali, that now I understood the meaning of the statement in Avot (2:4), “Do not believe in yourself until the day you die.” This five-star hotel was equipped with the most expensive, state-of-the-art furnishings and the latest in modern technology; I would never have believed that vermin populated the place. Nonetheless, the creature was nestled comfortably in my room as though that was its natural habitat.

We can take a *mussar* lesson from this incident. Often, a person feels he is perfectly fine, serving Hashem with fear. He seemingly has nothing to correct. He continues on the road of life with this belief. He is careful in his deeds, but generally thinks he has already fulfilled his obligations and is going in the right direction.

But this understanding is rotten at the roots. As long as the candle burns, there is what to mend. As long as man has a *neshamah* within him, he must improve himself. Only one who “gazes at His image” realizes that he has a long way to go in order to acquire Hashem’s wonderful attributes. We are enjoined to emulate Hashem, as the Gemara (*Shabbat* 133b) states, “Just as He is merciful, so should you be....” And just as a despicable creature can steal into a classy hotel, so does the *Yetzer Hara* try to worm his way into man’s heart, causing him to stumble in sin. The only weapon against him and his bag of tricks is the power of *shiviti* (I have set Hashem before me always).

In parashat *Terumah*, Hashem commands Moshe Rabbeinu (*Shemot* 25:10-11), “They shall make an Ark of acacia wood, two and

a half cubits its length; a cubit and a half its width; and a cubit and a half its height. You shall cover it with pure gold, from within and from without shall you cover it, and you shall make on it a gold crown all around.” What is the purpose of this gold crown? Furthermore, the *Aron* was kept hidden in the *Kodesh Hakodashim*, away from the public eye. Bnei Yisrael could not know when the *keruvim* were facing one another. What, then, was the point of the two *keruvim*, made of pure gold?

The *Aron* is a model for our private life. Even when a person finds himself in his own quarters, with nobody watching him, he is adjured to conduct himself according to the Torah. He should not feel obligated to observe the mitzvot only when outside in public, where everyone can see him. The *Aron* was behind the thick *parochet*, inside the Inner Sanctum. Nevertheless, it was beautiful both outside and inside. So, too, should a person “perceive Hashem,” acting appropriately even when in his private domain.

At the time of *Matan Torah*, Bnei Yisrael “saw the sounds” (*Shemot* 20:15). They were on such an exalted level that they were not limited by their physical senses. They were capable of even seeing sounds. This is like a person who has a house full of children. If one of them would suddenly start crying in the middle of the night, the father would immediately recognize which child it is, despite the fact that he has a lot of children, and he cannot see who is crying. In contrast, a person cannot discern the sound of his car’s horn from among a multitude of vehicles, for this is a purely physical thing, with no spirit at all.

When a person is connected to the Torah with ropes of love and is scrupulous in mitzvah observance, then, through the power of Torah, he is able to discern the sounds which emanate from Above, as though he were literally gazing at Hashem’s image.

On one of my trips to Argentina, a Jew far from Torah and mitzvot sat near me and my escort. During the flight, the two of them entered into a lively discussion. When the meals were being distributed, we removed our sandwiches from our bags, while this Jew partook of the non-kosher food distributed by the airline. When he saw how we watched as he ate crab and shrimp and other revolting victuals, he smiled at us a crooked smile. "I am Jewish," he said, "but not religious." He felt that explained everything. He was capable of avoiding nonkosher food, but because he lacked the *shiviti*, he felt no shame in his act. After we landed, I approached this man and told him, "Although you did not behave appropriately, I bless you with *berachah* and success in all you do." The man was taken aback at my words, believing I was merely mocking him. He did not pay attention to my blessing and went on his way.

The continuation of his journey depends solely upon him. Will he obstinately cling to his path of perversion or make an in-depth personal accounting of his deeds, seeking for ways to improve his spiritual state? It is obvious that Torah study brings one to proper actions (see *Kiddushin* 40b). Therefore, only one who opens a sefer and learns which road he should travel will merit traversing it successfully. Let us constantly keep in mind that one who "gazes at Hashem's image" will eventually "see the sounds," just as Bnei Yisrael did at *Matan Torah*.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ "Mouth to mouth do I speak to him." How was it possible for Moshe Rabbeinu to see the *Shechinah*? Moshe fulfilled the dictum "I have set Hashem before me always," to such a degree that he was considered to have literally seen Hashem. He constantly felt Hashem's Presence before him, for "His glory fills the land."

- ◆ When the sons of Rabbi Akiva passed away, Rabbi Akiva got up on a bench and proclaimed that all those assembled came in the merit of his Torah learning, and not in his personal merit at all. Rabbi Akiva stood on a bench, for this depicts the Beit Hamidrash, where Torah disciples sit and learn. He was excessively humble, his *neshamah* rooted in that of Moshe Rabbeinu.
- ◆ Chazal state that Moshe Rabbeinu sinned by stating, “From the time I came to Pharaoh...” Although he was not punished for it, he corrected this deed, as the Torah testifies at *Shirat Hayam*, with the words “Then Moshe sang.” The word **טן** is used there to allude to his previous ill usage of the word. Bnei Yisrael knew this song, even without prophecy, in the merit of Moshe’s humbleness, demonstrated by his desire to do teshuvah for even a minor sin.
- ◆ The Aron was coated with gold inside and out, even though it was not in public view. This teaches us that a person must serve Hashem loyally, both in his private domain and in his public life.



Gems on Parashat Beha'alotcha



The Menorah – Igniting the Inner Spark

“When you kindle the lamps”

(Bamidbar 8:2)

The word בהעלותך (When you kindle) has the same root as the words עליה והתעלות (spiritual elevation).

The pasuk (Bamidbar 8:4) refers to the Menorah as “one piece of hammered out gold.” The words one piece are emphasized to stress the importance of the inner essence of the Menorah, as well as its outer form, being fashioned with the proper intentions. This hints to the road of elevation. A person must improve his inner essence, not only his outer deeds.

Who was chosen to kindle the Menorah? Aharon HaKohen, who pursued peace and was filled with the desire to serve Hashem in the best way possible. The pasuk testifies to his perfect purity with the words (Shemot 4:14), “When he sees you, he will rejoice in his heart.” Even deep within his heart, Aharon harbored no feelings of envy toward his younger brother, Moshe, who had been chosen to lead the nation (ibid. 7:7; see Rashi, ibid. 4:10). In the merit of his

inner sanctity, Aharon was chosen to light the Menorah, fashioned with pure intentions both within and without.



Pesach Sheini

“Those men said to him: We are contaminated through a human corpse; why should we be diminished by not offering Hashem’s offering in its appointed time among the Children of Israel?”

(Bamidbar 9:7)

Those who had become defiled by bearing the bones of Yosef from Egypt (see *Sukkah* 25a) turned to Moshe with the complaint that they felt deprived of their part in offering the *korban* Pesach along with the rest of the nation, at the right time. They, too, wished to achieve closeness with Hashem, provided by the *korban* Pesach. Why should they lose out due to the mitzvah in which they had been involved? But didn’t they know the maxim, “Once the appointed time for a *korban* has passed, the *korban* is invalid” (*Berachot* 26a; *Tosafot* *ibid.*)? How could they demand a second chance, when *korbanot* do not have second chances?

They hoped that perhaps Hashem would accede to their request and grant them the *zechut* to bring the *korban* Pesach at a later date, since they had been denied this privilege through no fault of their own. When Hashem saw their sincere desire to become sanctified through the *korban*, He arranged events so that the halachot of

Pesach Sheini were brought to light through them (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 275*). Every person must aspire to come closer to *kedushah*. If a person does everything possible toward this end, he will be aided by *Shamayim*, and he will succeed, as we are told (*Makkot 10b*), “In the way in which a person wishes to go, he is led.”



The Gift of Torah

“Those men said to him: We are contaminated through a human corpse; why should we be diminished by not offering Hashem’s offering in its appointed time among the Children of Israel?”

(Bamidbar 9:7)

A group of people approached Moshe Rabbeinu and told him that on Pesach they had been contaminated through a human corpse and were therefore deprived of the opportunity to celebrate Pesach along with all of Am Yisrael. They asked Moshe for his verdict, for they truly wished to offer the *korban* Pesach, which contains much mystical meaning.

Chazal (*Sukkah 25a*) explain that they had become defiled by the corpse of Yosef, for they carried his casket out of Egypt. Before his death, Yosef had instructed Bnei Yisrael to remove his remains from Egypt and bury them outside of that land (*Bereishit 50:25*). Tehillim states (114:3), “The sea saw and fled.” The commentaries remark (*Rabbeinu Bachya, Bereishit 39:12*; see *Tanchuma, Vayeishev 9*) that

the sea noticed the remains of Yosef and fled from them. The nation indeed carried out his instruction and brought him to burial in Eretz Yisrael.

Moshe Rabbeinu, seeing the genuine desire of these people, who were defiled by the dead, to bring the *korban* Pesach, turned to Hashem for guidance. Hashem expressed His satisfaction with their request and granted them another chance to bring the *korban*, on Pesach Sheini. They merited that this halachah was enacted through them. Until this point, Moshe was unaware of this ruling. Since they came to him with their request, they had the merit of making it public knowledge (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 275*). As it is known, merit is attributed to the meritorious (*Shabbat 32a*).

Among the nation, there were certainly others, aside from those who had buried Yosef's remains, who had become contaminated through a corpse. Why didn't they feel the same need to bring the Pesach offering? It would seem fitting to say that those who had become defiled by Yosef's remains did so out of loyalty to Yosef's last request. He made them promise that they would not allow his remains to remain in the defiled land of Egypt. They were forced into a condition of contamination. Therefore, they had an overwhelming desire not to miss the mitzvot of Pesach.

When the Rambam was young, he did not show interest in learning Torah. His father decided to teach him shoemaking. In this manner, the Rambam sat all day long, repairing shoes. One day, he suddenly had an urge to learn Torah. He forsook shoemaking in pursuit of Torah. If not for his seeking the gift of Torah, Am Yisrael would have suffered a great loss. Only after he changed lanes and went the way of Torah study, are we able to understand the great gift we received.

Shavuot is called חג מתן תורה (*Chag Matan Torah*) (Tefillat Shemoneh Esrei). The word מתן has the same root as the word מתנה

(gift). Just as we do not force a gift upon a person, so is the Torah not forced upon anyone. Whoever truly desires to receive this gift is invited to partake of it. Man searches for gold and jewels, which do not accompany him on his final journey. He would do better seeking out the Torah, which is more precious than pearls. The Torah is what will ultimately advocate his cause in the Heavenly Court, as the *Navi Yeshayahu* states (58:8), “Your righteous deed will precede you.” Torah is the supreme righteousness (see *Rashi, Chulin* 89a).



The Test of Temptation

“The rabble that was among them cultivated a craving, and the Children of Israel also wept once more, and said: Who will feed us meat?”

(Bamidbar 11:4)

The people on the fringe of the nation lusted for meat. Hashem eventually caused the sea to wash up *selav*, a type of fat bird, to feed the passion of the people. As they chewed its meat, they died, as the pasuk (*ibid.* 11:33) states, “The meat was still between their teeth, not yet chewed, when the wrath of Hashem flared against the people, and Hashem struck a very mighty blow against the people.”

These birds came in a most surprising, frightening manner, as the pasuk in *Tehillim* (78:28) testifies, “And He dropped it amid His camp.” How were the people not afraid to eat these birds? Also, they observed Moshe’s anger at their request, as it says (*Bamidbar*

11:10), “In the eyes of Moshe it was bad.” How did they have the audacity to go ahead and do something that was wrong in Moshe’s eyes?

We can learn a great principle from this parashah. When a person has a passion for a materialistic lust, this passion burns within him. He sees nothing but the pleasure he imagines he will have. He does not consider the danger that will result from yielding to the forbidden pleasure. He completely ignores the tremendous punishment awaiting him in Gehinnom if he surrenders to his *Yetzer Hara*. Whoever wishes to have an illustration of what Gehinnom is like can read the sefer *Reishit Chochmah (Sha’ar Hayirah)*. It is very frightening, to say the least.

A Jew in Argentina once told me that he cannot sleep at night for fear of the ultimate retribution, as described in the sefer *Reishit Chochmah*. He expected me to allay his fears, reassuring him that the truth is not as bad as the sefer makes it sound. But instead, I told him that there is definitely what to be afraid of. Everything that is portrayed there is the unvarnished truth.

A disciple of the Arizal writes in his sefer that a teacher and his pupil once boarded a boat together. As they reached the middle of the sea, a strong wind threatened to sink their boat. The boat broke, leaving the teacher to the mercies of the sea. The pupil managed to grab hold of a plank of wood, thereby being spared death. As he floated along, he noticed his teacher’s body being torn apart by deep-sea creatures. The pupil was tremendously shaken, not able to comprehend how his teacher could be killed in such a gruesome way. Sometime later, his teacher appeared to him in a dream. “Do not worry about me,” he reassured his pupil, “For I am in Gan Eden. The sea creatures killed me as punishment for my having once stolen something.”

How awful is the punishment of Gehinnom! Even if a person is aware of this at the time of sinning, he forgets the dangers involved as he pursues his lusts. Bnei Yisrael in the Wilderness saw only the attraction of their temptations, completely blinded to the overpowering peril involved, in this world as well as the Next. This teaches the overwhelming powers of passion.



The Key to Salvation

“Hashem said to Moshe: Is the hand of Hashem limited? Now you will see whether My word comes to pass or not!”

(Bamidbar 11:23)

There is an amazing insight that we can learn from this pasuk. The word יד (hand) is numerically equivalent, adding one for the word itself, to Hashem's Name יה-י. Yeshayahu Hanavi proclaims (26:4), “כי- ב-י-ה ה' צור עולמים – For in G-d, Hashem, is the strength of the worlds.” Hashem created this world with the letter ה, and the World to Come, with the letter י (Menachot 29b). Man is called a miniature world (Sha'arei Kedushah 2:3), for he contains elements of both worlds within himself (Bereishit Rabbah 14:5). His body is of this world, while his soul is of the World to Come. When two people marry, they become one. The man (איש) contains the letter י in his name, whereas the woman (אשה) contains the letter ה in her name. Together, they form Hashem's Name יה-י. When they are meritorious, Hashem's Shechinah rests among them (see Sotah 17a). When a

person unites his body and soul, he contains Hashem's Name within himself.

The pasuk (*Shemot* 17:16) states, "For the hand is on the throne of G-d (כס י-ה): Hashem maintains a war against Amalek, from generation to generation." As long as Amalek exists, Hashem's throne is incomplete (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 268). Torah, too, is called a throne (see *Zohar* I, 71b), as the pasuk in *Tehillim* (122:5) states, "For there sat thrones of judgment, thrones for the house of David." Regarding Torah, the pasuk (*ibid.* 68:36) states, "It is He Who grants might and power to the people." Through Torah, Hashem's Name is exalted, as it states (*ibid.* 68:35), "Acknowledge invincible might to G-d." By means of Torah, called Hashem's throne, we vanquish Amalek and rectify Hashem's Name of י-ה.

Let us return to our pasuk (*Bamidbar* 11:13) that states, "היך ה' תקצור – Is the hand of Hashem limited?" As we explained, the *gematria* of the word יד (hand), adding one for the word itself, is equal to that of י-ה. When a person connects his entire being to Torah, he is, in essence, rectifying Hashem's Name, י-ה. He, so to speak, frees Hashem's hand from being "limited" and merits His salvation. The word יד contains the letter 'ד, which, when spelled out, forms the word דלת (door). The way to open the door to Hashem's salvation is by rectifying His Name י-ה through keeping the Torah.

I thought of the above-mentioned lessons, with *siyata di'Shemaya*, on a visit to Argentina. I arrived there on Tishah b'Av, to the community of *Sha'arei Tzion*. I was called upon to pray at the bedside of a young boy who was quickly succumbing to a torturous illness. His body was being completely consumed by disease. His family asked that I pray for his immediate death, bringing an end to his suffering. As soon as I set foot in the house, I was reminded of the home of my holy grandfather, the tzaddik, Rabbi Chaim Pinto,

zy”a. I felt an ethereal joy, and realized that this incident would end happily. This is the prayer I offered: Just as Hashem will, in the future, transform Tishah b’Av into a day of great joy, so too, should He transform this day of Tishah b’Av for this destitute family into one of unbridled joy. I related this to the members of the family. I added that in the merit of these words, there would be a changeover on High, *B’ezrat Hashem*, and the boy would recover. This is what miraculously transpired.

Hashem’s hand is not limited, on condition that man completes His Name ה-י by means of Torah and tefillah. This awakening below arouses an awakening Above, bringing the redemption.



The Greatness of Humility

***“Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble,
more than any person on the face of the earth!”***

(Bamidbar 12:1-3)

The words והאיש משה (Now the man, Moshe) contain the letters ה-י of Hashem’s Name. We stated above that Hashem placed His glory in this world (*Yeshayahu* 6:3). He created both worlds with the letters ה-י (*ibid.* 26:4; see *Menachot* 29b). Nevertheless, He resides among us in this world.

Moshe Rabbeinu, greatest of all prophets, learned the *middah* of humility from Hashem Himself. Despite the fact that it would seem beneath His dignity to reside in a world of filth and defilement, He has chosen to do so. This is to teach the secret of self-nullification.

Although He reigns supreme, He is prepared to rest His *Shechinah* in this world.

Humility is the rectification for all negative character traits. It is called the primary (ראשית) positive character trait (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Mishlei* 960). All negative *middot* are corrected in the merit of one's humility. Negative character traits are considered the *kelippah* of Amalek (see *Zohar* III, 160a). Amalek, too, is called, ראשית as the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 24:20) states, "Amalek is the first (ראשית) among nations." Amalek desecrated Hashem's Name, יה-י as we are told (*Shemot* 17:16), "For the hand is on the throne of G-d (יה-י): Hashem maintains a war against Amalek, from generation to generation." The secret of humility lies in Hashem's *Shechinah*, which resides in His Name יה-י. The power of humility will correct the Name יה-י, previously defiled by Amalek. This is reflected by the statement, "והאיש משה – Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth."



Shelach



Conceit Chases a Person Out of This World

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Send forth men, if you please, and let them spy out the Land of Canaan that I give to the Children of Israel; one man each from his father’s tribe shall you send, every one a leader among them”

(Bamidbar 13:1-2)

The initials of the words שלח לך אנשים spell the word אשׁל , and the last letters spell the word חכם (wise man). My son, Rabbi Moshe, says that the word חכם hints to the fact that Moshe was charged to send wise, righteous men to spy the Land. And the word אשׁל refers to the hospitality of Avraham Avinu, who was told to leave his homeland and follow Hashem into an unknown land (*Rashi, Bereishit 12:1*). Without knowing where he was being led, Avraham withstood this trial, following Hashem’s order to the letter (*ibid. 12:2; Bereishit Rabbah 39:9*). When Avraham arrived at the Land of Canaan, he traversed its length and breadth with the undiluted joy of doing a mitzvah; the mitzvah of settling the Holy Land. By means of his

hospitality (*Bereishit* 21:33), he publicized Hashem's existence in the world and brought many people to repentance (*Rashi* *ibid.*).

True love for one's fellow man and the desire to do kindness with him attest to one's closeness with Hashem, that he is a partner with Him in His *middah* of *chessed* (see *Shabbat* 133b; *Sotah* 14a). From this wellspring of *chessed*, a person draws strength to withstand the *nisyonot* that life places in his path. He will eventually reap satisfaction and pleasure from the kindnesses he did. When he was still in Charan, Avraham Avinu brought wayward sons under the wings of the *Shechinah* by means of his *middah* of *chessed*. Therefore, Hashem told him to go from his land for his own benefit. The very air of the Holy Land makes man wise (*Bava Batra* 158b). Imbibing its holy air would intensify the *middah* of *chessed* within him, enabling him to come ever closer to Hashem.

Hashem wanted Moshe to send men who epitomized the trait of loving-kindness, so that they would not become negatively influenced by the wicked people who inhabited the Land. These men would see the Land with a good eye, and not seek to speak derogatorily about it. By the spies singing the praises of the Land, Am Yisrael would hurry to enter it and become affected by the air of wisdom with which it was infused.

How, indeed, did the spies, the *Nesi'im* of their tribes and wise men of distinction who excelled in loving-kindness, fall into sin by speaking derogatorily of the Land? One who studies their report will find it full of falsehood and a testimony to their lack of gratitude. Hashem performed miracles for the spies by shortening their way (*Tanchuma, Shelach* 8). He also occupied the natives with burying their dead (*Sotah* 35a), in order that they should not notice the spies and attack them. The spies certainly recognized these miracles. How did they have the audacity to deny Hashem's goodness and speak ill of the Land?

Furthermore, why didn't the spies follow Calev as he went to pray at the burial sites of the Avot (ibid. 34:2)? They should have taken their cue from Yaakov Avinu, who, upon reaching Charan, remembered that he had not prayed at Har Hamoriah, the place where his ancestors had prayed. On the spot, he made up his mind to return there (*Chulin* 91b). When Hashem noticed his distress and self-sacrifice, He performed a miracle by placing Har Hamoriah under his feet. This is learned from the words (*Bereishit* 28:11), "He encountered the place and spent the night there." Har Hamoriah was literally uprooted from its spot and put under Yaakov's feet (*Rashi* 28:17), in order not to impose on him. Why didn't the spies pray at the graves of their fathers? Moreover, how did they not fear retribution at the hands of the giants for harboring evil thoughts about the Land?

When a person has a vested interest in something and does not subdue this interest to a higher cause, even if he is a great tzaddik, a wise and kind-hearted individual, he is liable to fall into the clutches of sin. The Torah calls the spies *men* (*Bamidbar* 13:3). They were wise and righteous men of distinction (*Rashi, Bamidbar* 13:3; see *Tanchuma, Shelach* 4), no different from Yehoshua bin Nun and Calev ben Yefuneh. It was their greatness itself which was the cause of their downfall. They were proud to be princes of the tribes, chosen to tour the Land. They did not see any need to pray for Divine assistance at the graves of the Avot. "Pride comes before a fall."

Instead of feeling responsibility toward the nation who appointed them as their leaders, the spies felt haughty due to the fact that they were righteous and kind-hearted individuals. They felt they had been chosen due to their sterling qualities. Their pride was misplaced. A king's glory lies in the fact that his subjects are subject to him (*Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 3). What is the purpose of an empire

if the people are not submissive to their king? The spies should have realized that without Am Yisrael, they would never have been chosen for their mission (see *Berachot* 32a).

This pride blinded their eyes from seeing the beauty of the Land, causing them to speak negatively about it. Likewise, they felt it was beneath their dignity to prostrate themselves at their fathers' graves. Chazal (*Sotah* 35a) state that just as they came back from Canaan with ill intentions, so too, did they originally go with a negative outlook. Their arrogance colored everything they saw.

The Gemara (*Sotah* 5a) states that Hashem cannot tolerate the haughty of spirit. Since Eretz Yisrael is the seat of the *Shechinah*, the spies could not remain there. Therefore, they spoke negatively about the Land. I once read that the very name כְּנָעַן (Canaan) has the same roots as the word הַכְנָעָה (subservience) (*Shelah Hakadosh, Lech Lecha, Torah Ohr* 2). Whoever lacked the trait of subduing himself to Hashem had no right to enter the Land.

Often, a person feels he understands the Torah topic he is learning and has no need to take counsel with his friend or ask for his opinion. This is a trick of the *Yetzer Hara*, who tries to inject arrogance into man's heart, causing him to stumble time and again. Similarly, there are those who consider themselves clever and intelligent. They never bother listening to lessons from the Rav. They never seek the tzaddik's blessing and guidance. When this braggart is a rabbi or head of the community, the situation is even worse. He feels he is above all others in his community, not realizing it was the people who put him there. He believes that without him and his pearls of Torah wisdom there would be no community to speak of.

There was no reason for the *Nesi'im* to feel any sense of arrogance whatsoever. Moshe Rabbeinu, the spiritual leader of the nation, was

the one who appointed them. They should have bent their heads in submission to him and their monumental mission. Chazal (*Horiyot* 10b) teach us that public figures should always feel a burden on their backs. They should never view their high positions as a source of pride over their constituency. On the contrary, their station should be considered the place where they bear the burden of the populace.

Calev ben Yefuneh was spared this false sense of arrogance in the merit of stopping off at Chevron to pray for success. He immediately remembered the three Avot. In spite of their greatness of spirit and Torah knowledge, they always humbled themselves before others. Avraham Avinu was the father of many nations. Yet he opened his home before one and all, in a pleasant and congenial manner, bringing them under the wings of the *Shechinah*. Yitzchak Avinu was pursued by Avimelech, yet he made a peace treaty with him. Yaakov (יעקב) Avinu was called by this name because all his life, he viewed himself as the עקב (heel), the lowliest part of the body (*Shem MiShmuel, Shemot* 683).

While praying at the ancestral graves, Calev ben Yefuneh was reminded of the day of death, when one is powerless against the *Malach Hamavet* (*Kohelet* 8:8). Of what use is arrogance, then? He was instantly awakened to do teshuvah and prayed that the merit of his fathers should protect him from the plot of the spies.

The author of *Zer Hatzvi* (*Shelach* 224) asks why Calev ben Yefuneh was called by this name. The name כָּלֵב can also be read as כָּלֵב (dog). A dog walks confidently before its master, wagging its tail self-assuredly, yet its ears are pricked to hear its master's instruction, as it knows full-well who is really in charge. Calev ben Yefuneh went with the spies, who were full of self-confidence. But he understood that he was not at the helm of the nation. He realized that he was going only by commission of Moshe Rabbeinu, who

appointed him as leader of his tribe. And above him was Hakadosh Baruch Hu, Leader of the world. In contrast, the spies were puffed up with pride. Their self-esteem went to their heads, causing them to feel that Am Yisrael was obligated to take their word as the final one and ignore Moshe's words of praise for Eretz Yisrael.

This is the way of the *Yetzer Hara*. At first, he tells a person to transgress a small sin, and afterward, another. Eventually, he brings a person to rebel against Hashem's Kingship, *rachmana litzlan* (*Shabbat* 105b; *Niddah* 13b). Similarly, the *Yetzer Hara* at first suggested to the spies that they were the heads of the nation in the merit of their righteousness, causing them to forget that it was Bnei Yisrael who had granted them this position. Then the *Yetzer Hara* convinced them that they were so full of merit that they had no need to pray at the graves of the forefathers. Am Yisrael, he claimed, would survive the enemy in their merit. After convincing them with these most conniving arguments, the *Yetzer Hara* persuaded them to revolt against Moshe, inciting the nation to join them in a most revolting manner.

In order to provoke Bnei Yisrael to rebel against Moshe, the spies employed the tactic of *lashon hara*. This caused an uproar, which challenged Moshe's entire leadership. The nation became so enmeshed in sin that they did not hesitate to rebel against Hashem Himself, stating (*Bamidbar* 13:31), "We cannot ascend to that people for it is stronger than us!" They doubted Hashem's power to bring them into the Land (*Sotah* 35a).

How frightening is the power of arrogance! It swells within a person until he is literally taken out of this world. This is what happened to the spies. They died a horrific death and caused the nation to perish in the Wilderness. The entire nation was punished by spending forty years in the Wilderness, until they were finally worthy of inheriting Eretz Yisrael. If such greats of the nation fell

victim to the fire of arrogance, what can we, simple people, say for ourselves? The nation was punished so severely due to the fact that the spies did not accredit Am Yisrael with their elevated status, but took all of the credit for themselves. Because they failed to view the matter correctly, they spiraled downward until their sorry end.

Community leaders must remember that they attained their elevated positions through the community which they represent. They must be true to their constituency and always bear in mind that it is the merit of the people that put them where they are. If a leader, *chalilah*, perceives his post as something which he deserves by his own merit, he is clinging to the *middah* of Pharaoh, who recognized the truth but denied it, proclaiming (*Yechezkel* 29:3), “Mine is the river and I have made myself.”

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ The initials of the words **לך אנשים שלח** spell the word **אש"ל**, and the last letters spell the word **חכם** (wise man). Moshe was enjoined to send forth wise men. The word **אש"ל** refers to the hospitality of Avraham Avinu, who followed Hashem to Eretz Yisrael. By means of this hospitality, he brought many under the wings of the *Shechinah*. His *middah* of *chessed* became further internalized when he made the move to Eretz Yisrael, whose very air makes one wise. Hashem wanted Moshe to send forth men who had the trait of loving-kindness. They would look at the Land with a good eye, instilling in the nation the desire to enter it and become influenced by the air of wisdom there. This would enable them to merit the *zechut* of their fathers.
- ◆ How could the spies, men of repute, fall to the level of speaking derogatorily about the Land, thereby demonstrating ingratitude toward Hashem? Why didn't they take an example from Calev ben Yefuneh, who went to pray at the graves of his ancestors?

- ◆ The spies were puffed up with pride. They felt that they had been chosen to represent the nation in their own merit and did not accredit their high positions to the people. In truth, it was the merit of the nation that earned them this status. It was this false sense of pride, also, which prevented them from prostrating themselves at their ancestral graves.
- ◆ Calev ben Yefuneh was protected from this false pride in the merit of visiting the graves of the Avot. He remembered their extreme humility. He emulated it, and it was what rescued him from the machinations of the spies. The ancestral graves, too, reminded him of the day of death, which shows a person how empty conceit really is. The name **פְּלֵב** can also be read as **פְּלֵב** (dog). A dog walks confidently before its master, wagging its tail as if it is in the lead, yet its ears are pricked to hear its master's instruction, fully knowing who is really in charge. Calev constantly remembered that he was merely a messenger of Hashem and Moshe Rabbeinu.
- ◆ We see that one sin leads to another. The *Yetzer Hara* causes a person to stumble in small matters, sin by small sin, until eventually he dumps him in the ditch of purgatory. If this was the end of that great generation, what can we say for ourselves?



Man Is Led in the Way He Wishes to Go

“Send forth men, if you please, and let them spy out the Land of Canaan that I give to the Children of Israel; one man each from his father’s tribe shall you send, every one a leader among them”

(Bamidbar 13:1-2)

The last letters of the words שלח לך (Send forth, if you please) spell the word כח (strength). And the word שלח, written backwards, spells חלש (weak). By speaking to Moshe in this way, Hashem was indicating that the sending of the spies would weaken his and the nation’s strength. As long as Bnei Yisrael traveled in the Wilderness, they were led in a most supernatural way. They were surrounded by the Clouds of Glory, which absorbed all arrows thrown at them (See *Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 233*). They never had to physically enter into battle with their enemies.

Sending spies to tour the Land demoted the nation from their elevated spiritual status to a level of living under the laws of nature. Hashem had originally planned to bestow the Land upon them in a miraculous fashion (*Rashi, Devarim 1:8*). But by sending the spies, they indicated that they wished to live by the laws of nature, just like any other nation that is preparing to conquer enemy territory. Hashem changed His course of action, as well, forcing Am Yisrael to inherit the Land just like any other nation. The implied meaning of His words was that this act would weaken their power, as well as their spiritual standing, and they would function, from now on, in a natural manner.

We find a similarity in the incident with Yosef Hatzaddik. He was punished for asking the cupbearer to remember the favor he had

done with him by resolving his dream and to mention his name to Pharaoh, so that he would be released from prison. Yosef ended up sitting in jail for another two years in retribution for this misdeed (*Bereishit Rabbah* 89:3). This is quite surprising. Yosef's request of the cupbearer would seem to come under the category of making requisite effort, which a person is enjoined to do. On the contrary, one would think that he did well by asking to be remembered to Pharaoh, as this was a method of extricating himself from jail. Why, then, was he punished with languishing in prison for another two years?

The entire life of Yosef was led in a supernatural manner. The friction with his brothers, the story of his sale, and his being cast into prison, where he found favor in the eyes of the prison warden, all point to the Divine supervision which guided him. The fact that Yosef forgot the Torah lessons that he had learned from his father (*Bereishit Rabbah* 79:5), yet withstood all the tests placed before him, attested to the fact that his life was being managed in an unnatural manner. Yosef should have internalized this understanding and trusted that his success lay only in Hashem's hands, with no need for human intercession. Since Yosef took natural measures in order to gain his release, he indicated a desire to go in the way of nature. He was therefore punished measure for measure. He was delayed in jail for an extra two years for the double language he used in asking to be remembered to Pharaoh.

The sefer *Shmuel* describes David's supernatural manner of fighting his enemies. He experienced numerous miracles in his victories. Once, his messengers informed him that the Pelishtim were preparing to attack. David immediately conferred with the *Urim V'tumim*. He was told to wait near the trees. Only after he heard the rustle in the leaves, was he to go out to fight the enemy (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shmuel* II, 142). David obeyed Hashem's command. Even

though the Pelishtim were advancing, and his people were pressing him to fight, David remained unmoved, awaiting the Heavenly signal to wage war. Only when the enemy was a footstep away from David and his men, their sword nearly at their necks, was there a rustle in the leaves. Then David and his men jumped out, subduing the mighty Pelishti army. This incident should teach us the following. The moment a person shows a desire to be led in a supernatural manner, Hashem provides him with special protection, granting him *siyata di'Shemaya* to overcome all his enemies, without any need to turn to physical acts.

With Moshe's passing, Yehoshua bin Nun was chosen to lead the people. He sent spies to check out Yericho (*Yehoshua* 2:1) before attacking that city. Why did he choose to send forth spies, especially after what happened to the original spies who were sent to scout Eretz Yisrael? Yehoshua was afraid that the nation would demand that he send spies out of impure motives. He therefore preempted their request by sending his own messengers. He sent righteous individuals. They were Pinchas, who later became Eliyahu Hanavi (see *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 46) an angel of Hashem (*Vayikra Rabbah* 1:1), and Calev ben Yefuneh (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 16:1), who had refused to involve himself in speaking derogatorily about the Land when the spies returned with their evil report in the Wilderness, meriting the appellation (*Bamidbar* 14:24) "My servant, Calev." Since Yehoshua had altruistic intentions, he merited *siyata di'Shemaya*, and the walls around Yericho fell simply from the sounds of the shofar blasts (*Yehoshua* 6:20). There was no need to fight naturally. The path of one who walks in Hashem's ways is paved with supernatural success.

Why didn't Moshe prevent the spies from touring the Land, knowing that Hashem was not pleased with the proposition? We cannot say that he had no idea how the incident would end, for he

added the letter ׀ to the name of Hoshea bin Nun, blessing him, “May Hashem save you from the plot of the spies” (*Sotah* 34b). Moshe wished to impart the following lesson. When a person does not heed Hashem’s voice, he will pay the price. There is no escaping Hashem’s command. One who thinks he can outsmart Hashem’s word, veering from the line of duty, is putting his life on the line. Everyone is responsible for his deeds, and the way a person desires to go is the way in which he is led (*Makkot* 10b). One who indicates that he wants Hashem to lead him above the laws of nature merits this. But if someone demonstrates an interest in using natural methods to save himself, Hashem removes His Divine protection from him, giving him free reign to manage on his own. The results may prove to be unfortunate.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The last letters of the words שלח לך (Send forth, if you please) spell the word כח (strength). And the word שלח, written backwards, spells חלש (weak). Hashem was indicating to Moshe that by sending the spies, he was weakening his own strength, as well as that of the entire nation. By requesting to send spies, the people were implying that they preferred to live naturally, no longer above the laws of nature.
- ◆ Yosef had been led in supernatural ways. He was therefore punished for asking the cupbearer to remind Pharaoh of his situation, since he displayed the desire to be dealt with in a natural manner.
- ◆ David Hamelech waged his wars in miraculous manners. He showed Hashem that this was the way he wished to be led, even though it entailed self-sacrifice on his part, as described in *Navi*.
- ◆ Yehoshua bin Nun sent two righteous spies to scout Yericho. He was afraid that Am Yisrael would send spies of their own, with ulterior motives. He therefore preempted them by sending out these men. He was granted Heavenly assistance, and the walls of Yericho miraculously fell before him.

- ◆ Why did Moshe accede to the demand of the people and send spies to investigate the Land, knowing that Hashem did not approve? He wanted to teach us that one who tries to outsmart Hashem, so to speak, will never profit. Also, the way in which a person wishes to go, he is led, whether by miracle or by nature. It is all up to him.



Arrogance – Impediment to Avodat Hashem

“They went and came to Moshe and to Aharon and to the entire assembly of the Children of Israel, to the Wilderness of Paran at Kadesh, and brought back the report to them and the entire assembly, and they showed them the fruit of the Land”

(Bamidbar 13:26)

Rashi asks, “What is the reason that *they went* is stated? To compare their going with their coming; just as their coming was with an evil scheme, so too, their going was with an evil scheme.”

The spies were originally great tzaddikim (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 16:5), as well as *Nesi'im* of their tribes (*Bamidbar* 13:2-3). How could they fall to the level of speaking *lashon hara* about the Holy Land, unafraid to speak derogatorily about the Promised Land, where they witnessed tremendous miracles? How was it possible that they had planned to speak ill of the Land already at the outset of their trip, according to Rashi’s interpretation?

Moshe knew of their negative intentions even before they even set out. Therefore, he added the letter ך to the name הושע, calling him יהושע. He blessed him that Hashem should save him from the plot of the spies (*Sotah* 34b). If Moshe knew of their evil designs, why didn't he avert their entering the Land in the first place? Alternatively, why didn't he add letters of *kedushah* to the names of all of the spies, thereby granting them all Divine protection from wrong thoughts? Why was Yehoshua the only one singled out for this privilege?

The way in which a person desires to go, he is led (*Makkot* 10b). The spies were righteous only as far as the eye could see. But they were rotten inside. This is attested to in the Torah, which states that they had evil schemes regarding the Land from the time that they had set out. Their entire motive in exploring the Land indicated a lack of faith in Hashem, Who promised that it is a good, blessed country (*Devarim* 1:22; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 16:7). Hashem allowed them to do as they wished, for He did not want to prevent them. This taught Am Yisrael a great lesson in how wily the *Yetzer Hara* is in catching a person in his net. The *Yetzer Hara* can make a person look like a tzaddik, when, in reality, the opposite is the case.

Moshe Rabbeinu was well aware of the spies' intentions in investigating the Land. Still, he did not prevent them from going. He realized that were he to intercede, they were liable to rebel against Hashem for no reason, warranting even greater retribution than they received after speaking *lashon hara* about Eretz Yisrael. Additionally, he wanted their masks of righteousness to be removed in public, revealing who they really were – pompous and pretentious men, who had no inhibitions about speaking derogatorily about the Land.

Moshe Rabbeinu added the letter ך to the name of הושע, stating, “May G-d (יה-י) save you from the plot of the spies” (*Sotah* 34b). The

Name ה-י has the same *gematria* as the word גאוה (arrogance). Moshe was assuring Yehoshua that Hashem would protect him from the arrogance of the spies, which caused their downfall, as they spoke negatively about the Land. They wished to take pride in their positions as leaders of the people, but did not feel the awesome responsibility which came along with it. Moshe blessed Yehoshua, commissioning him with the task of taking up for Hashem's honor, as the pasuk in Tehillim (93:1) states, "Hashem has reigned, He has donned grandeur."

How could Moshe send Yehoshua together with the rest of the spies, knowing that they could influence him so negatively? Moshe Rabbeinu was certain that after adding the letter ך to his name, Yehoshua would be shielded from their evil designs. Moreover, Moshe realized that he had to send at least one spy who would speak well of the Land. Otherwise, Am Yisrael's entire future was in jeopardy. Indeed, Yehoshua's words of lauding the Land were applauded by Hashem, earning the nation His eventual forgiveness. If not for Yehoshua's intervention, Hashem's wrath would have been directed against Am Yisrael, and they would have been annihilated. Calev did not have the same authority as Yehoshua, who was the chief disciple of Moshe. Furthermore, Moshe knew that Yehoshua was the one who would lead the nation into Eretz Yisrael. After scouting out the Land, he had the power to strengthen the hearts of the people, allaying their fears vis-à-vis the mighty nations who were inhabiting it.

The letter ך is the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, alluding to humility and submission. Moshe was hinting to Yehoshua that when he would eventually take his place after he passed on, as Eldad and Meidad had prophesied, leading the nation into Eretz Yisrael, he should conduct himself with utmost humility and feel as though he was a servant of the people. This was in direct contrast

to the conduct of the spies, who were pompous and proud in their elevated positions.

Chazal (*Zohar* III, 158a) explain that the spies knew that the first item on the agenda after entering Eretz Yisrael would be to coronate a king, as the Torah instructs (*Devarim* 17:15; see *Sanhedrin* 20b), “You shall surely set over yourself a king whom Hashem, your G-d, shall choose.” Since the spies, who were *Nesi'im* of the nation, enjoyed their popularity, they feared that appointing a king upon entering the Land would detract from their personal honor. This led them to speak ill of the Land. When Am Yisrael would hear that the country was inhabited by giants and mighty nations, they would fear entering it, and in this manner, the *Nesi'im* would continue in their prestigious positions.

Moshe’s adding the letter ׀ to Yehoshua’s name indicated to the spies that he knew their underlying motives in going to scout the Land. He hoped they would change their minds and re-write their agenda. For this reason, he instructed them to see whether or not the land contained trees (*Bamidbar* 13:20). He was actually telling them to see if there were tzaddikim there, called *living trees* (see *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Bamidbar* 742). Once they perceived that the nations of the Land had no tzaddikim in their midst, they would understand that there was no *zechut* sustaining them, and would therefore be easy prey to the Jewish people. Moshe tried mightily to change their frame of mind, hoping they would do teshuvah. We find that this tactic was effective with Calev, who originally followed the ways of the other spies, but eventually forged his own path, remaining loyal to the Land (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 16:19).

Why did Moshe bless only Yehoshua and not the rest of the *Nesi'im*? “Man is led in the way he wishes to go” (*Makkot* 10b). The other *Nesi'im* had ill intentions from the beginning. In contrast, Yehoshua’s intent was positive, and he was not party in any way to

the plot of the other spies. Therefore, Hashem's *berachah* could have effect upon him. But this was not the case regarding the rest of the spies, whose intentions were dishonorable. Adding a letter of Hashem's Name to theirs would prove ineffectual, for they were not inclined to see the good of the Land.

Additionally, Moshe was afraid that the added letter would severely indict them. Were they to sin despite the protection of an additional letter, they would never be forgiven. Moshe did not know for certain that they would sin. Being doubtful, he decided to refrain from granting all of them letters of Hashem's Name. It was preferable that they sin without this added level of sanctity. "Nothing stands in the way of desire" (*Shem MiShmuel, Tzav 675*). Since the spies were so bent on sinning, Moshe abstained from blessing them. He was afraid that the addition of Hashem's Name would invoke the *Middat Hadin* upon them.

One commentary remarks (see *Ahavat Yonatan, Bamidbar 13b*) that the source of the sin of the spies lay in the fact that they did not sufficiently consider Hashem's desire. Rather than entering the Promised Land, they preferred to remain in the Wilderness, where they could continue basking in His *Shechinah* and living an existence based on miracles. The generation of the Wilderness was called the Generation of Wisdom because they saw the *Shechinah* with their own eyes. This exalted level of sanctity obligated the spies, who did not perceive Hashem's will in the proper light. He wanted His children to enter Eretz Yisrael, where they would be capable of acquiring spiritual attainments unavailable to them in the Wilderness.

Furthermore, during their days in the Wilderness, Bnei Yisrael merited a wonderful reality pro bono. In Eretz Yisrael, on the other hand, they would be able to scale to great heights only by means of toil and exertion. They should have taken to heart the message of

(*Devarim* 11:12), “A land that... the eyes of Hashem, your G-d, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year’s end.” Settling the Land is intrinsic to the nation’s success. We are taught (see *Zohar* II, 90b; III, 4b) that the Torah, Hashem, and Yisrael are one. The study of Torah in the Wilderness cannot be compared with the study of Torah in Eretz Yisrael, for the very air of the Land makes one wise. (*Bava Batra* 158b). There are specific mitzvot which can be performed only in Eretz Yisrael. These were denied to our nation as long as they were in the Wilderness.

The entire purpose of our nation descending to Egypt was in order to be purged in the “smelting furnace” that it provided (see *Devarim* 4:20; see *Sha’ar Hakavanot, Pesach* 1). They would eventually be redeemed from Egyptian abomination, receive the Torah, and enter Eretz Yisrael. This was exactly as Hashem had promised to the Avot. After all the years of our ancestors’ suffering in Egypt, their descendants would inherit the Land and settle there peacefully, completely committed to Torah study. The grievance against the spies was very great. Living in the Generation of Wisdom, they should have realized that life in the Wilderness was a temporary existence. The *kelippah* resides there (*Zohar* II, 157:1). But Eretz Yisrael is the Land where perfection is accessible, where our attention should be focused. It was the self-aggrandizement of the spies that clouded their vision. Although they were part of the Generation of Wisdom, they could not comprehend Hashem’s true desire. Since “one sin leads to another” (*Avot* 4:2), they eventually spoke disparagingly of the Land, and spoke negatively even of Hashem Himself. The words (*Bamidbar* 13:31), “For it is stronger than us!” were directed Heavenward, *rachmana litzlan* (*Sotah* 35a).

Yehoshua stood in direct contrast to the rest of the spies. The Torah attests the following about him (*Shemot* 32:17-18). When Moshe Rabbeinu returned from receiving the Torah on High, he

heard loud sounds coming from the camps. He asked Yehoshua what they were all about. Yehoshua assumed they were the sounds of warfare, when in reality, they were the sounds of levity and frivolity, as the nation danced around the Golden Calf. The commentaries (*Rashi, Shemot 24:13*) remark that after Moshe ascended to Heaven to receive the Torah, Yehoshua pitched his tent at the foot of the mountain, anticipating the return of his beloved teacher. He was so fixed on his teacher's return that he was completely oblivious to the goings-on around him. He was unaware of the sin of the Golden Calf and the murder of Chur, who had attempted to halt the people. How could Yehoshua not know what was transpiring around him? Did he not hear the sounds, which struck Moshe's ears immediately upon descending the mountain?!

Yehoshua was cut of a different cloth from the rest of the spies. He was so intent on seeing Moshe as soon as he descended Har Sinai with the Torah that he was completely severed from his surroundings. As Yehoshua set up his tent at the foot of the mountain, he set his sights on one single goal – greeting his mentor with the Torah. In the merit of the Torah taking first place in his mind, he was the one who received it from Moshe (*Avot 1:1*). Torah is transmitted to the one who gives it place of prominence as his life's priority (*Mishlei 2:4-5; ibid. 8:17*). Yehoshua possessed the trait of honesty, never veering from his code of behavior, in spite of his surroundings. Therefore, he merited being spared from the *Chet Ha'egel*, as the pasuk (*Shmuel I, 2:9*) states, "He guards the steps of His righteous ones."

Yehoshua desired to fulfill Hashem's will, intending to perform the mitzvah of settling the Land. Moshe was afraid that the spies would influence him negatively, and he would lose all of his wonderful attributes. This is why he added the letter 'y' to his name. The others did not have the mitzvah of settling the Land foremost in their

minds. Hashem wished to bequeath the Land to Bnei Yisrael, as He had promised the Avot (*Bereishit* 15:18), “To your descendants have I given this land.” The *sefarim hakedoshim* relate (*Shelah Hakadosh, Lech Lecha; Torah Ohr* 2) that the root of the name כְּנַעַן (Canaan) is הִכְנַעַה (submission, humbleness). Only one who humbles himself can inherit the Land. But the spies came puffed with pride and arrogance. They could not comprehend Hashem’s intention. This eventually resulted in their downward spiral, until they could no longer inherit the land of their fathers.

Regarding Calev, the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 14:24) states, “A different spirit was with him.” Calev was from the tribe of Yehudah. As such, he was a fitting candidate for the crown once the nation entered the Land. Therefore, we might conjecture that he prayed at the graves of the Avot in order to be spared from the evil plot of the spies. But the Torah testifies that “a different spirit was with him.” He had no such thoughts in mind when praying at his ancestral graves. Hashem’s honor was his only motivation. This is why he saw the Land as good and blessed. The pasuk (*Bamidbar* 13:30) states that “Calev silenced the people toward Moshe.” His sole desire was to uphold whatever Moshe said, and even though Moshe had not added a letter to his name, he merited doing teshuvah and was thereby spared involvement in the evil plot of the spies.

From where did Calev draw the inspiration to pray at the graves of the Avot in order to be spared from the plan of the spies? We might answer with the dictum in Avot (2:4), “אל תאמר לכשאפנה אשנה” – שמא לא תפנה – Do not say, ‘When I am free I will study,’ for perhaps you will not become free.” The word לכשאפנה (when I am free) is similar to the name of Calev’s father, יפונה (Yefuneh). Calev understood the gravity of maintaining constant Torah sessions. He knew that just as soon as he slackened in Torah study, he would fall

prey to the wiles of the spies. He therefore prayed for Divine help at the graves of the forefathers.

Vigilance in the study hall was also the hallmark of Yehoshua. Yehoshua did not desist from Torah during his vigil for his teacher, Moshe, to the degree that he was unaware of the goings-on in the camp. The diligence of Calev's father, Yefuneh, together with Yehoshua, inspired Calev to pray at the ancestral graves in Chevron. This prayer saved him from sin. The Avot were the quintessential servants of Hashem, always cleaving to Torah and desiring to do only Hashem's will, with no self-interest whatsoever.

In a different vein, we might add that the first and last letters of the name **כלב** stand for the **כ"ב** (twenty-two) letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and the letter **ל'** refers to **לימוד התורה** (Torah study). The *gematria* of the name **כלב** is fifty-two, the same as double that of the Ineffable Name **י-ה-ו-ה**. The merit of the Torah afforded Calev Hashem's exclusive supervision, protecting him from the plot of the spies. This is the underlying meaning of the phrase (*Bamidbar* 14:24), "A different spirit was with him." The word *spirit* refers to the *neshamah*. The *neshamah* of his father, Yefuneh, stood by him, in order that he not veer from Torah study and the desire of Hashem, both alluded to in his name.

A person can be most knowledgeable in many areas of Torah, but if he is not completely committed to Torah, he is living a lie. If one part of him is true to Torah, but another part of him pursues physical pleasures, he is living a paradoxical life. On the one hand, he concerns himself with the honor of Hashem and the Torah, yet on the other hand, his personal interests precede all else. He is self-contradictory and in a most sorry state. Often, we are shown our mistakes, yet we close our eyes to our own follies, due to personal interests. May Hashem enable us to constantly be involved in Torah and fulfill His will through complete subservience.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ How could the spies, all considered *men*, come to sin? Moreover, as Rashi explains, their entire journey was shrouded in sin. Moshe knew of their evil intentions and therefore added the letter ׀ to the name of Hoshea. Why didn't he see fit to prevent their going to scout the Land in the first place, or, at the very least, add Hashem's Name to all of theirs?
- ◆ "In the way man wishes to go, he is led." The intentions of the spies were rotten from the outset. They wanted to continue ruling over the people. They knew that the first mitzvah upon entering the Land was appointing a king. But because they wanted to retain their positions of prestige, they defamed the Land before the nation. This would scare Bnei Yisrael away from it, and they would continue ruling. Had Moshe prevented them from scouting Eretz Yisrael, they would have found other ways of rebelling against Hashem, but then their sin would have proven unbearable.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu added the letter ׀, which, combined with the letter ׀ of Yehoshua's name, numerically equals the word גאווה (pride). Moshe prayed that only Hashem's pride should stand before him, and not the false pride of the spies.
- ◆ How did Moshe not fear for Yehoshua's safety in sending him along with the rest of the spies? Moshe knew that the addition of Hashem's Name to his would stand on his behalf. Furthermore, it was to the ultimate benefit of the spies, as well as of the entire nation, that there was one who spoke well of the Land. Had this not been the case, Hashem's wrath would have been increased manifold. Moreover, Yehoshua was the one appointed to eventually lead them into the Land. Remembering his glowing report about Eretz Yisrael allowed the nation a measure of confidence in following him there.
- ◆ Moshe added the letter ׀ to Yehoshua's name. This is the smallest of all the Hebrew letters, alluding to humbleness and subservience. This teaches that a leader must be the servant of his people. "Nothing stands

in the way of desire.” Moshe blessed only Yehoshua, for he discerned the true desire of the spies. His blessing would hold no power to influence them. Additionally, were they to sin while containing the Name of Hashem within their own, their sin would have been all the greater.

- ◆ One opinion is that the spies sinned due to not understanding Hashem’s plan. The Wilderness was a temporary setting for the nation; Eretz Yisrael was their ultimate destination. Hashem supervises this Land in a special way, the Land itself makes its inhabitants wise, and there are specific mitzvot relevant only there. It was their arrogance that clouded their intellect, blinding them to Hashem’s desire, and causing them to rebel against Him.
- ◆ Regarding Calev, the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 14:24) states, “A different spirit was with him.” He visited the ancestral graves only out of the desire to bring honor to Hashem’s Name, and not to eventually become king of the nation. He was inspired to do this in the merit of his father, Yefuneh, who taught him never to postpone spiritual pursuits. He learned this from Yehoshua, as well, who did not detach himself from his teacher, Moshe, thereby being spared from the sin of the Golden Calf and meriting to lead the nation. The name כלב stands for the כ”ב (twenty-two) letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and the letter ל’ refers to לימוד התורה (Torah study). The *gematria* of the name כלב is fifty-two, the same as double that of the Ineffable Name יה-וה-וה-י. The merit of the Torah afforded him Hashem’s exclusive supervision.



Last in Deed, but First in Thought

“But the men who had ascended with him said: We cannot ascend to that people for it is stronger than us!”

(Bamidbar 13:31)

Rashi expounds on the words *for it is stronger than us*, that they said this regarding the One Who is Above. Bnei Yisrael were insinuating that the people of Canaan would prove too strong for Hashem to overcome.

Hashem told Bnei Yisrael, His Chosen Nation, that He was on the verge of bringing them into Eretz Yisrael, the land of milk and honey, the place that Hashem supervises throughout the year (see *Devarim* 11:12). Hashem’s attributes are good. Therefore, all He desires is to benefit mankind (see *Da’at Tevunot* of the *Ramchal* 18). And even when He does something which seems difficult to understand, and may even be painful, His wish is that we awaken to teshuvah (ibid. 142).

Often, things seem good and pleasant. But afterward, they are exposed for their true essence, which is detrimental. This is referred to (*Kohelet* 5:12) as “riches hoarded by their owner to his misfortune.” Instead of bringing him joy and wealth, the rich man’s fortunes sometimes bring him misfortune and sorrow.

Hashem, Who desires to grant goodness upon His creatures, testified that Eretz Yisrael is the Chosen Land, perfect in every way. What, then, was the purpose of the spies in scouting the Land? Their plan to spy the Land was rotten at the root, stemming from a place of heresy and doubt of Hashem’s word. They denied Hashem,

claiming that the native nations were too powerful for Him, *rachmana litzlan* (*Sotah* 35a).

How awesome is the power of *lashon hara*! The spies made charges that were ludicrous, yet Bnei Yisrael were drawn after them and believed in them, to the extent that they rebelled against Hashem. *Lashon hara* blinds the eyes of the wise and confuses their minds.

The spies were originally the *Nesi'im* of the nation and princes of note (*Rashi, Bamidbar* 13:3). How could such prominent people fall into such severe sin, speaking derogatorily of the Land and brazenly toward Heaven?!

The original motivation behind their desire to tour the Land, in spite of Hashem's promise that it was flowing with milk and honey, was their self-centeredness. The spies knew that the first mitzvah which Bnei Yisrael would be commanded upon entry into the Land would be to crown a king upon themselves (*Devarim* 17:15; see *Sanhedrin* 20b). Since they feared being demoted from their posts, they plotted to speak negatively about the Land (*Zohar* III, 158a). Certainly, they did not originally entertain thoughts of speaking against Heaven, but "one sin leads to another" (*Avot* 4:2). Their desire for honor caused them to speak *lashon hara*, which eventually sucked them deeper and deeper into sin, until they actually spoke against Hashem Himself.

Every act of a person is preceded by a thought. If this thought is positive, the act that follows will be solidly based, and be beneficial and good. But if the preceding thought is negative, the act which follows will likewise be harmful. This is stated in the *Lecha Dodi* liturgy, in the words "Last in deed, but first in thought." We must ensure that all of our deeds are done with appropriate forethought. Negative motivations will certainly produce misdeeds. Positive thoughts, on the other hand, will provide benefit and advantage.

One should always consider his motives before acting. Are his intentions pure, or does he harbor self-interests? Is he driven by altruism, or do materialism and prestige propel him?

When a person is faced with decisions which will direct his future, he must carefully examine the purity of his intentions. He must scrutinize his resolutions at their core, making sure they do not contain twisted calculations. An infected original thought is liable to cause numerous blemishes down the line.

A young man and woman once came to me, stating that they wished to marry. When I asked the young man whether or not he was Jewish, he blushed furiously and answered no. The woman was extremely surprised to hear this, assuming he was a Jew. I asked her how she was so sure that he was Jewish. She said that she had met him at a Torah *shiur*, and presumed that only Jews attend such lectures.

This first mistaken assumption blinded her eyes, to the extent that she did not even verify his religion. Had she investigated the matter, and not wandered after mistaken notions, she would immediately have severed all connection with him, never imagining entering into marriage with this fellow.

Similarly, because their initial intention in scouting the Land was flawed, the spies caused their own deaths and the deaths of their entire generation.

Eretz Yisrael is unique among all of the lands. It is the only country called “the Land,” as Hashem had told Avraham Avinu (*Bereishit* 12a), “Go for yourself... to the Land that I will show you.” We don’t find that England, France, Morocco, Brazil, or any other country is called “the Land.” We call each place by its name, whereas Eretz Yisrael is called “the Land of Israel.” The word Land

denotes importance, describing the significance of, and fondness for, the Chosen Land, bequeathed to the Chosen Nation. In Morocco, we used to refer to Eretz Yisrael simply as “the Land,” signifying its inherent holiness and significance.

Moreover, all other countries are gauged by their external qualities – for example, their size, quality of soil, minerals, and strategic location. But Eretz Yisrael is measured by a completely different yardstick (see *Sefat Emet, Vayikra, Pesach* תרס”ו). Superficial sighting cannot absorb its essence (see *ibid. Bamidbar, Shelach* תרס”ז). Even when the spies saw the tremendous fruits of the Land, they construed it as a disadvantage and not the blessing that it was. Had their original touring been with a good eye, all of their sightings would have been intrinsically different, producing praiseworthy results.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Hashem had told the nation that Eretz Yisrael was a good land. Why, then, did the spies feel compelled to scout the Land? Furthermore, how did they fall so low, speaking brazenly against Hashem Himself?
- ◆ A person’s actions depend on his initial motivating thoughts. Since the *Nesi'im* were, first and foremost concerned with their own personal glory, fearful that entering Eretz Yisrael would prove the end of their career as princes of the nation, they decided to speak derogatorily about the Land, thereby postponing Bnei Yisrael’s entry into it. Since their original thoughts were flawed, all of their subsequent deeds were flawed, as well, for “one sin leads to another.”
- ◆ “Last in deed, but first in thought.” If a person wants his deeds to be beneficial and productive, he should ensure that his preceding thoughts are good, specifically when major issues are at stake.



The Negative Results of Negative Speech

“They brought forth to the Children of Israel an evil report on the Land that they had spied out, saying: The Land through which we have passed, to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants! All the people that we saw in it were huge!”

(*Bamidbar* 13:32)

After the spies returned from scouting the Land, they brought back a disparaging report. They complained to the people that Eretz Yisrael devours its inhabitants. What is the point of entering, they asked, if, after a short time, they will all be consumed? As a punishment for their words, Bnei Yisrael wandered in the Wilderness instead of entering Eretz Yisrael immediately after *Matan Torah*, as was the original plan. They were decreed to remain there for another forty years, in retribution for the forty days in which the spies scouted the Land (*ibid.* 14:34).

Lashon hara sometimes begins with something small and insignificant. But it can swell into mammoth proportions, beyond imagination. It can even result in scorning Hashem, *rachmana litzlan*. At first, the spies spoke ill only of Eretz Yisrael. But they were walking on thin ice. Their words eventually snowballed into heretical diatribe, as explained above (*Rashi, Bamidbar* 13:31).

For this reason, the *Chachamim* forbade even *avak lashon hara* (*Bava Batra* 165a). This speech, not necessary derogatory in and of itself, is liable to be a springboard for juicy gossip, out-and-out Torah transgressions, which carry hefty penalties.

Our Sages state that the fast of Assarah b'Tevet is nearly as serious as that of Tishah b'Av. On Assarah b'Tevet, the enemy merely surrounded the wall of Yerushalayim, whereas on Tishah b'Av, the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed, and our nation was exiled. How can these two fasts be compared?

Assarah b'Tevet was the beginning of the destruction. If not for the events of that day, the enemy would never have come to destroy the Beit Hamikdash. We fast and mourn on that day because it was the harbinger of the terrible tragedies to come.

Rashi asks (*Bamidbar* 13:2), "Why was the passage concerning the spies placed next to the passage concerning Miriam? For she was stricken over matters of speech which she spoke against her brother, and these wicked ones, the spies, saw what happened to her, yet did not take a lesson from it."

Miriam was punished for casting aspersions upon Moshe. She asked why Moshe saw fit to separate from his wife. If it was because he was a prophet, well, she and Aharon were also prophets, yet they did not separate from their spouses. How dare Moshe behave this way, bringing suffering upon his wife, Tzipporah?! (*Tanchuma* 96:13). The sefarim state (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 737) that Miriam said these things in front of Moshe, thereby proving that she did not mean to be disparaging. If she had no ill intentions, why was she punished so severely?

Miriam knew that Moshe's trademark was humility. Due to his humbleness, Moshe would not respond. This made her remarks fall into the category of *lashon hara* spoken behind the subject's back.

Had Miriam had altruistic motivations, she should have spoken privately to Moshe, without including Aharon in their tête-à-tête. Involving Aharon in their conversation brought her words under the

umbrella of *lashon hara*. In response to her sin, she was showered with *tzara'at*.

The spies should have taken a lesson from Miriam. She did not mean to speak disparagingly, yet was punished. All the more so would they receive retribution for speaking undeniable *lashon hara*. But how can we compare Miriam's speech with that of the spies? Miriam spoke about a living being, whereas the spies spoke merely about a place. Superficially, it seems as though Miriam's sin was much graver.

The fact that the spies cast aspersions on Eretz Yisrael was a form of heresy, for Hashem had told them that Eretz Yisrael is blessed more than all other lands, above scrutiny. Not only did they obstinately oppose Hashem's will in scouting the Land, they added to their iniquity by speaking disparagingly about the Land of milk and honey. They were therefore punished for their heretical invective.

We can compare the sin of the spies with the command (*Shemot* 23:5), "You shall help repeatedly with him." If one sees his friend's donkey collapsing from a burden too big to bear, he is instructed to help alleviate the poor beast. He may not exempt himself by claiming that the owner can manage on his own. If one desists from helping his fellow man in this manner, he deserves a double punishment. One for not helping his fellow man; and another for transgressing this Torah injunction. This was the case with the spies. They spoke merely about the Land. But they chose the wrong land to speak about. This was the place lauded by Hashem as the most luscious spot, lacking nothing.

Furthermore, the spies wished to prevent Bnei Yisrael's entry into Eretz Yisrael, disqualifying the nation from keeping the mitzvot of the Land. This was likely to cause a breach in the Torah as a whole,

for the Torah is one entity and demands observance of all its mitzvot.

The pasuk (*Bamidbar* 13:26) states, “They went and came to Moshe and to Aharon.” Why is it necessary to state that they went – isn’t it obvious that in order to come, they had to first go from their original place? Rashi explains, “Just as their coming was with an evil scheme, so too, their going was with an evil scheme.” The Zohar (III, 158a) adds that the spies were afraid that upon entering the Land, they would be demoted from their posts as princes, as the nation would be commanded to coronate a king. They decided to speak ill of the Land in order to cause the nation to fear entering it, so that they themselves would remain the *Nesi'im*.

How can we say about *distinguished men* (*Rashi* 13:3), that they went with evil intentions? It was the responsibility of the spies, as *Nesi'im* of the nation, to spur Am Yisrael with the desire to enter the Land. The *Nesi'im* were the envoys of the people and were thus meant to direct the nation properly. But they were remiss. Instead, they incited the people to send spies. They wanted to maintain their status of significance. Therefore, even their going was considered evil.

See how envy, lust, and craving for honor drive a person out of the world (*Avot* 4:21)! The *Nesi'im* hungered for power and prestige, envying the future king of Israel. The commentaries remark that they were actually envious of Calev ben Yefuneh, of the tribe Yehudah, from whose tribe the future kings of the nation would come (see *Likutei Batar*, *Lekutei* 116, in the name of the *Kenesset Yechezkel*). Despite their obligation to steer the nation in the right direction, they betrayed their mission, due to these three negative character flaws, speaking *lashon hara* against Eretz Yisrael and heresy against Hashem.

Lashon hara is a cancerous growth. It begins as a small cell, hardly discernable. But if it is not excised in time, it grows and festers, sending its poison throughout the entire body. It starts as a speck of dust. But if it is not flicked away, it grows thicker and thicker, until it is heavy and powerful enough to smother a person.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The sin of *lashon hara* may begin with a small word, but grow to epic proportions. We find that the spies originally spoke disparagingly about the Land and eventually spoke ill of Hashem Himself.
- ◆ The Torah forbids even words of *avak lashon hara*, for they are liable to result in terrible slander. The fast of Assarah b'Tevet is considered as severe as Tishah b'Av, for it marks the beginning of the end.
- ◆ The sin of the spies is connected to the sin of Miriam, because the spies should have taken a lesson from her and not spoken *lashon hara*. She was guilty of *lashon hara* even though she spoke in front of Moshe, since she knew he was humble and would not speak up to defend himself. It was considered as if she spoke behind his back.
- ◆ If Miriam, who did not have negative intentions, was punished, all the more so were the spies, who purposely spoke disparagingly, deserving of retribution. How can we compare Miriam's speaking about a human being to the spies' report about an inanimate land? Speaking about the Land of milk and honey is akin to speaking against Heaven itself. For this, they were held accountable.
- ◆ Included in the sin of the spies was the fact that they wished to defer entry into Eretz Yisrael, thus denying Bnei Yisrael the opportunity to observe the mitzvot of the Land. Thus they would damage the entire Torah. For this, they were punished.
- ◆ The pasuk states, "They went and came to Moshe and to Aharon." Both their coming and going were with evil intentions. The Zohar explains that when they returned from scouting the Land, they sought to speak

negatively about it, in order that Am Yisrael should be scared to enter, and thereby they would maintain their posts as *Nesi'im*. But the Torah calls them *distinguished men*. Why was even their going considered evil?

- ◆ On their great level, they should have obviated the need among the nation for touring the Land. They should, instead, have strengthened the level of the people's *emunah*, trusting that the Land was just as good as Hashem had promised. Their encouragement to send forth spies proved that they had evil intentions from the start.



The Test of Ahavat Hashem

“They brought forth to the Children of Israel an evil report on the Land that they had spied out, saying: The Land through which we have passed, to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants! All the people that we saw in it were huge!”

(Bamidbar 13:32)

Many commentaries ask how the spies could have spoken ill of the Land. Hashem had testified to its perfection, calling it “a land of milk and honey.” The spies scouted out the Land for the duration of forty days and merited returning in peace. How could they disparage the Land, as they were carrying its tremendous fruits back to the people, having been spared from the giants who lived there?

The Zohar (III, 158a) says that the spies were the *Nesi'im* of the nation. They were afraid that after Bnei Yisrael entered Eretz

Yisrael, they would be demoted from their posts, in favor of the king, whom the nation would elect upon entry into the Land. They hatched a plan to prevent Am Yisrael from desiring to enter the Land, thereby obviating the election of a king. These people were righteous, prominent men (*Bamidbar* 13:3; *Rashi* *ibid.*; *Tanchuma, Shelach* 4). How could they be accused of speaking derogatorily about Eretz Yisrael for their own self-aggrandizement?

In order to explain, I would like to preface with the incident of Rut Hamoaviah (*Rut* 1:8-17). Naomi, mother-in-law of Rut and Orpah, attempted to discourage her daughters-in-law from returning with her to Eretz Yisrael. She tried to persuade them to return to their father's home in the land of Moav. Orpah accepted her mother-in-law's entreaties and turned on her heel, heading back to Moav. But Rut stayed with Naomi, proclaiming, "Where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people, and your G-d is my G-d." Orpah and Rut had grown up together (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Rut* 600) and married brothers. How could their reactions to Naomi's appeals have been so contradictory?

They both knew that back home, a life of wealth and ease beckoned them, whereas in Eretz Yisrael, poverty and privation would be their lot. Orpah was drawn back to the riches of her father's home, which she preferred over a life of suffering and tribulation. Rut was well-aware of what awaited her in Eretz Yisrael, but she knew the definition of true wealth. The glitter of gold eventually fades, while spiritual acquisitions last forever. This thought propelled her to follow Naomi. Rut kept sight of *Olam Haba*, whereas Orpah clung to the transience of *Olam Hazeh*.

Orpah surely converted to Judaism before she married the son of the righteous judge, Elimelech. But this did not stand by her on the day of reckoning, when she chose to turn her back on her mother-in-law, Naomi. She went ahead and married a non-Jew and

gave birth to the rasha, Goliat (*Sotah* 42b), who cursed Hashem (*Shmuel* I, 17:10, *ibid.*, 17:45). How could a woman who had been married to the son of the leader of the generation abandon it all, marrying a gentile and begetting a hate-monger?

In order to answer this question, let us ask ourselves the following: Do we truly love Hashem? Does our love for Him completely fill our hearts? Or is it mere lip-service? *Ahavat Hashem* is tested during a time of challenge. If a person overcomes his *nisayon*, and continues clinging to Hashem even when the going gets tough, this is proof that he is fulfilling the command (*Devarim* 6:5) “You shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources.”

The very fact that Orpah could turn her back to the Jewish nation and return to the idolatry of her father’s home, marrying a gentile and begetting a wicked man, proves that she never truly loved Hashem. During a time of test, she buckled under and forsook everything holy. On the other hand, Rut truly loved Hashem with every fiber of her being. Therefore, even when times were rough, she continued to cleave to the Jewish nation, telling her mother-in-law that she would never forsake her.

I am acquainted with a cardiologist who was looking for a job for a number of years. After five years of searching, he found the position he was looking for and made a *seudat hodayah* in gratitude to Hashem. A few days later, he was notified that his job entailed working on Shabbat. He knew that working on Shabbat was out of the question. He therefore left this promising job. This is called a true lover of Hashem. One who is prepared to abandon his personal comfort in order to increase the quality of his eternal life is a person who places love of Hashem at the forefront of his consciousness.

Shmuel Hanavi (I, 17:16) describes how Goliat would go out early each morning for forty days, in order to blaspheme the Jewish

nation (ibid. vs. 10). He chose the early hours, in order to counteract the power of the morning Kriyat Shema of Am Yisrael (*Sotah* 42b). It seems that Goliath inherited an especial aversion to this particular prayer, for we recite there (*Devarim* 6:5), “You shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources.” His mother, Orpah, failed miserably in this area, proving her infidelity to Hashem. Rut, on the other hand, withstood the *nisayon* admirably, for love of Hashem filled her being. She therefore merited being the forebear of David Melech Yisrael, who eventually killed Goliath.

Let us return to the account of the spies. They were originally tzaddikim, men of repute (*Rashi, Bamidbar* 13:3). When did they begin their downward spiral? It was as soon as they left the camp of Bnei Yisrael and placed their own personal honor before everything else. The *nisayon* for honor is a difficult one. But to one who clearly realizes that honor, fame, and prestige all come from Hashem, Who allocates them as He sees fit, the entire subject is cast in a different light. Had the spies truly loved Hashem, fully believing that they were chosen to serve Am Yisrael, they would have viewed their positions in a broader perspective.

This flaw in their *ahavat Hashem* distorted their view of their positions. This eventually led them to speak derogatorily about the Land and speak brazenly even toward Heaven, *rachmana litzlan* (*Sotah* 35a). As long as the *Nesi'im* were together with the nation under the wings of the *Shechinah*, they did not feel the push to glorify themselves. But as soon as they left, their hearts beat with self-glorification. The true test takes place when a person leaves the nursery of spirituality. Calev withstood temptation even after leaving the wings of the *Shechinah*, for love of Hashem filled his heart. He even went to the graves of the Avot in order to pray for success in withstanding the *nisayon* of the spies (34:2).

“Do not believe in yourself until the day you die” (*Avot* 2:4). Regarding the *Yetzer Hara*, Chazal (*Kiddushin* 30b) state, “If not for Hashem’s help, one would not be able to surmount him.” We need Hashem’s help in overcoming the temptations of lust and honor. Let us at least love Him unconditionally, thereby meriting *siyata di’Shemaya* to overcome all the *nisyonot* which stand before us.

David Hamelech asked Hashem to test him (see *Tehillim* 26:2; *Sanhedrin* 107a). He wished to demonstrate his unswerving love for Him, just as the *Avot* did. Hashem acceded to his request and tested him with the incident regarding Batsheva. But David did not withstand this test, marrying her before he received Divine permission (see *ibid.*). Whoever claims that David sinned is mistaken (*Shabbat* 56a), but he was judged according to his lofty level, and found guilty.

Even when a person loves Hashem perfectly, he still needs Heavenly assistance to overpower his inclinations and cleave to the ways of righteousness. For this reason, one should never place himself in a position of *nisayon*. He may feel that his love of Hashem can vanquish all temptations, but he would do well to remember that he is but flesh and blood, by definition limited in his strength. Protecting one’s eyes and ears from the forbidden is a step in the right direction toward thwarting the *Yetzer Hara*.

The letters of the word שלח (send forth) can be transposed to spell the word חלש (weak). As long as we are located in an environment of spirituality, we have the fire needed to grow in our *Avodat Hashem*. But as soon as we leave the bastion of Torah, we are confronted with the *nisyonot* of the street and are liable to become weak in our service of Hashem. Regrettably, we find that many *bachurim* take a spiritual downturn during *bein hazmanim*. The true test is the one outside the camp, past the walls of the *yeshiva*. As long as a *bachur* finds himself within the security of the

Beit Hamidrash, he is safe and sound, due to the force of the Torah there. But as soon as he leaves, if he does not harbor true love for Hashem in his heart, he is vulnerable, like a sailboat at sea, to all of the prevailing winds, liable to lose all that he acquired through sweat and toil.

Ahavat Hashem is the weapon with which we can combat the *nisyonot* and temptations of the street. When love of Hashem fills our hearts to capacity, we merit acquiring eternal life, preferring it over this temporal world.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ How could the spies bring themselves to speak derogatorily about the Land, when they observed its goodness and merited returning unscathed? The Zohar states that they wished to prevent Bnei Yisrael's entry into Eretz Yisrael, for then a king would be appointed to lead the nation, demoting them from their posts.
- ◆ The story of Rut and Orpah illustrates how the degree of one's love of Hashem affects his decisions. Orpah turned her heel upon her mother-in-law, choosing to return to her father's house. She begot the wicked Goliath. In contrast, Rut clung to Naomi, and she merited being the progenitor of David Hamelech. Orpah failed miserably, for *ahavat Hashem* was not at the forefront of her consciousness. But Rut was filled with love of Hashem, and therefore, when faced with the choice of temporary, ephemeral happiness or everlasting life, she gladly chose the latter.
- ◆ As long as the *Nesi'im* were in the camp of Hashem, they were not consumed by arrogance. But as soon as they stepped out of this spiritual hothouse, they succumbed to the temptation of personal glory. Their flawed *ahavat Hashem* brought about their downfall.
- ◆ Even when a person is consumed with love of Hashem, he must pray for *siyata di'Shemaya* in order to be able to withstand *nisyonot*. This was

the case with David Hamelech. One should try to keep away from situations of *nisyonot*, for, as our Sages exhort us, “Do not believe in yourself until the day you die.”

- ◆ The letters of the word שלח (send forth) can be transposed to spell the word חלש (weak). When a person leaves the spiritual security of the Beit Hamidrash, he exposes himself to the dangers of the street. He is liable to stumble on the roadblocks. He would do well to fill his reservoirs with *ahavat Hashem*. This will grant him the *siyata di'Shemaya* necessary to help him in a time of *nisayon*.



Man's Actions Affect Him for Better or for Worse

*“The entire assembly raised up and issued its
voice; the people wept that night”*

(Bamidbar 14:1)

The day the spies returned from touring the Land and brought back their negative report was Tishah b'Av (*Ta'anit* 29a). Hashem told the nation, “You cried for no reason. This day will become a day of weeping for generations.” Both Batei Mikdash were destroyed on Tishah b'Av, warranting it to become a day of weeping.

Our *Chachamim* prohibit Torah study on Tishah b'Av, as words of Torah gladden the heart (*ibid.* 30a). The essence of this day is sorrow and grief; in direct contradiction to the joy of Torah study.

But we do find that announcing an engagement is permitted during the week in which Tishah b'Av falls (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach*

Chaim 551:2). This is difficult to understand. Doesn't every engagement produce joy? Why, then, is it permitted at that time?

Building a Jewish home is adding a stone to the future Beit Hamikdash. Chazal (*Sotah* 17a) state that if a man and woman are meritorious, the *Shechinah* rests among them. But if not, a fire consumes them. A couple who has the intelligence to build their home on the pillars of Torah and *yirah*, with peace and unity between them, draws the *Shechinah* into their midst. But if not, the *Shechinah* departs and leaves the fire of dissention to consume them. The Beit Hamikdash was destroyed on account of baseless hatred (*Yoma* 9b). The way to mend this breach is to increase peace and brotherliness in the nation, through building Torah-true homes.

The prohibition against Torah study on Tishah b'Av is a punishment for Bnei Yisrael turning their backs upon Hashem and His Torah. Therefore, on Tishah b'Av, He deprives us of the potential for joy inherent in Torah. This gives us a feeling of the pain Hashem experienced when we neglected the Torah in those days.

I remember one Friday, when I was extremely busy with a certain financial problem. I lifted my eyes heavenward, praying for salvation. When I realized that my anxiety was consuming me, I turned to my sefarim and began delving into them. Through pleasant study, I succeeded in resolving a difficulty which had been plaguing me for a long time. When my family noticed my great joy, they hurried to ask if I had straightened out the financial problem. To their surprise, I said I hadn't. But the joy of Torah study mitigated my worries, and the fact that I had resolved a longstanding difficulty suffused me with much more joy than alleviating my financial worries ever could.

The Gemara (*Berachot* 64a) states, "*Talmidei chachamim* increase peace in the world." Their Torah study raises the level of peace in the entire world. As mentioned, the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed

on account of forsaking the Torah (*Yirmeyahu* 9:12), as well as the sin of baseless hatred (*Yoma* 9b). The way to rectify this state of affairs is through increased Torah study, which brings peace to the world. Peace is so beloved by Hashem that He allows us to make matches in the Nine Days. This is in order to intensify love and brotherliness in the world, thereby hastening the *geulah*.

Nevuchadnezzar destroyed the first Beit Hamikdash (*Melachim II*, 25:1-9). Titus destroyed the second Beit Hamikdash (*Gittin* 56b). The Midrash relates (see *Reishit Chachmah*, *Ahavah* 3; see *Shelah*, *Ta'anit*, *Matot* 22) that Nevuchadnezzar was a grandson of Shlomo Hamelech. In what way did Shlomo Hamelech sin to deserve such an unworthy descendant? He transgressed Hashem's command forbidding a king from having too many wives. But Shlomo had an agenda. He felt himself worthy of being the Mashiach. Toward this end, he married daughters of all the kings of the world, after he had them converted. His plan was that the kings themselves would be drawn after their daughters, eventually coming under the wings of the *Shechinah*, as well. When the entire world would recognize Hashem's sovereignty, it would be worthy of welcoming Mashiach.

Hashem charged Shlomo for being involved in calculating the time of Mashiach's arrival, when this was not in his domain. He was commanded to not take too many wives, and he should have obeyed. With the arrival of Nevuchadnezzar, Hashem was sending us an important message. In order for the world to be deserving of Mashiach's arrival, each and every individual must contribute his share. The tzaddikim cannot possibly do all of the work. Let us not rely on them to do the job. We ourselves must awaken and do what is incumbent upon us to hasten the *geulah*.

I am frequently visited by people who are far from Torah and mitzvah observance. They ask me to pray that they recover from an illness, or succeed in some business venture. When I notice how

distant they are from true Judaism, I tell them, “Do you think my prayers and blessings can prove beneficial to someone in your state? My blessings need something to rest upon. As long as you do not observe Torah and mitzvot, my blessings cannot be of value.” I tell them they must make themselves fitting vessels for *berachah*. They must increase their personal merits increasing their awareness in *Shemirat Shabbat*, *kashrut*, *taharat hamishpachah*, *tefillin*, etc.

Hashem was, in essence, telling Shlomo, “Do you think that merely by marrying many women, you can hasten the arrival of Mashiach? You are sorely mistaken. Every single Jew in the nation must contribute his part for the sake of Mashiach’s arrival. Only in this manner, will the Jewish nation be worthy of the ultimate *geulah*.”

The Midrash (*Tanchuma, Va’era 7*) relates that on the day that Shlomo inaugurated the Beit Hamikdash, he prayed for a miracle that he succeed in bringing in the Aron. But Hashem did not accept his prayer, and the gates remained sealed. Then he brought the bed of his father, David. The gates opened before it, and he managed to bring in the Aron as well. When this happened, everyone realized that Hashem is the only G-d, and there is none besides Him.

But this sublime state did not last long. Immediately after the inauguration, one of Shlomo’s wives, the daughter of Pharaoh, told him she had prepared a festive meal in honor of the inauguration of the Beit Hamikdash. He partook of this feast and imbibed wine, falling into a deep slumber (see *Vayikra Rabbah 12:5*). The Gemara (*Shabbat 56b*) recounts that when he had taken the daughter of Pharaoh as a wife, the angel Gavriel planted a staff in the sea, which took root and eventually developed into Rome. Shlomo Hamelech exchanged the joy of the inauguration of the Beit Hamikdash for the joy of revelry. This evoked Hashem’s wrath, bringing the ultimate destruction of the Beit Hamikdash (see *Vayikra Rabbah 12:5; Bamidbar Rabbah 10:4*).

“All’s well that ends well,” or, as the Gemara (*Berachot* 12a) declares, “Everything is remembered according to its end.” The last incident leaves the lasting impression. If one consumes garlic after eating a filling meal, it is the taste of garlic that remains in his mouth. Since Shlomo partook of the festive meal prepared by his wife after inaugurating the Beit Hamikdash, the joy of the Mikdash was converted to the joy of this feast. This was held against Shlomo, setting into motion the wheels of retribution, by none other than Nevuchadnezzar, born to the queen of Sheba, who had been converted by Shlomo Hamelech.

See what far-reaching effects our actions have! They influence future generations. The spies spoke disparagingly about the Land, which resulted in weeping for generations to come. Likewise, Shlomo Hamelech, by marrying too many wives and celebrating his ill-timed feast, caused that the future *churban* was brought about by his own grandson, Nevuchadnezzar. Inappropriate actions have far-reaching results. How much more so do positive actions.

When Nevuchadnezzar observed Chananiah, Mishael, and Azariah emerge alive from the fiery furnace, his mouth was filled with songs of praise to the Creator. He extolled Hashem to such an extent that He sent an angel to strike him on his mouth in order that his praises not exceed those of David Hamelech (*Sanhedrin* 92b). We also find that Nevuchadnezzar merited ruling over the entire world in the merit of the few steps that he took in honor of Hashem (*Sanhedrin* 96a). Just as Hashem is stringent with His sons when they sin, when they walk in His ways, He pays them many times over.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Tishah b’Av is a day of sorrow. Therefore, Torah study, which gladdens the heart, is prohibited on it. This is a direct punishment for Bnei

Yisrael's sin at the time of the *churban*, which was forsaking the Torah. Yet, announcing an engagement is permitted during the days preceding Tishah b'Av, in spite of the joy inherent therein. This is because every additional Jewish home adds a stone to the building of the future Beit Hamikdash.

- ◆ Nevuchadnezzar was a descendant of Shlomo Hamelech. Shlomo was punished in this way because he attempted to hasten the arrival of Mashiach by converting numerous princesses to Judaism through marriage. Hashem's plan is that each and every individual do his part in bringing Mashiach closer, and not rely on the tzaddikim of the generation to do the work for us.
- ◆ On the very day of the inauguration of the Beit Hamikdash, Shlomo Hamelech partook of a feast which his wife had prepared for him. The exchange of spiritual joy for physical pleasure was a catalyst in bringing about the future destruction. The last thing makes the lasting impression. This was the feast prepared by his wife, which was not held in good taste.
- ◆ Nevuchadnezzar merited ruling over the entire world, because he took a few steps for Hashem's honor. See how significant are our actions; for better or for worse.



The Significance of Forty

“Like the number of the days that you spied out the Land, forty days, a day for a year, a day for a year, shall you bear your iniquities – forty years – and you shall comprehend straying from Me”

(Bamidbar 14:34)

Hashem punished Am Yisrael measure for measure. Just as the spies scouted the Land for forty days with negative intentions, Hashem punished the nation with wandering in the Wilderness for the duration of forty years.

Hashem knows everything which will transpire. Why, then, didn't He cause the spies to spend only ten days touring the Land, thereby shortening our nation's sojourn in the Wilderness by thirty years? This question becomes intensified in light of Rashi's words. The pasuk (*Bamidbar 13:25*) states, "They returned from spying out the Land at the end of forty days." Rashi expounds that the Land of Israel is four hundred parasangs by four hundred parasangs, and the distance an average person walks is ten parasangs a day. Thus it is a forty days' walk from the east to the west alone, yet the spies walked both its length and its width. How could they have walked such a long distance in such a short time? This is because it was revealed before the Holy One that He would decree exile upon them of a year in the Wilderness for each day that the spies were on their mission. Therefore, He miraculously shortened the road before them.

If Hashem was already shortening the road, couldn't He have shortened it some more, in order to alleviate their punishment?

The Gemara (*Ta'anit* 29a) states that Hashem decreed Tishah b'Av, the day Bnei Yisrael wept for no reason, as the day of mourning the destruction of both Temples. Why, then, is Torah study forbidden on Tishah b'Av? What is the connection between the sin of the spies, with its superfluous weeping, and Torah study? On the contrary, there seems to be no better day to study Torah and connect to Hashem.

A mourner is also banned from studying Torah (*Mo'ed Katan* 15a). Wouldn't we think that specifically after someone has lost a loved one, he is aroused to come closer to his Heavenly Father? Why is the Torah, the best means of coming close to Hashem, forbidden to him then?

It is because Torah evokes joy in man's heart. Due to the honor of the deceased, it is inappropriate to have feelings of joy during a time of mourning. Hashem forbids Torah study during the week of *shivah*, so that the mourner can concentrate on his grief, thereby paying his last respects to his loved one.

Since Torah gladdens the heart, it is a privilege to be allowed to learn it. The very fact that Hashem prohibits this on Tishah b'Av indicates the degree of His anger toward our nation. Due to Bnei Yisrael's sin, they are denied the joy of Torah study on Tishah b'Av. This is part and parcel of the punishment.

The number forty alludes to the Torah, which was given after Moshe spent forty days and nights in Heaven. Why was the Torah given specifically after this amount of time? A fetus is formed in forty days (*Ohr Hachaim, Shemot* 32:6). Only after that time is it considered viable (see *Yevamot* 69b).

By bequeathing the Torah to Bnei Yisrael after forty days and nights, Hashem was indicating that until now, they did not have the

status of a living being. Only after accepting the Torah, were they considered living. Torah is the essence of man's existence, as the pasuk (*Mishlei* 3:18) states, "It is a tree of life to those who grasp it."

Upon accepting the *lashon hara* of the spies, Bnei Yisrael defamed the Torah, which contains the negative commandment (*Vayikra* 19:16): "You shall not be a gossipmonger among your people." This defect removed them from their very lifeline. Hashem had to keep them in the Wilderness for forty years in order to recreate them, granting them the merit of receiving the Torah anew. This would enable them to enter Eretz Yisrael and vanquish their enemies.

This is another reason why Torah study is forbidden on Tishah b'Av. The fact that Bnei Yisrael defected from the Torah by accepting the report of the spies deprived them of the privilege of pursuing Torah study. It is by means of sorrow and grief that they will return to their Heavenly Father and seek His closeness, the closeness of Torah.

The sin of the Golden Calf was forgiven, as Moshe had beseeched (*ibid.* 34:9), "You shall forgive our iniquity and error, and make us Your heritage." Conversely, Hashem judged the sin of the spies strictly. He did not forgive the people, causing them to wander in the Wilderness for forty years.

The day Bnei Yisrael sinned with the Golden Calf was the 17th of Tammuz (*Ta'anit* 28b). As a result, the walls of Yerushalayim were breached on that day (*ibid.*). Therefore, it was designated as a day of fasting for all generations. The sin of the spies, on the other hand, happened on Tishah b'Av (*ibid.* 29a). This day was selected as the day of the *churban* Beit Hamikdash (*ibid.*). This fact also signifies that the sin of the spies was more severe than that of the Golden Calf. How can we understand this?

When Bnei Yisrael worshipped the Golden Calf, they had not yet received the Torah. Conversely, the sin of the spies transpired after they had already received the Torah and had been warned against the sin of *lashon hara*. Therefore, Hashem was more exacting with them. Likewise, Eretz Yisrael is directly connected with Torah, due to the mitzvot of the Land stated in the Torah. Whoever scorns the *kedushah* of Eretz Yisrael is akin to one who scorns the *kedushah* of the Torah. His sin is too great to bear.

By speaking derogatorily about the Land, the spies damaged the *kedushah* of the Land, which is dependent on the Torah, as well as damaging the *kedushah* of the Torah itself. Measure for measure, they were penalized by being forbidden from studying Torah on Tishah b'Av. They were thereby denied the joy which Torah study brings. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." Distancing Bnei Yisrael from Torah study would arouse their desire to re-connect with it after this day of mourning.

Hashem calculated that the spies should spend exactly forty days touring the Land in order to compel them to wander the Wilderness for forty years, parallel to the forty days in which the Torah was given. They regained their vitality during those years, facilitating their entry into Eretz Yisrael and their inheritance of the Land.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Hashem punished Bnei Yisrael with forty years of wandering in the Wilderness. It was a fitting punishment for scouting the Land; a year for a day. Why didn't Hashem shorten their way in the Land, in order to lessen their punishment? Chazal state that Hashem did make their journey into Eretz Yisrael take less time than normal. Why didn't He shorten it even more?
- ◆ Tishah b'Av, the day the spies brought back their evil report, became a day of weeping for generations. Why did Hashem forbid Torah study on

this day, when this would seemingly mend the breach that had been formed by the spies' evil report?

- ◆ Mourners are forbidden from Torah study, which gladdens the heart. The reason for this is that one should concentrate on his personal loss and pay his last respects to his loved one. For this reason, too, Torah study is forbidden on Tishah b'Av. It is a day of mourning for all, and Torah study has no place then. With the sin of the spies, Bnei Yisrael damaged the mitzvot of the Land, included in the Torah. It is appropriate, then, that their punishment includes the ban on Torah study on that day.
- ◆ The forty days which the spies spent touring the Land correspond to the forty days and nights in which Moshe received the Torah. The number forty alludes to the days in which a fetus is formed, after which it is considered viable. Hashem emphasized the number forty in order to awaken Bnei Yisrael to the fact that *Matan Torah* was when they were created.
- ◆ The sin of the spies removed the vitality from our nation. They were therefore decreed to wander in the Wilderness for forty years, in order to renew their contract with the Torah, gaining once more the gift of life.
- ◆ Hashem was more severe regarding the sin of the spies than He had been concerning the sin of the Golden Calf. The day of the sin of the spies, Tishah b'Av, likewise, is more serious than that of the day of the sin of the Golden Calf, the 17th of Tammuz. When they sinned with the Golden Calf, the nation had not yet received the Torah. Therefore, they were less accountable for that sin than for the sin of the spies.



Appreciating the World of Action

“It shall constitute tzitzit for you, that you may see it and remember all the commandments of Hashem and perform them; and not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray”

(Bamidbar 15:39)

Chazal explain that *tzitzit* serve a dual purpose (see *Menachot* 43b). They bring man closer to mitzvah observance, while distancing him from sin. The words “You may see it and remember” drive home the point that by looking at the *tzitzit*, one is reminded of Hashem and His mitzvot. This will prevent sin and encourage adherence to mitzvot. Rashi states that the numerical value of the word צִיצִית is six hundred. Add the eight strings of the *tzitzit* and its five knots, and you have 613, the number of the Torah’s commandments. *Tzitzit* are the means by which we bind ourselves to Hashem, through remembering and observing His commandments (*Menachot* 43b).

There is a famous story regarding the Vilna Gaon (*Aliyot Eliyahu* 113:117). Before his death, he held his *tzitzit* in his hand and wept bitterly. When his disciples asked for the meaning of this, he explained, “How can I not cry? In this world, every moment of merely wearing a pair of *tzitzit* confers merit upon a person, without him making any effort at all. Moreover, looking at the *tzitzit* reminds a person to cleave to Hashem. I am about to leave this world and be deprived of this precious mitzvah.”

This world is the world of action, whereas the World to Come is the world of reward (*Rabbeinu Bachya, Devarim* 7:11). Only one who

exerts himself on Erev Shabbat (i.e., this world) will eat on Shabbat (i.e., receive his Heavenly reward). But what will one receive in the Upper World of reward, if he didn't bother exerting himself in the world of action? The Vilna Gaon lamented leaving the only place where one accrues merits. He specifically bemoaned the loss of *tzitzit*, which provide their wearer with untold reward. Every moment a person wears *tzitzit*, he is accumulating merits, with hardly any effort on his part. Additionally, the *tzitzit* have the ability to awaken him to perform the rest of the mitzvot.

The Gemara (*Berachot* 28b) recounts that before his death, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai began weeping. When asked to explain, he said that he feared for his future. He saw two paths before him. One led to Gan Eden; the other, to Gehinnom. He did not know on which road he would be led. He further dreaded his judgment before the Creator, which he would be obligated to undergo. He wasn't sure if he was leaving this world sufficiently prepared to meet his Maker in the Heavenly Court.

The Gemara continues that Rabban Yochanan proclaimed, "Make way for Chizkiyahu, king of Yehudah!" This was despite of the fact that Chizkiyahu died hundreds of years earlier. Rabban Yochanan's disciples understood that King Chizkiyahu had come to escort him to the world of good. This was perfect proof that Rabban Yochanan was certainly on the way to Gan Eden. Nonetheless, he feared facing the Heavenly Tribunal. Until his last moment, he did not rely on his deeds to bring him to a good place. He constantly feared lest sin propel him into Gehinnom.

If Rabban Yochanan, famed for his piety and righteousness, worried about his future, not relying on his tremendous Torah knowledge or his mitzvah observance, what can we, men of small stature, say for ourselves? We do not reach even the heels of this giant, who spent all his days fulfilling Hashem's word to the letter.

Many tzaddikim dread the day of death. They appreciate the value of every minute of life in this world, the world of action. Since they realize how tremendous is the reward for Torah study and mitzvah performance, they constantly seek ways and means of utilizing every moment properly in preparation for their final journey. Tzaddikim do not take comfort in the knowledge that they did mitzvot to perfection. They are always afraid that maybe they were somehow remiss in their mitzvah performance. Maybe they did not exhibit enough enthusiasm while doing mitzvot, and this will be held against them. We should take a lesson from their behavior, and never claim to be good enough, satisfied with what we have already accomplished. One should always feel there is more to learn. He should always strive to progress, for “as long as the candle burns, it is still possible to mend,” increasing one’s mitzvah account.

Once, approximately at 2:00 a.m., Rav Shach, zy”a, was seeking matches to light a cigarette. He felt that smoking would keep him awake, enabling him to continue his Torah study. He looked all around for matches, but could not find them anywhere. The next day, his disciples noticed that he had stopped smoking. They asked him to explain. He said that he had wasted too much time in the pursuit of matches. If smoking can cause such a waste of time from Torah study, a very serious offense, he wished to have none of it. He immediately stopped his habit of smoking, so that he should not find himself in such a predicament again.

This anecdote depicts how tzaddikim view life in this world. They appreciate every single moment of life, for it can be sanctified for Torah study and mitzvah performance, whose rewards are indescribable. The following tale gives us insight into the priceless value of mitzvot.

A man appeared before the Chafetz Chaim, complaining that his lot was bitter and painful. “Can’t Hashem repay me in this world for

one mitzvah that I did, and all of my troubles will leave?” The Chafetz Chaim replied, “Chazal teach us (*Kiddushin* 39b), ‘The reward for a mitzvah is not in this world.’ Hashem rewards us only in *Olam Haba*.” He went on to compare this with someone who enters a candy store. He wishes to purchase a candy and pays with a thousand-dollar bill. Obviously, this is ludicrous. The cashier will not give him so much change for such a small purchase.

Hashem does not reward our mitzvot in this world, for the reward for even the smallest mitzvah is unimaginable. Only in the World to Come, the world of eternity, can a person expect to receive remuneration as befitting each and every one of his good deeds.

I remember once visiting Rav Shach, zy”a. We spoke of the spiritual condition of the Jews in France. I asked if I could transmit to them a message from him, as they thirsted for the word of Hashem. He looked me in the eye, and with characteristic modesty, told me, “I don’t have much to say. I will state something which everyone knows but bears repeating. Upon awakening each morning, a person opens his eyes, and moves his hands and feet, and all of his other limbs. This all seems most natural. He certainly doesn’t see this as a reason to become excited and to thank Hashem for returning his *neshamah* after a night’s sleep, which is similar to death. This lack of excitement stems from our living in a world of routine. It is this routine which blinds man’s eyes to the wonderful miracles which transpire anew each day.

“In order for a person to awaken in *emunah*, which will eventually bring him to crown Hashem as his King, prompting him to learn Torah and keep mitzvot, he must begin his day with the following question, ‘Who gives me the strength to move my limbs? Who allows me to open my eyes, to hear with my ears, to taste with my mouth?’ Faith comes from studying the world of nature and noticing Hashem behind the scenes, guiding us individually with His

Providence. This observation will help him feel tremendous love toward the Creator. It will engender the desire to fulfill His wishes with all of one's might, even at the cost of one's own personal interests."

These words, said with such simplicity, rang with genuine truth. If we would only recite *Modeh Ani* with proper attention and intention, our days would look different, and *emunah* in Hashem would be discernable in our every step.

Rabbi David Finkel, zt"l, a relative of Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, zy"l (also known as the Brisker Rav), related that he once saw a figure dancing in the snow. Upon examination, he realized that it was none other than Rav Shach. He asked him to come inside, so that he wouldn't get sick from the freezing weather. Rav Shach declined. He explained that he had just left the home of the Brisker Rav, where he had merited hearing a wonderful Torah insight. How could he not jump from joy? Here is the place to add that in his will, Rav Shach wrote that he prayed to leave this world in a state of complete teshuvah. See how great are our tzaddikim! Their entire lives revolve around the axis of Avodat Hashem. Nevertheless, their undying wish is to leave this world in perfect teshuvah, arriving before the Heavenly Court pure and worthy.

Let us learn a lesson from the deeds of our leaders. They attempt to use every moment in the employ of their Maker. And even on their deathbeds, they worry lest they did not accomplish enough in this world, the world of deeds. As long as they live, they strive to reach greater heights. All we can say is, "When will our deeds reach those of our forefathers?" (*Tanna d'vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 25).

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The pasuk states, "That you may see it and remember." Merely seeing the *tzitzit* has the power to awaken a person to perform mitzvot and

distance himself from aveirot. The word *tzitzit* is numerically equivalent to 613, hinting to the 613 mitzvot, as explained by Rashi. And simply wearing *tzitzit* grants a person constant reward, with no effort on his part.

- ◆ The tzaddikim of our nation always try to utilize every moment to the fullest. They know that only in this world are they granted the opportunity to accrue merit. They are always afraid that maybe they did not fulfill each mitzvah to perfection. This would decrease their reward. See how significant is this world of deed!
- ◆ Rav Shach, zy”a, said that merely noting the fact that our body is miraculously revitalized every day has the power to strengthen our *emunah* and encourage us to fulfill the mitzvot properly.



The Fringe Benefits of Tzitzit

“It shall constitute tzitzit for you, that you may see it and remember all the commandments of Hashem and perform them; and not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray”

(*Bamidbar* 15:39)

Hashem commanded Bnei Yisrael to put *tzitzit* on their four-cornered garments. The *tzitzit* have the power to remind a person about Hashem’s existence and His mitzvot, as it says, “that you may see it and remember.” By remembering Hashem and His Torah, one avoids aveirot and is drawn to mitzvot (see *Menachot* 43b).

Tzitzit serve as a partition separating one from sin. Gazing at one's *tzitzit* awakens him to thoughts of Hashem and stirs his heart to fulfill His commandments.

What was it that safeguarded our nation during their years of slavery in Egypt, the land of abomination (*Sifra, Acharei Mot* 13:5-7)? They had not yet been granted the Torah, and were therefore not yet commanded to keep the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. What was it that protected them from assimilation and preserved their Jewish identity, in spite of the adversity they faced?

When a person is faced with trials and tribulations, he has two options. He can either strengthen his connection with Hashem and intensify his faith, or he can, *chalilah*, throw in the towel, wiping his hands of Torah and mitzvot. Many members of our nation emerged from the Holocaust strong and firm of faith. Amidst all their suffering, they saw Divine intervention at play, time and again. The Holocaust did not break their spirit. On the contrary, it fortified it ever the more. In contrast, there were many who denied Hashem's existence after experiencing the atrocities of the Holocaust. They were stripped of any vestige of Judaism. This was due to their unmitigated anger toward Hashem, Who allowed them to suffer so. Let us not judge these Jews who were placed in such awful circumstances. Chazal (*Avot* 2:4) teach, "Do not judge another person until you have reached his place."

Bnei Yisrael suffered tremendously in Egyptian bondage. The men were forced to do the work of women, while the women were compelled to do the labor of men (*Sotah* 11b). They were under such duress that family life came to a halt (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 163). Nevertheless, they maintained their Jewish identity with utmost self-sacrifice. They never allowed themselves to be defiled by the gentiles. What was the secret of their success? How did they succeed in preserving their Judaism in a land reeking with

immorality? How did they manage to live in line with Hashem's wishes, when their lives were constantly on the line? They managed to do all of this, without even the merit of the Torah, which is a rampart of security against the gentiles. They had not yet been commanded the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, whose main objective is to protect a person from abomination and immorality, as the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 15:39) says, "That you may see it and remember" and, immediately afterward, "and not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray."

Am Yisrael were redeemed in the merit of the following. The first was the righteous women among them (*Tanchuma, Pekudei* 9). In their merit, Am Yisrael increased and multiplied. When these women noticed how down-and-out their husbands had become from the slave-labor, they would pull out their mirrors, using them to beautify themselves. In this manner, they would win over their husbands' hearts, producing more members for the Jewish nation. The chain of our heritage was never severed. Bnei Yisrael also possessed the merit of never changing their language, dress, or names (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 4:25; see *Maharal, Netzach Yisrael* 25; *Pesikta Zutrati, Shemot* 6:6). This helped them maintain a distance from the gentiles and preserve their unique lifestyle as the Jewish nation, in spite of their centuries of bondage.

Carrying a Jewish name carries with it a constant reminder of one's Judaism, preventing assimilation with the gentiles. Many Jews in the Diaspora have the practice of calling their children distinctly non-Jewish names. These names seem to them more sophisticated than those of the ghetto Jews. And then there are those who try to straddle both worlds. They give their children both a Jewish and a non-Jewish name. What happens is that the child ends up being called by his secular name and quickly forgets his Jewish name

altogether. When he registers for marriage, he cannot even remember his Jewish name.

Assimilation begins when parents give their children secular names. In this manner, they categorically erase their Jewish identity, deleting all distinction between them and their gentile neighbors. A boy who is called Robert or Raymond feels equal to his non-Jewish friends. When he grows up, he feels no compunctions about marrying a gentile girl, believing there is no real difference between them, as they all have similar names.

A person may make a mark on his wrist in order to remind himself of something. Likewise, one's Jewish name is a constant reminder that he is a member of the Chosen Nation. It is imperative that he preserve his identity and not assimilate among the nations of the world.

Another item which Bnei Yisrael preserved in Egypt was their distinctly Jewish dress. This was an effective method of separating themselves from their gentile neighbors. I remember my father, zy"va, often wearing five or six *kippot* at once, even in the sweltering summer. When we would try to convince him to leave on only one *kippah*, and avoid such heat, he replied that the more heat he feels on his head, the more fired up he is with love of Hashem. The layers of *kippot* added layers to his sense of Hashem's existence and were well worth the discomfort.

The Haskalah movement began with the claim "Why should we be different and separate from the gentiles? Let us be just like them! We will call ourselves by their names, we will speak their language, and we will wear their clothes. This way, we will not look odd in their eyes." These people honestly felt that if we behave as similarly as possible to the nations and subscribe to their culture, their inherent hatred toward us will disappear. But they did not realize that one of

the laws of nature is that Eisav hates Yaakov (*Sifri, Beha'alotcha* 11). Even if the Jew behaves more gentile-like than the non-Jew, this force of nature will not change. On the contrary, their animosity will only grow. Hashem injected the nations of the world with hatred toward us. It is part and parcel of their very make-up, in order to prevent assimilation. If there are Jews who are not punctilious in preserving their Jewish heritage, choosing instead the lifestyle of the gentile, Hashem turns the wrath of the gentiles upon them, in the hope that they will awaken and repent from their evil deeds, internalizing the fact that they are part of the Jewish nation.

Parashat *Shemot* (2:5) relates the account of Batya, daughter of Pharaoh, who went with her maidens to immerse in the river. She suddenly heard the cry of a youth. She stuck out her hand toward his basket, and Hashem stretched her arm so that she succeeded in reaching it and removing him from the water (*Sotah* 12b). Chazal (*ibid.*) explain that Batya had gone down to the river to purify herself from the defilement of Egypt and join the Jewish nation. This is difficult to comprehend. What possessed Batya to leave her life of comfort and convenience, in order to join the wretched Jewish nation? We find that Yitro, too, turned his back on his past and joined the Jewish people (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 268), but his conversion occurred at a time when Am Yisrael was on the top of the world, and all the nations recognized Hashem's greatness, as well as the greatness of His people, who merited His mighty miracles and left Egypt with a strong hand. What did Batya see in the Jewish nation that drew her to them?

Batya was impressed, each time anew, at how this nation did not seek to merge with the gentiles, despite all their suffering. They staunchly maintained their identity by not changing their names, dress, or language. These aspects of their loyalty proved to her their individuality from among all of the nations. Their preference to

suffer rather than forsake their heritage testified to their unique status. She was drawn to investigate their ways in greater depth.

Batya took the step of immersing in the river. There, she heard the cry of a youth. The Gemara (see *Sotah* 12b) asks why the pasuk states that a youth was crying? Moshe was a tiny newborn at the time! We can learn a lesson from this. A person must educate his children in the ways of Torah and mitzvot from infancy, as though they are already young men. Proper *chinuch* begins from early childhood. There are those who state that it begins even beforehand, from the time the baby is still in his mother's womb. He absorbs all that occurs in his surroundings even at that tender age.

A couple once approached a Torah leader, asking for advice in educating their newborn. He turned to them and said, "Where were you until now? You should have come nine months ago, as soon as this child was conceived." In the womb, the fetus absorbs voices and sights and becomes influenced by them.

In order for parents to educate their offspring successfully, they must first educate themselves so that they can serve as role models. Unfortunately, many of our brethren are unschooled in Torah Judaism. Their parents failed to provide them with a Torah upbringing. How much pain I feel each time that I witness the suffering of parents who tell me that their children married out! I ask if they ever troubled themselves to provide their children with the most basic Jewish concepts, like Shemirat Shabbat, *taharat hamishpachah*, kashrut, etc. They shamefully respond no. Although it hurts me to do it, I then reprimand them. "Why did you stick your heads in the sand and not wake up earlier? What did you expect from children who are inundated with the filth of the streets, with no type of protection?!"

The intelligent person who foresees the future will educate his children in the ways of our heritage, as we did from generation to

generation. He will bequeath to his children uncompromising, kosher education, without emulating the gentiles in their names, language, or dress. Wearing *tzitzit* and providing them for one's sons will serve as a talisman of protection from sin. The Gemara (*Menachot* 44a) relates that a Jewish man was tempted to commit a sin with a beautiful woman. But as soon as he caught sight of his *tzitzit*, he was reminded of Hashem and ran for his life.

Often, parents feel that they are behaving cruelly toward their children by preventing them from following the ways of the gentiles, or awakening them early for prayer with a minyan. But the exact opposite is the case. One who does not stop his children from going in the way of sin and does not feel the need to educate them in mitzvot, is displaying cruelty. They will eventually be drawn after lust and materialism, completely forgetting their Jewish roots. Who knows how they will end up? Wise men would do well to keep their eyes open and their finger on the pulse of their children's upbringing.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The mitzvah of *tzitzit* has the power to bring a person closer to mitzvah performance, while distancing him from sin. This is learned from the juxtaposition of the words, “That you may see it and remember” and, immediately afterward, “and not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray.”
- ◆ Chazal state that the following things granted Bnei Yisrael the *geulah*. One was the merit of the righteous women, who, with great self-sacrifice, concerned themselves over the continuation of our nation. In addition, Bnei Yisrael did not change their names, language, or dress. These aspects of Judaism protected them from defilement by the Egyptian nation.

- ◆ What did Batya, the daughter of Pharaoh, see in the Jewish nation which drew her to join them, a wretched, broken people? She noticed how they staunchly maintained their Jewish identity, not breaking their connection with Hashem, in spite of all their suffering. She realized they are a unique, unparalleled people, and therefore wished to be a part of them.
- ◆ The pasuk states, “A youth was crying.” Why is Moshe called a youth – he was a tiny newborn! This teaches us the lesson that a person is obligated to educate his children in the ways of Torah and mitzvot from infancy, as though they were older children. Our Torah leaders go so far as to say that child-rearing begins from when an embryo is in his mother’s womb.
- ◆ People should realize that the primary focus of their children’s education must be their own character development. Providing one’s children with a positive role model will pave their path to Hashem.



Gems on Parashat Shelach



One Sin Leads to Another

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Send forth men, if you please, and let them spy out the Land of Canaan that I give to the Children of Israel”

(Bamidbar 13:1-2)

Rashi asks (*Bamidbar* 13:2) why the passage concerning the spies is juxtaposed to the passage concerning Miriam. He answers that even though the spies saw how Miriam was punished with *tzara'at* for speaking negatively about Moshe Rabbeinu, they did not take a lesson from it and still spoke negatively about the Land.

How can these two cases be compared? Miriam's sin was different from that of the spies. She spoke correctly in stating that Moshe had separated from his wife. The charge against her was that she should have spoken directly to Moshe without involving Aharon. This claim contains an element of merit for Miriam. She was afraid to confront Moshe directly, believing Aharon would make a stronger impact on him, especially since Aharon was the one practiced in making peace between husband and wife. Nevertheless, it was considered a sin on

her part. The spies spoke disparagingly about Eretz Yisrael. This was out and out *lashon hara*.

“A stitch in time saves nine.” A small sin which is not completely corrected will eventually grow to gargantuan proportions. The spies saw that Miriam was punished. Nevertheless, they felt self-assured that they would never fall into such sin. They therefore did not take the trouble to correct themselves by taking a lesson from her retribution. They ultimately fell into the sin of speaking derogatorily about the Land.

At the beginning of the parashah (*Bamidbar* 13:3), the spies are referred to as distinguished men. Rashi comments that at that time, they were upright people. But afterward (*ibid.* 13:26), the Torah states, “They went and came,” upon which, Rashi comments, “The pasuk compares their going with their coming; just as their coming was with an evil scheme, so too, their going was with an evil scheme.” This would seem to indicate that they were sinners from the beginning. How, then, can Rashi state that they were originally righteous men?

Based on the above, we might venture to say that in their own eyes they were righteous. Therefore, they did not bother taking a lesson from Miriam. They saw themselves as *tzaddikim*, above criticism. But Hashem, Who knows the workings of man’s heart, knew that their original going was with evil intentions, and therefore calls them *resha’im*. Because they did not attempt to improve themselves, their original going was considered wicked.



The Judgments of Hashem Are True, Altogether Righteous

“Moshe sent them forth from the Wilderness of Paran at Hashem’s command; they were all men; heads of the Children of Israel were they”

(Bamidbar 13:3)

Rashi expounds, “Every instance of the word *men* in Scripture is an expression of importance. At that time, they were honorable.”

How could the spies, princes of our people and distinguished tzaddikim, descend to the level of sinning by speaking evil against the Land? They should have placed their trust in Hashem, Who said that Eretz Yisrael is a land flowing with milk and honey. How could they rebel against Him by touring the Land, seeing for themselves whether or not it was fit for entry?

The spies were, indeed, men of great caliber. Nonetheless, they did not accept Hashem’s word with absolute faith. They wished to prove the veracity of Hashem’s words by going to tour the Land. The very act of bringing proof to Hashem’s promise showed that they doubted His words.

When a person unequivocally believes in Hashem’s words, he naturally needs no proofs to testify to their truth. It is clear as day that if Hashem commands one to behave in a certain manner, this is the way he must behave, no questions asked. In contrast, the desire to bring confirmation of Hashem’s words confirms a certain weakness in one’s faith. The downfall of the spies resulted from the doubt which gnawed at them, the same doubt which spurred them to scout the Land and bring testimony to the truth of Hashem’s promise.

Going to tour the Land with the objective of corroborating Hashem's words that the Land was flowing with milk and honey came not from a place of innocence, but from criticism. This is why they saw everything there with a jaundiced eye. Had they gone with pure, simple faith in Hashem's words, they would naturally have seen everything as the blessing it really was.

The *Nesi'im* were essentially men of repute. Ostensibly, their objective was to prove how good the Land was. But deep within them, doubt gnawed, until they were completely consumed with their negative impression of the Land, which led to their eventual downfall.

This teaches us a very important lesson. We should accept Hashem's words as we are taught them. We should not seek explanations and proofs. When a person fulfills Hashem's command because this is what he is meant to do, not entertaining the thought that he must give his stamp of approval to the Torah, he demonstrates his faith in the words of David Hamelech (*Tehillim* 19:9-10), "The orders of Hashem are upright, gladdening the heart, the command of Hashem is clear, enlightening the eyes... the judgments of Hashem are true, altogether righteous."



Slanderous Speech and Baseless Hatred Caused the Churban

“Your children will roam in the Wilderness for forty years and bear your guilt, until the last of your carcasses in the Wilderness”

(Bamidbar 14:33)

The commentaries remark that the spies set out on their mission with a warped view of the Land, as Rashi explain on the words, “They went and came.” Just as they returned with a negative report, their setting out was with negative intentions. They spent forty days touring the Land. In retribution, Am Yisrael was decreed to wander in the Wilderness for the duration of forty years, until they were finally worthy of inheriting Eretz Yisrael. The pasuk (ibid. 14:34) states that for every day that they toured the Land, looking at it in a negative way, Am Yisrael was punished with another year of wandering.

Hashem told the nation, “You cried for nothing, accepting the *lashon hara* of the spies. This day will become a day of crying for all generations” (*Ta’anit* 29a), as both Batei Mikdash were destroyed on that day, Tishah b’Av.

Let us take a lesson from this incident. If, for speaking *lashon hara* against Eretz Yisrael, Am Yisrael was punished so harshly, how much greater is the retribution for one who speaks negatively about a human being (*Arachin* 15a). Speaking *lashon hara* about one’s fellow Jew demonstrates the same baseless hatred which caused the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. Since baseless hatred was what spurred him to speak negatively about his fellow Jew, he is considered to have caused the *churban*.

As we comprehend the implications of the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, we must distance ourselves from the sin of *lashon hara*, a direct cause of the destruction. Let us not have any part in its destruction, *chalilah*. When Hashem observes how a person is scrupulous in guarding his mouth and protecting his ears from words of *lashon hara*, He grants him *siyata di'Shemaya* not to fall into the snare of temptation. And if he did fall in, he is assisted to withstand the temptation admirably.



Tzitzit – Our Bullet-Proof Vest against Sin

“It shall constitute tzitzit for you, that you may see it and remember all the commandments of Hashem and perform them; and not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray”

(*Bamidbar* 15:39)

Hashem granted man a precious gift in the form of *tzitzit*. This mitzvah has the power to protect him from sin (see *Menachot* 43b), as well as motivating him to perform mitzvot. *Tzitzit* are a tried and true method for reminding one about Hashem, hurrying him along to perform mitzvot and avoid sin.

The *Navi* Zechariah (8:23) relates that in the future, ten gentiles will grab hold of one corner of *tzitzit*. This will be a punishment to the nations of the world who denied Hashem and His Torah. *Tzitzit* is the symbol of our faith, constantly reminding us of our job in this

world. Therefore, it is most appropriate that the gentiles grab hold of it and affirm their belief in Hashem and His Torah. This will be in fulfillment of the verse (ibid. 14:15), “Hashem will be the King over all the land; on that day Hashem will be One and His Name will be One.”

The Gemara (*Menachot* 44a) relates the following incident. A man who was involved in acts of immorality once heard about a beautiful woman who charged four hundred gold coins for her services. He sent her the money and intended to sin with her. As he was about to sin with her, his eyes fell upon his *tzitzit*. The *tzitzit* swung in the air and struck him in the face. When he saw them, he was filled with shame. He immediately fled from the scene. The woman pursued him, asking him if he saw anything wrong with her. He answered that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She asked why, then, did he flee from her.

He told her that although he had intended sinning with her, his *tzitzit* reminded him of the commandment (*Bamidbar* 15:39), “And do not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray.” He fled in fear of his *Yetzer Hara*. The woman was most impressed by his response. Then and there, she decided to seek his Rabbi and learn more about the Torah which has such moral advice, even providing protection from sin in the form of *tzitzit*. She came before the Rabbi, relating her story and her request to convert. When he observed her altruistic intentions, he agreed to convert her according to Jewish law. As soon as she was converted, she set out to find the man who had made such a turnabout in his lifestyle. Hashem noted this man’s sincere repentance and allowed the two to find each other, this time in a permitted manner.



Purity of Thought and Sight

“It shall constitute tzitzit for you, that you may see it and remember all the commandments of Hashem and perform them; and not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray”

(Bamidbar 15:39)

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, zy”a, states in his sefer *Nefesh Hachaim* (1:4) that if a Jewish person has thoughts of immorality, it is more severe than ripping a Sefer Torah, having relations upon it in the *Kodesh Hakodashim*, and destroying the Beit Hamikdash.

These were exactly the deeds of Titus the wicked, during the time of the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash (*Gittin* 56b). A person should know that if he gazes at improper sites on the Internet, he invites illicit thoughts into his mind, akin to Titus, who destroyed our Home.



Korach



Korach and the Avot – A Study in Contrasts

“Korach son of Yitzhar son of Kehat son of Levi took, with Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On ben Pelet, the offspring of Reuven”

(Bamidbar 16:1)

Rashi says that Korach took himself off to one side, separating himself from the assembly of Israel by raising objections regarding the priesthood. Rashi explains that this is why Onkelos translates “Korach... took” as “Korach... separated himself.” This indicates that Korach separated himself from the rest of the assembly by sustaining a dispute.

An in-depth study of the parashah raises several questions. How could Korach, from the family of Kehat, the proud bearers of the Aron (*Tanchuma, Korach 2*), fall so low as to shamelessly scorn Moshe and Aharon? His dispute with these giants of our people went further than their great stature. It was a challenge against

Hashem Himself. For example, Korach mocked the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. “How could it be,” he charged, “that a tallit which is completely *techelet* is not considered kosher, whereas only one string of *techelet* on the tallit renders it kosher?!” This was outright contempt toward Hashem, the One Who commanded this mitzvah. Moreover, regarding Korach, the pasuk (*Tehillim* 92:13) states, “צדיק כתמר יפרח – A righteous man will flourish like a date palm.” The last letters of these words spell the name קרח (Korach) (*Likutim, Tehillim* 92). The Arizal writes (*ibid.*) that after the resurrection of the dead, Korach will serve as Kohen Gadol (*Sha’ar Hagilgulim*, introduction 35). The fact that he was among those chosen to carry the Aron attests to his righteousness. How could he change colors so drastically, sinning brashly against Moshe, Aharon, the Torah, and Hashem Himself?

Korach was egged on by his own ego. He wasn’t satisfied with the great honor of bearing the Aron; he longed to lead the entire nation. His craving to carry the most respected position in the nation prompted him to virulently and vociferously attack Moshe Rabbeinu, suspecting him of living with a married woman (*Sanhedrin* 110a). He even had the audacity to claim (*Rashi, Bamidbar* 16:3), “You have taken far too much prominence for yourselves.” He continued his diatribe, “So why do you exalt yourselves?” He was saying, “If you chose kingship for yourself, you had no right to appoint your brother as Kohen. You were not the only ones who stood at Har Sinai and heard Hashem’s Voice.”

The entire episode of Korach’s disputation with Moshe and Aharon grew from the seed of asking halachic questions inappropriately. He asked in a derogatory manner, casting aspersions on the words of Torah. It is certainly praiseworthy to delve into the details of halachah. Doing so indicates Fear of Heaven. But everything depends on the way it is presented. Is the questioner

asking from pure motives, in order to know the halachah on a deeper level? Or, *chalilah*, is he asking in a manner of derision and disdain? Korach's challenge regarding *tzitzit* did not come from a place of purity. It was a means of using a halachic dispute as a spade. He wished to give Moshe a dig, thereby undermining his reliability. Korach was a smart man. He knew that in order to draw the people to join his cause, he had to depict himself as a seeker of the truth. He would gather the masses to "rally to the cause" of halachah, when what he really wanted was to arouse quarrel and grievance against Moshe and Aharon.

Korach spoke words of dissention, succeeding in bringing the people to stumble. Chazal (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:7) state that many fell into his trap, including Nachshon ben Aminadav, who had sanctified Heaven by sacrificing his life to enter the waters of the Yam Suf before it split. Korach was cunning. He sought ways and means of luring as many people as possible into his trap. His dishonorable behavior derived from the desire to attain honor. His climb to the top felled him to the bowels of the earth.

Korach's contentious nature and the lifestyles of our forefathers present a study in contrasts. Hashem never grants a person a position of honor before testing him. Avraham Avinu was tested ten times (*Avot* 5:3) before being chosen as the father of many nations. Yitzchak Avinu was blessed with one hundred times what he had planted (*Bereishit* 26:12) only after he passed the test of the Akeidah with flying colors. And Yaakov Avinu, chosen of the Avot (*Bereishit Rabbah* 76:1) merited fathering the Twelve Tribes only after living in the house of Lavan the Wicked and maintaining his purity. Yaakov himself attested to this in his words (*Bereishit* 32:5), "I have sojourned with Lavan and have lingered until now." Chazal, quoted by Rashi, interpret this to mean: "I kept the 613 commandments."

The following difficulty begs resolution. About Avraham, the pasuk (*Bereishit* 24:1) states, “Hashem had blessed Avraham with everything.” This seems to imply that Hashem granted Avraham honor and greatness. But Avraham had been previously called “Prince of G-d” by the nations of the world, after they witnessed his safe emergence from the blazing furnace. They felt a divine power accompanying him constantly. What, then, was the point of Hashem blessing Avraham again with greatness and honor?

Although the nations regarded Avraham with reverence prior to Hashem’s blessing (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 15:14), he was not affected in the least by this form of honor. On the contrary, he always sought ways of humbling himself and, instead, increasing Hashem’s glory. But one who flees honor will be pursued by it. Avraham felt no pride in the title that the nations gave him. He therefore merited being blessed by Hashem “with everything.”

In a similar vein, we find that the tribe of Levi was constantly immersed in the sea of Torah (see *Ramban* 5:4; *Panim Yafot*, *Bamidbar* 17:23). They were the only tribe not to be enslaved in Egypt (*Shemot Rabbah* 5:16). We would assume that they merited this distinction because of their involvement in Torah study. But Chazal (*Bamidbar Rabbah*) explain that they attained their greatness, carrying the Aron, because they refused to be involved in the sin of the Golden Calf. Torah confers benefit upon its adherents. One who sacrifices himself to remain in the tent of Torah and shuns honor, will be pursued by honor. Shevet Levi was protected from the sin of the Golden Calf by their Torah study. Their Torah study, too, accorded them the privilege of being the chosen tribe to serve in the Mishkan.

The holy Avot were most meticulous in keeping halachah (see *Avodah Zarah* 14b), always seeking to uphold Hashem’s word in the best way possible. With the Giving of the Torah, Am Yisrael was

granted specific mitzvot in commemoration of previous miracles. For instance, the mitzvah of sukkah memorializes the Clouds of Glory in the Wilderness (*Sukkah* 11b). Although these occurrences were yet to take place, our Avot kept the commemorative mitzvot nonetheless (see *Pesikta Derech Eretz* 31). They were scrupulous even in observing the Rabbinically-ordained mitzvot (*Tanchuma, Lech Lecha* 11). Punctilious observance of halachah ultimately brings a person honor, for Torah uplifts its adherents (see *Avot* 6a). Korach, on the other hand, portrayed himself as one who is stringent in the halachot of *tzitzit*. He finally fell to the fringes of society, cascading downward to the innards of the earth. His disguise was eventually ripped off, and he was unmasked as a man who never sated his thirst for honor and did not stop until he became an apostate, denying Hashem, His Torah, and His emissaries.

In the parashah describing the spies, the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 13:26) states, “They went and came to Moshe and to Aharon.” Rashi explains this double expression, “To compare their going with their coming; just as their coming was with an evil scheme, so too, their going was with an evil scheme.” How can Rashi say that the spies went with evil intentions? Didn’t Moshe himself approve of their going?

From the beginning of their journey, they had ulterior motives. They planned, from the outset, to bring back an evil report about Eretz Yisrael. The spies were the *Nesi'im*, princes of our nation. They knew that when the nation would arrive in Eretz Yisrael, they would appoint a king over themselves, as the pasuk (*Devarim* 17:15) commands, “You shall surely set over yourself a king.” The spies were afraid that they would then be demoted from their exalted positions (see *Zohar* III, 158a).

I would venture to say that it was their lack of stringency in halachah which brought the *Nesi'im* to negate Hashem's command to coronate a king over the nation upon entry into Eretz Yisrael. This brought them to speak disparagingly about the Land. The power of honor alone was not strong enough to push them over the brink. What toppled them was their mockery and denigration of the command of Hashem. The path to purgatory was paved before them. Ridiculing halachah injects a person with the desire to seek honor and glory. One who tries to become great in people's eyes will eventually mock the words of Hashem. Being scrupulous in the fine details of halachah, as well as eschewing honor, are prerequisites for being a true *eved Hashem*.

Chazal (*Avot* 5:17) teach us that the disputation of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai was for the sake of Heaven, and as such, will endure. Their motives were purely for the sake of understanding the Torah's ruling. When the members of Beit Shammai would offer their opinion, the members of Beit Hillel would study their words (*Eiruvin* 13b). They truly desired to research their claim, to see if they were correct and the halachah should be according to their ruling. They were not motivated by personal interests of self-aggrandizement, but strict adherence to the letter of the law. Their utmost stringency in the halachah and their desire to uphold Hashem's word in the most perfect manner led them to investigate the subjects among themselves. It is known that Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai would intermarry (*Yevamot* 14a), in order to prove to the world that their disputes were for the sake of Heaven, and not, *chalilah*, personal.

David Hamelech begins Tehillim (1:1) with the words, "Praiseworthy is the man who walked not in the counsel of the wicked, and stood not in the path of the sinful, and sat not in the session of scorners." Involvement in words of scorn and mockery prevent one from occupying himself with words of Torah *l'shem*

Shamayim (see *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 1:21), as he continues (*ibid.* vs. 2), “But his desire is in the Torah of Hashem, and in His Torah he meditates day and night.” Mockery and Torah are mutually exclusive. There must be a distinct line of demarcation to divide them.

Korach wanted to draw the hearts of the nation after him. His plan was to begin with the seemingly righteous endeavor of clarifying the halachah. But because he had ulterior motives, he was eventually swept along with the masses in words of derision and contempt toward Torah and mitzvot.

I remember once giving a speech before a large audience and successfully arousing the people to teshuvah. Suddenly, someone in the crowd asked a question whose sole purpose was to ridicule my words. As soon as he finished speaking, the entire assemblage burst into loud laughter. The awakening I had achieved was a thing of the past. I closed my sefarim and left the hall, tangibly sensing the truth in the dictum “One mockery repels a thousand rebukes.”

On another occasion, I was preparing to impart an important message. I wanted to attract as large an audience as possible. To that end, I decided to conduct a raffle drawing among the participants of the *shiur*. I felt that this would draw many people and open their hearts to my crucial words. The hall, indeed, filled from wall-to-wall, and I transmitted my message. It seemed as though my words were well-taken. After the speech, we conducted the drawing, but the winners refused to take their prizes. We searched for those who held the winning tickets, but there were no takers.

I later found out that someone had spread the rumor that Rabbi David Pinto buys his listeners with money. I was enraged at hearing these words of nonsense, whose intention was to sow seeds of discord among the masses. After some time, I happened to meet this

man. I asked why he hadn't participated in the *shiur*, and he replied that he wanted no part in a gathering meant to buy people with money.

After a while, it became known that this man removed his *kippah*. He later became involved with a gentile woman. I am certain that his envy at my success, which, in essence, was Hashem's success, was what brought him to speak such words of derision. He fell so low as to consort with a gentile woman and beget non-Jewish children.

Korach was envious of the greatness and success of Moshe and Aharon. He eventually spoke derisively of *divrei Torah* and spouted words of heresy against Hashem. There were numerous factors in the decline of Korach and his followers. They were remiss in the details of halachah, they were driven by a desire for honor and prestige, and they were burning with jealousy and mockery toward those greater than themselves. They truly personify the words of our Sages (*Avot* 4:21), "Jealousy, lust, and glory remove a man from the world."

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ How can we understand that Korach, a tremendous man, fell so low as to deny the authority of Moshe and Aharon, to the extent that he derided the mitzvot and expressed heretical thoughts? It was his all-consuming envy which drove him over the limits of common sense and brought him to fall into the abyss.
- ◆ Korach drew admirers with his smooth speech. At first, he spoke words of halachah. Once he had the people in his grip, he incited them with words of mockery and derision against Moshe and Aharon.
- ◆ In contrast, our Avot always eschewed honor. The entire world had heard about the righteousness of Avraham Avinu, miraculously rescued from

the fiery furnace. Nevertheless, Hashem gave him an additional blessing of honor. One who flees honor will be pursued by it.

- ◆ The tribe of Levi merited carrying the Mishkan and its utensils not only because they were constantly involved in Torah study, but also because they played no part in the sin of the Golden Calf.
- ◆ The Avot performed all the mitzvot with utmost submission to Hashem, even those Rabbinically ordained. In contrast, the spies were so consumed with their honor that they went to scout the Land with negative intentions from the start. They were afraid that they would be demoted from their elevated posts once the nation entered the Land and therefore injected a negative outlook into their report.



Arrogance Blinds

“Korach son of Yitzhar son of Kehat son of Levi took, with Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On ben Pelet, the offspring of Reuven”

(Bamidbar 16:1)

Chazal (*Tanchuma, Korach 5*) try to understand Korach’s reasoning in rising up against Moshe and Aharon. They explain that his eyes deceived him. He had a vision that Shmuel Hanavi would descend from him. Shmuel was considered equal to Moshe and Aharon, as it says (*Tehillim 99:6*), “Moshe and Aharon were among His priests, and Shmuel among those who invoke His Name.” Korach approached Moshe and Aharon with the following charge, “Why do you lord over the nation? I also have rights to rule the people, for I

will have a descendant who is the equivalent of the two of you together.”

Korach was a smart man. How could he be so blind as to believe that he was more important than the two giants of the generation, chosen by Hashem to lead Am Yisrael? Furthermore, Korach's righteousness was public knowledge, for he was one of the Ark-bearers (*Tanchuma, Korach 2*). It was well-known that anyone unworthy who touched the Aron would die on the spot (see *Bamidbar Rabbah 5:1*). Korach carried the Aron all along, and was never harmed. This attested to his spiritual stature. The pasuk (*Tehillim 92:13*) says, “צדיק כתמר יפרח – A righteous man will flourish like a date palm.” The last letters of these words spell the name קרח (Korach). This alludes to Korach's righteousness (*Arizal, Likutim, Tehillim 92*).

How can we fathom that he fell so low as to be involved in a terrible dispute against Hashem's chosen ones, sweeping the *Nesi'im* of our nation along with him? Their terrible punishment, being swallowed alive by the earth while shouting, “Moshe is true, and his Torah is true” (*Tanchuma, Korach 11*) echoes with the severity of their sin. How, indeed, did such men of distinction fall to such depths?

Our mission is to remain as one nation, unified at all times. Chazal (see *Zohar II, 124*; Ramban's Introduction to the Torah) teach us that the Torah is comprised of Hashem's Names. All of the *neshamot* of Bnei Yisrael, as well, are alluded to in the Torah (see *Sha'ar Hagilgulim, Introduction 17*). There is exactly the same amount of letters in the Torah as there are *neshamot* of Bnei Yisrael (*Ohr Hachaim, Bamidbar 16:1*; *Shelah Hakadosh, Pesachim, Matzah Ashirah 25*). When Hashem desired to create the Jewish nation, He interwove their *neshamot* with the Torah, a compilation of His Names. Corresponding to the 613 mitzvot, a person has 248 organs

and 365 sinews, each body part parallel to a different mitzvah of the Torah (*Sha'arei Kedushah* I, 1). Hashem's Names are found in the Torah, as well as inside each and every Jew, as the Zohar states (II, 90b; II, 4b), "The Torah, Hashem, and Am Yisrael are one." When a person separates himself from the congregation, lording over his fellow Jews, he has categorically severed his ties with Hashem and the Torah. He is no longer connected with Am Yisrael, the Torah, and Hashem. This was the situation with Korach. He divorced himself from the rest of Klal Yisrael. This led to his severance with the Torah and Hashem, Himself, *rachmana litzlan*.

Now we might better understand the words of Rabbi Akiva (*Torat Kohanim* 4:12), "You shall love your fellow as yourself – this is a fundamental principle in the Torah." The phrase "in the Torah" is used exclusively, as opposed to, "in general conduct," or "in good character." The names of Bnei Yisrael are intertwined with Hashem's Names, which are found in the words of the Torah. When one Jew bears animosity toward his fellow Jew, he has, in effect, dissociated himself from the Torah which contains Hashem's Names. In order to maintain an ongoing relationship with the Torah and Hashem's Names, one must love one's fellow Jew. This is the only way to keep up one's contact with Hashem and His Torah.

Arrogance repels the *Shechinah*, as Hashem says He cannot exist in the same place as an arrogant person (see *Sotah* 5a). This is difficult to digest. One who is haughty is sinning against his fellow man, not against Hashem. Why does Hashem deal so harshly with this person, removing his *Shechinah* from him? Chazal (*Avot* 4:21) go so far as to say that "honor removes a man from the world."

A person can connect to Hashem and His Torah only when he is connected with his fellow men. This is because Hashem's Names are located inside each and every person, by means of the Torah, which contains the Names of Hashem. When a person severs his ties with

his fellow men by being arrogant, it is as if he is dominating over Hashem and the Torah, which is acquired only in one who acts humbly (*Derech Eretz Zuta* 8). Moreover, every Jew was created in the image of Hashem, given a *neshamah* from on High (see *Mesilat Yesharim* 1). Therefore, whoever lords over others is, essentially, lording over Hashem. For this reason, Hashem refuses to be in his company.

With all of his wonderful attributes, Korach should have ensured that the trait of arrogance not get the best of him. One who considers himself important is liable to fall into thoughts of pride (ibid. 11). In this manner, without even realizing, he falls lower and lower, to the point of instigating a dispute not for the sake of Heaven (see *Avot* 5:17). In contrast, Moshe and Aharon were paradigms of humility (*Chulin* 89a). Their greatness lay in the fact that they did not view themselves as more significant than the rest of the nation. On the contrary, they ascribed their honor and respect to the merit of Bnei Yisrael. They understood that if not for their responsibility in leading the nation, they would never have been chosen for their posts. As proof of this, Moshe told the people (*Shemot* 16:7), “וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-כָּל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר מֶה-אַתֶּם” – For what are we?” The word מֶה (what) is numerically equivalent to the word אָדָם (man). Moshe and Aharon were so humble that they did not feel themselves worthy of being called a man.

Moshe and Aharon were essentially telling Korach that they were mere mortals, no more honorable than anyone else in the nation. He had nothing to envy. The amazing thing about tzaddikim, who are so knowledgeable in Torah and fear of Heaven, is that they don't accredit themselves with their lofty level. They do not perceive themselves as prominent, feeling they have cause for conceit over their fellow men. They follow the dictum of Chazal (*Avot* 2:4), “Do not believe in yourself until the day you die.” Even slight arrogance

has the potential to tear one's ties with Hashem, Am Yisrael, and the Torah. Then, all of a person's hard work will prove worthless.

Although Moshe Rabbeinu was considered the equivalent of all Am Yisrael, he did not accredit himself with his accomplishments. On the contrary, Moshe and Aharon, the paragons of humility, claimed, "What are we?" The word מה (what) is numerically equivalent to the word אדם (man), as well as Hashem's Name יהוה-י, with its letters spelled out. Moshe and Aharon did not even consider themselves on the level of an ordinary person. Who were they, they asked, that Hashem should rest His *Shechinah* among them.

Moreover, "If you consider us people, we are just one of the nation," they explained to Korach. They did not feel that they were more important than anyone else. The greatness of Moshe and Aharon rested in their caution never to impose their authority over a fellow Jew. This would have been considered lording over Hashem and His Torah, *rachmana litzlan*.

The Torah was given only after Bnei Yisrael rested at the foot of the mountain "as one man with one heart" (*Rashi, Shemot 19:2*). They had a sense of unity and mutual accountability. Had they displayed any form of arrogance over one another, it would have been considered lording over the Torah, which was written with the Names of Hashem, and they would have been unworthy of receiving it.

If even one letter is missing from a Sefer Torah, it is invalid and may not be used. Even if a letter is only partially erased or somewhat blurred, the Sefer Torah is invalid (see *Rambam, Sefer Torah 7:9*). Am Yisrael are a living Sefer Torah, for their *neshamot* equal the amount of letters in the Torah. When a person detaches himself from the nation or weakens his connection with a fellow Jew,

he has invalidated the Sefer Torah itself! Harsh decrees come in the wake of dissention, in order to arouse our nation to live peacefully. Only *galut* and suffering have the power to repair the breach in our national Sefer Torah.

One who acts with conceit toward his fellow man is harming, first and foremost, himself. Korach's haughtiness came with a hefty price, causing him to lose his portion in this world, as well as the Next. At first, he yielded to the abominable trait of arrogance. He isolated himself from the rest of the nation. Since one sin leads to another, he came to scorn the mitzvah of *tzitzit* (*Tanchuma, Korach 2*), as well as the mitzvah of *parah adumah* (see *Pesikta Zutrati, Chukat*), statutes that are above human intelligence.

The end of parashat *Vezot Haberachah* describes Moshe Rabbeinu's death, as the pasuk (*Devarim 34:5*) states, "So Moshe, servant of Hashem, died there, in the land of Moav, by the mouth of Hashem." Why do we read the passage concerning Moshe's death on Simchat Torah, which is the holiday of Shemini Atzeret? This is in order to teach us that our entire purpose in this world is to be engrossed in Torah. Only Torah will escort a person on his final journey, advocating his cause on High, as the Gemara (*Pesachim 50a*) states, "Praiseworthy is the one who arrives here with his Talmud in his hand." At the end of reading the entire Torah, we read of the passing of Moshe. This demonstrates to us that this is what Moshe took along with him after his death – the Torah that he toiled over all his life. His honor and his wealth remained behind. The Torah, which was called by his name, and written and bequeathed by him to his nation, was his eternal asset.

The Torah ends with parashat *Vezot Haberachah*, wherein Moshe blessed the nation before his death (*Devarim 33:1*). This attests to the strong bond between Am Yisrael, Hashem, and the Torah. One cannot involve himself in words of Torah without love for his fellow

Jew. Love of one's fellow Jew encompasses all of Torah, and through *ahavat Yisrael*, one attains *ahavat Hashem*. Moshe blessed the nation before his death in an open display of affection and brotherliness. The Torah endures only in a person who relates to all Jews as equals.

As he was being swallowed up by the earth, Korach finally recognized his fatal mistake. He called out, "Moshe is true and his Torah is true, and we are the wicked ones" (*Tanchuma, Korach* 11). He thereby will merit purification in the World to Come, as *Tehillim* states (92:13; see *Likutim, Tehillim* 92), "A righteous man will flourish like a date palm." Korach will eventually be called a righteous man. His dispute taught us how distant we must keep from arguments which arise from arrogance. Before his death, Yaakov Avinu warned his sons to always be united (*Shelah Hakadosh, Yoma; Derech Chaim, Tochachat Mussar* 70). For this reason, Korach's lineage is not attributed to Yaakov, but ends with his great-grandfather, Levi. Only through unity would the nation gain closeness and connection with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, and His Names, as they appear in the Torah.

The Torah begins with the word *בראשית* (in the beginning), and ends with the words, "לעיני כל ישראל" – before the eyes of all Israel" (*Devarim* 34:12). The Torah is teaching us a wonderful principle. The secret to our survival lies in the words "all Israel." We live with mutual responsibility, allowing our fellow man to be *ראשית*, first. Only in this manner will we merit a portion in *Olam Haba*, as the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* 90a) states, "All Israel has a share in the World to Come, as it is said, 'And your people are all righteous, they shall inherit the land forever.'"

How distant must one keep from discord! Let us not allow our eyesight to be blinded like Korach, who disputed Moshe and Aharon by truly believing he was defending Hashem's honor. The words "before the eyes of all Israel" teach us that Moshe Rabbeinu did not

allow himself to be blinded from the truth. He never felt that he was above the level of the nation. On the contrary, he acted openly, before their eyes, never hiding anything from them. He humbled himself before them, for he considered each Jew as ראשית, or first.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Korach was a man of spiritual stature. How could he possibly have denied Moshe and Aharon's appointment, to the extent that he eventually mocked the words of Torah?
- ◆ Bnei Yisrael have a mitzvah to constantly remain unified. Hashem's Names are contained in the Torah, as well as within each and every Jew. The Zohar states, "Hashem, the Torah, and Yisrael are one." By defecting from the nation, Korach was, in effect, disconnecting himself from Hashem and the Torah. Rabbi Akiva states, "You shall love your fellow as yourself – this is a fundamental principle in the Torah." Since all of the *neshamot* correspond to the Names of Hashem, with which the Torah was written, whoever slights his friend's honor is considered to have belittled the honor of the Torah.
- ◆ Whoever dominates over others is considered to dominate over Hashem, for the *neshamah* of a person corresponds to the Torah, which was written with Hashem's Names. Furthermore, every person breathes the life which Hashem implanted within him. Slighting a fellow man, then, contains an element of slighting Hashem Himself.
- ◆ Korach's pride pushed him to the lowest level. His defecting from the nation effectively brought him to mock Hashem and His Torah.
- ◆ In contrast, we find that Moshe and Aharon, paragons of humility, claimed, "What are we?" The word מה (what) is numerically equivalent to the word אדם (man), as well as Hashem's Name יהוה-י with its letters spelled out. Some commentaries say that Moshe and Aharon did not even consider themselves on the level of an ordinary person. Who were they, they asked, that Hashem should rest His *Shechinah* among

them? Others explain that they meant they were only on the level of ordinary mortals, not more important than anyone else in the nation.

- ◆ Moshe's passing is recorded in parashat *Vezot Haberachah*, read on Shemini Atzeret. The great, final message that Moshe left us is the following: When a person passes on, he takes neither his possessions nor his prestige. His only escort is the Torah he amassed in his lifetime. Moshe's Torah was what accompanied him on his final journey. And Moshe's blessing of the nation before his passing teaches us that one cannot be connected with the Torah if he lacks love of his fellow Jew.
- ◆ Korach's lineage stops at Levi. Yaakov had ordered his sons to maintain unity. It was therefore unfitting for Korach and his uprising to be attributed in any way to our Patriarch, Yaakov.
- ◆ The Torah begins with the word בראשית (in the beginning) and ends with the words "לעיני כל ישראל" – before the eyes of all Israel" (*Devarim* 34:12). The secret of our survival lies in the fact that we maintain unity, and each person considers his fellow Jew number one.



Women's Intuition

"Korach son of Yitzhar son of Kehat son of Levi took, with Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On ben Pelet, the offspring of Reuven"

(*Bamidbar* 16:1)

Rashi expounds on this pasuk: "Korach took himself off to one side, to be separate from the assembly of Israel by raising objections regarding the priesthood." Rashi points out that the tribe of Reuven,

including Datan, Aviram, and On ben Pelet, participated in this dispute.

The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 109b) describes the incident with On ben Pelet. He followed Korach in his rebellion against Moshe, decrying the appointment of Elitzafon ben Uziel. On the day of the uprising, On came home to rest a bit. He asked his wife to wake him up when Korach's men came to call on him to participate in the revolt. But On's wife was a righteous woman. She tried her best to convince him to desist from this dangerous quarrel. She used tactical statements like, "What personal profit will you gain from this fight?" After seeing that he would not break his promise to follow Korach, she decided to take matters into her own hands. She sat at the doorway to her tent, with her hair loose. When Korach's men came to call for On ben Pelet, they found his wife sitting at the entrance with her hair uncovered. They immediately turned away from such an unseemly sight, and never approached On.

In the merit of her quick thinking, this tzaddeket saved her husband's life, both spiritual as well as physical. When On ben Pelet finally awakened, his wife relayed the news of the gruesome death of Korach's band and how she had managed to save him from this fate. This righteous woman brought shame upon herself and lowered her dignity in order to save her husband from involvement in dissention, and, as a result, the accompanying punishment.

Similarly, the Gemara (*Sotah* 11b) relates that it was in the merit of the righteous women that our nation was released from Egypt, and in their merit, we will be redeemed in the future. How was this? During their years of bondage in Egypt, the men lost all interest in life, certainly the desire to bring more children into the world. What did their wives do? They adorned themselves by using copper mirrors to check their appearance. They would thereby arouse their husbands' desires, ensuring the continuation of our nation. In the

merit of these women's dedication, the Washbasin in the Mishkan was formed from their mirrors (*Tanchuma, Pekudei* 9). Their use in fashioning a holy vessel reflected Hashem's satisfaction with the deeds of these great women.

Additionally, Chazal (see *Tanchuma, Pinchas* 7) relate that after hearing the report of the spies, the nation complained to Moshe, blaming him for releasing them from Egypt in order to die in the Desert. They went so far as to say (*Bamidbar* 14:2), "If only we had died in the land of Egypt, or if only we had died in this Wilderness!" They preferred a life of suffering over the fear of the unknown in the Wilderness. But they failed to remember the torture and tribulations which were their daily fare in Egypt. Here, too, the righteous women came to the rescue. Not only did they not take part in the grievances of their menfolk, but they tried to dissuade them from their complaints. The women praised the Promised Land. For their strength of spirit, these women were rewarded and did not perish in the plague that struck the nation in the wake of their complaints.

Scriptures are replete with instances of noble women. Yael defended Hashem's honor by killing Sisera, bringing salvation to our nation (*Shoftim* 4:17-22).

The Torah tells us that Avraham would convert the men to Judaism, whereas Sarah converted the women, bringing them under the wings of the *Shechinah* (*Bereishit* 12:5, *Rashi* *ibid.*). Sarah was so righteous that Rashi states (*ibid.* 23:1) that at her death at 127 years old, she was as pure and free of sin as a woman of twenty, who is free of Heavenly retribution.

In light of the above, how is it that women are absolved from the mitzvah of Torah study (*Kiddushin* 34a) and all time-related mitzvot in general (*ibid.* 29:1)? This seems to imply that women are inferior to men, who were chosen by Hashem to be the transmitters of His Torah, and in that way, uphold the entire world.

Hashem originally created man in His image. Afterward, He put him to sleep and created a wife for him from his rib (*Bereishit* 2:21-22). Had Hashem created both Adam and Chava at the same time, this equality would have led to discord, for two kings cannot wear the same crown (see *Chulin* 60b).

When we look at nature, we realize that nothing is created equal to anything else. This is in order to maintain balance in the world. For instance, some countries are blessed with oil and coal resources. Other countries lack these resources, but are rich in water reserves. This allows for mutual give-and-take between nations, as they conduct international business deals. Each fulfills the needs of the other, with each benefiting.

If every country would be exactly equal, this would disturb the world equilibrium, and would lead to a constant battle of survival. Let us take another example. There are nations, such as the United States, which are world powers. On the other hand, there are weaker countries that depend on the protection of these world powers for their very survival. In return, they obey the directives of the world powers and support their policies, in order to maintain a level of order and obedience in the world. It is blatant that were all nations equal in status, one nation would simply consume the next, and normal living could not exist.

Furthermore, within each society, there are wealthy individuals as well as paupers. There are white-collar workers and blue-collar workers. In this manner, the country can operate successfully. Each stratum of society contributes to the success of the country in its unique way. If each person was in the upper class of society, it would be beneath anyone's dignity to pave the roads or collect the garbage. Everyone gains by living in a society of different ranks, as each member carries out his own task.

This is how Hashem created man. He was made in the Divine image, and as such, is superior to woman, who was created from one of his parts. This is in order for the woman to recognize her place and appreciate the supremacy of her husband. This understanding ensures a well-balanced household. Had Hashem created the two exactly equal, the wife would constantly complain about the difficulty in her role. But when she recognizes her position in Creation, she accepts her lot with love and fulfills her mission with diligence and goodwill. Torah study is demanded only of a man. This helps the wife recognize his elevated status, as well as freeing her up for the demands of her children and the upkeep of her home.

Chazal (*Sotah* 17a) teach us, “Man and woman, if they merit, the *Shechinah* rests among them. If they do not merit, a fire consumes them.” The letter ׀ in the name אִישׁ (man), coupled with the letter ׀ in the name אִשָּׁה (woman), produce Hashem’s Name אֱ-הוּ. When a Jewish home functions according to the Torah’s dictates, the *Shechinah* rests upon it. But when the woman has grievances toward her husband and is not prepared to perform her tasks, or the husband acts condescendingly toward his wife, the *Shechinah* leaves them, and a fire consumes them. Removing the letters ׀ and ׀ from their names will leave them with the אֵשׁ (fire) of contention.

Our *Chachamim* (see *Tanna d’vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 9) tell us, “Who is a kosher woman? One who does the will of her husband.” Let us try to understand the intention of the word “kosher.” Is a woman who disobeys her husband called “*treifah*,” *chas v’shalom*? The word kosher symbolizes wholeness. For example, the cow is a pure animal, but it is not considered kosher until it has been ritually slaughtered according to halachah and is found to be unblemished. Only after it is checked according to the Torah rulings and salted correctly, can it be called kosher. The term kosher indicates a

complete process, with special attention to the fine details of the halachah. A woman who fulfills her husband's wishes without question is entitled to be called kosher.

How does a woman reach the elevated level of honoring her husband sufficiently and fulfilling his will? Through using her womanly intuition (*Niddah* 45b). This intuition guides her along the correct path. It is this intuition which allows her insight into her husband's true wishes and enables her to fulfill them to perfection. This brings her to a level of wholeness and completion.

During the years of Egyptian Exile, the women of our nation employed this gift with which they were blessed. They knew exactly how to console their husbands and bring them pleasure, in this manner, preserving the Jewish heritage (see *Sotah* 11:2). It was the women who recognized Hashem's miraculous conduct and tried to dissuade their husbands from believing the irrational talk of the spies. They asserted that Hashem's plan was to bring them to a Land of perfection, a land that flowed with milk and honey. Otherwise, He would not have extricated them from the Egyptian exile with a powerful hand. What, then, was there to complain about? Why should they long for the days of slavery?

Let us repeat what was mentioned above. The added level of wisdom granted to women is a compensation for her husband's exalted level above her. In the merit of her added intuition, the woman is doubly benefitted. Her husband appreciates her and respects her intuition, and she is capable of fulfilling his wishes due to it. She thereby merits being called kosher. It was this special intuition which stood by the Jewish woman throughout history. In their merit, Bnei Yisrael were redeemed from the Egyptian exile. They kept away from the sin of the Golden Calf. They refused to donate their jewelry toward its fashioning, and the men gave their own jewelry (see *Tanchuma, Ki Tisa* 19). They were capable of

pointing out the nation's mistake with the spies. And Chazal (*Yalkut Shimoni, Rut 606*) tell us that in the future, too, our nation will be redeemed in the merit of the righteous women who employ their special intuition to do what is right.

I remember that in Morocco they used to say the following: A woman has the power to build or destroy her home, together with her husband and children. This is due to her intuition. It can steer her on the right track, or, conversely, if used inappropriately, be the cause of her downfall.

Chazal (*Sanhedrin 109b*) describe at length the incident with the wife of On ben Pelet in order to teach us a lesson. When a woman uses her intuition wisely, she can reach untold heights. But, on the other hand, when her intuition is channeled toward the wrong end, it becomes a tool of destruction in her hands.

Every man should recognize and appreciate the added level of intuition in women. Chazal (*Bava Metzia 59a*) exhort us, "Show respect for your wives, and in this manner, you will merit many children who are *talmidei chachamim* and good livelihood." What is the connection between respecting women and spiritual and physical riches? The answer is that when a woman feels that her husband appreciates her and respects her, she tries to behave even better toward him. She wishes to prove that she is worthy of her husband's appreciation. The benefits to their marriage are priceless. A woman who is satisfied with her lot and in good cheer will raise her children calmly and guide them along the correct road in life. She sends her husband off to learn, even when it involves self-sacrifice on her part. She takes advice from others and looks for ways and means of running her household efficiently and within her budget.

Woe to the home in which the husband constantly reminds his wife of his superiority due to the Torah knowledge he has, or due

to any extra wisdom he may have acquired. When that is the case, the woman uses her intuition in a negative way. The husband should realize that were women commanded to study Torah, it could very well be that his wife would do a better job of it, due to her woman's intuition. It was due only to Hashem's fear that the woman would overrule her husband's sovereignty in the household, were she to have the added mitzvah of Torah study, that He prevented women from learning Torah. [We find that Beruriah, the wife of Rabbi Meir, was erudite in Torah knowledge, and the Sages used to ask her their questions.] A husband should appreciate his wife's virtues and respect her. He will be the first to gain from this, as his appreciation will be an impetus for her to employ her womanly intuition in a manner most positive to their relationship.

The pasuk (*Bereishit* 2:18) states, "I will make him a helper corresponding to him." What type of helper corresponds to (i.e. opposes) a person? Chazal (*Yevamot* 63a) explain, "If he merits, she will be a helper; if he does not merit, she will oppose him." A woman who receives respect from her husband is energized to be his helper, doing acts of goodness to him without limit, using her innate intuition to understand what is correct. But if a husband does not have the sense to treat his wife honorably, she will stand opposite him, opposing him at every opportunity.

May we all have the good sense to use the tools with which Hashem has blessed us, to build our houses into kosher, pure, Jewish homes. Love and harmony, as well as peace and brotherliness, will find a dwelling place there. This will contribute to the future redemption, speedily in our days.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The wife of On ben Pelet saved him from Korach's rebellion. She uncovered her hair, categorically preventing the men of dissention from

entering the tent and calling on her husband. Similarly, Chazal attribute the Exodus to the merit of the Jewish women. They would adorn themselves for their husbands, using their mirrors. In this manner, they ensured the preservation of our nation. In the future, too, our nation will be redeemed in the merit of the Jewish women.

- ◆ We find many instances in the Torah where women took the initiative, based on their womanly intuition, to bring salve and salvation to our nation. For example: The women's refusal to take part in the sin of the Golden Calf and the sin of the spies; Sarah, who converted the women; and Yael, who killed the warrior, Sisera.
- ◆ Why are women seemingly discriminated against, by being deprived of the mitzvah of Torah study? Hashem knew that there must be one captain and one first mate. If both man and wife would be perfectly equal, mutiny would be the result. For this reason, Hashem saw fit to create man in His image, and only afterward, to accord him a wife.
- ◆ As compensation to the woman, she is granted an added level of intuition. This intuition has the power to bring her to great heights, and in its merit, her husband appreciates her all the more.
- ◆ A man must be careful to show respect for his wife and not lord over her. If she were the one entrusted to study Torah, with her added intuition, she might do a better job than he!
- ◆ About the woman, it says, "If he merits, she will be a helper; if he does not merit, she will correspond to him." A woman has the power to use her intellect for good or for bad. If her husband does not respect her, she can be his worst opponent. But if he makes sure to value her properly, she becomes his helper. If man and woman merit, the *Shechinah* rests among them. If not, a fire consumes them.



Torah – The Antidote for the Yetzer Hara

“Korach son of Yitzhar son of Kehat son of Levi took, with Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On ben Pelet, the offspring of Reuven”

(Bamidbar 16:1)

Rashi expounds that the word “took” indicates that “Korach took himself off to one side.” He separated himself from the assembly of Israel by raising objections regarding the priesthood.

How could Korach, who was one of the bearers of the Aron (*Tanchuma, Korach 2*), disparage Moshe Rabbeinu, casting doubts upon his legitimacy as leader? As bearer of the Aron, Korach was certainly a man of spiritual standing. What possessed him to quarrel with Moshe Rabbeinu, even succeeding in drawing after himself two hundred and fifty of the *Nesi'im*, who were all men of repute?

Korach noticed that Hashem had not appeared to Moshe in a manner of affection for thirty-eight years. Korach felt that this was an indication of His displeasure with Moshe’s leadership of the nation. In that case, thought Korach, it was high time they chose a new leader.

Although his observation was correct, he failed to consider the reason for this. He simply assumed that Moshe had been demoted from his position as leader. Had he investigated the matter, he would have come to the realization that Hashem had done this not due to any flaw in Moshe, rather, due to the fault of the people. After the sin of the spies, Hashem was angry at the nation who had accepted their negative report. Their *lashon hara* about the Land

indicated a denial of Hashem, Who had promised them, “I will bring you into a Land flowing with milk and honey, which is under My supervision throughout the year.”

Korach stumbled in sin, falling into the innards of the earth. Most of his descendants were obliterated. When a person closes his eyes to the truth, refusing to understand the real reason for what occurs, he becomes blind, even when the truth stares him in the face. Had Korach truly desired to discover the truth, he would not have dismissed the matter so easily. Rather, he would have exerted himself to reveal the real reason for Hashem’s distance from Moshe for the past thirty-eight years.

The episode of Korach teaches us a timeless lesson. The greater a person, the greater is the *Yetzer Hara* lurking within him. Hashem brought the Torah down to Har Sinai, surrounded by clouds and fire. Where the fire of Torah glows, the clouds of the *Yetzer Hara* blur our sight, in an attempt to obstruct our view from the burning truth of Torah.

Korach was a great Torah scholar, but he did not attempt to overcome his *Yetzer Hara*, which obscured his vision from the beauty of Torah. He allowed the cloud of the *Yetzer Hara* to envelop him. His *Yetzer Hara* eventually vanquished him completely, bringing him to the lowest level possible.

“Datan and Aviram went out erect at the entrance of their tents” (*Bamidbar* 16:27). When a person stands merely at the entrance of the tent of Torah, not showing a desire to enter and take lodging in the welcoming embrace of Torah, his vision is blocked from seeing the beauty contained in the Beit Hamidrash. Since Datan and Aviram did not make the effort to enter the portals of Torah, thereby using it as a weapon against the *Yetzer Hara*, their *Yetzer Hara* got the better of them, convincing them to join forces with Korach and his dubious crowd.

There is one way to remove the heavy haze which veils our view of the fire of Torah. This is by clinging to Torah with every fiber of our being. Only Torah has the power to remove all effects of the *Yetzer Hara* from a person, as the Gemara states (*Kiddushin* 30b), “I created the *Yetzer Hara*; I created the Torah as its antidote.”

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Korach had the distinction to be a bearer of the Aron. How could he have fallen so low? When he observed that Hashem had not spoken with Moshe in an intimate way for thirty-eight years, he concluded that it was due to a deficiency on Moshe’s part, *rachmana litzlan*. He did not bother to analyze the matter thoroughly. Had he done so, he would have arrived at the correct conclusion that it was due to Am Yisrael’s acceptance of the evil report of the spies.
- ◆ During *Matan Torah*, a cloud hovered over Har Sinai. This imagery illustrates the method of the *Yetzer Hara*, which is compared to a cloud. He constantly attempts to obscure our vision from the fire of Torah. Man must constantly battle against this force. Korach made no serious attempt to remove this cloud from before him. He therefore became completely enveloped in it and could not see past it.
- ◆ “Datan and Aviram went out erect at the entrance of their tents.” When one merely stands at the entrance to the tent of Torah, with no desire to go in, the true beauty of Torah is lost on him. Had Datan and Aviram sought to cling to Torah, thereby fighting their *Yetzer Hara*, they would never have fallen as they did.



Korach's Dispute

“Korach son of Yitzhar son of Kehat son of Levi took, with Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On ben Pelet, the offspring of Reuven”

(Bamidbar 16:1)

Why did Korach begin his dispute specifically after the sin of the spies (see Ramban, Bamidbar 16:1; Kedushat Halevi, Korach)? Why wasn't he immediately disturbed by the appointment of Elitzafon ben Uziel as Nasi?

There are those who say (Kedushat Halevi, Korach) that Korach was envious of Elitzafon from the start. However, since he thought that Bnei Yisrael were very close to entering Eretz Yisrael, he was not overly disturbed by his new position. He hoped that upon arriving there, he himself would be appointed to a more prestigious position than that of Ark-bearer, a temporary job. But, after the fateful and fatal sin of the spies, Bnei Yisrael were decreed to be detained in the Wilderness for another forty years. Korach realized that the journey to the Promised Land was a long one. He then began his diatribe against Moshe, fanning the flames of dissention and dispute. (The Sefat Emet, Likutim, Korach offers a different opinion.)

Korach has gone down in history with a black reputation. Yet he began as a righteous individual. Let us unearth evidence of his original virtue. When Moshe tried to avert the quarrel, he turned to Korach respectfully, stating (Bamidbar 16:7), “It is too much for you, O offspring of Levi!” Korach was, indeed, an honorable man. The Arizal (Likutim, Tehillim 92) states that in the future, Korach will be the Kohen Gadol. This is deduced from the pasuk in Tehillim (92:13),

“צדיק כתמר יפרח – A righteous man will flourish like a date palm.”
The last letters of these words spell the name קרח (Korach).

Another proof of his righteousness is the fact that he succeeded in attracting two hundred and fifty heads of the Sanhedrin after him. They recognized Korach as a great tzaddik, and were thereby drawn after his claims. Furthermore, when Korach and his cohorts offered their pans of incense before Hashem, Moshe had to pray a special prayer, (Bamidbar 16:15), “Do not turn to their gift-offering,” so that Hashem would not accept their offerings. When Korach first approached Moshe Rabbeinu with his charges, he began by saying (ibid. 16:3), “The entire assembly – all of them – are holy, and Hashem is among them.” Korach felt the Shechinah with him. This is definitely an indication of a high spiritual level. And the last point that bears evidence to his greatness is the fact that he was among those who bore the Aron (Tanchuma, Korach 2).

After understanding a measure of Korach’s exalted level, we cannot claim that he was possessed by a brazen spirit and acted out of brashness. With his exceptional virtues, he recognized the futility of earthly pursuits. They are nothing at all compared with the superior satisfaction of serving Hashem. Whoever increases his level of Avodat Hashem merits additional closeness to Him and added awareness of His Presence. For this reason, Korach was dissatisfied with the job of bearing the Aron, which was not a steady occupation. He preferred a task in which he would constantly be involved in Avodat Hashem, such as the position of Nasi. Then he set his sights on the High Priesthood.

As the nation neared Eretz Yisrael, Korach kept his peace. He knew the dictum of Chazal: that a mitzvah performed in Eretz Yisrael is worth double that of the same mitzvah done in chutz la’aretz (see Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim 885; Ramban, Bereishit 26:5; Vayikra 18:25). Korach waited for the day when he would serve Hashem in the Holy

Land, doubling the value of his avodah in bearing the Aron. But when he observed how Bnei Yisrael were detained for forty years in the Wilderness after the sin of the spies, he could control his passions no longer. He aggressively demanded to be promoted to a more elevated position, in order to come closer to Hashem.

We might consider Korach's dispute l'shem Shamayim, as it came from a pure desire to connect with Hashem. But Chazal (Avot 5:17) categorically state, "What sort of dispute was for the sake of Heaven? The dispute between Hillel and Shammai. And which was not for the sake of Heaven? The dispute of Korach and his entire company." In spite of the righteous indignation which prompted Korach to act as he did, his argument was not for the sake of Heaven and therefore did not endure. Arguments and quarrel over prestigious positions diametrically oppose acting for Hashem's sake.

The following incident, which took place in France, will give us further insight into this subject. A wealthy Kohen who had a minimal connection with mitzvah observance wished to marry a divorcee. I told him that this is strictly forbidden by the Torah. He pontificated on the virtues of such an act, as this woman was shunned by everyone else. Furthermore, he claimed that by untying her shackles of abandonment, he would cause his parents untold pleasure. But I tried to convince him that his Father in Heaven would be terribly displeased by this act. Hashem is not happy with such a union. "You are concerned with pleasing your parents, yet your Creator's displeasure means nothing to you?!" I demanded. This story shows how a person can pervert the truth to make his deeds seem worthy, when, in reality, he is doing a most abominable act.

Chazal's evaluation of Korach was correct. Korach began with the honorable quest for closeness with Hashem by means of becoming

the Nasi. But then he set his sights on the High Priesthood. After that, the very night that he and his congregation offered their ketoret, he sat with the heads of the Sanhedrin and ridiculed Moshe Rabbeinu. They finally fell to the depths, as we read Moshe's description of them in his words (Bamidbar 16:26), "Turn away now from near the tents of these wicked men."

A frightening aspect of Korach's quarrel was the charge he made against Aharon (Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim 614). He fabricated a story about a poor, pitiful widow who was required to give a portion of her bread to Aharon HaKohen as terumah. Korach depicted the Kohanim as money-hungry individuals who robbed the poor people of their sustenance. However, he himself desired to become the High Priest. But then he, too, would be part of this distasteful form of extorting the people. This incident, too, proved that his quarrel was not for the sake of Heaven.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why did Korach argue about the priesthood only after the sin of the spies?
- ◆ Some commentaries say that he thought he would obtain a more prestigious position, once the nation entered Eretz Yisrael. Once he saw that they would be detained in the Wilderness for another forty years, he began his dispute.
- ◆ Korach was a man of stature. In the future, he will be the High Priest. His original motive was to become closer to Hashem, by means of serving in a more prominent position in the nation. At first, he remained silent. He knew that the mitzvot are more effective in Eretz Yisrael. There, his task as Ark-bearer would reach a higher level.
- ◆ After the sin of the spies, when it became apparent that the nation would wander in the Wilderness for another forty years, Korach lost his patience and began his revolt.

- ◆ All in all, his dispute was not *l'shem Shamayim*, as described in *Avot*. Although he began as a tzaddik, by the end of the incident, Moshe called him a rasha.



In Virtue of Tzitzit

“Korach son of Yitzhar son of Kehat son of Levi took, with Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On ben Pelet, the offspring of Reuven. They stood before Moshe with two hundred and fifty men from the Children of Israel, leaders of the assembly, those summoned for meeting, men of renown”

(Bamidbar 16:1-2)

Rashi expounds on these words, “They came and stood before Moshe. They said to him, ‘Is one obligated to put *tzitzit* on a cloak which is made entirely of *techelet*?’ He said to them, ‘One is obligated.’ They began to laugh at him, and said, ‘Is this possible? One is not obligated to put *tzitzit* on a cloak which already contains a thread of *techelet*. Why should we have to put *tzitzit* on a cloak that is made entirely of *techelet*?’”

Hashem has commanded us to wear *tzitzit*, for they remind a person of the mitzvot and encourage him to perform them enthusiastically, as it says, (*Bamidbar 15:39*) “You may see it and remember all the commandments of Hashem.” Seeing the *tzitzit* brings one to remember Hashem and His mitzvot, which in turn

brings one to actually do the mitzvot (*Menachot* 43b). This is illustrated by the following story (*ibid.* 44a). A man wished to do an act of immorality. He suddenly caught sight of his *tzitzit* and was immediately reminded of the above pasuk, which commands us to wear *tzitzit* in order to “not explore after your heart.” He fled from the scene before the pull of sin would overwhelm him. *Tzitzit* provide a partition, shielding one from sin. Observing one’s *tzitzit* draws a person to observe the mitzvot.

At the end of the passage concerning *tzitzit*, the Torah (*Bamidbar* 15:41) states, “I am Hashem.” The *mussar* giants (*Shelah Hakadosh, Yoma; Derech Chaim, Tochachat Mussar* 39) tell us that looking at one’s *tzitzit* is a proven *segulah* against anger. Anger is a most detestable trait. Whoever yields to anger will be relegated to the terrible tortures of Gehinnom (*Nedarim* 22a). One who becomes angry is considered an idol worshipper (see *Shabbat* 105b). Gazing at one’s *tzitzit* will douse the fire burning within him.

The mitzvah of *tzitzit* is a kindness from Hashem. When a person performs mitzvot, such as *tzitzit*, correctly, they protect him from sin. Not only does gazing at the *tzitzit* help one to perform mitzvot, but every moment that a man wears *tzitzit*, he is performing a mitzvah (see *Eliyahu Rabbah* 8:2). Hashem has presented us with the opportunity to do mitzvot without limit, with hardly any effort on our part.

Before the Vilna Gaon, zy”a, passed on, he was found weeping. When his disciples asked him to explain the reason for his tears, as he certainly had untold reward awaiting him on High, he answered the following. “This world is the world of deed. The Next World is the world of reward and punishment, without the opportunity to amass more merit.” As he stood on the threshold of *Olam Haba*, the Gaon bemoaned his fate. In this world, he asserted, a person can

accumulate limitless mitzvot by merely wearing *tzitzit*, an easy mitzvah of minimal cost.

Korach roused the rabble by casting aspersions on the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. He claimed that the entire nation was sanctified, with Hashem residing among them. Why should Moshe and Aharon be distinguished from among everyone else, and why was Aharon more worthy of priesthood when the nation was full of righteous men, worthy of that position? Everyone together stood at the foot of Har Sinai, so why were Moshe and Aharon selected to lead the nation?

But Korach did not stop there. He continued his diatribe by mocking the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. He claimed that it is illogical that one thread of *techelet* can exempt an entire cloak, whereas a cloak made completely of *techelet* is not exempt of this single thread (*Tanchuma, Korach 2*). Korach spoke so convincingly that he succeeded in inducing two hundred and fifty *Nesi'im*, men of distinction, to defend his cause. He even persuaded Nachshon ben Aminadav, who sacrificed his life to be the first to “test the waters” at Yam Suf, by jumping in before the rest of the nation (*Bamidbar Rabbah 13:7*). How did Korach have the audacity to ridicule the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, the very same mitzvah held dear by the Vilna Gaon? How did he dare display suchchutzpah toward Moshe and Aharon, the emissaries of Hashem?

Originally, Korach’s intentions were altruistic. He truly wished to understand how *tzitzit*, an easy and effortless mitzvah, could provide its wearer with tremendous reward. Mitzvot demand exertion. He therefore had suspicions regarding Moshe’s assertion that merely seeing the *tzitzit* reminds a person of his obligation to perform mitzvot. In this manner, each additional moment of wearing *tzitzit* accrues untold reward for the wearer.

Korach approached Moshe with the pure desire to clarify the halachah. Proof that he began his dispute *l'shem Shamayim* is that he managed to draw the most prominent men of the nation after him. Had he initially intended to degrade Moshe, these men would certainly never have had any part of it. Korach clothed his motives in a halachic query, thereby qualifying his contentions.

How, then, did Korach fall to such depths, to the extent that Hashem agreed with Moshe, to have Korach and his men die a gruesome death? Although Korach began his disputation with an innocent question regarding *tzitzit*, his question was loaded with ulterior motives. It was full of personal interest, desire for honor, and arrogance. His difficulty swelled to mammoth proportions, pushing him into the pit. He was consumed by the thought that he should have been chosen to lead the people, in spite of the fact that he was one of the Ark-bearers. This thought gnawed at him, making him envious of Moshe Rabbeinu. Korach actually harbored jealousy in his heart all along, but it was kept on a low flame. As soon as he began his dispute, this unseemly trait burst forth into fiery fury. As long as a person has a vested interest, his questions are not as innocent as they seem. And they are likely to push him over the brink, to a place where he will be lost forever.

Chazal (*Avot* 4:21) teach, “Jealousy, lust, and glory remove a man from the world.” These detrimental character traits burn within a person. And even though he has no intention of utilizing them, he can never know when they will rear their ugly heads, ensnaring him in their trap.

A person might have a righteous grievance. But if it contains a trace of these negative traits, the truth of his complaint becomes secondary as the person's true colors emerge. He is exposed amid great shame and humiliation. Regarding Korach, the pasuk (*Tehillim* 92:13) states, “צדיק כתמר יפּרַח” – A righteous man will flourish like

a date palm.” The last letters of these words spell the name כרח (Korach) (*Likutim, Tehillim* 92). The Arizal writes (ibid.) that after the resurrection of the dead, Korach will serve as Kohen Gadol (*Sha’ar Hagilgulim*, introduction 35). If even he did not manage to squelch the jealousy and quest for honor which burned within him, what can we, small people, say for ourselves?

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Concerning the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, the pasuk says, “You may see it and remember.” By seeing the *tzitzit*, a person remembers Hashem. This encourages him to observe the mitzvot and beware of doing an aveirah. A proven *segulah* to keep safe from anger is to gaze at the *tzitzit*.
- ◆ The mitzvah of *tzitzit* is a *chessed* of Hashem, as each moment of wearing *tzitzit* provides a person with reward, in an easy way.
- ◆ How did Korach come to mock the important mitzvah of *tzitzit*? Moreover, he succeeded in enticing two hundred and fifty *Nesi'im*, including Nachshon ben Aminadav, to join him. How did Korach have the boldness to fight against Moshe?
- ◆ Korach began his dispute for the sake of Heaven. He truly wished to clarify how an easy mitzvah like *tzitzit* can provide so much reward to the wearer, when we know that the mitzvot demand toil. Since he started off with pure motives, he succeeded in drawing a large following of the respectable men of the nation. But since Korach’s question was laced with personal interests of jealousy and honor, his dispute swelled out of proportion and eventually pushed him over the precipice, down to the innards of the earth.



Wealth and Prestige Belong to Hashem Alone

“Korach son of Yitzhar son of Kehat son of Levi took, with Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On ben Pelet, the offspring of Reuven. They stood before Moshe with two hundred and fifty men from the Children of Israel, leaders of the assembly, those summoned for meeting, men of renown. They gathered together against Moshe and against Aharon and said to them: It is too much for you! For the entire assembly – all of them – are holy and Hashem is among them; why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of Hashem?”

(Bamidbar 16:1-3)

Korach was one of the Ark-bearers (*Tanchuma, Korach 2*). This fact attests to his great spiritual status. A stranger who would touch the Aron would die on the spot. Korach’s appointment as one who carried the Aron testifies to his righteousness.

When studying the life of Korach, we are faced with a paradox. How could such a devout and pious man arouse a dispute in Am Yisrael, fighting Moshe and Aharon so vehemently? His traits seem self-contradictory. How was it possible to contain such diametrically opposed qualities simultaneously?

We will attempt to resolve this difficulty by examining a passage of the Morning Prayer. In *Pesukei D’Zimrah*, we recite (*Divrei Hayamim I, 29:10-12*), “And David blessed Hashem in the presence

of the entire congregation... Yours, Hashem, is the greatness, the strength, the splendor, the triumph, and the glory, even everything in heaven and earth; Yours, Hashem, is the kingdom, and the sovereignty over every leader. Wealth and honor come from You and You rule everything.” This passage states that wealth and honor belong to Hashem. He controls them, and only He decides who is worthy of receiving them and who will lose them. For this reason, when one sees a Jewish king, he recites the blessing, “Blessed is the One Who apportioned of His honor to those who fear Him.” When one encounters a gentile king, he proclaims, “Blessed is the One Who gave of His honor to flesh and blood” (*Berachot* 58a). Riches and prestige are His Alone. We bless Him and thank Him when He has deemed it fitting to share his honor with others, out of His great kindness.

Many have the custom to stand during the recitation of this prayer and give *tzedakah* while saying it (*Sha’ar Hakavanot, Tefillat Hashachar, Drush1*). Why do people give charity specifically then? By both the rich man and the pauper distributing coins to charity, they are demonstrating that their financial status is temporary. The wheel of fortune is in constant motion. One who is on the bottom today will reach the top another day, while the one at the top will descend. Wealth and honor come only from Hashem, and He Alone decides how to allocate it.

This awareness enables one to feel humble. How can he take pride in his wealth, knowing it is here today and gone tomorrow? We have heard of wealthy magnates whose stocks took a plunge and were left penniless. In contrast, pitiful paupers suddenly inherited tremendous fortunes and went, in an instant, from rags to riches.

Korach reached the nadir of lowliness. In spite of his elevated status, he did not internalize the message that wealth and honor are Hashem’s Alone. Korach was fabulously wealthy, as we are wont to

say: “Rich like Korach” (see *Pesachim* 119a). Nevertheless, he pursued prestige in order to accrue to himself more pride. All his money could not buy him happiness. He was blessed with riches, but he lacked inner joy and satisfaction. He sought ways and means of gaining stature at the expense of others. This is why our Sages (*Tanchuma, Korach* 5) state that Korach’s eyesight was flawed. He was too near-sighted to realize that prestige does not come through power. Only Hashem has the ability to grant fame and fortune upon a person.

There are those who purchase prestige. They surround themselves with slaves and servants who are at their beck and call. But this honor is superficial, for outward appearances only. As soon as these people withhold the salaries of their employees, they will abandon them like the plague. In direct contrast, there were giants in character who were desperately poor. Despite their poverty, they merited tremendous respect, for the world acknowledged their righteousness and wisdom. Tzaddikim of old are remembered with reverence, and their names mentioned with honor and awe. Money does not produce honor. Only Torah and good character will help a person acquire a good name.

Korach’s fatal mistake was that he pursued honor when Hashem withheld it from him. He attempted to take it forcibly. He eventually rebelled against Hashem Himself. He attempted to increase his personal honor, egged on by his band of men. He stretched this band until it snapped, hurtling him into the depths of the earth.

Parashat *Shelach* closes with the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, as the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 15:38-39) states, “They shall make themselves *tzitzit* on the corners of their garments, throughout their generations. And they shall place upon the *tzitzit* of each corner a thread of turquoise wool. It shall constitute *tzitzit* for you, that you may see it and remember all the commandments of Hashem and perform them; and

not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray.” *Tzitzit* wrap a person in a shield, protecting him from sin. When one looks at his *tzitzit*, he remembers Hashem and is protected from sinning (see *Menachot* 43b).

Chazal connect the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, at the end of parashat *Shelach* and the dispute of Korach, at the beginning of this parashah (*Bamidbar* 18:3). The Chida states that Korach began his dispute with invectives against the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. Rashi (*Bamidbar* 16:1) explains that Korach gathered together groups of people. He dressed them in a cloak made of *techelet* and brought them before Moshe. As they wore these garments, they scornfully asked if such robes require *tzitzit*. When Moshe answered in the affirmative, they began to mock him, saying, “Is this possible? We find that a cloak of a different color fulfills the mitzvah of *tzitzit* by having one thread of *techelet* attached to it. Why is a cloak that is entirely *techelet* not exempt from this mitzvah?”

Through showing contempt for the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, Korach eventually challenged Moshe’s leadership of the nation. The Chida continues, stating that when Am Yisrael were punished after the sin of the spies, slated to wander for another forty years in the Desert, they assumed that they were exempt from keeping all mitzvot until they would enter Eretz Yisrael. The Torah wishes to impart the fact that even in the Wilderness they were obligated to observe the mitzvot. What would remind them of this obligation? The *tzitzit*, which has the ability to awaken a person, and remind him about all of the mitzvot, as the pasuk states, “That you may see it and remember.”

The *tzitzit* hang downwards, reminding a person to constantly lower his gaze and behave with humility. This is the correct way to serve Hashem. Korach did not learn this message. He sought honor. Had he tried to internalize the message of *tzitzit*, he would not have

fallen so low. But he sought that which diametrically opposed this message: fame and glory. He mocked and scorned the mitzvah of *tzitzit*.

Furthermore, Korach claimed that the nation was not obligated to observe the mitzvot in the Wilderness. Although Hashem proved to them, by the death of the one who gathered wood on Shabbat (ibid. 15:35-36), that they were obligated in mitzvah observance, Korach did not admit to the truth, arguing that this man was put to death for no reason. On the other hand, he desired to be the Kohen Gadol. This was a self-contradiction within him. If there was no purpose to doing mitzvot in the Wilderness, what would be the point of being the Kohen Gadol? This is why Chazal (*Tanchuma, Korach* 5) state about Korach, "His eyes deceived him." The lust for honor and glory burned so strongly within him that he behaved irrationally.

Korach held the mitzvah of *tzitzit* in contempt. This mitzvah reminds a person to observe all of Hashem's mitzvot. But Korach asserted that here, in the Wilderness, the people were exempt from mitzvah observance. They were specifically relieved of the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, whose purpose is to remind its wearer of the other mitzvot. The *Yetzer Hara* injects the lure of honor into man's heart, to the extent that he loses his logic and clear rationale, acting in a self-contradictory manner.

Rabbi Pinchas Abutbol, Rabbi of Lyon, France, writes the following in his sefer. When one receives a prescription from a specialist, he relies on this doctor that the medicine will be effective. He doesn't ask what it contains. He trusts that if the specialist has prescribed it, it is what he needs and will help to heal him. This is the case with mitzvot. If Hashem commanded us to fulfill His mitzvot, we may not ask questions. We must fulfill them to the best of our ability, no questions asked. Korach's downfall began when he questioned and challenged the mitzvah of *tzitzit*.

The Gemara (*Eiruvin* 13b) states, “Whoever flees honor is pursued by it.” When Hashem sees that a person does not seek prestige, He presents it to him as a gift. Let us learn a lesson from the episode of Korach. Here was a man who was fabulously wealthy, but he was not satisfied with the gifts he was granted. He wished to receive the honorary title of Kohen Gadol. But Hashem is the One Who decides who will receive honor and who will not. Not only did Korach not gain honor, he forfeited all of his possessions. Everything he owned was sucked up by the earth, buried together with him.

This is a lesson for all generations. We should be satisfied with our lot and not demand more honor than what Hashem has bestowed upon us. When a person hungers for a bigger portion than he was allotted, what he was originally given is taken from him. All that is left of Korach is his story, a lesson for generations. Hashem allocates wealth and glory as He sees fit. When a person attempts to gain what is not rightfully coming to him, he stands to lose everything he has.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ How could Korach, one of the Ark-bearers, have fallen so low? He did not internalize the message in the words, “Wealth and honor come from You.” Korach was not satisfied with his tremendous wealth, but sought honor and prestige, above and beyond what he deserved. This brought him to his downfall.
- ◆ The Chida explains the connection between the beginning of the parashah, the story of Korach, and the end of the parashah, the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. Korach used the mitzvah of *tzitzit* as an example of a mitzvah which makes no sense.
- ◆ The fringes of the *tzitzit* hang downward. This is to teach a person to observe the mitzvot in humility. Korach did not internalize the message in the *tzitzit* and therefore met his gruesome end.

- ◆ Korach was among those who asserted that it was unnecessary to observe the mitzvot as long as Bnei Yisrael were in the Wilderness. In spite of Hashem's evidence to the contrary, illustrated by the fact that the man who gathered wood on Shabbat was put to death, Korach held fast to his position, even scorning the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, the mitzvah which reminds us to observe all of Hashem's commandments.
- ◆ Korach acted in a self-contradictory manner. He claimed there was no need to observe mitzvot in the Wilderness, while, at the same time, maintaining his desire to become the Kohen Gadol. The *Yetzer Hara* has all sorts of ways of controlling a person's mind in his pursuit for glory.
- ◆ When a person is not satisfied with his lot, what he already has is taken away from him. All of Korach's wealth was swallowed up by the earth.



Negating Negative Traits

“Korach son of Yitzhar son of Kehat son of Levi took, with Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On ben Pelet, the offspring of Reuven. They stood before Moshe with two hundred and fifty men from the Children of Israel, leaders of the assembly, those summoned for meeting, men of renown. They gathered together against Moshe and against Aharon and said to them: It is too much for you! For the entire assembly – all of them – are holy and Hashem is among them; why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of Hashem?”

(Bamidbar 16:1-3)

A dispute for the sake of Heaven will endure, whereas a dispute that is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure (*Avot* 5:17). What is a dispute for the sake of Heaven? It is a dispute whose goal is to fulfill Hashem’s will. For example, two people who argue over words of Torah seem to be filled with hatred and anger at each other. But when the study session ends, they are friends once again; peace and harmony reign between them. The entire objective of their argument was *l’shem Shamayim*, to distill the words of Torah, revealing Hashem’s desire.

This describes the nature of the disputations between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. Their intentions were purely for the sake of Heaven. The halachah that we follow is according to the ruling of Beit Hillel. Nevertheless, we find that the members of Beit Hillel would delve into the details of the opinion of Beit Shammai (*Eiruvin*

13b). They wanted to clarify the halachah in the best way possible. Ordinary people who engage in a squabble usually do not make the effort to truly understand their adversary's position. Beit Hillel's study of the opinion of Beit Shammai is proof that their dispute was for the sake of Heaven. This type of argument will endure. Regarding the opinions of both these schools of thought, we are told, "These and those are words of the Living G-d." Each group tried to increase Hashem's glory in this world by understanding His word to the best of their ability.

A prime example of a dispute that was not for the sake of Heaven is the dispute of Korach and his followers (*Avot* 5:17). There was no give-and-take here, for Korach was fighting a one-sided battle. Moshe, the man of peace, never entered into the argument. When Moshe heard Korach's contentions, he fell on his face in distress. Moshe constantly sent messages to Korach's men, in an effort to dissuade them from the dispute. It was a dispute for its own sake, and Moshe would have none of it.

Korach used the holy words of the Torah to further his cause of contention. He began by asking questions regarding the *parah adumah* (see *Pesikta Zutrati, Chukat*), as well as mezuzah and *tzitzit* (*Tanchuma, Korach* 2). Afterward, he began challenging Moshe's choice of Kohen Gadol. Korach used the Torah to further his own ends. He undermined the mitzvot and incited quarrel.

Why was Korach blameworthy? Judaism encourages people to ask questions, for the bashful one will not learn (*Avot* 2:5). He was censured for the manner in which he asked his questions, which contained an element of scorn and disdain. His entire objective was to cast contempt upon all that our nation holds dear. He used the Torah itself to further his personal cause. In this manner, he made a mockery of the Torah, and caused a tremendous *chillul Hashem*.

Who provoked Korach to instigate his quarrel? His wife. She instilled in his heart feelings of haughtiness (*Sanhedrin* 110a). The Gemara (*Niddah* 45b) relates that women are granted an extra measure of wisdom. How did Korach's wife cause him to sin, in spite of her additional measure of wisdom? Not only did she bring about his downfall, but with her wicked advice, she caused another two hundred and fifty people to meet their bitter end.

In contrast, we find that the wife of On ben Pelet used her womanly intuition to save her husband from the fire of dissention (*Sanhedrin* 109b). She reasoned with him, asking why he thought that he, out of two hundred and fifty Kohanim, would be chosen as Kohen Gadol. Since he had no chance to win the big prize, why expend so much effort in the competition? Why should he lift his head against the leaders of the generation, Moshe and Aharon? On heard her words of wisdom, but lamented the fact that he had already given Korach his word that he would join him. His wife gave him strong wine and told him to take a short nap.

By the time On ben Pelet awoke, Korach and his men were history, buried deep underground. Their voices echoed far and wide, "Moshe is true and his Torah is true" (*Tanchuma, Korach* 11). With her womanly intuition, On's wife saved him from the fire of contention, as well as from an abominable death.

Two women; two worlds. Korach's wife incited his terrible dispute, bringing about his horrific death, while the wife of On ben Pelet succeeded in saving his life.

The difference between them teaches us a tremendous lesson. Everything one does is an outgrowth of the characteristics already rooted within him. Korach's wife succeeded in fanning the flame of dispute because Korach had the roots of jealousy nestled in his heart all his life. He had always harbored feelings of envy toward

Moshe and Aharon. His wife's words fell on fertile ground and were the seeds that blossomed into a full-fledged rebellion. In contrast, On ben Pelet never bore any feelings of jealousy toward Moshe and Aharon. He never entertained thoughts of leadership for he was a simple man, merely a servant of Korach. Therefore, his wife succeeded in preventing him from joining the rebellion.

The following phenomenon is evidence that a person's actions stem from what is rooted in his heart. *Ba'alei teshuvah* return to their heritage, even though they may have been mired in the mud of the forty-nine levels of defilement. Nevertheless, they find their way back to their Heavenly Father. The spark of Judaism, latent in the heart of each and every Jew, bursts forth, shining the path to their heritage.

I once had a dried-up plant in my house. Whenever I saw it, I meant to dispose of it, but I never did. One day, I decided to water it, curious as to whether or not it would become rejuvenated. Wonder of wonders! Within a few days, this plant returned to its former glory, blooming as before. Its roots were still alive and gave it the energy to return to life.

Every person contains positive and negative character traits. Some of these are active, while others lay dormant within him. Man's mission is to awaken his good *middot*, while laying to rest the negative ones. And even when the negative traits are at rest, there is never a guarantee that they will not awaken to overtake him. Man must constantly seek ways and means of keeping his negative traits inactive.

Korach's wife succeeded in attaining her goal, for Korach did not work on stilling the voice of envy which whispered within him. Korach was fabulously wealthy (*Pesachim* 119a). His riches puffed him with pride and the desire to control others. Korach did not

work on improving his character, and therefore, his wife found fertile ground for her claims.

Korach was one of the Ark-bearers (*Tanchuma, Korach 2*). But the Ark carried its carriers! (*Sotah 35a*). Korach was surely on an elevated level if he was chosen to handle the vessels of the Mishkan. He claimed (*Bamidbar 16:3*), “The entire assembly – all of them – are holy and Hashem is among them.” This acknowledgment came through *ruach hakodesh*. Korach had attained a high position in the nation. How could he have fallen so low? This was because his corrupt *middot*, left unattended, grew into poisonous plants, instilling the venom of envy deep in his heart.

On Erev Pesach, we are enjoined to check the house for chametz, even though we have cleaned our whole house beforehand (*Mishnah Berurah 433:45*). And afterward, we say the passage of *bitul chametz*, nullifying any chametz which we did not discover. This is all in order than one should not, *chalilah*, have any chametz in his possession during Pesach. The same is true with *middot*. A person must make sure to “let sleeping dogs lie.” He should never rouse his negative character traits.

We can work on ourselves by involving ourselves in Torah. One who is not involved in Torah study will be overcome by his negative inclinations. He will be dragged to the depths of the earth. Examples of those who defected are Elisha ben Avuyah, who was called “Acher” (Another) by Chazal (*Chagigah 15a*), and Yannai Kohen Gadol, who became a heretic and killed *talmidei chachamim* (*Kiddushin 66a*). He was eaten up by arrogance. This arrogance was the cause of his downfall, despite the fact that he was a Kohen Gadol.

In his last moments, as the earth was swallowing him and his followers, Korach called out, “Moshe is true and his Torah is true”

(see *Tanchuma, Korach* 11). The *Ba'al Haturim* states that the letters of the word משה (Moshe) can be transposed to spell השם (Hashem). Korach finally admitted to Hashem's Presence, as well as the truth of His Torah, acknowledging the tzaddikim of the generations who contain a Divine spark within them. When a person works on improving his character and uproots his negative qualities, he is able to recognize that Hashem is truth and His Torah is truth. Korach managed to do teshuvah in his final moments and was therefore granted this revelation.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ A prime example of a dispute *l'shem Shamayim* which will endure is that of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, as Chazal say, "These and those are words of the Living G-d." In contrast, an example of a dispute for ulterior motives is that of Korach and his cohorts, who were ultimately buried alive.
- ◆ Korach was blamed for using the Torah as a tool to promote his rebellion. Who initiated his dispute? It was his wife, who incited his jealousy toward Moshe and Aharon, encouraging him to seek personal honor. She saw that this was his inherent desire and fanned the flames of passion within him. On the other hand, the wife of On ben Pelet used her womanly wisdom to save him from dispute.
- ◆ Korach sinned because of his wife, whereas On ben Pelet was saved because of his. Korach already had the seeds of envy planted within him, whereas On did not. Each followed his natural inclination, for better or worse.
- ◆ Man's mission in this world is to arouse the good qualities within him, while laying to rest the negative ones. This is a lifetime mission, for one is never guaranteed protection from his negative attributes.
- ◆ Torah is the tool with which we work on our *middot*. One who becomes

detached from Torah will be overcome by his evil tendencies. This was the case with Elisha ben Avuyah and Yannai Kohen Gadol.

- ◆ Korach did teshuvah before he was swept underground. He finally acknowledged Hashem's Presence, as he proclaimed, "Moshe is true and his Torah is true!" The letters of the word משה (Moshe) can be transposed to spell מהש (Hashem).



The Hazards of Habit

"They gathered together against Moshe and against Aharon and said to them: It is too much for you! For the entire assembly – all of them – are holy and Hashem is among them; why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of Hashem?"

(Bamidbar 16:1-3)

The Midrash tells us that Korach mocked the words of Torah and denied the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu, the emissary of Hashem (*Tanchuma, Korach 2; Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim 614*). He claimed that Moshe fabricated the Torah, *rachmana litzlan* (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 750*). What brought Korach to such heretical contentions, eventually denying Hashem, Himself?

This question is strengthened by the fact that Korach was one of the Ark-bearers, a testimony to his righteousness. Had he not been of high spiritual standing, he would have been put to death upon touching the holy Aron. Moreover, Korach foresaw that the

righteous Shmuel Hanavi, equal to Moshe and Aharon (*Tehillim* 99:6), would descend from him. This surely attests to Korach's greatness.

What was Korach lacking that he felt impelled to rebel against Moshe Rabbeinu? Was it honor? Did he feel that only the priestly garments would bring him respect? He was already respected by the nation. One who is honored by people merits receiving honor from Hashem. The very fact that Korach was a tzaddik, a prophet, and one who carried the Aron brought him untold honor, even without the frills of the priestly garments. The honor accorded him by Bnei Yisrael indicated that Hashem thought highly of him, as well. Why wasn't he satisfied with this? Why did he so hotly pursue the honor accorded to Moshe and Aharon?

Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam were the great benefactors of the generation. In their merit, Bnei Yisrael were worthy of Hashem's open miracles. The manna, Clouds of Glory, and the well came to the nation in the merit of these three giants (*Tosefta, Sotah* 11:4). The nation realized that only these great people were worthy of leading them in the Wilderness and serving in the Mishkan. What drove Korach into dissention, jeopardizing the nation's resources of food, water, and the protective clouds?

Moshe stated that offering sacrifices would prove who Hashem had chosen. Moshe pleaded with Hashem that He not accept Korach's offering (*Bamidbar* 16:15). Rashi explains that he asked Hashem not to take the portion of these men together with the communal offering. Their section would not be burnt like the rest, but would remain raw. Why did Moshe put such emphasis on this request? Bnei Yisrael would likely attribute the unburnt part of the *korban* to happenstance, not making the connection between it and Korach's wrong behavior.

Moshe asked that the earth open its mouth and swallow Korach and his followers. What a strange type of punishment! Why did Moshe choose specifically this punishment?

Later, when Bnei Yisrael complained about the priesthood another time, they were punished with a plague which claimed fourteen thousand lives (*Bamidbar* 17:14). Moshe asked them to bring staffs, and whichever staff blossomed first would indicate that its bearer was the chosen one of Hashem (*ibid.* 17:17-24). What is the significance of staffs and blossoms?

See how great is the power of habit! Even a tzaddik, the giant of the generation, can fall into the pitfalls of rote. If a person does not make sure to constantly keep a vigil on his level of Avodat Hashem, he is liable to straddle two very opposing worlds, without even realizing. Just as a person's body grows with time, and changes from month to month and year to year, so too, do man's habits and inclinations change from day to day, for better or for worse. For this reason, a person must constantly analyze himself. Where is he standing today? Is he at a better place than yesterday? This self-examination will prevent his slippery descent from the path which is paved toward the House of Hashem.

I once observed a *yarei Shamayim* who was praying the Shemoneh Esrei with utmost concentration. Suddenly, he felt something vibrate in his pocket. He instinctively stuck his hand inside, withdrawing his cell phone. He looked at the screen to see who was calling, and then continued praying as though nothing had happened. I saw not a flicker of shame upon his face. He resumed his prayers with a purely innocent look. On another occasion, I noticed a great Torah and *mussar* scholar who was conversing with someone in the very midst of Kaddish! Although we were a small group of people, where everyone was observed, they talked and

joked together, answering Amen as they saw fit, with no inhibitions whatsoever.

“Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth” (ibid. 12:3). Hashem testifies, in His Torah of truth, that in the entire world, there never was a man as humble as Moshe Rabbeinu, His servant. Moshe always kept in mind the knowledge that a person will eventually forsake everything in this world. He will return to the earth from which he was created.

Constantly keeping his mind on the ground, where he would eventually be interred, enabled Moshe to live all his days in humbleness. At any given moment, he was liable to be called up to the Heavenly Court, ordered to give a reckoning for his deeds. Where, then, was there room for haughtiness?

The Admor of Alexander, zy”a, wrote the following. The more a person perceives Hashem’s glory, the more he is aware of his own shortcomings. He seeks ways and means of humbling himself before his Maker. But if, *chalilah*, a person holds highly of himself, his perception of Hashem’s greatness is conversely reduced. He will eventually deny His goodness, *rachmana litzlan*.

In the Wilderness, Bnei Yisrael were so accustomed to Hashem’s miracles that they did not have an appreciation of their three benefactors, Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam. They forgot that it was their generosity that bestowed upon them the manna, the Clouds of Glory, and the well (*Tosefta, Sotah* 11:4). They began to believe it was their own merit that granted them these privileges. The nation had become so accustomed to the miracles of the Wilderness that they no longer felt it necessary to respect these giants of our nation in whose merit these miracles came. Korach proclaimed this in his accusation (*Bamidbar* 16:3), “The entire assembly – all of them – are holy and Hashem is among them.” He claimed that the miracles were

in the merit of Am Yisrael's collective sanctity. Why, then, he countered, should Moshe and Aharon be singled out for national respect?

Korach's arrogance obstructed his path of Avodat Hashem. He began to sink in the quagmire of habit, with no recourse for rescue. This was in direct opposition to Moshe, who cried out (*Shemot* 16:7), "For what are we?" Moshe and Aharon perceived themselves as nothing at all, compared to Hashem's majesty. Korach believed that he served Hashem in the best way possible. He became accustomed to the miracles in the Wilderness, without recognizing in whose merit those miracles came. He felt a powerful urge to cast aspersions upon the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. Chazal (*Tanchuma, Korach* 5) relate that Korach's eyes deceived him. Had he analyzed the matter honestly, he would never have raised contention upon those so much greater than himself.

Let us not assert that because Korach was a righteous man, one of the Ark-bearers, he had a right to cast aspersions upon Moshe and Aharon. On the contrary, his list of contentions, in spite of his elevated status, indicates that something was remiss in his Avodat Hashem. He allowed himself to be drawn by the force of habit, instead of serving Hashem with freshness. Since Korach and all of Bnei Yisrael became accustomed to a supernatural existence, they attributed all of the miracles to their own merit, instead of to that of their benefactors. They confronted Moshe with the charge (*Bamidbar* 16:3) that since the entire nation was holy, why should Moshe and Aharon receive more honor than anyone else? Their underlying meaning was, "Why do you give us the feeling that our entire existence is in your merit? It is very likely that you are fabricating many of the mitzvot which you claim are from Hashem."

A person must make sure never to fall into the force of habit regarding his Avodat Hashem. Similarly, a student must make sure

never to become overly familiar with his teacher. Familiarity can, *chalilah*, cause him to mock his teacher and the Torah he imparts. Although Yehoshua was already fifty-six years old at the time, the Torah calls him a lad (*Shemot* 33:11): “His servant, Yehoshua son of Nun, a lad, would not depart from within the tent.” Yehoshua was also called Moshe’s servant, always at the ready to execute Moshe’s command. The word נער (lad) can also mean “shaking off” (לנער). Yehoshua always shook off negative traits from himself. This word also indicates an aspect of youthfulness, injecting within himself a feeling that he is a young boy, so that he never felt on par with Moshe Rabbeinu, and never habituated himself to him. In this merit, Yehoshua was the link in the chain of the Mesorah, receiving the Torah from Moshe, his teacher, and transmitting it to the next generation. Torah is acquired only by one who humbles himself before it (*Derech Eretz Zuta* 8), all the while shaking off feelings of pride and vanity.

The Torah should constantly be new in our eyes (*Yalkut Shimoni, Mishlei* 537). One should consider Torah from a fresh perspective. This will obviate doing the mitzvot by rote or ridiculing them. When a person disciplines himself to feel as though he received the Torah today, this feeling of renewal allows him to connect with the Torah and desire it all the more.

Chazal (*Chagigah* 9b) teach that one who reviews his lesson 101 times cannot be compared with someone who reviews his lesson only 100 times. What does this additional review add to his understanding of the matter? The fact that a person reviewed his studies 100 times puts a limit on his interest in pursuing the matter further. The round number of 100 “rounds out” his learning, and he subconsciously feels he has pursued the matter sufficiently. On the other hand, one who reviews his lesson 101 times is indicating that his Torah study never really comes to an end. On the contrary, it is

constantly new in his eyes. In spite of the long road he has traversed, he believes there is always more ground to cover.

This additional review effectively breaks the spell of habit within the person. He proves that he does not feel he knows the material cold. He indicates that there is always something to add in the way of another insight. Torah is deeper than the sea. The deeper one immerses in it, the more treasures he discovers. One who does not allow the force of habit to find a resting place in his heart merits the Torah defending him in this world, as well as the Next, as Chazal (*Pesachim* 50a) proclaim, “Fortunate is the one who arrives here with his learning in his hand.”

The *gematria* of the word לִכְאֵן (here) is 101. Fortunate is the one who reviews his lessons 101 times, thereby banishing the trait of habit from within himself. This type of learning will speak in his defense as he stands before the Heavenly Court.

According to this, we can answer our question as to why Moshe asked Hashem not to burn Korach’s portion together with that of the rest of the nation, we might answer based on the above. Moshe wanted to pull the nation out of the lethargy of habit. Observing a *korban* half burnt and half raw would awaken them to doubt all of Korach’s contentions.

Although Moshe was always self-effacing, he offered this request to Hashem before the entire nation. He felt it was an instance when silence was forbidden. It was a case of “a time to act for Hashem; they have voided Your Torah” (*Tehillim* 119:126, see *Berachot* 63a). As Bnei Yisrael observed Moshe in prayer and then saw that Hashem accepted his tefillah, changing reality in an unprecedented way, they finally came to the following realization. It was the force of habit that had blinded their eyes to the fact that Korach was acting with ulterior motives, not considering Hashem’s honor whatsoever.

The earth opening its mouth to swallow Korach and his party would further rouse Bnei Yisrael from the stupor of standard routine. Bnei Yisrael felt that all of Hashem's kindnesses upon them were justly theirs, in the merit of their righteousness. They were so self-assured that they denied the wonderful *chessed* Hashem was doing for them. As the earth swallowed Korach and his followers, Bnei Yisrael finally swallowed their pride, shaking themselves from the shackles of habit. They once again acknowledged the miracles in their lives, attributing them correctly to the benefactors of the generation.

Korach and his men opened their mouths inappropriately. The earth opened its mouth to devour them, measure for measure. They did not remain silent when silence was called for. Their abominable death indicated just how enormous was their sin.

When the earth swallowed up Korach and his followers, they began shouting so loudly that they chased away the rest of the nation. The pasuk (*Bamidbar* 16:34) states, "All Israel that was around them fled at their sound, for they said, 'Lest the earth swallow us!'" In direct measure for the curses and blasphemy which they shouted against Moshe and Aharon, they died while shouting (*Tanchuma, Korach* 11) "Moshe is true and his Torah is true, and we are the wicked ones." This amazing incident pulled Bnei Yisrael out of the apathy of routine, through which they were serving Hashem until this point. This incident proved to them that there is justice and there is a Judge. When a person serves Hashem merely out of habit, he ultimately becomes blind to the myriad miracles surrounding him. He takes everything for granted, as the natural order. He will eventually become filled with pride, feeling that all he has is in his own merit. It is frightening to imagine what his end will be.

As Bnei Yisrael witnessed the terrible plague claiming thousands of lives, they approached Moshe, complaining (*Bamidbar* 17:6), “You have killed the people of Hashem!” Moshe then asked Aharon to call a halt to the epidemic by offering incense. Aharon stood between the living and the dead. Grabbing hold of the Angel of Death, he succeeded in terminating the epidemic. When the nation observed Moshe’s great power, they understood that those who doubted Hashem’s word were punished. Through Moshe’s prayer, the earth swallowed Korach and his followers, together with their possessions, with Datan and Aviram among them. Bnei Yisrael also perceived Aharon’s innate purity and self-sacrifice. He was able to literally grab hold of the Angel of Death and present him before Moshe Rabbeinu, thereby bringing the plague to a halt.

When the epidemic finally ceased, Moshe commanded the nation to take twelve staffs, one for each of the *Nesi'im*. Upon each staff was written the name of a *Nasi*. Aharon’s name was on the staff of Shevet Levi. Moshe ordered them to place these staffs before the Aron in the Ohel Moed. Whoever’s staff would blossom would be the one indicated by Hashem to lead Bnei Yisrael.

As the Torah (*ibid.* 17:23) narrates, Aharon’s staff blossomed and grew almonds. What a wonderful miracle! A dried-up tree suddenly sprang to life, growing leaves and almonds. Hashem wrought this miracle in order to open the eyes of His children. There is a Supervisor on High Who manages the world. The nation is therefore required to open their eyes and contemplate the renewal of Creation, constantly standing in awe of the Creator.

The Torah tallies the score of the dead at 14,700 people. The number fourteen is the numerical equivalent of the word ׀ָ (enough). Hashem was effectively telling the people, “Enough. How much longer will you mock My honor? You became so accustomed

to miracles that you don't even realize that you are straddling two worlds."

David Hamelech beseeches Hashem (*Tehillim* 27:4), "One thing I ask of Hashem, that shall I seek: Would that I dwell in the House of Hashem all the days of my life, to behold the sweetness of Hashem and to contemplate in His Sanctuary." David Hamelech feared serving Hashem by rote. Therefore, he asked that whenever he comes to learn Torah in Hashem's House, the experience should contain an element of novelty, as though it was the first time he was there. Just as the first time was accompanied by a pleasure never to be duplicated, so too, did he want each successive visit to the House of Study to be infused with sweetness and satisfaction.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ What was the reason for Korach's rebellion? Was it a desire for honor? He received plenty of honor as bearer of the Aron. Everyone knew that the miracles in the Wilderness were in the merit of the three benefactors: Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam.
- ◆ What was the purpose of Moshe's prayer that Hashem should not accept Korach's offering? The nation was liable to view this as coincidence. Furthermore, what is the secret behind the gruesome deaths of Korach and his followers, who were swallowed alive by the earth? And what mystery was sprouting behind Aharon's flourishing staff?
- ◆ Habit forces a person into a stupor. He is so dulled to the miracles surrounding him that he takes everything for granted. Korach complained because he refused to attribute the miracles of the nation's daily survival to the benefactors of the generation. He claimed, "The entire assembly – all of them – are holy and Hashem is among them." He attributed the miracles to the collective merit of Am Yisrael. Korach served Hashem through habit, without seeking new methods for spiritual growth.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu asked Hashem not to accept Korach's part of the

offering for the following reason: The nation would see part of it burnt, and the other part, raw. This anomaly would awaken them from the lethargy of habit. Korach's death, too, was most unusual. These miracles would give the nation pause to reflect on their obligations in this world, as they realized where everything came from.

- ◆ Korach and his men opened their mouths wide in contention. Therefore, the earth opened a wide mouth, swallowing them alive, together with their possessions.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu asked each *shevet* to provide a staff. Aharon's staff blossomed. This taught the people that Hashem oversees everything and has the power to change the order of nature. Bnei Yisrael shook off the cobwebs of indifference as they observed the blooming of Aharon's staff, and their understanding of Hashem's supervision blossomed within their hearts.



The Three Miracles of the Staff

“On the next day, Moshe came to the Tent of Testimony and behold! the staff of Aharon of the house of Levi had blossomed; it brought forth a blossom, sprouted a bud, and almonds ripened”

(*Bamidbar 17:23*)

The Ben Ish Chai (*Shanah Rishonah 4*) asks, “What was the purpose of the three separate miracles with the staff of Aharon – it blossomed, it sprouted a bud, and almonds ripened on it? Wouldn't

one miracle have been sufficient to prove to all that Aharon was the one chosen by Hashem to be the Kohen Gadol?"

The Ben Ish Chai explains that each of the three miracles pertained to different types of *tumah*, referred to as: a stormy wind, a great cloud, and a flashing fire (*Yechezkel* 1:4). We can use these terms to describe the terrible consequences of the one who allows jealousy to enter his heart. A stormy wind blows at him, driving him mad. Clouds of darkness blind his vision, and a flashing fire burns within him. Had Korach truly wished to be worthy of the title Kohen Gadol, he should have humbled himself like the dried-out staff of Aharon. But the trait of envy burned within him, firing him with passion to pursue his dishonorable dispute. Corresponding to the three miracles of Aharon's staff, three types of *tumah* controlled Korach. It was these three forces which compelled him to act in such a dastardly way toward Moshe and Aharon.

The beautiful blossoms which sprouted forth from Aharon's staff and the almonds which grew on it hint to the exquisite character traits of one who truly wishes to serve Hashem.

The blossom refers to the quality of joy. People present flowers as a symbol of appreciation or the desire to bring joy to others. Flowers are an expression of growth and happiness. (This is why the Jewish religion frowns upon placing flowers upon a tombstone, seemingly mocking the one buried there, lacking life and potential for growth). The bud represents the ripening of the fruit, symbol of life and freshness. And the word שקדים (almonds) has the same letters as the word שקידה (diligence), referring to toil in Avodat Hashem.

The staff is actually a dried-out piece of dead wood. All the waters in the world cannot bring it back to life. When a person awakens each morning, he would do well to remember the following. As he

slept, he was like a piece of dead wood, lacking all signs of life. But if, upon awakening, he makes an attempt to become like the staff of Aharon, which displayed signs of life and growth, he will become transformed into an entity of vivacity and joy.

Let us arise each morning with enthusiasm, embracing the new day with ecstasy and freshness. Let us be like the flower, instilling happiness in the hearts of others. This will invigorate us with energy to serve Hashem with enthusiasm. We will be like the bud that sprouts new fruits and keeps them alive. As we toil in Torah, we will become filled with the spirit of vitality in Avodat Hashem. But if a person fails to uphold these three principles of Avodat Hashem, he will find himself in the same situation as Korach. In spite of his righteousness, Korach spiraled downward, rebelling against the Torah and the leaders of our people.

The Ba'al Shem Tov (*Noach* 31) states that many Jews are deficient in their fear of Heaven. Upon awakening each morning, instead of involving themselves in matters of the spirit, such as praying with a minyan and learning with a *chavruta*, their minds are preoccupied with personal pursuits, such as fame and fortune.

Yirmeyahu *Hanavi* proclaims (*Eichah* 3:23), "They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness." The Arizal (*Eitz Chaim, Sha'ar* 29:3) explains this pasuk in the following manner. Every morning, a person's mind becomes rejuvenated. One who is wise will take advantage of this and renew his commitment to Hashem. He will refresh his level of faith with vigor and life. He will inject all of his spiritual quests with novelty and newness. He will be wary of allowing this freshness to be lost on fleeting matters of transience.

Korach was lacking the three qualities mentioned above, because his jealousy consumed him completely, eradicating from within him any vestige of goodness.

Moshe turned to Korach and told him (*Bamidbar* 16:16), “You and your entire assembly, be before Hashem – you, they, and Aharon – tomorrow.” Why did Moshe see fit to wait until the next day, and not immediately prove that Aharon was the chosen one? Moshe was hoping that by the next day Korach would repent, and there would be no need for this sign from Hashem (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 18:7). Chazal (*Berachot* 19a) tell us, “If you see a tzaddik sin at night, do not suspect him in the day, for he has certainly done teshuvah.” Moshe judged Korach favorably, considering him a tzaddik, as he was one of the Ark-bearers (*Tanchuma, Korach* 2). He admirably believed that postponing the gathering for another day would bring Korach to teshuvah, avoiding the humiliating punishment which was waiting for him.

But Korach did not have the good sense to utilize the opportunity placed before him. Instead of retiring that night, renewing his faculties to be able to serve Hashem optimally, he spent the entire night going from door to door, soliciting members for his cause by casting aspersions upon Moshe and Aharon (*Rashi, Bamidbar* 16:19, see *Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim* 614). Had Korach surmounted his rising jealousy, categorically removing it from himself, Hashem would have given him the *siyata di'Shemaya* to attain the three crucial qualities of the service of Hashem. Filled with vigor and verve to serve Hashem properly, he would have gone to toil in Torah instead of working on recruiting members for his rebellion.

Pirkei Avot (4:21) cites jealousy as one of the traits which drives a person out of this world. Not only was Korach swallowed up by the earth, but all of his possessions were, as well. One who nurtures the trait of envy within himself stands to lose everything he already has.

In Summary

- ◆ The Ben Ish Chai asks why it was necessary to have three miracles occur with the staff, when one would have been enough. He explains that each miracle corresponds to another *kelippah* of *tumah* which adheres to a person who is envious. This was the case with Korach.
- ◆ In another vein, flowers represent joy. The bud symbolizes life, and the almonds allude to diligence. When a person sleeps, his body is like a dead piece of wood. Upon awakening in the morning, he must invigorate himself in these three areas. Korach was deficient in these three areas and therefore spiraled downward.
- ◆ Moshe called Korach to appear before him the next day. Why did Moshe postpone the meeting? He considered Korach a tzaddik and hoped that upon awakening in the morning, Korach would strengthen himself in the three areas mentioned above. In this manner, he would be spared the shame of punishment which awaited him. But instead of refreshing himself with a good night's sleep, Korach made the rounds of the Jewish tents, spewing forth words of disparagement against Moshe and Aharon and depriving himself of the opportunity to do teshuvah.
- ◆ Jealousy not only removes a person from the world, but takes away his possessions, too, as we find in the case of Korach.



A Blossom, a Bud, and an Almond

“Moshe laid the staffs before Hashem in the Tent of the testimony. On the next day, Moshe came to the Tent of Testimony and behold! the staff of Aharon of the house of Levi had blossomed; it brought forth a blossom, sprouted a bud, and almonds ripened”

(Bamidbar 17:23)

After the incident of Korach’s rebellion, Hashem commanded Moshe to order the *Nesi'im* of each tribe to present a staff with his name written upon it. Aharon Hakohen’s name would appear on the staff of Shevet Levi.

Moshe Rabbeinu was told to place these twelve staffs before Hashem in the Ohel Ha’eidut. The one whose staff would blossom by the next day would be the one indicated as Hashem’s chosen one for *Kehunah Gedolah*. When Moshe came there the next day, he found that Aharon’s staff had blossomed overnight, growing almonds. Am Yisrael unequivocally accepted Aharon’s position as Kohen Gadol.

The Ben Ish Chai points out that three miracles occurred with Aharon’s staff. One part blossomed, another sprouted a bud, and another part of the staff grew almonds. Why did Hashem see fit to produce a three-pronged miracle, when one would seemingly have sufficed?

The Ben Ish Chai explains that there are three forces of *tumah* in the world. Torah study has the power to break each of these forces. The first force is the *kelippah* of stormy winds. It is the energy which

propels a person to rush into sin. The second *kelippah* is called a great cloud which obscures a person's eyesight from the enormity of his sin. And the third *kelippah* is that of a flashing fire, the fire of passion burning within him.

Regarding this third type of *kelippah*, the fire of lust, it is appropriate to cite the following story (*Kiddushin* 81a). Rav Amram Chassida housed in his attic a few girls whom he had redeemed from captivity. The moon suddenly lit up the leg of one of these girls. When Rav Amram noticed this, he cried out, "Fire! Fire!" His disciples came running, ready to douse the flames. But when they found none, they asked their mentor to explain his shouts. He said that he was referring to the fire of temptation which had begun to take root in him when he saw the leg of one of the girls. His disciples pressed further, "Are you not ashamed that everyone should hear of your weakness?" To which he countered, "Better to be ashamed in this world than to arrive at the World to Come with shame." The *Siach Sarfei Kodesh* similarly writes that retribution in Gehinnom is the most shameful punishment possible, when all will witness the sinner's deeds (*Olam Hazeh Olam Haba* 12).

Each miracle with the staff peeled away, as it were, another layer of *kelippah* of impurity. Similarly, there are also three parts to every *brit milah*. There is the *milah*, the *priyah*, and the bloodletting. They, too, remove layers of *kelippah* from the newborn (*Eitz Chaim* 49:2). As it is known, *milah* is the antidote for the temptation of the sin of immorality, which nourishes itself from the power of the *kelippah*.

The Ben Ish Chai (see *Korach*, *Shanah Rishonah*) continues that the three camps of Am Yisrael: Kehunah, Leviyah, and Yisrael, also correspond to the three layers of *kelippah*. Each camp fights on a different front. The miracle that the dead staff blossomed implanted in the hearts of Am Yisrael the understanding that when one acquires the attribute of humility, Hashem is with him. Shevet Levi,

who had no inheritance other than their relationship with Hashem, merited having their staff bloom.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ After the episode of Korach's rebellion, Moshe ordered each *Nasi* to bring a staff to the Ohel Ha'eidut. The staff which would blossom would indicate that its owner deserved to be the Kohen Gadol. Three miracles occurred with Aharon's staff: it blossomed, it sprouted a bud, and it grew almonds.
- ◆ Why were three miracles necessary when one might have sufficed?
- ◆ The Ben Ish Chai explains that there are three forces of *tumah* in the *kelippah*. The first is a "stormy wind," which propels a person to hurry to sin. The second is a "great cloud," which obscures a person's vision from the severity of his sin. And the third is a "flashing fire," the passion of lust. The three miracles with the staff corresponded to these three forces of impurity. Likewise, the mitzvah of *brit milah* contains three aspects, *milah*, *priyah*, and bloodletting, corresponding to these three forces.
- ◆ The three camps of Bnei Yisrael also corresponded to the three forces of impurity.



Gems on Parashat Korach



The Mitzvah of Tzitzit

“Korach son of Yitzhar son of Kehat son of Levi took, with Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On ben Pelet, the offspring of Reuven”

(Bamidbar 16:1)

Rashi expounds on these words, “He dressed them in a tallit of *techelet*. They came and stood before Moshe. They said to him, ‘Is one obligated to put *tzitzit* (of *techelet*) on cloak which is made entirely of *techelet*?’ He said to them, ‘One is obligated.’ They began to laugh at him, and said, ‘Is this possible? A cloak that is of a different color fulfills the mitzvah of *tzitzit* by having one thread of *techelet* attached to it. Why should we have to put *tzitzit* on a cloak that is entirely of *techelet*?’”

In Kriyat Shema, the mitzvah of *tzitzit* is mentioned with the following words (*Bamidbar* 15:39), “You may see it and remember all the commandments of Hashem and do them.” Seeing the *tzitzit* reminds one of the mitzvot. And remembering the mitzvot brings one to fulfill them (*Menachot* 43b). Hashem commands us to wear

tzitzit, which have the power to remind a person of the other mitzvot in the Torah. Once a person is aware of the mitzvot, he is motivated to perform them.

Korach is held culpable for causing the nation to forget the mitzvot. By mocking the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, he influenced the people to drop this mitzvah. But then they had no access to the rest of the mitzvot. By ridiculing just one mitzvah, he was liable to cause the nation to forget the entire Torah!

Korach's punishment was measure for measure. Just as he had no compunctions about eliminating all of the mitzvot of the Torah, so too, did the earth open its mouth and swallow up all of his possessions, leaving not a trace. Anything he owned found its way underground. Even if he had lent an item to a neighbor, it was sucked up by the gaping hole, which left no remnant (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 752*).



Yours Is Wealth and Honor

“Korach son of Yitzhar son of Kehat son of Levi took, with Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On ben Pelet, the offspring of Reuven”

(Bamidbar 16:1)

Korach spiraled downward because his eyes deceived him (*Tanchuma, Korach 5*). He saw that he would be the ancestor of Shmuel Hanavi, who was equal to Moshe and Aharon (*Tehillim 99:6*). His reasoning was that if such a great man would descend from him,

it was an indication that he himself was tremendously great. It meant, according to his logic, that he deserved to be the Kohen Gadol.

“Pride comes before a fall.” The quest of honor against Hashem’s wishes is the cause of downfall (see *Sotah* 9a). Korach should have admitted that it was his descendant Shmuel who would be a prophet of the people, equal to Moshe and Aharon, not he himself. Korach should have been satisfied with his role – bearer of the Aron (*Tanchuma, Korach* 2). He should not have sought that which was too big for him. Climbing the ladder of arrogance, Korach attempted to reach the greatness which was reserved for his descendant, Shmuel. Instead of reaching the pinnacle, he fell into the precipice, swallowed up by the ground and losing everything he ever had.

In *Pesukei D’Zimrah* of the Morning Prayers, we recite (*Divrei Hayamim* I, 29:12), “Wealth and honor come from You and You rule everything – in Your hand is power and strength.” Fame and fortune are Heavenly blessings, allotted to those whom Hashem sees fit. A person may not demand them for himself, taking them by force. Because Korach tried to sequester power and pride, he lost everything. He forfeited his task of carrying the holy vessels, which had previously been a special honor for him. All this was due to his quarrel (see *Sotah* 9b).

Korach should have been satisfied with his lot. In the Aron rested the *luchot habrit*. He should have been full of joy at the opportunity to serve Hashem by being honored to carry the holy Aron. He should have shouted (*Tehillim* 73:29), “As for me, G-d’s nearness is my good.” Instead, he wished to be the Kohen Gadol, who entered the *Kodesh Hakodashim* once a year. But by carrying the Aron, he maintained contact with Hashem on a daily basis. Why didn’t he allow this to satisfy him?

Obviously, closeness with Hashem was not his motivating factor. Jealousy and the pursuit of honor spoke from his throat, causing him to behave as he did. His dispute, which was not for the sake of Heaven, did not endure. Moreover, it pushed him over the edge, bringing him and his followers to their living death.



The Perils of Pursuing Pride

“Korach son of Yitzbar son of Kehat son of Levi took, with Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On ben Pelet, the offspring of Reuven”

(Bamidbar 16:1)

Rashi expounds on this pasuk, “What was it that Korach saw that led him to argue with Moshe? He was jealous of the princely position of Elitzafon ben Uziel.”

Rashi (ibid. 7) adds that Korach was a clever person and thus did not wantonly fall into such a grave sin. He explains that Korach saw through prophecy a great chain of descendants emerging from him. He saw that the prophet Shmuel, who was as important as Moshe and Aharon together, and twenty-four watches of Kohanim would descend from him.

The pursuit of honor was what prompted Korach to argue with Moshe, eventually plunging him into the abyss. This *Yetzer Hara* seized his sense of logic. He foresaw the great Shmuel Hanavi, who

would descend from him, and therefore felt that he, not Elitzafon, was worthy of being the *Nasi*.

The desire for respect is tremendous. Rabbeinu Hakadosh declared that Rav Huna, head of the nation in Bavel, was preferable to him as *Nasi*, as Rav Huna was descended from the males of the House of David, whereas he was descended from the females. He stated that were Rav Huna to come to Eretz Yisrael, he would hand over this title to him. But when Rabbi Chiya informed him that Rav Huna had indeed arrived, Rabbeinu Hakadosh had misgivings. Then Rabbi Chiya stated that it was Rav Huna's casket that had arrived. Rabbeinu had a grievance toward him for this (*Yerushalmi* 9:3).

Many tzaddikim cast their eyes downward when being honored. They want to distance themselves from the temptation for glory as much as possible. Others attribute personal honor to Hashem, Whose Torah they represent. In all cases, great men keep their distance from the honor accorded them.

I once organized a gathering in Lyon for the purpose of imparting an important message. I feared a poor turnout. I was, therefore, pleasantly surprised to find the place packed, more full than I could have imagined it would be. I felt a tinge of pride. And then I completely forgot what it was I had wanted to say. I offered a quick prayer, reminding myself that only Hashem may be proud. I recited the chapter in Tehillim (93:1) stating, "Hashem has reigned, He has donned grandeur." I opened with a joke, which got the audience laughing. But I felt foolish, standing up there and cracking jokes. As soon as the trace of pride left me, I remembered my original speech and succeeded in strengthening the public in the area I had wanted.

Chazal (see *Tanchuma, Vayikra* 3) teach, "Whoever pursues honor, honor flees him. Whoever flees honor is pursued by it." Furthermore (*Avot* 4:21), "Jealousy, lust, and glory remove a man

from the world.” Originally, Korach merely wanted to be the *Nasi* (*Tanchuma, Korach* 1). Ultimately, he wanted to take Aharon’s place as the Kohen Gadol, as he charged Moshe (*Bamidbar* 16:3), “Why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of Hashem?”



Channah’s Prayer

“They gathered together against Moshe and against Aharon and said to them: It is too much for you! For the entire assembly – all of them – are holy and Hashem is among them; why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of Hashem?”

(*Bamidbar* 16:3)

Channah, the mother of Shmuel Hanavi, beseeched Hashem for a son (*Shmuel* I, 1:11). Chazal (*Berachot* 31b) explain that she asked for “an ordinary child, not wise and not foolish, not rich and not poor, not strong and not weak.”

Chazal (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shmuel* 78) relate that during that time, a Heavenly Voice announced that a boy the equal of Moshe and Aharon was soon to be born. He would be called Shmuel. Each woman who gave birth at that time called her son “Shmuel” in the hope that he would be that special child. Channah certainly aspired to merit such a wonderful son. Why, then, did she specify that her child not be exceedingly wise?

Let us examine Shmuel's ancestry. He descended from Korach, who claimed (*Bamidbar* 16:3), "All of the assembly – all of them – are holy." Chazal (*Sanhedrin* 110a) state that Korach suspected Moshe and Aharon of illicit relationships. His proclamation regarding the sanctity of the nation declared that the entire nation is removed from all matters of immorality. Korach himself was holy, wise, and wealthy. But he asserted that Moshe and Aharon were deficient in this area. How could Korach suspect our spiritual leaders of such base acts?

Rashi (*Bamidbar* 16:7) states that Korach, who was a clever person and would not wantonly fall into such a grave sin, was blinded by his prophetic vision. He saw a great chain of descendants emerging from him. He saw that the prophet Shmuel, who was as important as Moshe and Aharon, as well as twenty-four shifts of *Kehunah* would descend from him. So he said to himself, 'Because of them, I shall escape.' Korach saw how great his family tree would grow. He realized that he contained within himself the seeds of righteousness and wisdom.

Shmuel Hanavi, the son of Elkanah, descended from Korach (see *Divrei Hayamim* I, 6:18-22). Channah was afraid that her son would inherit his wisdom from his notorious ancestor, Korach, and would be led to sin also. For this reason, she asked Hashem that he not be wise or foolish. She preferred he attain his lofty level through his own hard work and not through inheritance.



The Tefillah of the Tzaddik Is Always Accepted

“He said to Hashem: Do not turn to their gift-offering”

(Bamidbar 16:15)

Aharon, Korach, and Korach’s followers offered sacrifices in order to clarify who had been chosen by Hashem to officiate as the Kohen Gadol. Moshe prayed that Hashem should deny the offerings of Korach and his men. Hashem accepted his prayer, turning away from Korach’s *korban*.

The prayers of the righteous are always accepted. The fact that Korach’s *korban* was rejected proved to Moshe that Korach was a rasha. Therefore, Moshe commanded (*Bamidbar 16:26*), “Turn away now from near the tents of these wicked men.”



Korach – One of the Ark-bearers

“Korach gathered the entire assembly to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of Hashem appeared to the entire assembly”

(Bamidbar 16:19)

Korach was a great man; he was one of those allowed to carry the Aron (*Tanchuma, Korach 2*). How could he fall so low as to dispute the word of Hashem?

There are people who allow their pride and power go to their head. They become so conceited that they lose all power of reasoning. Korach was aware of the fact that the Aron carried its carriers (*Sotah* 35a). The tribe of Kehat merely made the motion of bearing the Aron. Where, then, was there cause for haughtiness? The fact that he was involved with the Aron carried with it the consequence of the test of arrogance, which Korach failed miserably.



Moshe's Concealed Criticism

“But if Hashem will create a phenomenon, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them and all that is theirs, and they will descend alive to the pit – then you shall know that these men have provoked Hashem!”

(Bamidbar 16:30)

When Moshe Rabbeinu realized that he could not prevent the dispute peacefully, he tried another tactic. He called Korach and his followers and the entire Am Yisrael, and told them the following. If these men would die an ordinary death, it would be an indication that he had fabricated the entire Torah, and he was not an agent of Hashem. But if they would die an unusual death, which had never previously taken place, it would indicate that they had provoked Hashem and were responsible for the sin of dispute.

Why did Moshe specify that only an unusual death would prove that he was the true emissary of Hashem? Why wouldn't their immediate demise prove this?

Moshe wanted to open an aperture for teshuvah for Korach and his followers. He thought that if he would remind them of the earth, a hint to man's humble beginnings and his modest end, it would have the power to awaken them to do teshuvah. The gruesome retribution awaiting them would thereby be averted. Thoughts of the punishment of the earth opening its mouth would arouse them to consider Hashem's proclamation to the first man (*Bereishit* 3:19), "For you are dust, and to dust shall you return." Where would there be room for arrogance?

Regarding the positions which people hold in the World to Come, Rav Yosef ben Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi stated (*Pesachim* 50a), "I have seen an upside-down world. The elevated ones are low, and the lowly ones are elevated."

Korach was so smitten with the traits of envy and arrogance that he did not even notice the implied criticism of Moshe Rabbeinu. These traits drove him out of this world (*Avot* 4:21), obstructing his path to teshuvah. Korach's sons, on the other hand, did not hold fast to the trait of arrogance. They took the message in Moshe's words and did teshuvah.



On What Grounds Was Korach Swallowed by the Earth?

*“But if Hashem will create a phenomenon,
and the earth opens its mouth and swallows
them... The earth opened its mouth and
swallowed them”*

(*Bamidbar 16:30, 32*)

Why was Korach punished specifically by the earth opening its mouth and swallowing him alive? Korach began his dispute after the sin of the spies. When he was first granted the task of Ark-bearer, he kept his peace, thinking that once the nation would enter Eretz Yisrael, he would be assigned to a higher position. But after the sin of the spies, Bnei Yisrael were slated to remain in the Wilderness for another forty years. Korach's patience was broken. He then broke into his diatribe against Moshe and Aharon.

Korach's dissention was intimately connected to the postponement of Bnei Yisrael's entry into the Holy Land and living on its soil. Measure for measure, he was swallowed up by the soil.

Moreover, the earth of the Holy Land refused to accept Korach. Eretz Yisrael is acquired peacefully. Our Avot were promised that they would inherit the Land. Nonetheless, they bought parts of it for full payment, in order not to arouse quarrels or the enmity of the nations.



The Dangers of Dissention

“The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all the people who were with Korach, and the entire wealth”

(Bamidbar 16:32)

How dangerous is dissention! Those who disputed Moshe did not even merit proper burial. They were swallowed alive, together with their children. All of Korach's wealth went down, as well (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 752*). From wherever Korach's riches were, they were sucked up by the gaping hole in the ground.

There are some who say that Korach's followers shouted, “Moshe is true and his Torah is true” as they went under, and they are still shouting it until this very day. This is in rectification of the dispute that they executed with their voices. Korach and his men are history, but their shouts reverberate eternally.



Chukat



The Decree of the Parah Adumah

“Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, saying: This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(Bamidbar 19:1-2)

Rashi expounds that the mitzvah of *parah adumah* is a “statute,” hinting that it is “a decree from before Hashem; and you do not have the right to reflect upon it.” The nations of the world, and indeed, the Satan himself, mock Am Yisrael for the mitzvah of *parah adumah*. Nevertheless, Am Yisrael is enjoined to remain steadfast in their faith, not wondering about the reason for this mitzvah and not capitulating to the taunts of their adversaries.

We have many mitzvot that we observe staunchly, without understanding them, simply because Hashem commanded them. The mitzvah of *sha’atnez* is a prime example. Even one thread of the opposing fabric renders the garment forbidden.

Another example is the mitzvah of *niddah*. The pasuk (*Vayikra* 18:19) states, “You shall not approach a woman in her time of unclean separation.” As long as a woman is a *niddah*, she is forbidden to her husband. He may not even touch her with his finger (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De’ah* 195:2). And even after childbirth, when a woman is in a *niddah* state for a long time, and is particularly in need of her husband’s support, the Torah forbids contact between them. Am Yisrael, the nation of believers, observe all of the mitzvot, regardless of whether or not they understand the rationale behind them.

The mitzvah of *parah adumah* remains an enigma. How does a person become pure after being sprinkled by the ashes of a cow? And why must the cow be red? And why must the ashes be from a cow altogether, as opposed to some other animal? The pesukim continue (*Bamidbar* 19:6), “The Kohen shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson thread, and he shall throw [them] into the burning of the cow.” Cedar trees grow in Lebanon (*Tehillim* 29:5). Why were they commanded to use trees which did not grow in Eretz Yisrael? Cedar trees were rare and expensive; kings used them to build their palaces.

Shlomo Hamelech understood the reasons for all the mitzvot, but regarding the mitzvah of *parah adumah*, he proclaimed (*Kohelet* 7:23), “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me.” Our Sages (*Yoma* 14a) explain that Shlomo exerted himself to understand the reasoning behind the mitzvot. He succeeded in this endeavor, until he came to the mitzvah of *parah adumah*. In spite of his tremendous wisdom, Shlomo could not fathom the reason for this mitzvah. The words (*Bamidbar* 19:2), “They shall take *for you* a completely red cow” indicate that Moshe Rabbeinu was the only person throughout history who understood the reason for this obscure mitzvah. How did Moshe merit this level of wisdom? It was

through his relentless exertion in bringing down the Torah to Am Yisrael and instilling it within their hearts. For this reason, Hashem granted him the power to understand this mitzvah, demonstrating how highly He regarded Moshe for his efforts (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:6).

I have tried to explore various aspects of this mitzvah. I don't for a moment imagine that I have reached the root of it. Nevertheless, there are a few points which can give us a taste for this mitzvah.

Let us begin by analyzing the concept of impurity. This is a state in which a person's *kedushah* is removed. *Tumah* is caused either by contact with a dead body or by different types of bodily emissions. Man is led in the way he wishes to go. Therefore, defilement indicates a lack of sufficient effort to remain in a state of purity. One who makes every effort to remain pure merits Hashem's assistance in this area. For instance, a person who is stringent regarding the purity of his eyes will receive Heavenly assistance to keep away from places of ill repute, where he would likely be tempted to sin.

My father, the tzaddik, Rabbi Moshe Aharon Pinto, zy" a, was punctilious regarding his daily schedule. He would eat his midday meal promptly at 12:00 noon. No matter what was going on, he never swerved from this schedule. For many years, he remained indoors, not leaving his house at all. In spite of the doctors' warnings that lack of activity would lead to obesity, my father remained slim all his life. One day, he received visitors a few minutes before 12:00 noon. My grandmother suggested he ask the men to wait while he ate the food which was already prepared. But he refused to do this. Instead, he greeted them warmly. The visitors spent a long time with my father.

Suddenly, my mother asked my grandmother if she had kashered the chicken before cooking it. Grandmother answered in the

negative, assuming Mother had kashered it previously. See how my father, who was always so scrupulous about what he ate, was saved from consuming unkosher food! Had the guests not come just then, or had my father agreed to eat before seeing them, he would have certainly sinned, *chalilah*. His strictness regarding kosher food saved him from sin.

Channah the Prophetess, proclaims (*Shmuel I*, 2:9), “He guards the steps of His devout ones.” The word רגל (foot or step) is similar to the word הרגל (habit). Hashem obviates the need for His devout ones to deviate from their good habits. He prevents even the potential to sin.

The episode of Pinchas is a case in point. The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 82a) describes how Pinchas took a spear and, with one stab, killed both Zimri and the gentile woman he was sinning with. Pinchas, who would later be rewarded with becoming a Kohen, was spared from becoming defiled by a dead body. Lo and behold! Hashem arranged it so that when he lifted the spear, all of Am Yisrael observed the bodies of Zimri and Kuzbi quivering, still alive. Only after Pinchas put down the spear, did they die. Hashem saw that Pinchas’s act of heroism stemmed not from a desire to prove his strength, but to eradicate the terrible *chillul Hashem* resulting from their misdeed. Seeing that Pinchas acted purely *l’shem Shamayim*, Hashem granted him success. They died only after he replaced the spear (*Tanchuma, Balak* 21). In this manner, Pinchas remained pure and did not become defiled to the dead bodies.

Man is led in the way he wishes to go (*Makkot* 10b). If a person is defiled by *keri* at night, it is an indication that he gazed at forbidden sights, which brought him to improper thoughts (see *Avodah Zarah* 20b; *Rashi*, *ibid.*). Had he hurried to repent this sin, he would not have had this type of impurity. The *tumah* which comes upon a

person awakens him to his deficiency, showing him what type of teshuvah he must do.

The sprinkling of the ashes upon a person who is defiled alludes to his end, nothing but dust of the earth. What gain will he have by sullyng his eyesight with forbidden sights? The crimson thread made from the silkworm reminds a person that he will end up being consumed by worms. The word שני (crimson) can also mean two. This alludes to the two eyes, agents of sin, as the pasuk states, “The eye sees, and the heart desires.”

The cedar wood symbolizes the Torah, which is compared to a tree, as the pasuk (*Mishlei* 3:18) says, “It is a tree of life to those who grasp it.” Standing tall, the cedar tree represents pride and arrogance. Its use in the process of purification has a message for the tzaddikim. If they became defiled by the dead, it is likely that they stumbled in the sin of arrogance. They may have used the Torah for their own ends and not for Hashem’s sake. For example, an honored rabbi who delivers a complicated *shiur* may attribute his success to his own merit. He may feel personal pride in the fact that he did such a good job. But he fails to realize that pride and glory belong solely to the Torah. The wisdom contained in the Torah knows no bounds, and it alone makes man wise, granting him the power to reveal new insights.

The tzaddik does not sin on the same level as the ordinary man. His adherence to Torah averts exposure to forbidden sights. Together with the ashes of the red heifer, the nation was commanded to bring other items which would stir their hearts to teshuvah. These included hyssop and the crimson thread, symbols of humility. The cedar tree contained a message for the tzaddikim, reminding them to do teshuvah.

Rabbi Yishmael Kohen Gadol and Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel were slated for death by the Romans. Rabban Shimon asked Rabbi

Yishmael what was the reason for this. Try as he might, he could not understand why he deserved this terrible punishment. Rabbi Yishmael told him he should not, *chalilah*, think that Hashem decreed this without a reason. According to the Beraita (*Aderet d'Rabbi Natan* 38:3), he suggested that perhaps when Rabban Shimon ate his meal, paupers found their way to his door, and he did not invite them inside to partake of the food. Rabban Shimon replied that this was never the case, for he had guards stationed at his entranceway, inviting in all wayfarers. Rabbi Yishmael pressed further. "Maybe when you delivered a *shiur* at the Har Habayit before the throngs of our nation, you felt a measure of pride?" Rabban Shimon admitted to this flaw, and accepted upon himself the harsh decree of Heaven. (See another reason in *Tanna d'vei Eliyahu* 30.)

How stringently are tzaddikim judged! They may not bask in the pleasure of words of Torah which they themselves prepared and delivered. They are enjoined to transfer all of the glory to the Torah itself. The Torah is so vast that a mere reading of its letters makes man wise. The cedar wood used in the purification process taught the tzaddikim that they, like the tree, have roots of Torah knowledge, deep underground. But this may never be cause for personal prestige or pride. The addition of the crimson thread to the mixture is a message to the tzaddikim that although they are erudite, they must humble themselves like the lowly worm and the low-growing hyssop plant.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ The mitzvah of *parah adumah* is a decree which we cannot understand. Why does the Torah command that specifically a cow should be used, and why must it be completely red? There are so many details which are beyond our comprehension. But we can attempt to explain the underlying

meaning behind the cedar wood, the crimson thread, and the hyssop branch.

- ◆ Shlomo Hamelech tried to understand this mitzvah, but remained unsuccessful. The only one who knew the reasons for all mitzvot was Moshe Rabbeinu. This was a reward for his exertion in bringing the Torah to Bnei Yisrael.
- ◆ Let us try to gain some taste of this mitzvah. If a person becomes *tamei*, it is an indication that he is being notified of an aspect of his character which needs correction. On the other hand, one who constantly guards himself from that which is forbidden will receive Heavenly assistance, as the pasuk states, “He guards the steps of His devout ones.”
- ◆ Pinchas is an example of one who receives Heavenly protection when he makes the first move. He saw an act of immorality and took the initiative to rectify the matter. He spared no effort in spearing both Zimri and Kuzbi, the sinners. But Hashem did not let them die immediately. Pinchas was able to first put down his sword and thereby did not become defiled by their dead bodies.
- ◆ The cedar wood brought together with the ashes of the red heifer alludes to the tzaddikim, bearers of the Torah. But they must constantly remember that glory belongs solely to the Torah. In spite of all their Torah knowledge, they may not accredit themselves with personal pride. The crimson thread and hyssop branch symbolize humility. They taught the ordinary people the beauty of humility.
- ◆ If a person wishes to be spared impurity, he is obligated to live by the Torah’s dictates. Torah is compared to fire, which is red in color, like the *parah adumah*.
- ◆ When a person observes the mitzvot which he does not understand, he demonstrates that he is a true servant of Hashem, serving Him as he was commanded, no questions asked.



Supporting Torah Statements

“Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, saying: This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(Bamidbar 19:1-2)

Rashi expounds on this pasuk, “It is a decree from before Me; you do not have the right to reflect upon it.”

Torah is comprised of mitzvot and *chukim*. The mitzvot are logical commandments, which we can understand with human reasoning. Conversely, *chukim* are not explained and are beyond our comprehension. We would not naturally think of doing them. Shabbat is an example of an understandable mitzvah. Although it demands sacrifice and is often difficult to observe, its beauty and inherent pleasures draw adherents. Everyone knows that a person needs a day off once a week to recharge his batteries. Shabbat is a gift from Hashem (see *Shabbat* 10b). Notwithstanding the self-sacrifice due to the many prohibitions, this day grants pleasure to the body and soul. We gather strength on Shabbat for the coming week.

On the other hand, the *chukim* are completely beyond our grasp. We observe them as orders of our King. Among them are the mitzvot of *parah adumah*, the prohibition of eating milk and meat together, the prohibition of *niddah*, etc. The most difficult of the *chukim* is the decree to study Torah. The *Yetzer Hara* in this field has a field day, constantly trying to keep a person away from his sefarim. For this

reason, Chazal tell us that words of Torah need strengthening. Rashi expounds that when we are told, “If you will go in My statutes” (*Vayikra* 26:3), it is a command “That you should labor in the Torah.” Toiling in Torah is part and parcel of Torah study, not an additional level. In order to study Torah with the full measure of enthusiasm, one must exert himself in it.

Mitzvot which sit well with us are easy to enjoy. But how can we bring ourselves to take pleasure in the *chukim*, which we don’t understand, such as the mitzvah of Torah study?

In Tehillim (34:9) we are told, “Taste and see that Hashem is good.” The way to love of Torah is to develop a taste for it. This will give us an insight into its sweetness.

A sick man visits the doctor. The doctor prescribes a medicine, which the patient is loath to take, due to its bitter taste. But after following the doctor’s orders, he has only gratitude toward him. Just as soon as he has tasted the medicine, he begins to feel better. When a person sweats and toils over something, he develops a love for that thing. Parents agonize over their children, raising them with self-sacrifice, foregoing personal pleasures for the sake of their offspring. Yet, one of the greatest types of love in the world is the love of parents toward their children.

How can we understand that a mother smothers her child with affection, when, even before he came into this world, he caused her pain and discomfort? After “schlepping” him around for nine months, she goes through the labor pains. As a newborn, he doesn’t repay her kindnesses with him. What draws her to love him so?

It is due specifically to her efforts that she feels such an affinity for her child. We naturally feel connected to something in which we invest ourselves. Parents therefore love their children uncondi-

-tionally. By devoting oneself to Torah study, one will come to truly cherish Torah.

The mitzvah of *parah adumah* does not sit well with those far removed from it. Rashi (*Bamidbar* 19:2) states, “Because the Satan and the nations of the world aggrieve Israel by saying, ‘What is this commandment?’ and, ‘What reason is there to it?’ therefore, Scripture called it a ‘statute.’” Broadening their accusation, we can say that the nations of the world have no concept how *bnei Torah* can immerse themselves in the sea of Torah all lifelong. What is the point of it? they wonder. This is why the ignoramuses dub the Torah scholars “idlers.” Animosity toward those who spend all their lives in Torah study dates back many generations. Rabbi Akiva attested that before he learned Torah, he would have bitten a *talmid chacham* like a donkey, breaking his bones.

I was once invited to the home of a wealthy American. He was dying of cancer. When I entered his house, I tangibly felt that this world is merely a vestibule before the banquet hall, which is *Olam Haba* (*Avot* 4:16). My escort and I walked down a long well-appointed corridor with marble tiling and wall-to-wall carpeting. Portraits of famous artists graced the walls. As I walked the length of the hallway, I wondered what the main room looked like. I felt that Hashem had placed me here in order to better understand the analogy of this world being a vestibule before the World to Come. Indeed, as we stepped out of the elevator which carried us to the main room, the lights went on automatically. The grandeur we observed cannot be described in words.

The man of the house welcomed us warmly and asked us to take seats. As we spoke, he told me that he had recently purchased a new boat and outfitted it with a very expensive radar system. When I asked why he needed this boat and why the expensive radar

system, he told me it was to catch fish. In the same breath, he asked that I bless him that he should succeed in this endeavor. When I heard this, I was shocked. Is this what occupies the mind of a man on the brink of death? Instead of asking for a *berachah* for a speedy recovery, he asked that he should catch a lot of fish!

I sighed with relief, blessing Hashem for not making me an ignoramus. This is what happened to Korach. He was misled by what he saw (*Tanchuma, Korach* 5). He was blinded by the glimmer of gold and could not perceive reality for what it was. Chazal (*Pesachim* 119a) state that Korach needed a herd of donkeys just to carry the keys to his treasure chests! It is not for nothing that we have the expression “Rich as Korach.” But he eventually lost everything in his rebellion against Moshe.

If Korach, who was one of the Ark-bearers (*Tanchuma, Korach* 2) was not protected by his Torah knowledge, what can we, small people, say for ourselves? We certainly need to increase our level of Torah study and constantly strengthen ourselves against the wiles of the *Yetzer Hara*. We must ensure that we don't spend our precious time engaged in fishy pastimes.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ “If you will go in My statutes.” Rashi expounds, “That you should labor in the Torah.” The command to study Torah is a *chok*. How does one come to cherish this command, which is beyond our understanding? Tehillim tells us, “Taste and see that Hashem is good.” As we involve ourselves in words of Torah, we develop a taste for them, eventually coming to cherish them.
- ◆ The nations of the world have always scorned us for our Torah study, as Rashi explains. This animosity, unfortunately, is also found among our own co-religionists. The ignoramuses of our nation hate the Torah

scholars. Rabbi Akiva himself would have bitten a *talmid chacham* to the bone, like a donkey, before he was involved in the world of Torah.

- ◆ Torah study is our weapon against the *Yetzer Hara*, saving us from his snares.



Sense in the Statutes

“Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, saying: This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(Bamidbar 19:1-2)

The mitzvah of *parah adumah* is a *chok*, above our understanding. Many mitzvot are within the grasp of human logic, such as the prohibitions of murder, stealing, lying, and incest. Society demands a level of adherence to law in order to function. This promotes quality of life. Conversely, there are *chukim*, which are beyond our understanding. Examples are *sha’atnez*, eating milk and meat together, *niddah*, and *parah adumah*. If a person became *tamei* through contact with the dead, he was obligated to be sprinkled with the ashes of the red heifer. One who neglected to do this was punishable by *karet*.

There is no coincidence in the placing of events in the Torah. The juxtaposition of certain subjects indicates a connection between

them. What, then, is the connection between parashat *Korach* and parashat *Chukat*, which opens with the topic of the *parah adumah*? Chazal (see *Pesikta Zutrati, Chukat*) explain that Korach mocked the mitzvot which are incomprehensible, such as *parah adumah*. He especially found it difficult to conceive how the ashes of the cow could render pure the impure, while defiling the pure. Parashat *Chukat* teaches us that although there are those who scoff Hashem's word, one must remain staunch in his faith and not be taken in by the apostates.

There are many secrets that are hidden from our understanding. It is difficult for us to comprehend why some tzaddikim have bitter lives, whereas wicked people lead easy, comfortable lives. Contemplating this subject can lead to doubts in one's belief. But as soon as a person admits to the fact that his intelligence is limited and he cannot comprehend all that transpires, he will accept Heavenly justice with love, without digging deeply into these areas.

We have seen occasions in which a person was involved in doing a mitzvah, when he was suddenly killed in a car accident, in spite of our Sages' assurance (*Pesachim* 8b) that one who is involved in a mitzvah is saved from harm. People who are punctilious in honoring their parents might die young, notwithstanding the promise (*Shemot* 20:12), "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days will be lengthened." Many years ago, the holy Rabbi Refael Pinto, zt"l, was murdered in Morocco by wild Arabs. Everyone was in shock over his tragic death. Rabbi Refael was an ascetic, known for his righteousness and profound Torah knowledge. He was constantly cloistered in the confines of his home. Compounded with our shock was our surprise at such betrayal, as Rabbi Refael was known as a man who dealt often with the Arabs, doing charitable acts for them and supporting them in their hour of need.

Our history is replete with instances of tzaddikim suffering untold

torment. During the time of the Syrian-Greeks, Channah's seven sons were killed before her eyes. After that, she threw herself from the roof (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim* 873; *Gittin* 57b). The Gemara (see *Berachot* 5b; *Rashi, ibid.*) states that all of Rabbi Yochanan's children died during his lifetime. The thirteen children of the *Chidushei HaRim* died during his lifetime, when he went to study under his new mentor. Throughout the Holocaust, the Jews of Eastern Europe suffered indescribably. Likewise, the Satmar Rebbe's wife and children were murdered, along with millions of our people.

This phenomenon is liable to shake one's faith, to the degree that he might abandon it altogether, *chalilah*. In order for Am Yisrael to remain true to Hashem in spite of all the incomprehensible suffering, we are commanded to observe the *chukim*. By accustoming ourselves to fulfill even those mitzvot which we cannot fathom, we will come to perfect, unshakeable faith in Hashem, despite the questions which arise in the wake of challenges.

The parashah continues with the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 19:14), "This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent." I would like to explain its connection with the opening pasuk of the parashah, "This is the decree of the Torah." A person attains the strength to cope with the challenges that befall his "tent," even in the direst situations. When death or tragedy come knocking at one's door, he has recourse in the teachings of the Torah. When a person trains himself to accept whatever Hashem has decreed upon him, even that which he cannot understand, he possesses the strength to deal with his ordeals without casting doubt upon Hashem's justice.

Moreover, Chazal (*Berachot* 63b) teach that "This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent" refers to the tent of Torah. However, this raises an impelling question. Isn't the Torah the tree of life (*Mishlei* 3:18), not the gallows of death? Why does the pasuk

imply that a person must sacrifice himself upon the altar of Torah? In order for a person to really dwell in the tent of Torah, he must first slay all forms of physical desires. Only after deadening his materialistic pursuits in order to pursue the Torah, is he truly capable of setting camp in the tent of Torah.

The Torah tells us, “When the Ark would journey, Moshe said, ‘Arise, Hashem, and let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee from before You’” (*Bamidbar* 10:35). Rashi expounds, “Because [the Ark] would go ahead of them by three days’ journey, Moshe would say, ‘Halt, and wait for us, and do not distance yourself yet further.’” The Aron would travel three days’ journey ahead of the nation, in order to show them the way. Imagine the scene: Tens of thousands of Bnei Yisrael, including their wives, children, and cattle, wandered in the Wilderness, led by the cloud which flattened the way and a fire by night. Furthermore, they were fed by the manna and provided water by the Well of Miriam, which traveled along with them throughout.

The Aron took the lead, indicating which way to go. Moshe ensured that it would not get too far ahead of them. Knowing the Aron was nearby gave Am Yisrael a feeling of security. The Aron symbolized the Torah, as it contained the *luchot* within it. Every Jew contains a spark of Moshe Rabbeinu within himself. It is this spark which stimulates him to cry out, “Hashem, do not distance Yourself from me! I need to know You are near!” Hashem, for His part, tells us, “I am always here. If you feel far from Me, it is because you have distanced yourselves from Me.”

How can a person constantly feel Hashem’s Presence? By being connected to Torah and mitzvot, and fulfilling those commands which are above our understanding. When a person performs all of the mitzvot, not neglecting anything, he merits a special bond with

Hashem, and does not question His deeds. When sudden tragedy strikes, he is not ruffled, for the love of Hashem is deeper than any doubt.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Many mitzvot of the Torah are incomprehensible to our small minds. An example of this is the mitzvah of *parah adumah*.
- ◆ Korach mocked the mitzvah of *parah adumah*. The connection between the two parshiyot of *Korach* and *Chukat* indicates our obligation to adhere to Hashem's commands, observing even the mitzvot which are difficult to understand, in spite of the scoffers. *Chukim* teach us that even when we do not grasp the meaning of mitzvot, we must fulfill them nonetheless.
- ◆ One who has accustomed himself to accepting Hashem's decree without question will find it easier to accept tribulations with love.



Rulings Reveal the Ruler

“Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, saying: This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(Bamidbar 19:1-2)

Why does the Torah command us to take specifically a red cow, to the exclusion of any other color? Additionally, why does it have

to be perfect, never having carried a burden, and why must it be an animal that never cohabited?

The mitzvah of *parah adumah* is a *chok*, meaning that it was commanded without explanation. Only Moshe Rabbeinu, who ascended on High to receive the Torah from Hashem, learned the reasoning behind this mysterious mitzvah (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:6). Even Shlomo Hamelech, wisest of all men, said (*Kohelet* 7:23), “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me.” Shlomo Hamelech merited understanding the purpose of all of the *chukim* of the Torah (see *Niddah* 9a), but the reasoning behind the *parah adumah* was hidden from him. Far be it from us to imagine that we understand that which was concealed from Shlomo Hamelech. But maybe, with *siyata di’Shemaya*, we can give some explanation of the details of this mitzvah.

Hashem ordered that the ashes of a red heifer be sprinkled upon a defiled person. The color red alludes to the traits of jealousy, anger, and lust. When a person becomes angry or is envious, his face turns red. Furthermore, the color red depicts passion. This is why Chazal forbade Jewish women from wearing the color red (see *Maharsha, Berachot* 20a). This color draws the eye and arouses desire. One who became defiled and in need of the ashes in order to purify himself, obviously was deficient in a mitzvah. He was not stringent enough in one of these three areas, which have the potential of driving a person out of this world. Hashem arranged for him to become defiled, in order to awaken him to examine his deeds and discover the sin which caused his defilement.

“Man is led in the way he wishes to go” (*Makkot* 10b). If a person’s sole aspiration is to come close to Hashem, he merits maintaining his purity and is spared from defilement. Conversely, one who embraces the traits of jealousy, anger, lust, and honor, is automatically distanced from Torah and mitzvot. Hashem places

him in a situation where he becomes *tamei*, and which warrants him being sprinkled with the ashes of the red heifer. A red light should flash in his mind, transmitting to him the signal that something is amiss and he must return to Hashem.

The ashes allude to man's beginning, as well as his end, nothing but a heap of dust. What is the purpose in envying one's fellow man, or lording over him, when life is so fleeting? In a short while, he will pass on to the world of eternity.

Sprinkling the ashes signifies that the person has been born anew, similar to Adam Harishon, who was formed by Hashem from the dust of the earth. Chazal (see *Vayikra Rabbah* 30:3) tell us that one who does complete teshuvah is compared to a newborn, who never tasted the taste of sin. The knowledge that he has been recreated, coupled with the awareness that he will return to the ground from where he came, will be sufficient to obviate further sin, arousing him to be close with his Heavenly Father.

The Midrash (*Peliah* 458:460) states that when Moshe heard the allegations of Korach, he "heard and fell on his face" (*Bamidbar* 16:4). The Midrash finds this difficult to understand, asking what brought Korach to argue with Moshe Rabbeinu. The Midrash explains that Korach took issue with the mitzvah of *parah adumah*. What is the connection between the two?

Korach entered into a dispute with Moshe and Aharon due to the tremendous envy he had toward them. Korach demanded that Moshe reveal to him the reasoning behind the mitzvah of *parah adumah*. But Moshe refused to divulge that which Hashem wanted hidden. Korach interpreted Moshe's silence for evasiveness. He claimed that Moshe obviously did not know the reason for the *parah adumah*. Why, then, was he held in high esteem by the nation? Furthermore, Korach asserted, it was most likely that Moshe had

fabricated this mitzvah himself. Stretching this idea, he continued, declaring that who knew if Moshe had not fabricated all of the mitzvot, as well, *rachmana litzlan*. Moshe Rabbeinu knew which way the wind was blowing. He understood that silence on his part would be translated as ignorance. In his great anguish, he “heard and fell on his face.” As he fell, he saw an image of the *parah adumah* that added fuel to the fire of Korach, bolstering his charges.

Shlomo Hamelech proclaimed, “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me” (*Kohelet* 7:23). The word רחוקה (beyond) alludes to קורח (Korach), who maintained his distance from Hashem and Klal Yisrael. This was through asking numerous questions instead of accepting Moshe’s authority as Hashem’s agent with complete faith. Shlomo Hamelech was big enough to admit that he could not understand this mitzvah. But Korach was so full of conceit and jealousy toward Moshe that he could not concede to the fact that this was kept from him. He stirred up a quarrel as a result of his negative attitude.

The task of a Jew is to accept the words of Hashem with perfect faith, as they were given, no questions asked. We must fulfill Hashem’s wishes to perfection simply because this is what He wants, even when it is beyond our understanding. Korach’s downfall began when he refused to accept Hashem’s words unconditionally. In a place where silence and acceptance were called for, he demanded explanations. This drew him into the web of dispute, from which he was unable to extricate himself.

How could Moshe Rabbeinu understand the reasoning behind the mitzvah of *parah adumah*, when it was beyond the understanding of Shlomo Hamelech, wisest of all men? Moshe Rabbeinu received the Torah directly from the mouth of Hashem, thereby meriting understanding the reasons for the mitzvot. Shlomo Hamelech did

not have this distinction, and was therefore denied the understanding of the *chok* of *parah adumah*.

Hashem purposely placed *chukim* in the Torah, whose reasons are hidden from us. It is specifically the mitzvot which we don't understand that bring us to a deeper level of faith as we long to crown Hashem as our King. Unconditional fulfillment of the mitzvot, even when we don't understand them, testifies to the faith in Hashem deep in our hearts. We are prepared to accept His mitzvot even when we don't understand the reasons for them.

The Zohar (III, 113a) states that statutes signify that there is the existence of a kingdom. A king's sovereignty can be measured by the level of his subjects' adherence to his rulings, even when they don't understand them. We are enjoined to observe the *chukim* of the King of kings. This fortifies our faith to such a degree that we are ready to sacrifice our lives for His will. Shlomo Hamelech, in spite of his tremendous wisdom, could not fathom the reason for this mitzvah. There is a King above him Who is yet wiser. We have faith in Him Alone. He commanded us the mitzvah of *parah adumah* to instill faith deep in our hearts.

The mitzvah of *parah adumah* is introduced with the words: "This is the decree of the Torah." The *Ohr Hachaim* raises a question. Why doesn't it read, "This is the decree of the *parah adumah*"? Furthermore, why is this language of "decree of the Torah" used exclusively regarding this mitzvah and nowhere else? The reason is that all of Torah is founded upon this *chok*. Fulfillment of this mitzvah, even without understanding it, arouses faith in one's heart. This faith is fundamental for fulfilling the mitzvot of the Torah. The foundation of Torah is faith. It is what prompts a person to coronate Hashem, encouraging him to fulfill all of the mitzvot, even those which are beyond our comprehension. When a person observes the

mitzvot without understanding them, he attests to his unwavering faith in Hashem.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why were Bnei Yisrael commanded to sprinkle the ashes of a red cow? The color red symbolizes the traits of envy, lust, and pursuit of honor. One who became defiled was deficient in a mitzvah of the Torah, because he was not scrupulous in one of these areas.
- ◆ When Moshe heard the allegations of Korach, he “fell on his face.” What drove Korach to argue against Moshe? It was the mitzvah of *parah adumah*. Korach was envious of Moshe’s exalted position in the nation. He demanded an explanation for the mitzvah of *parah adumah*. Moshe knew that Hashem wanted to keep this from mankind. Therefore, he fell on his face in anguish, realizing that his silence would be misconstrued as ignorance. This was liable to cause a *chillul Hashem*, as Korach would claim that Moshe concocted this mitzvah, as well as all the others.
- ◆ Shlomo Hamelech stated, “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me” (*Kohelet* 7:23). The word רחוקה (beyond) alludes to קורח (Korach). Korach distanced himself, by means of his many questions. He refused to make peace with the fact that some things were beyond his understanding. Shlomo Hamelech, on the other hand, realized that not everything was within his grasp.
- ◆ Our faith is gauged by the way we observe those mitzvot which we cannot understand. The Zohar, therefore proclaims that *chukim* refer to royalty. We truly coronate Hashem when we observe the mitzvot for no other reason than that He commanded them.
- ◆ The pasuk states, “This is the decree of the Torah,” and not, “This is the decree of the *parah adumah*.” The entire Torah is based upon observance of this *chok*.



Keeping Mitzvot, No Questions Asked

“Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, saying: This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(Bamidbar 19:1-2)

The mitzvah of *parah adumah* is called a “statute” to indicate that it is a decree from Hashem, and we must keep it whether we understand it or not. We are fortified by this thought when the Satan and the nations of the world mock us for keeping this statute, since it is incomprehensible (*Rashi*).

The Satan is a mighty force, instilling doubt in the heart of man regarding those mitzvot which he does not understand. If a person, *chalilah*, begins doubting mitzvot whose explanation is hidden from him, he will quickly become suspicious and skeptical regarding all mitzvot, even those which he is capable of understanding. There are those who, despite the pull of their *Yetzer Hara*, fulfill mitzvot. But their mitzvah performance is perfunctory at best, lacking all enthusiasm.

People might have trouble resolving their difficulties regarding the *chukim* of the Torah. But it is impossible not to believe there is a Creator. Even the most foolish ignoramus feels that there is a Higher Being managing the world. Those who refrain from observing the mitzvot, be it from laziness or lustfulness, claim that they are atheists. But this is merely a sham. In their inner hearts, they know very well that there is a Creator. They wish to exempt themselves

from the burden of Torah and mitzvot and the sense of responsibility involved in believing in Hashem. Therefore, they conveniently claim that they are non-believers, and thereby silence the voice of reproof.

These people are too lazy to do Hashem's will. They therefore question the purpose of this *chok*, which purifies the defiled while defiling the pure. This is all in order to arouse ridicule over the words of Torah, *rachmana litzlan*. In this manner, they attempt to calm their conscience when they do not go in the ways of the Torah. Hashem has therefore stated that there are mitzvot which are above our understanding, and no explanation is forthcoming. We are adjured to observe them because that is what Hashem commanded. As soon as we realize that there are some things we cannot fathom, the allegations of the prosecutors against Torah will fall by the wayside, never to disturb us again.

The nations of the world are the first to mock the words of Torah. They inject coolness and doubt into the hearts of wayward Jews. They attempt to make a correlation between the mitzvah of *parah adumah* and all the other mitzvot. They state that *parah adumah* is diametrically opposed to sound logic. So, too, they claim, all of the Torah is incomprehensible and illogical, *rachmana litzlan*. What, then, is the point of observing it?

Parashat *Chukat* is called by this name in honor of the mitzvah of *parah adumah*, the quintessential *chok*, contained therein. Not only is *parah adumah* a decree which we cannot understand; it seems to defy all logic. Shlomo Hamelech succeeded in understanding the reasoning behind every *chok*, except for *parah adumah*. He stated, "I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me" (*Kohelet* 7:23). Only Moshe Rabbeinu was taught the secrets of this statute (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:6).

The mitzvah of *parah adumah* has a special status among the

statutes of the Torah. The Satan, who receives nourishment from the forces of defilement, tries to undermine this mitzvah, which eradicates impurity from the world.

Rashi (*Bamidbar* 19:2) states that the Satan and the nations of the world aggrieve Israel. By mocking this mitzvah, the Satan influences the nations of the world to participate in increasing impurity in the world. They, too, receive sustenance from the impure forces. The nations rejected the Torah; why would they ridicule Am Yisrael about it? The Satan's entire existence is at stake. He therefore recruits the nation of the world in his battle, convincing them that it is their sacred mission to increase desecration in the world.

Why did Hashem enlighten Moshe as to the explanation of this mitzvah? Why didn't He conceal it from him, just as He concealed His glory from him (*Shemot* 33:23)? Why did He explain it to him and not to Shlomo Hamelech? It seems that Hashem had a special reason for revealing this matter only to Moshe Rabbeinu and nobody else.

Moshe Rabbeinu was the only mortal to ascend to Heaven during his lifetime. Admittance into the World of Truth attested to Moshe's signature trait – truth. All of the Torah's secrets were revealed to him, for in Heaven, all is exposed. Even the Angel of Death, whose purpose is taking people out of this world, humbled himself before Moshe Rabbeinu, revealing to him the secrets of the *ketoret*, which was capable of halting a plague (*Shabbat* 89a). The Angel of Death was thereby jeopardizing his entire existence. Nonetheless, he could not resist Moshe Rabbeinu in *Shamayim*, and felt compelled to share this secret with him. In the World of Truth, all is crystal clear. Nothing can be hidden.

The secrets of the mitzvah of *parah adumah* were revealed to Moshe Rabbeinu. He spent forty days and nights in Heaven, learning Torah from Hashem Himself. He triumphed over the angels. Nothing could be concealed from him. Moshe attained such an elevated level

of clarity that he perceived all the insights which future *talmidei chachamim*, throughout the generations, would innovate (*Yerushalmi, Pe'ah* 2:4).

It seems that Hashem disclosed the secrets of the *parah adumah* to Moshe Rabbeinu for the following reason. Moshe was the equivalent of all Am Yisrael (*Tanchuma, Beshalach* 10). Because of this connection, since Moshe possessed complete understanding of this mitzvah, even though they themselves were unaware of its intricate explanations, Bnei Yisrael were able to fulfill it without fear of the Satan injecting doubt into their minds. Hashem never gives a person a *nisayon* which he is incapable of overcoming. Moshe's knowledge of the intricacies of *parah adumah* gave Bnei Yisrael the faith to accept Hashem's *chok* without question, as the pasuk (*Devarim* 33:4) states, "The Torah that Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the Congregation of Yaakov."

The pivotal point of the mitzvah of *parah adumah* is hidden from us. But through study, we are capable of understanding some aspects of this mitzvah, drawing energy to fulfill it in spite of the numerous questions involved. One may not give up on understanding any part of it, thereby claiming it is illogical. This is a scheme of the *Yetzer Hara*, suggesting that we are exempt from fulfilling whatever is above our understanding. Instead, a person should attempt to understand as much as he can. Whatever is beyond our comprehension has a rational explanation, albeit hidden from us at present. The day will come when Eliyahu Hanavi will clarify whatever was obscure to us all these years.

Moshe's level of humility was amazing! He knew all the secrets of the Torah, including that of the *parah adumah*. Nevertheless, the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 12:3) testifies, "Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth." Commensurate with his understanding of the Torah's secrets was

his subservience to Hashem. He did not lord over anyone in the nation. When Hashem observed Moshe Rabbeinu's tremendous humility, He revealed to him deep secrets of the Torah and its *chukim*. One who subjects himself to the Torah merits understanding its mysteries and innovating insights.

Regarding the Torah, the pasuk (*Tehillim* 19:8) says, "The Torah of Hashem is perfect, restoring the soul." The word תמימה (perfect) contains the words מ' - מיתה (death – forty). The Torah, given after forty days and nights, restores man's soul when he is prepared to "kill himself in the tent of Torah," by fulfilling the mitzvot with complete devotion. He is completely committed to Torah, even without understanding the reasons of all the mitzvot. The *parah adumah*, the quintessential *chok*, symbolizes our attitude toward the *chukim*. The cow itself had to be "without blemish and upon which a yoke has not come." This signifies that we should accept the mitzvot unconditionally, without giving sway to the Satan. It is specifically the mitzvot that a person performs "without blemish," in all innocence and unquestioningly, simply because that is what Hashem commanded, that restore our souls and grant us the dew of life.

Two parshiyot of the Torah have similar names: *Chukat* (Statute) and *Bechukotai* (In My Statutes). We can explain the connection between them in the following way. Regarding parashat *Bechukotai*, Rashi expounds on the words, "If you will go in My statutes, "That you should labor in the Torah." Much exertion is required to plumb the depths of Torah. One must immerse himself in it completely, not merely surf it. This applies even to the *chukim*, which are beyond our understanding. One must sweat and toil to arrive at some level of comprehension of these statutes. He may not say that he is exempt from trying to understand the reasoning behind them, since they are anyway beyond his grasp. On the contrary, if ordinary

mitzvot demand exertion, all the more so the statutes, whose meaning is hidden from us. Although they will never be completely comprehensible to us, we are enjoined to master them to the best of our ability. The words, “If you will go in My statutes” teach us that toil in Torah is an essential ingredient in its study.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The Satan injects coolness into the hearts of man regarding the observance of *chukim*. He claims that they are incomprehensible to us; why try to understand them at all? Likewise, he plants these thoughts in the hearts of the nations of the world. It is all in order to prevent us from serving Hashem as we should.
- ◆ The parashah of *chukim* begins with the mitzvah of *parah adumah*, the quintessential *chok*. This is the mitzvah which threatens the Satan’s existence. Purification detaches him from his source of nourishment, which is defilement. He therefore attempts to maintain impurity among the nation.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu was the only one who ever understood the reason behind the mitzvah of *parah adumah*. Even Shlomo Hamelech, wisest of all men, did not comprehend the reasoning behind this mitzvah. This is because Moshe was the only one to ascend to Heaven in his lifetime. That is the place of undiluted truth, where nothing is hidden. Even the Satan himself taught Moshe the secrets of the *ketoret* in halting an epidemic.
- ◆ Just as a person exerts himself to understand the mitzvot of the Torah, so too, is he enjoined to attempt to understand the *chukim*, to the best of his ability. This is alluded to in the similarity between the words *Chukat* and *Bechukotai*. The injunction to “toil in Torah,” indicated by the word *Bechukotai*, applies also to the *chukim*, which we cannot fully understand.



The Life-Giving Waters of the Mikveh

“Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, saying: This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(Bamidbar 19:1-2)

The mitzvah of *parah adumah* is a *chok* which we cannot fathom (*Tanchuma, Chukat 8*). Nevertheless, in the days of the Beit Hamikdash, Bnei Yisrael performed this commandment to perfection. Just as one who was defiled by a dead body needed to be sprinkled by the ashes of the *parah adumah* in order to become pure once again, so too, must a woman who has become *niddah* immerse in a kosher *mikveh* after seven clean days. In this manner, she becomes purified of this defilement. A woman can sprinkle all of the waters of the world upon herself, but as long as she has not immersed in a kosher *mikveh*, she remains impure. The injunction for a woman to immerse in a kosher *mikveh* is a *chok* and beyond our comprehension, just like the mitzvah of *parah adumah*. Despite this, kosher Jewish women throughout history have sacrificed themselves in order to uphold this mysterious mitzvah.

I have a gentile neighbor in Lyon who is constantly puzzled by my actions. Once, as I was leaving my home on the Sukkot festival, carrying the Four Species, my neighbor was completely confounded. I saw curiosity written all over his face as he attempted to make sense of our unusual actions on this holiday. As I passed by, I greeted him. He took the opportunity to ask about the mysterious

items I held. I told him that as detailed an explanation as I would offer, he would never really understand the root of things. There really was no point in trying to explain to a gentile concepts such as *sukkah*, the Clouds of Glory, the Four Species, etc.

Just as some things are beyond the understanding of a gentile, *l'havdil*, there are *chukim* of the Torah which are above our comprehension. We observe them only because Hashem commanded us to. When Mashiach will arrive, Eliyahu Hanavi will explain all of our difficulties. But we cannot evade the matter completely. Therefore, I will attempt to offer reasons, based on what our Sages have told us.

The Gemara (*Berachot 7a*) recounts an incident that occurred to Rabbi Yishmael Kohen Gadol. On Yom Kippur, when he entered the *Kodesh Hakodashim*, he heard the voice of Hashem call out to him, "Yishmael, My son, bless Me." How did Rabbi Yishmael attain such a lofty level as to warrant Hashem's request for a blessing? Chazal (*Otzar Hamidrashim* pg. 400) explain that before Rabbi Yishmael's birth, his mother went to immerse in the river. When she emerged, she saw a dog. The kosher Jewish women were always stringent not to gaze at an unkosher animal upon emerging from the *mikveh*. Therefore, she returned to the freezing river, with *mesirut nefesh*, to immerse once again. And once again, upon emerging, she saw the dog. She returned a third time. And saw the dog. This scene repeated itself time after time, but Rabbi Yishmael's mother did not surrender. Fear of Hashem was her sole motivation; she had no fear of the icy waters. When the angels on High observed the self-sacrifice of this righteous woman, they removed the dog. That very night, she conceived Rabbi Yishmael, who would eventually become the Kohen Gadol who was fitting to bless Hashem.

At the Creation of the world, there was nothing but water. At the time of Creation, Hashem separated the waters. Some rose to the

heavens, becoming the skies, while the others became bodies of water, such as oceans and rivers. These lower waters wept at their fate, distanced as they were from the *kedushah* of the *Shechinah* (*Bereishit* 5:4). Hashem promised them that their waters would be used for *nisuch hamayim*, bringing the nation *kedushah* during the days of the Beit Hamikdash. Furthermore, these waters are used in the *mikveh*, purifying women from their *niddah* status, enabling them to draw holy *neshamot* from on High. These *neshamot* shine like the firmaments, combining the best of both worlds.

The word מים (water) is numerically equivalent to ninety. This is the sum of forty-five plus forty-five. Forty-five is the *gematria* of Hashem's Name ה-ו-ה-י, with each letter spelled out. It is also the *gematria* of the word אדם (man). By purifying and sanctifying man, the waters have the ability to connect him with his Creator. The letters of the word מ-י-נ numerically equal forty, ten, and another forty. Two times forty allude to the forty days and forty nights which Moshe spent in *Shamayim* in order to receive the Torah. The number ten alludes to the Ten Commandments. Waters, therefore, connect a person with Torah, elevating him with *kedushah* and *taharah*.

Our Sages (*Bava Kama* 17a) state, "Water is Torah." Water flows ceaselessly. Standing waters become putrid. A person is constantly obligated to study Torah. Words of Torah should pour forth from him. If he remains stagnant, he will turn sour. Hashem is not satisfied with one small act on our part. He wants us to continually flow onward in our Avodat Hashem, like the running waters which never stand still.

A baby in the uterus is surrounded by protective waters. If these waters break, the baby's life is in great danger. Just like the embryo is ensconced in water, so are we enclosed in the life-giving waters of Torah, protected from sin. Men are commanded to swim in the

sea of Torah. Women, who are exempt from Torah study and time-bound mitzvot, connect to life-giving waters by immersing in the *mikveh*, divesting themselves of defilement and becoming bound with their lofty source. As stated previously, the world was originally covered with water. Water was the first thing created. When a woman immerses in a *mikveh*, she connects to the primal root of the world. These are the waters which existed when all of the *neshamot* resided under the Heavenly Throne, pure and clean of all sin.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Just as the mitzvah of *parah adumah* is a *chok*, above our understanding, so too, is the mitzvah to immerse in a *mikveh* a *chok*. Still, we can try to be seaworthy, gaining clarity in this matter.
- ◆ Rabbi Yishmael Kohen Gadol merited Hashem's request for a blessing. This was due to his mother's *mesirut nefesh* in the mitzvah of *mikveh*.
- ◆ At the time of Creation, Hashem separated between the Upper and the Lower waters. As compensation for the Lower waters, He granted them the mitzvah of *nisuch hamayim* and *mikveh*. The word מים (water) is numerically equivalent to ninety. This is the sum of forty-five plus forty-five. Hashem's Name ה-ו-ה-י, with each letter spelled out, has the *gematria* of forty-five. It is also the *gematria* of the word אדם (man). By purifying and sanctifying man, the waters have the ability to connect him with his Creator. The letters of the word מ-י-נ numerically equal forty, ten, and forty. Two times forty allude to the forty days and forty nights which Moshe spent in *Shamayim* in order to receive the Torah. The number ten alludes to the Ten Commandments. Waters, therefore, connect a person with Torah, affecting him with *kedushah* and *taharah*.
- ◆ Our Sages (*Bava Kama* 17a) state, "Water is Torah." Water flows ceaselessly. Standing waters become putrid. A person is constantly obligated to study Torah. Words of Torah should pour forth from him. If he remains stagnant, he will turn sour, and may become involved in

illicit deeds. Hashem is not satisfied with one small act on our part. He wants us to continually flow onward in our Avodat Hashem, like the running waters which never stand still.

- ◆ When a woman immerses in the *mikveh*, she is connecting with the world's oldest resource – water. Water existed in the world before anything else, alone with the *neshamot* on High, which were free of all sin.



For Love of Torah

“Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, saying: This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(Bamidbar 19:1-2)

The words “This is the decree of the Torah” imply that Torah study is a decree, whose reasoning is not specified. It is not enough for a person to observe the mitzvot of the Torah. He must exert himself in its study, as well. The more a person increases his toil in Torah, the more reward he accrues on High. Some people claim that it is sufficient to keep the mitzvot. “What is the point of learning Torah,” they ask, “and especially the intricacies of the mitzvot which are irrelevant today, when we no longer have a Beit Hamikdash?” We ignore their contentions, obeying Hashem’s order that we study Torah at all times and in every situation, even the

details of those mitzvot which are not relevant nowadays. We do not question the King's orders, but rather execute His wishes implicitly.

Our Sages have provided some enlightenment regarding the mitzvah of Torah study. Diligence in Torah study connects a person with Hashem and arouses him to do more mitzvot. Study brings to action (*Kiddushin* 40b). Therefore, learning the mitzvot pertinent to the days of the Beit Hamikdash will produce strong feelings of yearning for the days when we had the *Shechinah* in our midst. This will stimulate a person to pray for its return. A person feels an affinity for that in which he invested himself. This is why people are especially attached to their hard-earned money.

The parashah continues with the words (*Bamidbar* 19:14), "This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent." Chazal (*Berachot* 63b) teach us that a person should be so dedicated to Torah study that he is prepared to sacrifice his life in the tent of Torah. The ability to sacrifice one's life for Hashem's sake and the sake of Torah and mitzvot indicates a powerful bond of love which exists between himself and Hashem. He is willing to neglect his personal interests in order to sanctify himself for Hashem (see *Tanchuma* 58:3).

At the end of parashat *Balak*, the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 25a) states, "Israel settled in Shittim and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moav." This pasuk connects beautifully with the message of parashat *Chukat*. When Bnei Yisrael sit idly, not involved in Torah study, their *Yetzer Hara* grabs hold of them and convinces them to sin. They eventually commit the worst sins imaginable, such as acts of immorality. The way to avoid sin is by remembering that "this is the decree of the Torah." Torah study provides a person with protection from sin. Chazal (*Ketubot* 59b) teach, "Idleness brings to acts of immorality." As the saying goes, "Idle hands seek mischief." Preventing boredom will prevent one

from acts of immorality. The best method to do this is to become occupied with Torah study, the antidote to the *Yetzer Hara* (*Kiddushin* 30b).

Many people tell me that their time is not their own. They cannot carve out a niche in their day for Torah study. I am shocked anew each time I hear this claim. If they would have had a dreadful disease consuming their bodies, would they say that they have no time to see a doctor? Only one who has suicidal tendencies would consider ignoring his symptoms and continue with his regular schedule.

The *Yetzer Hara* is eating away at our insides. If a person does not ensure to take the healing medicine which is Torah, the *Yetzer Hara* is liable to consume him (see *Mesilat Yesharim* 5). How can one be so foolhardy as to assert that he has no time for Torah study, when every moment devoid of Torah study is liable to cause him untold damage? A person must internalize the concept that Torah is vital for his body and soul, no less than medicine is vital for the sick man. This knowledge will arouse him to study Torah and exert himself in it.

In parashat *Beha'alotcha*, we read (*Bamidbar* 10:29), “Moshe said to Chovev son of Reuel, the Midianite, the father-in-law of Moshe.” Rashi explains that this refers to Yitro, who was called Chovev (חובב), for he cherished (חיבב) the Torah. Yitro was originally the priest of Midian, to whom the throngs flocked for advice and blessing. After Yitro recognized Hashem’s Presence and the greatness of His nation, he abandoned all of his former glory and attached himself to the Jewish nation. The word לחבב (to cherish) is numerically equal to the word במ (in them). The word במ is a reference to the words of Torah, as the pasuk (*Devarim* 6:7) states, “You shall speak in them.” This implies that Yitro loved the Torah (*Tanchuma, Yitro* 4), in which we are enjoined to delve both day and

night. The name Reuel (רעואל) alludes to the fact that Yitro was a friend (רע) of Hashem (אל) (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 169*). Yitro accepted upon himself all of the decrees of the Torah, without asking questions.

The grandson of the *Ba'al Shem Tov* writes in his sefer *Degel Machaneh Efrayim (Acharei Mot)* that wherever Avraham Avinu went, he said, "There is none other than Him." This statement, coupled with his *hachnasat orchim*, brought people under the wings of the *Shechinah*. When can a person truly feel that "there is none other than Him"? Only when he nullifies himself before Hashem, Whose glory fills all the worlds. But when a person accords significance to himself and the illusory pleasures of this world, he consequently loses the feeling of "there is none other than Him." His mind is filled with secondary substance, leaving no room for that which is Primary.

When a person internalizes the lessons that "there is none other than Him" and "His kingship rules over all," He will be quick to hearken to the word of Hashem and fulfill His mitzvot, including Torah study, which is a *chok*. Imagine someone who adores his king. Certainly, anything connected to his king will evoke feelings of affection. He will equally cherish orders which he understands, as well as those which he does not. One who honestly believes that "there is none other than Him" will feel innate love toward everything connected with Hashem, including Torah study. (See the words of the Zohar in praise of Torah scholars.)

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ The mitzvah of Torah study is a *chok*. We are enjoined to learn the details of even those mitzvot which do not apply today. We do this because it is the command of Hashem. Study brings to action. When a

person learns those sections regarding the Beit Hamikdash, feelings of yearning will be stirred up within him, and he will do his utmost to hasten its rebuilding.

- ◆ The words “If a man will die in a tent” are explained to mean that one should be prepared to “kill himself” in the tent of Torah. This indicates the strong love between Am Yisrael and Hashem.
- ◆ The *Yetzer Hara* consumes a person like a deadly disease. Its antidote is Torah.
- ◆ Yitro was called Chovev (חובב) , for he cherished (חיבב) the Torah. He was also called Reuel (רעואל) because he was a friend (רע) of Hashem (אל). Avraham publicized Hashem’s Name in the world by constantly stating, “There is none other than Him.” In this manner, he brought people to an awareness of their Creator. A person is capable of reaching the level of believing “there is none other than Him” by considering himself nothing compared to the greatness of Hashem. This awareness can arouse a person to fulfill all of the mitzvot, even the *chok* of Torah study, with unconditional love.



Lessons from the Parah Adumah

“Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, saying: This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(Bamidbar 19:1-2)

Parashat *Chukat* begins with the mitzvah of *parah adumah*, a *chok*. Even though we are not given its explanation, we are commanded to observe it simply because this is Hashem’s will. The Torah is replete with *chukim*. Examples are: the prohibition of *sha’atnez*, the prohibition of eating milk and meat together, and the impurity of *niddah*. Because these mitzvot are beyond our understanding, their observance demands a level of personal sacrifice.

Shlomo Hamelech, wisest of men, succeeded in understanding the reasons for all of the mitzvot. When he came to the mitzvah of *parah adumah*, though, he encountered a red light (*Yoma* 14a). About this mitzvah, he pronounced (*Kohelet* 7:23), “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me.” He could not fathom the reasoning for *parah adumah*.

The mitzvah of *parah adumah* raises several questions. First of all, why did Hashem command a red cow, which is most unusual and hard to find? Secondly, what was the purpose of the crimson thread and the hyssop plant? Certainly, there are deep meanings behind these items. Thirdly, why did Hashem command the inclusion of the wood of the cedar tree, which is most uncommon and difficult to attain, instead of a more common tree?

If the great Shlomo Hamelech could not discover the meaning of this mitzvah, who are we to imagine we are capable of it? But we cannot ignore the matter completely. Let us make an attempt to resolve our questions.

The purpose of the *parah adumah* was to purify the defiled. Impurity comes by means of contact with a corpse or other types of *tumah*. The objective of Am Yisrael is to remain in a state of holiness, as the pasuk (*Vayikra* 11:44) states, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” Furthermore, we are enjoined to maintain a level of sanctity, for Hashem tells us (*Shemot* 19:6), “You shall be to Me a kingdom of ministers and a holy nation.” Whoever became defiled had to approach the Kohen in order to become purified by the ashes of the *parah adumah*. A person who truly wishes to become holy is protected from sin. But one who makes no effort in this area does not receive this Heavenly help. He is liable to fall into situations of *tumah*. Chazal summed it up in the saying (*Makkot* 10b), “Man is led in the way he wishes to go.” (Refer to the story at the beginning of parashat *Chukat*, regarding my father, who was punctilious in matters of holiness. Hashem protected him from sinning even unwittingly.)

Channah the Prophetess proclaims (*Shmuel* I, 2:9), “He guards the steps of His devout ones.” When Hashem observes how staunchly His devout ones fulfill His desires, He protects them so that they can maintain their sanctity. I was once asked why this verse mentions specifically the steps of His devout ones instead of the hands or the eyes of His devout ones. The word רגל (foot or step) is similar to the word הרגל (habit). Tzaddikim accustom themselves to go in the path of holiness and sanctity. They therefore merit Hashem’s protection in helping them preserve their good habits.

On the other hand, if a person becomes defiled, it is an indication that he has done an aveirah. In order to awaken him to repent,

Hashem caused him to become defiled by a corpse. This necessitated the purification by the *parah adumah*. The entire process brought him to make a personal accounting of all of his deeds, as he tried to understand how he became impure. For example, if a person becomes defiled by *keri* at night, it implies that he had improper thoughts during the day. *Tumah* is a signpost, warning a person that he must make restitution in some area. One who desires to live a life of *kedushah* will be granted signals from *Shamayim* when he sins. This will enable him to rush to do teshuvah, not getting sunk in the quicksand of sin, as one aveirah leads to another (*Avot* 4:2).

There are tremendous tzaddikim who are spared defilement, due to their great level of *kedushah*. Pinchas Hakohen is a prime example. Avenging Hashem's honor, he took his spear and killed both Zimri ben Salu and Kuzbi bat Tzur. Hashem protected Pinchas from defilement by a dead body by allowing them to remain alive while yet on the edge of his spear. He was to become a Kohen, forbidden to be defiled by a corpse. Only after he laid down his spear did they breathe their last (see *Tanchuma, Balak* 21). Hashem observed Pinchas's level of self-sacrifice for the sake of the holiness of our nation and therefore granted him protection from defilement by the dead.

The following idea provides us with another glimpse into the *chok* of the *parah adumah*. In retribution for the sin of the Golden Calf, Bnei Yisrael deserved to be destroyed. Instead, we pay up for this sin in every generation. The Red Heifer, mother of the Golden Calf, atones for the sins associated with her son, as the Midrash states (*Tanchuma, Chukat* 8), "Let the mother come and wipe up her son's mess."

Regarding the question as to why wood from a cedar tree, a hyssop plant, and a crimson thread had to be burnt together with

the *parah adumah*, I would like to offer the following. The *parah adumah* alludes to everyone in the nation, righteous and simple folk alike. All people come from dust and will return to dust. Therefore, it is imperative that they hasten to do teshuvah.

The crimson thread (שני תולעת) corresponds to man's two (שני) eyes, which must be constantly protected, as the Midrash states, "The eye sees and the heart desires." The crimson thread, produced by the silkworm, hints to a person that after 120 years, he will be placed in a plot and fed to the worms. This should motivate him to keep away from sin and repent for his former misdeeds.

The hyssop plant, which is food for animals, hints that the sinner degraded his essence by not being punctilious in observing the mitzvot. He is lowly like a hyssop bush, and has no right to lord over others.

The cedar tree, conversely, is tall and significant, and difficult to attain. Righteous and devout people are not commonly found. How can the tzaddikim of the generation sin, stringent as they are with easy and difficult mitzvot alike? Just as the cedar tree is rare and special, materials of which palaces are built, tzaddikim sin when arrogance enters their hearts due to their stature.

The Beraita (*Avot d'Rabbi Natan* 38:3) recounts that Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel asked Rabbi Yishmael Kohen Gadol to explain why they deserved such terrible deaths by the hands of the Romans. Rabban Shimon finally realized that the pleasure he had in seeing the throngs arrive at his *shiur* caused him to feel arrogant. Then he was assuaged, accepting this as the cause of his death. (See another reason in *Tanna d'vei Eliyahu* 30.)

Tzaddikim are plagued by the *nisayon* of arrogance. Due to their high standing, they are revered by the people. They must beware,

more than ordinary people, not to fall into the snare of the *Yetzer Hara*, who constantly tries to instill haughtiness into their hearts. Tzaddikim do not sin by transgressing Hashem's word in the same way as ordinary people. They are charged with studying Torah without a trace of arrogance in their hearts. There is a positive type of haughtiness, described in Scriptures (*Divrei Hayamim* II, 17:6) as, "His heart was elevated in the ways of Hashem." The arrogance which is forbidden is that which stems from the thought that one's own prowess provided him with success in Torah study. How stringent is the strict hand of justice with the tzaddikim! Because Rabban Shimon took pleasure in the *shiurim* he gave and harbored a tinge of conceit in his heart, he was destined to undergo a gruesome death.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why did Hashem command that the nation bring a red cow, which is uncommon? What is so unique about the color red? What lies behind the command to bring a crimson thread, wood from a cedar tree, and a hyssop plant? Why specifically the cedar tree, which had to be imported from Lebanon?
- ◆ When Hashem observes a person trying to maintain a level of purity, He helps him, as it says, "He guards the steps of His devout ones." Hashem helps tzaddikim preserve their good habits. Pinchas, who wished to maintain his level of *kedushah*, was spared defilement by the corpses when he killed Zimri and Kuzbi. They did not die until after he withdrew his spear and left.
- ◆ The ashes of the cow indicate that all mortals, important and simple folk alike, are created from the ground and will return to the ground. The crimson thread alludes to the two eyes, the agents of sin. The thread of the silkworm alludes to the worms which will eventually consume the body. This should arouse a person to complete teshuvah. The hyssop plant refers to ordinary people, and the cedar trees refer to

esteemed people. Palaces are built with wood of the strong and tall cedar trees. This alludes to the important people, who may have sinned through haughtiness.

- ◆ Rabban Shimon was held culpable by the strict hand of justice due to the arrogance that crept into his heart at the fact that he succeeded in transmitting scintillating *shiurim*.



Hashem Runs the World above the Laws of Nature

“This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(*Bamidbar* 19:2)

Shlomo Hamelech, wisest of men, proclaimed, “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me” (*Kohelet* 7:23). The Gemara (*Yoma* 14a) explains that Shlomo Hamelech delved into the reasoning of all the *chukim* in the Torah. But the section of the *parah adumah* remained a closed book.

The word אמרתי (*I thought or I said*) is used regarding words of Torah, as Tehillim (12:7) calls them “אמרות טהורות – pure words.” The more Shlomo delved into the words of Torah, attempting to

understand the mystery of the *parah adumah*, the more distant it became from him. This is in direct contradiction to the usual course of nature. In general, the more one probes into a *sugya*, turning it over in his mind, inspecting it from all angles, the more likely he is to succeed in understanding it. But here, we find the exact opposite. As he tried to unravel the mystery of the *parah adumah*, Shlomo Hamelech became more entangled in it. Instead of becoming clear to him, it became obscure and hazy. How was this possible? And how can Hashem command us to do a mitzvah that is impossible to comprehend?

Let us elucidate with a tale from the Talmud (*Ta'anit* 21a). Nachum Ish Gamzu was on his way to his father-in-law's home, his donkey laden with parcels. As he reached his father-in-law's doorstep, a pauper approached him, begging for food and drink. Nachum asked him to wait a bit until he would finish unloading his donkey. Immediately afterward, he would give him whatever he wanted. Imagine his shock to find the man dead at the doorstep. Nachum was terribly anguished at this sight. He asked for his arms and legs to be removed, and that his entire body be covered by boils, in retribution for causing this poor man's death. Hashem did as he asked, and until his dying day, Nachum suffered tremendously.

I read a sefer that asks why Nachum decreed such cruelty upon himself. Was it his fault the man died? How was he to know that his delay would result in the man's demise? He didn't refuse him help; he only asked that he wait a few moments. Moreover, how could Hashem approve of his suggestions by agreeing to do as he asked?

Nachum Ish Gamzu was called by this unique name because he was accustomed to say, "*Gam zu l'tovah* – This, too, is for the best." A man of his caliber should have realized that if Hashem was sending a poor man his way, when he was laden with goods, he

should make it his priority to provide sustenance to him. The way of the world is to first unpack and then to feed the poor. But Nachum's elevated level dictated that he act above the laws of nature. He should have perceived this encounter with the poor man also as for the best, to be dealt with promptly. From Heaven, Nachum was not held accountable for delaying, but he was also not prevented from asking for a severe punishment. His atonement, as his deeds, was also fitting to be above the laws of nature.

When a person conducts himself above the laws of nature, Hashem behaves with him in a supernatural manner. The mitzvah of *parah adumah* drives home this point, for it is above our natural understanding. Even Shlomo Hamelech could not comprehend it. This is unnatural, for generally, the more one perseveres, the more knowledge he attains. When we observe the mitzvot that we do not understand, rising above our natural limitations, it redounds to our credit. Hashem will deal with us, likewise, in a supernatural manner.

On the morning of 9/11, the day of the fall of the Twin Towers in the USA, a man was involved in doing a mitzvah which was above his natural limitations. In spite of the great difficulty involved, he did it with alacrity, for he feared the opportunity would not present itself again. This man was scheduled to fly that day. His seat on the plane was next to one of the terrorists. He did not like the looks on the man's face and decided to disembark. A flight attendant asked the captain for permission for him to do this, and permission was granted. As soon as he got off the plane, he wondered what possessed him to do that. He wished to return, but it was too late. The doors were already closed. This plane gained publicity for its tragic end, crashing into the Twin Towers.

Overcoming his natural tendencies in order to do a mitzvah was an unnatural act. Hashem placed the unnatural thought into his mind to leave the aircraft, thereby saving him. When *nisyonot* come

my way, I succeed in withstanding them only when I don't ask questions, but accept everything with love. In this manner, all of my problems and difficulties disappear most miraculously.

In Summary

- ◆ In general, deep analysis into a *sugya* helps a person understand it better. How could it be that the more Shlomo Hamelech probed into the mitzvah of *parah adumah*, the more distant it became to him? And why did Hashem give us a mitzvah that is beyond our understanding?
- ◆ Nachum Ish Gamzu decreed suffering upon himself, in retribution for delaying in providing a poor man with food, thereby causing his death. Why did Nachum feel this was a fitting punishment, and how could Hashem comply with his request?
- ◆ Nachum was accustomed to act above the laws of nature. Therefore, Hashem agreed that his atonement, too, should be above nature. He realized that everything which transpires is from Heaven and is, therefore, good. He should have understood that this pauper's arrival was also Heaven-ordained. When a person acts in a supernatural manner, Hashem behaves likewise with him. In-depth study of the *parah adumah*, which is above the laws of nature, will warrant distance from its understanding, in order to teach us the above fundamental concept.



The Parah Adumah's Mysterious Ashes

“This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(Bamidbar 19:2)

Rashi expounds on this pasuk, “It is a decree from before Me; you do not have the right to reflect upon it.”

Shlomo Hamelech understood the reasons for all the mitzvot, but regarding the mitzvah of *parah adumah*, he proclaimed, “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me” (*Kohelet* 7:23). Our Sages (*Yoma* 14a) explain that Shlomo exerted himself to understand the reasoning behind the mitzvot. He succeeded in this endeavor, until he came to the mitzvah of *parah adumah*. In spite of his tremendous wisdom, Shlomo could not fathom the reason for this mitzvah.

What is the reason he used the phrase “But it is beyond me”? Shouldn't he have rather said, “But I did not understand”? Also, why did Hashem see fit to make the matter of *parah adumah* a mystery, never to be explained in this world?

After Hashem brought the Torah down to the world by giving it to Bnei Yisrael, He commanded that it be “in a corner,” accessible to all. Likewise, regarding the Torah, Hashem said (*Devarim* 30:11), “For this commandment that I command you today – it is not hidden from you and it is not distant.” Through studying Torah, a person acquires it for himself.

This is the reason why Shlomo Hamelech proclaimed, “But it is beyond me.” Try as he might, he could not fathom the logic behind

the *parah adumah*. The phrase “But it is beyond me” contradicts the words “It is not hidden from you.”

Hashem did not reveal the reasoning behind the *parah adumah* to us, but He will, in the future. He wants us to have something to look forward to. If a person would succeed in understanding all of the secrets of the Torah in this world, he would have nothing to anticipate in the World to Come. But the knowledge that all of the loose ends will be tied up in the World of Truth will make him aspire to merit entering that world, the world where the clouds will be lifted from the *parah adumah*.

Shlomo Hamelech’s proclamation gains significance when we pause to think who he was. He was the wisest of all men. He knew all the languages, even those of the animal kingdom. He might have had no interest in the World to Come, for he had attained all there is to attain here in this world. Therefore, Hashem withheld the secret of *parah adumah* from him, in order to maintain his longing and eagerness for the World to Come.

How do the ashes of the *parah adumah* purify those who are defiled? When a person dies, his body becomes defiled, due to the fact that his *neshamah*, of Divine origin, has left it. During the course of the first year after death, the *neshamah* still maintains ties with the body, coming to visit it every so often (*Shabbat* 152b). The *neshamah* thereby receives some of the body’s defilement. In order to purify it, the secrets of the ashes of *parah adumah* are revealed to it, for they have the power to purify the defiled. Hashem preserved the secrets of *parah adumah* for *Olam Haba*, in order to use them to purify the soiled *neshamot* from their association with the defilement of the body.

Moshe Rabbeinu merited understanding these secrets while yet alive, for he did not die in the usual manner. Hashem Himself buried

Moshe (*Sotah* 9b). Some commentaries go so far as to say that Moshe ascended alive to Heaven (*ibid.*). Moshe's *neshamah* never became defiled through contact with his body after death. Hence, it did not need to undergo the purification process gained through the revelation of the secrets of *parah adumah* in *Olam Haba*.

The *Parah adumah* remains a mystery. Nonetheless, we can try to understand some aspects of it. Only in the World of Truth will it be completely revealed to us. When Adam Harishon sinned with the Tree of Knowledge, Hashem decreed death upon him. Since Hashem is long-suffering and loves to do kindness, He did not put him to death immediately, but kept him alive, proclaiming (*Bereishit* 3:19), "For you are dust, and to dust shall you return." Before Adam sinned, there was no concept of death. Death came into the world in the wake of that first sin (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Yirmeyahu* 265).

Man became defiled by sinning with the Tree of Knowledge. Hashem created the mitzvah of *parah adumah* to combat the *tumah* which resulted from that sin. In order to purify the defiled, he was sprinkled with the ashes of the cow. These ashes were meant to arouse the person to make an accounting of his deeds, as he contemplated where he came from, and where he was destined to go. If not for Heavenly mercy, the sinner would warrant the death sentence immediately. By the sprinkling of the ashes, his sentence is reversed. He is provided with purity and continued life.

The red color of the cow reminds a person of his own blood. As soon as he dies, air no longer enters his body and his blood clots. As a person is sprinkled with the ashes of the *parah adumah*, he is awakened to do teshuvah. Hashem's grace allows him to repent and become purified by these ashes.

We might add the following. The word פרה (cow) is similar to the word הפרו in the phrase הפרו תורתך (they have voided Your Torah).

It is also similar to the word רפיין (weakness). The process of *parah adumah* brings to mind the thought that by becoming weak in Torah, he voided its teachings. Weakness in Torah allows impurity to enter. On the other hand, *tumah* does not adhere to one who is attached to Torah. The Shunamite said, regarding Elisha Hanavi, a holy and pure man, that she never saw a fly or mosquito on his bed (*Berachot* 10b).

The pasuk (*Bamidbar* 19:14) states, “This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent.” Chazal (*Berachot* 63b) say that the Torah endures only in one who sacrifices himself for it. I would like to add that one who “kills himself” for the sake of Torah does not become defiled after death, for he dies by the “kiss of Hashem” and is considered still alive. Chazal (*ibid.* 18a) teach, “Tzaddikim are considered living even after they die.” Death, coming in the wake of the first sin, defiles. But the tzaddik who never sinned is not defiled in his death.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Shlomo Hamelech wished to understand the secret of the *parah adumah*. When he found that it was not possible, he proclaimed, “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me.” Hashem said, “It is not in heaven... nor is it across the sea.” Torah is accessible to all. But the mysteries of the *parah adumah* are a closed book.
- ◆ When a person dies, his *neshamah* still maintains contact with the body, thereby becoming somewhat defiled by it. Then Hashem teaches the *neshamah* the secrets of the *parah adumah* and its purity is restored.



The Power of Positive Imagery

“This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(*Bamidbar 19:1-2*)

When the Beit Hamikdash stood, whoever was defiled by the dead would become purified through the *parah adumah*. Nowadays, the entire nation is considered defiled by the dead, as we have no recourse for proper purification.

Why do we continue to read the passages concerning the *parah adumah*, in all its intricacies, even though we are deprived of the purification process? Similarly, we read the details of the *korban Pesach*, in memory of Bnei Yisrael slaughtering the Egyptian sheep, in spite of the fact that we have no access to this sacrifice today.

Reading about the Pesach offering concretizes in our minds the events that transpired when our forefathers left Egypt. Studying the various aspects of the *korban* helps one feel that he himself left Egypt. This is in fulfillment of our Sages' injunction (*Pesachim 116b*), “A person is obligated to consider himself as though he left Egypt.”

Learning about the mitzvot pertaining to Yetziat Mitzrayim and other mitzvot that we cannot perform today, such as *bikurim*, arouses a yearning for those days of old, when our Beit Hamikdash stood in its full glory. This strengthens our faith. In contrast, the mitzvah of *parah adumah* is a *chok*, which is beyond our understanding. It is difficult for us to be awakened to yearn for the

days of old by reading about a mitzvah which we cannot fathom. Why do we still do so?

We possess the power of imagination. This can be positive and beneficial or a cause of untold damage. I recall that when the people greeted the king of Morocco, a pauper sat on the ground, looking up at the king with shining eyes. When I noticed the look in his eyes, I asked him what he was thinking. He replied, "I am imagining that I am also a king." Such thoughts, far as they are from reality, and most likely never to materialize, do not harm anyone. Similarly, in another instance, I noticed a pauper at the *hilula* ceremony of the tzaddik, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy" a, in Morocco. He told me that he was imagining purchasing a candle for the astronomical sum of 100,000 francs, in memory of the tzaddik. I told him that someone else might bid a higher sum, thereby getting the candle. "If so, I will double my price, and pay 260,000 francs, the numerical equivalent of Hashem's Name, multiplied by one thousand." In his imagination, he soared to the heavens in his quest to attain the coveted candle.

But there is another type of imagination. It is deadly and wreaks havoc. It is the imagination of those who think that it is their power that grants them success. This thought is so real to them that they feel only they are responsible for their accomplishments. They lack all feelings of gratitude toward Hashem, the one Who provides for them. I once heard that a man in the USA killed his nine children. When asked why he did this act of cruelty, he explained that he saved their souls from this world of falsehood and brought them directly to Paradise. Woe unto a person whose power of imagination runs wild with him, drawing pictures with no connection to reality.

A man came to me over the course of eight years, asking for my prayers that he find his intended match. But he himself was always closeted in his house, doing nothing in the way of seeking his mate. I felt that my prayers weren't really effective, as he did not make the

least effort on his own behalf. After eight years, this man came to me, bearing a wedding invitation. I was elated that finally he had found his intended. Secretly, I was surprised at this turn of events. I noticed that the date was set for the 28th of June and told him it is auspicious time, for that is my birthday. He replied, "If so, I will come and celebrate your birthday with you."

"But you are getting married then," I reminded him.

"I never got engaged. I had invitations printed out of despair. I imagined that I was getting married."

To which I answered, "You should know that if you sincerely wish to marry, you must increase your prayers and make an attempt in the right direction, instead of printing phony invitations, which have no purpose besides for making you more lazy."

"A person is obligated to consider himself as though he left Egypt" (*Pesachim* 116b). We are enjoined to utilize our power of positive imagination, the force which brings a person to perfect faith in Hashem. Commensurate with a person's level of delving into the story of our Exodus, imagining the suffering of his family enslaved will be his level of faith, fortifying his connection with Hashem. This type of imagination is beneficial. The Chafetz Chaim used to imagine the Ten Plagues, in order to reinforce his faith in Hashem.

The Jews of Eastern Europe suffered the horrors of the Holocaust, while almost all of the North African countries were spared these atrocities. Whenever I read accounts of the Holocaust, I attempt to feel how the Jews of Europe felt then, participating in their suffering. This is a difficult endeavor, however, as my entire family stems from North Africa, worlds apart from the stamp of the Nazi boot.

I once came upon a visual aid, in the form of a book with horrific pictures of the Holocaust. There is one photograph of a Jewish

mother holding a baby in her arms. Behind her is standing a Nazi soldier, holding a gun to her head. The next picture depicts the mother, dead on the ground, as the wicked soldier kills her child.

After seeing these pictures, I began to tangibly feel the pain that was the constant companion of the Eastern European Jews. Whenever I wish to sense their suffering, I refer to this book, which stirs my imagination, allowing me to participate in the anguish of those dark days.

Let us return to our original question. Why do we read about the *parah adumah*, even though it is not relevant to our time? The *korban* Pesach was brought only by those who were pure. Whoever had been defiled by the dead, had to first be sprinkled with the ashes of the *parah adumah*, then he could bring the sacrifice with the rest of the nation. Reading the passages of the *parah adumah* will allow us to feel the full flavor of the *korban* Pesach, which signifies the victory of Am Yisrael over the abominable beliefs of the Egyptians. It was the ashes of the *parah adumah* that purified those defiled by the dead and afforded them the opportunity to offer the Pesach sacrifice. The more one delves into the details of the festival of Pesach and the *kedushah* of our nation, the more his power of imagination will arouse him to sing songs of praise for his Creator, Who rescued Am Yisrael from Mitzrayim with a mighty hand.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ In the times of the Beit Hamikdash, those defiled by the dead became purified by the ashes of the *parah adumah*. Why do we continue to read about this matter every year, on *Shabbat Parah*, when it does not apply to us today? The mitzvah of *korban* Pesach, also, is not relevant today. We continue to study it because it is capable of fortifying our faith, affording us the opportunity to feel as though we and our offspring left Egypt.

- ◆ There are many mitzvot which, unfortunately, we cannot keep today. Yet we continue reading about them, because this arouses feelings of yearning for those bygone days when we had a Beit Hamikdash. In contrast, the mitzvah of *parah adumah* is a *chok*, whose reason is beyond our comprehension. What is the purpose, then, of reading about it?
- ◆ Man possesses the power of imagination, which is both beneficial and detrimental. Fulfilling the injunction “A person is obligated to consider himself as though he left Egypt” is a positive way of using the imagination. As he envisions the details of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, he strengthens his faith in Hashem. The *parah adumah* purified those who were defiled, affording them the opportunity to bring the *korban* Pesach. Learning about all of the intricacies revolving around the *korban* Pesach will fortify one’s faith in Hashem.



The Reason for the Red Heifer

“This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(*Bamidbar* 19:1-2)

The nations of the world mock Am Yisrael, ridiculing this mitzvah, which purifies the defiled while defiling the pure. They claim that just as this mitzvah is meaningless, the entire Torah is meaningless, *rachmana litzlan*. The Satan also jumps on the bandwagon, mocking this seemingly contradictory mitzvah. Rashi explains (*Bamidbar*

19:2) that this is why Hashem has called it a *chok* – statute. This implies that it is a decree from Hashem, and “you do not have the right to reflect upon it.”

Why do the nations single out the *chok* of *parah adumah* for ridicule, from among all of the *chukim* in the Torah?

A person’s actions dictate what happens to him, as our Sages state, “Your deeds will bring you close, and your deeds will distance you.” A person must be meticulous in all his ways, for they will determine his direction in life. A *talmid chacham* in particular must ensure that no mishap result from his actions. The red heifer is atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf, as Chazal (see *Tanchuma, Chukat* 8) state, “Let the cow come and wipe up her son’s mess.” If not for this sin, there would have been no need for the ashes of the *parah adumah*.

[Why was a cow, and not a calf burnt in atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf? It is because the concept of a calf is too closely associated with this terrible sin. It is more appropriate for the cow, mother of the calf, to atone for it].

How different history would have been had Am Yisrael not sinned with the Calf! (*Zohar*, see *Shelah Hakadosh, Chayei Sarah* 5). The *Yetzer Hara* would have been eradicated, and our nation would have been spared so much suffering. The way to make restitution for this sin is by bearing in mind the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 19:14), “This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent.” Chazal (*Berachot* 63b) expound that a person should “kill himself” in the tent of Torah. When Bnei Yisrael are involved in Torah study, the nations are silenced. The power of purity overcomes impurity. But when Am Yisrael are at a spiritual low, the nations are capable of criticizing their Torah. The nations single out this *chok* of *parah adumah* because it is associated with the sin of the Golden Calf, atoning for it. It is this sin which grants the nations the power to ridicule.

The Arab worker in our yeshiva is impressed each time he sees how the young boys pursue their Torah studies. He is so inspired by what he sees that he now covers his head at all times and abstains from forbidden foods and imbibing wine, which is forbidden by his religion. He has even been taken for a Jew, and asked to fill a minyan. He told me a number of times that the sanctity in the yeshiva is palpable. But other times, he would tell me that something was missing in the holiness of the place. When I asked how he can measure this, he was hard put to answer, merely saying it was a gut feeling.

How much is dependent on our actions! The way we behave directly impacts the nations' perception of us. Every Jew should decide in his heart which way he wants to go, and avoid causing a *chillul Hashem*.

During the days of Shlomo Hamelech, Am Yisrael were on an elevated level. Not only did the nations refrain from prosecuting against them, but they themselves tried to come close to Hashem. Regarding this period, the *Navi (Melachim I, 5:5)* states, "Yehudah and Yisrael dwelt in security, each man under his grapevine and under his fig tree." Peace ruled throughout the world and the land was filled with the knowledge of Hashem. Even the gentiles gathered to hear pearls of wisdom from the mouth of Shlomo Hamelech (*ibid. 5:14*). Am Yisrael was held in esteem, and Hashem's Name was publicized. The gentiles wished to offer sacrifices.

We ask Hashem (Tefillat Shacharit, *Vehu Rachum*), "How long will Your strength be in bondage and Your splendor in the enemy's power?" Hashem replies that it is up to us. When we come close to Him and His Torah, the nations leave us alone. But when we abandon Hashem, the nations ask about the *parah adumah*, which evokes memories of the sin of the Golden Calf, causing the prosecution of our people.

In Summary

- ◆ Rashi states that the nations of the world mock Bnei Yisrael regarding the mitzvah of *parah adumah*. Why do they single out this mitzvah from among all others?
- ◆ The *Parah adumah* atones for the sin of the Golden Calf, as Chazal say, “Let the mother cow come and clean up for her calf.”
- ◆ During the days of Shlomo Hamelech, the spiritual level of Am Yisrael was very high. This was in the merit of their toil in Torah and mitzvah observance. Therefore, the nations not only did not prosecute against them or mention the sin of the Golden Calf, but they wished to become close with them.

**Man's Essence**

“This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent”

(Bamidbar 19:14)

“You are called *Man* and the nations of the world are not called *Man*” (*Yevamot 61a*).

Although our Sages were referring to this specific instance, regarding the halachot of the defilement of the tent, we can learn a general rule about our elevated status from their words. Only Am Yisrael, who observe the Torah and perform mitzvot, are considered *Man*. A Jew who refrains from keeping the Torah and acts like the gentiles cannot be considered *Man*.

I would like to explain the essence of the title *Man*. In this manner, we will be able to understand Chazal's words and how they apply

to those Jews who are mitzvah observant and those who behave like non-Jews.

At the time of man's creation, Hashem breathed into him the breath of life, as the pasuk (*Bereishit* 2:7) states, "And He blew into his nostrils the soul of life." The Ramban (*ibid.*) explains, "One who blows, blows of himself." Hashem, as it were, blew of Himself into man as He granted him a *neshamah*. The *neshamah* of a person is literally a spark of Divinity (*Zohar*). For this reason, one does not discard parts of the body. Fingernails and toenails are either burnt or destroyed. Only hair and bodily wastes are thrown away. Sifrei Kabbalah call these items "gifts for the negative forces."

The word אדם (man) is numerically equivalent to the Heavenly Name יה-יה-יה with its letters spelled out. This method of spelling out the letters of a word to find out its hidden *gematria* is called מילוי אלפין, which literally means the inner aspect of the letters. The word אלפין alludes to the letter 'א', numerically equivalent to one. One is Hashem, אלופו של עולם (Commander of the world). It also alludes to Bnei Yisrael, one nation in the land, as well as the one and only Torah. Only when a person is connected with these concepts of one, becoming an intrinsic part in the triple-ply cord of Yisrael, the Torah, and Hashem, is he of the stature to be equal to Hashem's holy Name. Man was created a single individual, and even his wife, Chava, was actually a part of him, taken from his rib. Man must maintain a strong bond with oneness in order to preserve his *neshamah*, a spark of Divinity. He must always maintain ties with the Torah, Hashem, and Am Yisrael.

The name *Man*, then, is a name with essence, incorporating an element of sanctity. Only by maintaining this essence, through his connection with Hashem, Who is one, and the Torah, which is one, is a person granted the status *Man*. But if someone, *chalilah*, behaves like the gentiles, distancing himself from Hashem and not

observing the Torah, he does not merit this title. For this reason, Chazal (*Yevamot* 61a) teach, “You are called *Man*, and the nations of the world are not called *Man*.”

The Gemara (*Menachot* 43b) relates the following incident. When David Hamelech entered the bathhouse, he found that he was bereft of mitzvot and became distressed at this thought. When he remembered that he still had the mitzvah of *brit milah*, he was mollified. A person who is terribly thirsty is refreshed by a glass of water. David Hamelech, who always hungered and thirsted for mitzvot, was relieved when he remembered that he was connected to a mitzvah.

We can further understand this in light of what we mentioned above. A person’s superiority rests in the fact that he is connected to Torah and mitzvot. But in the bathhouse, bare of mitzvot, David thought he was unworthy of the title *Man*. Then he remembered *brit milah*, an intrinsic part of himself, which connected him to Torah and mitzvot and endowed him with the title *Man*.

The Torah surrounds us with mitzvot. David hints to this by saying (*Tehillim* 119:164), “Seven times a day I have praised You.” The number seven refers to the four fringes of the *tzitzit*, tefillin, *brit milah*, and mezuzah.

A person should ideally involve himself in the mitzvah of Torah study. His *brit milah* enables him to be connected to mitzvot when he is unable to learn Torah, such as in the bathhouse or during sleep.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ “You are called *Man*, and the nations of the world are not called *Man*.”
A Jew who behaves like the gentiles loses this title. What is the essence

of this title *Man*, distinguishing between one who observes Torah and mitzvot and one who behaves like the gentiles?

- ◆ The Zohar states that a person's *neshamah* contains a spark of Divinity. For this reason, we do not discard body parts, even the fingernails and toenails. Only the hair and excretions may be discarded, as "gifts to the negative forces."
- ◆ The word אָדָם (man) is numerically equivalent to the Heavenly Name ה'-י-ה' with its letters spelled out. Hashem, Yisrael, and the Torah are one. Only when a person is bound to Hashem and His Torah is he worthy of being similar to His holy Name. For this reason, man was created only one, and Chava was created from his rib, also a single unit.
- ◆ The name *Man* depicts a singular level of *kedushah*, on condition that the person binds himself to the oneness of Hashem and the Torah. But one who goes in the ways of the gentiles loses this epithet.
- ◆ David Hamelech was saddened that he was bereft of mitzvot when in the bathhouse. Then he remembered his *brit milah* and was mollified. The reason for his anguish is as stated above. Man is elevated only as long as he connects himself to the Torah. When David thought he had lost this connection, he became aggrieved.
- ◆ The Torah surrounds us with mitzvot all day long. The pasuk, "Seven times a day I have praised You" refers to the following seven mitzvot: the four fringes on the *tzitzit*, tefillin, *brit milah*, and mezuzah.



Learning from Achav How to Learn

“This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent: Anything that enters the tent and anything that is in the tent shall be contaminated for seven days”

(Bamidbar 19:14)

Chazal (*Berachot* 63b) expound on this pasuk, “Torah endures only in one who kills himself over it.”

We can understand this on a deeper level based on the following Midrash. The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 39b) relates that the king, Achav, had no desire for his wife, Izevel. Therefore, she hung pictures of women in his carriage. This was in order to arouse his baser instincts. This is quite surprising. We know that Achav had seventy children (*Melachim* II, 10:1). How could this have happened without him having interest in his wife? Obviously, her plan was to incite him further. This was the purpose of the illicit pictures in his wagon.

The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 103b) further states that Achav interpreted the Torah in eighty-five ways. He was also careful with his speech, guarding his tongue from *lashon hara* (see *Tanchuma, Chukat* 4). This is perplexing. Achav was infamous for transgressing the three cardinal sins. He committed *avodah zarah* by placing idols in every location (*ibid.* 102:2). He murdered Navot Hayizraeli in cold blood (*Melachim* I, 21:19). And he was immoral, as mentioned above. Achav ruled a vast empire (*Megillah* 11a), triumphing in every battle. Half of his sins were forgiven (*Sanhedrin* 102b), and he was thereby spared the penalty of death. How can we understand that on the one hand, Achav was a sinner, while on the other hand, he had tremendous *siyata di'Shemaya* in his endeavors?

Achav merited unchallenged dominion, victory over his enemies, and atonement for half of his sins in the *zechut* of his Torah study and his caution in guarding his speech. Hashem does not deprive anyone of his due reward. Therefore, He repaid Achav for his good deeds. Nevertheless, it is difficult to understand how Achav could advocate two opposing forms of behavior at the same time.

Not long ago, a well-known Rosh Yeshiva came to see me with his son. He expressed his anguish at the fact that this son was not going on the path of Torah and mitzvot. I asked the son to leave so that I could talk privately with his father. I then told the father that there was something wrong with the way he related to his son. He did not sufficiently respect his son's Torah insights. When the son realized this, he decided to abandon the lush pastures of Torah for other fields of interest.

In direct contrast, David Hamelech, the tzaddik who upheld the world, had such a desire for Torah that in one night, he succeeded in learning as much Torah from Shmuel Hanavi as a *talmid chacham* would learn in a lifetime (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shmuel I, 129*). David called Achitofel, "My guide and my intimate friend" (*Tehillim 55:14*), because he learned a few things from him (*Avot 6:3*). David always conducted himself with humility, even toward those of lesser wisdom and Torah knowledge. This behavior, depicted in the term he called Achitofel, demonstrates his greatness.

The pasuk "This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent" refers to someone who is capable of deferring to his friend, accepting his opinions. The pasuk does not refer to mere Torah study, but Torah study with a *chavruta*. Learning together with another person gives one the opportunity to humble himself before his companion. One cannot compare the gains of Torah study with a friend to Torah study alone.

Notwithstanding Achav's erudition in learning Torah and explaining it in eighty-five different ways, his learning lacked the benefits of a study partner. He eventually fell to the lowest possible level, because he did not learn to submit himself to another person. Therefore, we find inconsistencies in his lifestyle. He was extremely careful with his speech, but he was also a terrible sinner, transgressing the three cardinal sins.

Chazal tell us that in the future, Hashem will teach us Torah from His mouth, until *lashon hara* will be completely eradicated from the world. What is the connection between the two? Learning Torah directly from Hashem, with no intermediary, is the optimal type of study, since one has no ulterior motives, such as gaining prestige or honor, when one does so. This is what is meant by the phrase "regarding a man who will die in a tent." One who "kills himself," nullifying his own subjectivities to the opinion of his *chavruta*, will be spared the sin of *lashon hara*.

In the days of David Hamelech, Am Yisrael were involved in Torah study. Nonetheless, they sinned. I would like to reconcile this inconsistency by stating that there was a fault in their personal *avodah*. This prevented them from reaching spiritual heights, as they did during Shlomo Hamelech's reign. They transgressed the sin of *lashon hara* (see *Tanchuma, Chukat* 4). They claimed that whatever they said about others was for a practical purpose. But had they truly humbled themselves to their fellow men, they would never have felt the desire to speak *lashon hara*, purposefully or otherwise.

Our generation has greater trials in this area than previous generations did. Technological advances have advanced the opportunity to sin. In the old days, in order to fall into the sin of *lashon hara*, one had to speak with his friend, face-to-face. Nowadays, with a simple press of the buttons on the phone or a

click of the computer or fax keys, within moments, the most heinous deeds are available for public knowledge.

Achav was self-contradictory, straddling opposing forces. This was because he did not humble himself before Eliyahu Hanavi, and even considered killing him. When a person does not accustom himself to submit himself to the judgment of others, especially to one who is greater than himself, he is liable to fall to the depths. Achav spoke most brazenly to Eliyahu, claiming that Yehoshua was greater than Moshe. As proof, he charged the following. Moshe said that when Bnei Yisrael serve *avodah zarah*, the rains are withheld. He, Achav, served all forms of idols, yet the rains continued unabated. This proved that Yehoshua was greater than Moshe (for Moshe's words were untrue, according to him) (*Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin* 10b).

Eliyahu explained that the rains flow from Hashem's compassion toward His nation. But in order to silence Achav's charges, Eliyahu prayed to Hashem to halt them. There was a very heavy drought for the next three years (*Melachim* I, 18:1-2). Yet Achav still did not learn the lesson, and attempted to take Eliyahu Hanavi's life. He was unable to submit himself to his fellow man, as he never studied with a study partner.

As Achav straddled opposing forces, the *Yetzer Hara* danced. The *Yetzer Hara* convinced him that his Torah study and caution in *lashon hara* were enough. Achav became complacent and sinned with the three cardinal sins of the Torah with a clear conscience.

There is no refuge from the *Yetzer Hara*. The only way to combat him is by means of sacrificing oneself for Torah. This is a tall order, one which takes a lifetime to fill.

Elisha ben Avuyah, commonly known as "Acher," is another example of someone who was on the high road but took a turn for

the worse, spiraling downward into purgatory. He did not work on improving his character. If someone as great as he could stumble in such a manner, how much more careful must we be to work on our *middot*.

The king of Aram said to Achav, “I shall send my servants... everything precious in your eyes they will place in their hands and take” (*Melachim I*, 20:6). Chazal (*Sanhedrin* 102b) explain that “everything precious in your eyes” refers to the Sefer Torah. Achav did not consent to the king of Aram taking the Sefer Torah.

Why did the king of Aram want specifically the Sefer Torah, as opposed to gold and silver? Hashem put these words in his mouth, in order to influence Achav. Hashem is merciful upon His creatures; when He discerns a discrepancy in their conduct, He arouses them in order to bring them back to the proper path.

Hashem was sending Achav the following message: “If you truly love the Torah and are unwilling to part with it, why do you brazenly transgress it?” Achav claimed it is the Torah of the entire nation, not his personal possession. This was a self-indictment. For, if the Torah belonged to everyone equally, why didn’t he learn with a *chavruta*? Why did he prefer to learn alone, when he agreed that Torah was public property? Had Achav studied with a partner, he would have been able to submit himself to others, and thus to Hashem. This would have prevented him from sinning.

Torah endures only in one who kills himself over it. This means one who submits himself to others, accustoming himself to respect their opinions.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Chazal relate that Achav had no desire for his wife. Therefore, she placed pictures of women in his chariot. How could he have begot seventy

children without being interested in his wife? He did have an interest in her, but Izevel wanted to increase it.

- ◆ Achav was always straddling opposing forces. On the one hand, he studied Torah and even interpreted it in eighty-five ways. He was also punctilious to avoid the sin of *lashon hara*. Hashem granted him success. He ruled unequivocally and emerged victorious in battle. He even had half his sins forgiven. On the other hand, he transgressed the three cardinal sins. He claimed that Moshe's words held no water, as the rains continued even as they sinned. He also attempted to kill Eliyahu *Hanavi*. How was this possible?
- ◆ Chazal explain the words "This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent" to mean that Torah endures only in one who "kills himself for it." This means that one should break his negative traits. He can do this by learning with a *chavruta*, accustoming himself to accepting another's point of view and submitting his opinion to that of his friend.
- ◆ Achav learned Torah, but he learned alone. Learning with a *chavruta* helps one to refine his *middot*. He straddled two worlds. By lacking a *chavruta*, Achav was left with his negative character traits. This explains the contradiction in his behavior. On the one hand, he was engrossed in Torah study, but on the other hand, he transgressed the three cardinal sins.
- ◆ How great is the power of the *Yetzer Hara*! Achav's *Yetzer Hara* told him that it was enough that he learned Torah; he had no need to worry about his sins. Even a person as great as Elisha ben Avuyah fell into the trap of the *Yetzer Hara*. We must be aware how vital it is to distance ourselves from him. Only by "killing oneself in the tent of Torah," i.e., studying Torah and refining one's *middot*, can one hope to overpower his evil inclination.



Whole-hearted Service of Hashem

“This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent: Anything that enters the tent and anything that is in the tent shall be contaminated for seven days”

(Bamidbar 19:14)

Chazal (see *Berachot* 63b) teach that “a tent” refers to the Hall of Torah Study. This is inferred by the pasuk regarding Yaakov (*Bereishit* 25:27), “Yaakov was a wholesome man, abiding in tents.” A person should constantly strive to sacrifice his personal interests in order to dwell in the tent of Torah. The word **מת** (dead) can be transposed to spell **תם** (wholesome). Yaakov Avinu merited being the pillar of Torah due to his sacrifice in the tents of Torah.

Many things in this world are acceptable in halves. Even a small amount of an item is better than none at all. But concerning Torah study, we don't go halfway. The words of Torah must be upheld unequivocally. When there is a deficiency in one's Avodat Hashem or mitzvah observance, it can be the cause of his spiritual downfall, causing him to lose all he had attained. For this reason, we are adjured to sweat and toil over the words of Torah, upholding them perfectly, until we “kill ourselves” in the tent of Torah.

No one can be half dead. Either he is alive or he is dead. As long as he breathes, a person is obligated to study Torah (*Shabbat* 83b). The Rambam (*Talmud Torah* 1:8) rules that even a dangerously ill man is not exempt from the mitzvah of Torah study. As long as a person lives, his *Yetzer Hara* beats within his heart, bent on bringing him to sin. Only upon death does the *Yetzer Hara* let up, allowing him to rest in peace. Even a sick man must combat his *Yetzer Hara*

with the life-giving waters of Torah. I remember being very sick once, my temperature soaring. Nevertheless, I did not allow myself a break from Torah study. I continued learning as before, with energy and enthusiasm. With Hashem's help, I revealed a novel idea in Torah, thereby resolving a previous difficulty. Even a sick man has the ability to learn Torah. If he exerts himself in this area, he will be rewarded with blessing.

The only way to save oneself from the net of the *Yetzer Hara* is by means of Torah study (*Kiddushin* 30b). When a person is not taking succor in the tent of Torah, all life is sucked out of him. And just as the dead cannot sin, for the *Yetzer Hara* is powerless against them, so too, is a person who "kills himself" in the tent of Torah saved from sin, for the Torah protects him from the *Yetzer Hara* (*Sotah* 21a).

Imagine Rabbi Akiva. At the age of forty, he began to study Torah, from the ground up. He subordinated his pride and learned on an elementary level, together with the school children. His sole aspiration was to grow in Torah knowledge (*Avot d'Rabbi Natan* 6:2). He proclaimed (*Pesachim* 49b) that when he had been an ignoramus, he would state, "Bring me a *talmid chacham*, that I might bite him like a donkey bites (breaking the bones)." What brought Rabbi Akiva to this 180° turnabout? He took note of a stone that had been worn through by the constant dripping of water on it. Reflecting upon it, he cried out, "Just as water bore a hole in this stone, so can the waters of Torah penetrate my heart of stone, and enter it" (*Avot d'Rabbi Natan* 6:2).

This was certainly not the first time that Rabbi Akiva saw a stone worn down by water. Why did he take this message only now, at the age of forty? When Rabbi Akiva observed the self-sacrifice of his wife, Rachel, who was prepared to leave her father's wealthy home in order to marry him (*Ketubot* 62b), he understood there was

something special in the Torah. Rachel perceived Rabbi Akiva's inner strength, realizing he was fit for greatness in Torah. This is why she agreed to leave everything behind, for the sake of the wealth which only Torah offers.

Rachel brought Rabbi Akiva's attention to the truth and the inherent wealth of Torah. When he saw her undying self-sacrifice, he looked around and noticed the effects of the persistent dripping of the water on the stone. His heart was open to transformation, and he took a lesson from what he observed. He eventually became the teacher of all Klal Yisrael, his disciples numbering in the thousands.

Rabbi Akiva understood, too, that Torah is a package deal. It must be upheld in the best possible manner, not in half measures. He therefore exiled himself from home for twenty-four years in order to grow in Torah and acquire it completely.

When Am Yisrael received the decree that they were slated to wander in the Wilderness for forty years due to the sin of the spies, many of them had grievances. They claimed that most of the mitzvot are dependent on the Land. They felt they were exempt from observing them as long as they were in the Wilderness. The incident with Tzelafchad set them straight.

Tzelafchad was found gathering wood on Shabbat and was penalized with death (*Bamidbar* 15:32-36, 27:7, see *Shabbat* 96b). Nevertheless, his daughters merited portions in Eretz Yisrael. How could they receive a portion in the Land, eternalizing their father's name, when he was a blatant sinner? The answer is that Tzelafchad was actually a righteous man. He gave up his life for the sake of Am Yisrael. He wished, through his punishment, to demonstrate that although Bnei Yisrael were in the Wilderness, they were obligated to keep the Torah to the letter of the law. Although they could not

observe the mitzvot which were dependent on the Land, they were not exempt from the other mitzvot which they had already received.

Proof of this is that while yet in the Wilderness, Hashem commanded them the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. Regarding this mitzvah, the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 15:39) states, “That you may see it and remember.” Merely gazing at the *tzitzit* reminds a person to perform all the mitzvot. This mitzvah would not have been given to them in the Wilderness had they been exempt from the rest of the mitzvot. Korach arose and claimed that that this mitzvah was unnecessary. He did not question it out of a sincere search for truth. Rather, he sought to quarrel against Moshe and Aharon. This argument did not endure, for it was not *l’shem Shamayim* (*Avot* 5:17). Moreover, he was severely punished for it.

Korach’s actions were self-contradictory. On the one hand, he wanted to be Hashem’s emissary in leading the nation. On the other hand, he wanted to throw off the yoke of mitzvot, claiming that the mitzvah of *tzitzit* was superfluous. Korach was interested in serving Hashem, but only halfway. He wished to do only that which furthered his personal agenda. But when Hashem’s mitzvot demanded any form of sacrifice, he laughed them off. This is what eventually happens to those who serve Hashem halfway. In the end, they lose everything. Their mitzvot are half-baked, not fit to serve their Master.

A person is comprised of two elements, the material matter made from the ground, which is his body, and the spiritual aspect, which is his *neshamah*. The body and the soul are intimately connected and directly influence each other. The *neshamah* can affect the body by sanctifying it, bringing it to greater heights. Conversely, the body can impact the *neshamah*, causing it to lose its spirituality. When a person dies, the *neshamah* hovers over the body until it is buried.

Once the body is interred, the *neshamah* can finally return to its source on High (see *Shabbat* 152b).

Although one's soul eventually ascends to its place in *Shamayim*, if a person was always stringent in following the path of Torah and mitzvot, his *neshamah* remains connected to his sanctified body. This is borne out in the Gemara (*Yevamot* 97a) which states that the lips of the tzaddikim move in the grave when their Torah teachings are learned. If a person raises himself through Torah study to the best of his ability, "killing himself" in the tent of Torah, he will merit elevating his physical being to the extent that even after death, his spiritual *neshamah* will continue connecting to it, causing his lips to move with words of Torah in the grave.

Man's obligation in this world is to serve Hashem to the best of his ability, with self-sacrifice. He should constantly aspire to attain perfection. He should never be satisfied with doing the job halfway, because the mission is considered accomplished only if it is complete.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The pasuk states, "If a man will die in a tent." Chazal expound that a person is obligated to "kill himself" in the tent of Torah. Regarding Yaakov, the pasuk states, "Yaakov was a wholesome man, abiding in tents." The letters of the word תם (wholesome) can be transposed to spell מת (dead). Yaakov "killed himself" "in the tent of Torah.
- ◆ There is no halfway mark when it comes to Torah study. Torah must be learned comprehensively and completely. The Rambam teaches that as long as a person breathes, he is obligated to study Torah. Just as there is no concept of a half-dead person, so too, sacrifice for the sake of Torah must be complete. The *Yetzer Hara* has no control over the dead. Similarly, one who pursues a life of Torah, sacrificing himself for it, is exempt from the authority of the *Yetzer Hara*.

- ◆ Rabbi Akiva understood that there are no half-way measures in learning Torah. Therefore, he exiled himself for twenty-four years in order to learn Torah diligently. He merited teaching many disciples, all in the *zechut* of Rachel, his wife, who sacrificed everything for the sake of his Torah study.
- ◆ In contrast, Korach had divided loyalties. He was one of the Ark-bearers, yet he felt he was worthy of leading the nation in place of Moshe and Aharon. He ridiculed the mitzvot of *tzitzit* and mezuzah and asserted that the mitzvot were valid only in Eretz Yisrael. His half-hearted service of Hashem led to him disputing Moshe's authority, which was ultimately the cause of his downfall.
- ◆ A person should strive to serve Hashem to perfection. This will enable him to elevate his physicality. In that case, even after he dies, his *neshamah* will be intimately connected with his body, as our *Chachamim* teach that the lips of the tzaddikim move in the grave when their Torah teachings are being learned.



Defilement by the Dead

“This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent: Anything that enters the tent and anything that is in the tent shall be contaminated for seven days. Any open vessel that has no cover fastened to it is contaminated. The pure person shall sprinkle upon the contaminated person on the third day and on the seventh day, and shall purify him on the seventh day; then he shall immerse his

clothing and immerse himself in water and become purified in the evening. But a man who becomes contaminated and does not purify himself, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the congregation, if he shall have contaminated the Sanctuary of Hashem; because the water of sprinkling has not been thrown upon him, he is contaminated”

(Bamidbar 19:14-15, 19-20)

Hashem wants His children to constantly strive to be in a state of purity. Therefore, one who became defiled by a dead body is required to become pure as soon as he can. On the third day of his defilement, he is sprinkled with the ashes of the *parah adumah*, and he is partially purified. On the seventh day, he is sprinkled once again with these ashes. Then, he immerses and washes his clothes. He has now completed the purification process. One who desists from these acts indicates that he is not interested in being part of Hashem’s nation. About him, the pasuk states, “That person shall be cut off from the midst of the congregation.” He is punishable by death. The Torah’s strictness in this matter signifies just how significant our purity is in Hashem’s eyes.

A dead body contaminates those who touch it. Moreover, if a person is merely in the same tent as the corpse, he becomes defiled even if there is no physical contact between them. The tent itself transmits *tumah*. This person must undergo the seven-day purification process. Similarly, any open vessel becomes defiled and it, together with its contents, must undergo this process.

There are three types of defilement by the dead. The first affects any person who touched the body. The second affects those who

were in the same tent as the dead. And the third is the defilement of the tent itself, together with all open vessels.

Why is it that the defilement caused by a dead body is so severe? Secondly, why does the tent defile everything that is in it, even something which did not come into contact with the deceased?

Parashat *Chukat* begins with the words (*Bamidbar* 19:1-2), “This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come.” All the mitzvot have an explanation offered with them, except for the mitzvah of *parah adumah*. Regarding this mitzvah, Shlomo Hamelech stated (*Kohelet* 7:23), “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me.” To this day, the reasoning behind the mitzvah of *parah adumah* is hidden from us. The only one who ever understood this mitzvah was Moshe Rabbeinu, who received this revelation in reward for his exertion to transmit Torah to Am Yisrael. Hashem told him (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:6), “I will reveal it to you but to no one else.” Hashem has made a promise, though, that in the future, all those who “killed themselves” in the tent of Torah will merit understanding this mitzvah.

Every king is enjoined to write two Sifrei Torah. One remains in his treasure house; the other accompanies him wherever he goes (*Sanhedrin* 21b). What is the purpose of writing two Sifrei Torah, and why must one accompany him everywhere? This is in order that the king’s heart should never become haughty. He holds a place of prestige among the nation, yet he may not be proud about it. Hashem is the One Who appointed him to this elevated position. Bnei Yisrael are all called “the sons of kings” (*Shabbat* 67a). A king, therefore, has no right to lord over the people. The constant companionship of the Sefer Torah will remind him of the mitzvah of *parah adumah* contained in it. The fact that he does not know its

meaning indicates that he has limitations. He certainly cannot be conceited over the nation when even his knowledge is incomplete.

The Gemara (*Gittin* 62a) calls *talmidei chachamim* kings. In spite of this, they may not be arrogant. They are lacking knowledge regarding the *parah adumah* and this should humble them.

A person is compared to a Sefer Torah. Just as one missing letter invalidates the entire Sefer Torah, and it must therefore be repaired or put into *genizah* (*Tur, Yoreh De'ah* 279), so too, if a person contains no Torah, he is “out of commission,” ready for burial, *rachmana litzlan*. A person should be punctilious to fill himself with words of Torah in order that Hashem does not consider him useless and do away with him, *chalilah*.

Let us return to our original question. Why does a deceased body defile those who come into contact with it? At the time of death, the *kelippah* wishes to take control of the body. It adheres to it in order to suck out any sparks of *kedushah* or imprint of mitzvot which are still attached to it. One who comes into contact with the dead body, therefore, becomes defiled by this *kelippah* (*Chessed L'Avraham* 5:31).

When a person is without Torah, he is like the dead who are deprived of learning Torah. *Tumah* and *kelippah* take hold of him. In order that we do not get to the point where Hashem feels it is appropriate to take us in our prime, to bury us like an invalid Sefer Torah, we must gird ourselves with inner strength to study Torah and uphold its mitzvot. The defilement caused through contact with a corpse is to arouse a person to his mission in this world.

The Midrash relates the following incident (*Mishlei* 9). After the Romans killed Rabbi Akiva with a most gruesome form of death, Eliyahu Hanavi, who was a reincarnation of Pinchas Hakohen (see

Pesikta d'Rabbi Eliezer 46; see *Rabbeinu Bachya*, *Bamidbar* 25:11), gathered all the parts of Rabbi Akiva's body to bring them to proper burial. The *Chachamim* asked how Eliyahu, a Kohen, could do this, since he would become defiled. Eliyahu Hanavi answered that tzaddikim are called living even after death, and they therefore do not defile others.

However, we do not follow this halachic ruling. A mortal cannot discern whether or not a person is a true tzaddik. Therefore, all deceased, be they tzaddikim or resha'im, confer *tumah* to others. Eliyahu Hanavi, on his exalted level, was able to recognize Rabbi Akiva's righteousness and know with certainty that his body would not cause him to become defiled.

Why does the tent which houses the corpse become defiled, even if there was no physical contact between the two? When a person passes on, the *kelippah* wishes to adhere to it. But when a person is connected to mitzvot, his merits wage war with the *kelippah*, warding it off. The *kelippah* cannot attach itself to the corpse, but its *tumah* hovers over the tent, causing everything in it to become defiled.

To support the opinion that tzaddikim do not defile others even after death, for they are considered living, is the fact that Moshe involved himself in the burial of his brother, Aharon, and did not become defiled thereby. Moreover, Hashem Himself buried Moshe (see *Sanhedrin* 39a).

When a tzaddik arrives on High, they call out (*Pesachim* 50a), "Praiseworthy is the one who arrives here with his learning intact." All of a person's Torah acquisitions ascend, together with his *neshamah*, speaking on his behalf in the Heavenly Court, as the *Navi* states (*Yeshayahu* 58:8), "Your righteousness shall precede you" (see *Sotah* 3b). Righteousness refers to Torah (see *Chulin* 89a). After

death, the body is bereft of all mitzvot, and is therefore contaminated by *tumah*. This should teach us that we must utilize our time to sanctify ourselves while we yet live. Furthermore, if a corpse, which has no recourse to study Torah, becomes defiled, how much more so is a person who has the ability to study yet refrains from sanctifying himself by Torah teachings, affected by the powers of the *kelippah* and *tumah*.

Moshe Rabbeinu's passing is mentioned at the end of the five books of the Torah. This teaches us that a person takes with him all the Torah study he amassed while yet in this world. Mention of Moshe's death at the end of the Torah indicates that through his toil on behalf of teaching Torah to Am Yisrael, he merited his Torah accompanying him to the Heavenly Tribunal, advocating for him.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why is the *tumah* caused by contact with a corpse so severe, to the extent that one who desists from purifying himself deserves death by *karet*? Why is the tent where the corpse was, as well as all its contents, also defiled, even if it did not come into contact with the dead?
- ◆ Even Shlomo Hamelech, wisest of all men, could not comprehend the reason for the *parah adumah*. The Torah commands a king to write two Sifrei Torah. One is to be kept in his treasury, and the other is to accompany him wherever he goes. This is to prevent him from becoming arrogant. The mitzvah of *parah adumah*, contained in it, is an enigma. This proves to the king that his comprehension is limited.
- ◆ An invalid Sefer Torah must be buried. A person is compared to a Sefer Torah. He must make sure never to become empty of Torah, and thus fit for burial.
- ◆ When a person dies, the *kelippah* adheres to him. The *kelippah* is nourished by remnants of *kedushah* and the residue of mitzvot which are

still attached to the body. Due to this force of impurity, the corpse defiles those in its proximity.

- ◆ Tzaddikim are called living even after they die. Their bodies do not defile others. Since we are not capable of discerning who is a true tzaddik, we consider all dead bodies to confer *tumah*. The *kelippah* cannot adhere to the tzaddik because his merits chase it away. It therefore hovers over the tent, conferring *tumah* on everything that is inside, as well as on the tent itself.
- ◆ The Torah study of the tzaddikim escorts them on High after their death. This is learned from the fact that the death of Moshe Rabbeinu is written at the end of the Torah, and not where it belongs chronologically.



Striking the Rock

“Then Moshe raised his arm and struck the rock with his staff twice; abundant water came forth, and the assembly and their animals drank”

(Bamidbar 20:11)

Instead of speaking to the rock, Moshe struck it. As punishment, he was denied entry to Eretz Yisrael. How can we understand that Moshe disobeyed Hashem’s command? We further find that Moshe spoke disparagingly to the nation in his words (ibid. 20:10), “Listen now, O rebels” (*Ramban* ibid. 20:8, quoting the *Rambam*). Moshe did not give Bnei Yisrael the benefit of the doubt, by taking into account that they complained due to their terrible thirst.

Striking the rock was an outgrowth of this remark, for “one sin leads to another” (*Avot* 4:2). After getting angry with the nation, his clarity became obscured, and he did not make the right decision.

To Moshe’s benefit, we might posit the following. Hashem had commanded that he strike the rock. Afterwards, He commanded him to speak to the rock. Moshe therefore felt there was no difference between speaking to the rock in a harsh, demanding manner (as indicated by the word *דבר*) and actually striking it. He wished to water his thirsty flock and did not have time to differentiate between the two.

This incident teaches us that even in the bleakest circumstances we must obey Hashem’s word unquestioningly. Praiseworthy are those who place fences around themselves, thereby preventing sin. Bnei Yisrael were always punctilious regarding maintaining distance from a *niddah* (see *Shabbat* 13a), even one’s own wife. A *nazir* who wishes to strengthen his bond with Hashem, by means of divorcing himself from worldly pleasures, is instructed to keep away from vineyards (see *Bamidbar Rabbah* 10:8).

Moshe should have spoken to the rock as he had been instructed, without making calculations. Hashem commanded him to speak to the rock, rather than strike it, for the following reason. Toward the end of the forty years in the Wilderness, the generation was nearly gone. They were the ones who had witnessed the great miracles in Egypt and in the Wilderness, through Moshe’s staff, which had Holy Names engraved on it. However, the new generation might assert that the staff was the source of all miracles, including the splitting of the sea. To avoid this, Moshe should command the rock to issue water, rather than strike it with the staff.

One must follow Hashem’s commands exactly, without making calculations. Hashem forbade Adam from eating of the Tree of

Knowledge. When Adam conveyed this message to Chava, he added the prohibition to even touch the tree. Along came the Satan, in the guise of the Snake, and pushed Chava against the tree. He convinced her that just as she remained untouched by this transgression, she would also survive if she would eat from the tree (*Bereishit Rabbah* 19:3).

Adam and Chava did not have a *Yetzer Hara* as we know it, and therefore did not need the additional prohibition against touching the tree. A person knows his own nature. If he is not pulled after a specific sin, he can feel safe from its allure. By adding the prohibition of even touching the tree, beyond what Hashem had told him, Adam brought the *Yetzer Hara* upon Chava, since he was pulled by the allure of the tree being “a delight to the eyes” (*Bereishit* 3:6).

It is imperative to differentiate between fences which are necessary, such as those implied in the Torah, and those which are superfluous, since one has no pull to sin in that area. The second type of fence will not only prove ineffective, but, on the contrary, will be the cause of untold damage.

However, we must judge our loyal shepherd, Moshe, in a positive light. His act of striking the rock had deep meaning. The Torah (*Vayikra* 26:3) states, “If you will follow My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them, then I will provide rains in their time.” It is impossible to live in a land without water. But if the nation, *chalilah*, disobeys Hashem’s word, “there will be no rain, and the ground will not yield its produce” (*Devarim* 11:17). The mitzvah to settle the Land will be nullified. Moreover, many mitzvot revolve around the water cycle. There is *nisuch hamayim* in the Beit Hamikdash, as well as the mitzvot of *terumah*, *ma’aser*, etc, which are dependent on the rains.

Moshe wished to impact the water cycle so that, in the future, it would deliver the rains in spite of Bnei Yisrael's poor performance. He believed that striking the rock from which they drank water in the Wilderness would impact the waters for a longer time than merely speaking to it.

Moshe knew that he was jeopardizing his chances of entering Eretz Yisrael by disobeying Hashem's command. But he sacrificed his life for that of the nation. This is why Hashem told him (*Devarim* 3:26), "It is too much for you!" Hashem was telling Moshe to desist from continuing to pray that he be allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael. He knew Moshe's true intention in striking the rock. Only at the expense of his entry into Eretz Yisrael would Bnei Yisrael merit unlimited rainfalls.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ What was Moshe's intention in striking the rock instead of speaking to it, as Hashem had commanded?
- ◆ Moshe disparaged Bnei Yisrael by calling them rebels, when he should have judged them favorably at a time that they were extremely thirsty. "One sin leads to another." As a result of his anger, he hit the rock. He felt there was not much of a difference between speaking harshly (as indicated by the word דבר) to actually striking the rock. He was pressured into action by the demands of the people.
- ◆ A person should always be meticulous in his service of Hashem, even in difficult times. No one can fully understand Hashem's intentions. Hashem knew that through speaking to the rock, as opposed to striking it, a greater *kiddush Hashem* would flow forth.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu, forever our faithful shepherd, wished to ensure rainfall in Eretz Yisrael in the future, even when the nation sinned and would be unworthy. Hitting the rock to obtain water was a means of striking this message into the water cycle. Through this act of selflessness,

Moshe jeopardized his chances of entering Eretz Yisrael. Hashem was aware of Moshe's motives in striking the rock and acquiesced to his idea regarding the rains, but they would come at the expense of him entering Eretz Yisrael.



Fear of the Sages Leads to Fear of Hashem

*“The people spoke against G-d and Moshe:
Why did you bring us up from Egypt to die in
this Wilderness?”*

(Bamidbar 21:5)

Rashi expounds, “They equated a slave with his Owner.” They complained against Moshe, who acted as the emissary of Hashem.

Ba'alei Mussar (based on *Mesillat Yesharim* 21) state the following. Man's purpose in coming to this world is to serve Hashem. How should he know the correct way to do this? By observing the tzaddikim, he will learn how a servant stands before the Master of the world. When people ridicule tzaddikim and do not accord them appropriate honor, they display a lack of respect toward Hashem Himself (see *Sha'arei Teshuvah* 3:148). The tzaddikim are Hashem's agents, and whoever disparages them disparages Hashem.

The *Navi* Yeshayahu (30:20) teaches, “Your eyes will behold your teacher.” Not only is ridiculing the Torah giants a severe sin, but by doing so, one is destroying his own support system, for he can no longer see the tzaddik as the role model of how best to serve Hashem.

How did Bnei Yisrael fall to the level of denigrating Moshe, eventually denigrating Hashem Himself? Moshe was the one chosen to redeem them from Egypt with a mighty hand, and he led them faithfully in the Wilderness with unlimited self-sacrifice. How could the nation speak against him?

Moshe Rabbeinu was the humblest man who ever lived. He subordinated himself before one and all. Therefore, Am Yisrael did not perceive him as the person from whom they could learn how to serve Hashem. They were lacking the depth of understanding that he was an emissary of Hashem, an example of how to serve Him perfectly. With this superficial approach, they viewed Moshe merely as their physical leader, guiding them through the Wilderness until they reached Eretz Yisrael. They did not consider him a figure to follow in the path of *yirat Shamayim*. For this reason, they did not accord him due honor. As a result, they ultimately spoke against him and even against Hashem Himself.

The Gemara (*Pesachim* 22b) relates that Shimon Ha'amsuni (some say Nachum Ha'amsuni) would explain every instance of the word **את** in the Torah. He stated that this word indicates the inclusion of something else. For instance, he said that the mitzvah, "Honor your father (**את אבירך**) and your mother (**ואת אמירך**)" also includes honoring one's older siblings. But when he reached the pasuk "**את** – ה' אלוקיך תירא – You shall surely fear Hashem, your G-d," he was at a loss. Can there be something which a person should fear like he fears Hashem? Even wild animals should not be feared, since they are under Hashem's dominion and can harm a person only at His decree. Shimon Ha'amsuni was stuck, and therefore detracted all of his former assertions.

Rabbi Akiva came afterward, and explained that the word **את** in the above pasuk includes fear of *talmidei chachamim*. Just as a person is enjoined to fear Hashem, he must feel in awe of the

tzaddikim and *Chachamim* and accord them proper honor. Fear of the tzaddikim will bring a person to fear Hashem. A tzaddik depicts how much awe we should have in regard to keeping mitzvot.

The actions of the tzaddikim are most lofty (*Ba'al Shem Tov*; see *Ramban, Devarim* 11:22). Furthermore, "A tzaddik decrees and Hashem fulfills" (*Mo'ed Katan* 16b). A tzaddik has phenomenal powers. He acts with utmost sanctity and perfection, until he resembles the angels themselves. Hashem implanted within the tzaddik the ability to nullify harsh decrees. This is through the power of teshuvah. Hashem accepts penitents with open arms, as it were. When the nation witnesses the nullification of such a decree, and understands that it is the result of the tzaddik's teshuvah, they will similarly be aroused to repent and return to Hashem.

When Korach challenged Moshe's leadership and gathered his men to rebel, Moshe turned to Hashem and asked that He not accept Korach's offering (*Bamidbar* 16:15). How could Moshe speak so severely, asking Hashem not to accept the offering of a fellow Jew? Moshe knew that revolt against the emissaries of Hashem, i.e., the *talmidei chachamim*, is tantamount to revolting against Hashem Himself. Therefore, Korach did not deserve that Hashem should accept his offering. Conversely, one who speaks in praise of tzaddikim and relates their good deeds is considered to be speaking in praise of Hashem. One also ascends in levels of Torah and *yirah*, becoming fortified in his Avodat Hashem and thereby increasing Hashem's glory.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Man's purpose in coming into this world is to serve Hashem. How does he succeed in this mission? By observing the deeds of the tzaddikim and learning from them. Tzaddikim are Hashem's emissaries.

Whoever slights their honor is considered to have slighted the honor of Hashem. Moreover, he loses the opportunity of having a role model in serving Hashem.

- ◆ How could Am Yisrael offend the honor of Moshe, the agent of Hashem? It was because they viewed him solely as a physical guide, not as a spiritual leader who could direct them in the proper service of Hashem.
- ◆ The word **את** in the pasuk **ה' אלוֹקֵיךָ תִירָא** adds the injunction to fear *talmidei chachamim*. Through fearing tzaddikim, a person comes to fear Hashem Himself.
- ◆ Our Sages state, “A tzaddik decrees and Hashem fulfills.” Tzaddikim have the power to nullify harsh decrees. This is in order to awaken the nation to do teshuvah, ultimately bringing them closer to Hashem.
- ◆ Moshe asked Hashem to refuse the offering of Korach. Korach scorned Moshe’s leadership, akin to scorning Hashem’s leadership. Those who speak in praise of tzaddikim are considered to be praising Hashem. Moreover, one who constantly studies the good deeds of the righteous will ascend in Torah and increase Hashem’s glory.



The Poets Would Say: Come to Cheshbon

*“For Cheshbon – it was the city of Sichon,
king of the Amorite; and he had warred
against the first king of Moav and took all
his land from his control, until Ammon”*

(Bamidbar 21:26)

The Torah, which is usually so succinct, elaborates that Cheshbon was originally under the rule of the first king of Moav, until it was captured by Sichon, king of the Amorites. We know that the Torah only records those things that teach a lesson for generations. What is the lesson to be gleaned here? (see *Bava Batra* 78b).

Chazal explain that the name Cheshbon has another meaning. It refers to *cheshbon hanefesh*, which one is adjured to make. Most of our sins are done with full knowledge that we are erring. Yet we allow ourselves to be seduced by the *Yetzer Hara*. Why do we continue transgressing in spite of this knowledge? A child who knows that fire will burn his fingers will keep away from fire. All the more so, if he has been previously burnt.

We all know that forbidden acts are like blazing fires. We were harmed by our misdeeds many times in the past. Yet we continue, time and again, to sin. Our actions are like those of the dog who returns to his vomit to consume it yet again.

Our problem is that we fail to make a personal accounting of our affairs. Were we to take the time, at the end of each day, to sit down and review all that transpired that day, there is no doubt that we would begin to be more vigilant in our actions. But life is one big rat

race. There is no time to sit still and take stock, examining our actions. We never confront the truth of our lives, contemplating the horrific punishment of sinners.

We should make a personal accounting and internalize the concept that punishment awaits the sinner. We should consider each and every act of ours individually, so that we can make restitution now, instead of paying for them later. The name סיחון (Sichon) is similar to the word שיחה (conversation). Idle conversation, with no spiritual purpose, is liable to drive a person lower and lower on the spiritual ladder. Chazal (*Sotah* 42a) teach that the groups of scoffers, liars, flatterers, and those who speak *lashon hara* will not merit seeing the *Shechinah*. These people are flippant with their words. Their speech contains no element of thought or *yirat Shamayim*. They are like a consuming fire. Whoever cares about his soul would do well to flee from them. Our Sages (*Avot* 1:5) state, “Do not converse excessively with a woman.” They said this even about one’s own wife; surely it applies to another’s wife.

Korach is an example of someone who spoke excessively with his wife. His conversations with her led to disastrous results. He related everything that happened to him, probably adding his own editorials. She incited him to initiate a quarrel, which swelled into the dispute against Moshe and Aharon. A person should always ensure that his speech revolves around Torah and *kedushah*. He should minimize speaking with women. Even with his wife, he should arrange his words appropriately, so that no mishap should occur.

Sichon captured the city Cheshbon from the hands of Moav. The word מואב (Moav) alludes to אבינו (our Father). We should always see Hashem before us, as our Sages (see *Berachot* 28b) instruct us, “Know before Whom you stand, before the King of all kings,

Hakadosh Baruch Hu.” When a person places Hashem before himself, he will make a spiritual accounting, distancing himself from inane talk and other sins.

A thirteen-year old boy came to me in tears. He explained that his mother wished to celebrate his bar mitzvah in a way diametrically opposed to Torah standards. When she described her plans to him, he vehemently disagreed. In reaction, his mother told him, “You are not a man.” He was highly insulted and his entire self-esteem was liable to crumble from this one thoughtless comment. After hearing his words, I hurried to phone his mother and rebuked her for wishing to celebrate in an un-Torahdik fashion, and in the way she spoke to her son. I added that parents have the heavy responsibility to weigh each word that comes from their mouths. A single word has the power to make or break a child.

A person must consider every word which comes from his mouth. It should be purposeful and beneficial, not detrimental or destroying, as Mishlei (18:21) teaches, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.”

Often, people enter the Beit Hakeneset, but instead of initiating a talk with their Maker, they talk to their friends, inquiring after this one and that, exchanging news. Woe to the eyes that witness such blatant disrespect toward Hashem and His House of Worship. We are enjoined to constantly consider before Whom we stand. All the more so, in a Beit Hakeneset, which is a miniature Sanctuary.

A man once came to me and asked that I bless his dog with a speedy recovery. I asked for the dog’s name, which he said was Rudy. But when I asked for its mother’s name, the man laughed. I told him that his concern with his dog indicated that he had mercy toward creatures, which are made by Hashem. But, I asked him, did he ever feel an inclination to pray for his own spiritual well-being?

We often grant undue significance to nonessential matters, while ignoring the things that really count.

The parashah continues (ibid. 27), “Regarding this, the poets (מושלים) would say: Come to Cheshbon.” Who are the people who make a spiritual accounting? They are those who rule (מושלים) their *Yetzer Hara*, constantly involved in spiritual aspirations (see *Bava Batra* 78b).

I was once invited to attend a wedding. As is my custom, I made a condition that I would attend only if the guidelines of halachah and *tzeniut* were upheld. When I arrived, I saw that the host had kept his word and had ensured that the food was glatt kosher. Imagine my chagrin at noticing women stationed at the entranceway, greeting the guests upon arrival, dressed in a most unkosher manner. I asked the host how he could allow this. He was causing the guests to stumble by seeing forbidden sights. He shamefacedly apologized for this oversight. I told him to send these women home without embarrassing them. They were gentiles, and I didn’t want to cause a *chillul Hashem*.

Some time later, this man asked me to affix a mezuzah in his house. When I arrived at his new home, he handed me a mezuzah and directed me toward the room in question. The door of the room was open and it was impossible not to notice a gigantic picture hanging on the wall, far from anything modest. I asked how he had the chutzpah to ask for a mezuzah on a room which housed such a picture.

We often act like this man. We get caught up in being scrupulous in one area of halachah while neglecting another. But we fail to contemplate which areas demand strictness and where one may be lenient. Imagine a person who is very careful with the recitation of *Kriyat Shema* speaking during the *Shemoneh Esrei*. How effective

can such a tefillah be? Someone else washes his hands for *netilat yadayim* with utmost concentration, yet when the time comes for Grace after Meals, he is a closed book.

The king of Moav was afraid of Bnei Yisrael and therefore asked Bilaam for advice as to how to rid himself of them. The king of Moav knew that Bnei Yisrael were forbidden from waging war with his nation. But this prohibition did not apply to Sichon, king of Cheshbon. Bnei Yisrael therefore killed him. Shouldn't the king of Moav have felt relieved and grateful toward Bnei Yisrael for eliminating his enemy, Sichon, who had sequestered the land of Cheshbon from him? Armed with the knowledge that Bnei Yisrael had peaceful intentions, Moav should have granted them permission to cross their land. Why did the king of Moav feel so threatened by their presence, asking Bilaam the rasha for his help? Bilaam, for his part, knew very well that Hashem would not approve of his request to curse His children. But Bilaam was so consumed with hatred toward our nation that he did not think rationally. He brazenly went forth to curse Bnei Yisrael, with the knowledge that he would end up blessing them.

These two malicious men made a mistake in their calculations, bent as they were on eradicating Bnei Yisrael. Hashem took vengeance on them, punishing them to the full extent of the law. Upon reflecting their end, Bnei Yisrael were meant to learn a lesson. A Jew must calculate his every move, so that he does not take a wrong step, ultimately paying a hefty price.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why does the Torah describe the details of the city, Cheshbon? This name refers to another *cheshbon*, a *cheshbon hanefesh*, which a person is adjured to make. And the name of its king, Sichon, is similar to the

word *sichah*, meaning conversation. Idle conversation brings a person to his eventual downfall. One who is concerned about his *neshamah* would do well to distance himself from those who waste their lives, mocking all things meaningful.

- ◆ The name Moav alludes to our Heavenly Father. We should always picture Hashem before us. This will save us from physical and spiritual harm.
- ◆ The king of Moav behaved illogically in refusing Am Yisrael entry into his land. He knew they were forbidden from waging war with his nation. He sought the advice of Bilaam the rasha as to how to eliminate this thorn in his side. And Bilaam, for his part, also acted most illogically. He knew that Hashem would never allow him to curse His nation. Nevertheless, that was what he set out to do. The behavior of these two wicked men should provide us with a lesson in the importance of calculating our deeds.



Gems on Parashat Chukat



Pride Is His Alone

“This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(Bamidbar 19:2)

The initials of the phrase פרה אדומה תמימה (a completely red cow) spell תאף, which has the same *gematria* (when adding one for the phrase itself) as the negative force לילית (Lilit), which warms a person and incites him to sin by wasting seed, *rachmana litzlan*. The last letters of the phrase פרה אדומה תמימה are numerically equal to fifteen, just like the word גאווה (pride). Pride belongs solely to Hashem, the All-Powerful One. Haughtiness of heart can eventually lead a person to sin by wasting sin.

Adding the letter א' of the word תאו (ox) to Hashem's Name יה-י raises its numerical value to fifteen, equal to that of the initials of the pasuk “חיל בלע ויקיאהו” – He devoured wealth, but disgorged it” (*Iyov* 20:15). These words refer to the rectification of the sin of wasted seed, by means of the *mikveh*, the symbol of purity.

The red cow alludes to the blood of *niddah* (נידה). One who sins in this area is ostracized (מנוודה). Due to the severity of this sin, a person must maintain a level of purity and chasteness, so that he is never confronted with the negative force of Lilit. Just as the *parah adumah* must be without blemish, and without ever having borne a yoke, so must a person protect himself from the burden of such sins.

The mitzvah of *parah adumah*, the quintessential *chok*, remains an enigma. Nevertheless, various aspects of this mitzvah enlighten us with wisdom.



The Virtues of the Righteous

“This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(Bamidbar 19:2)

This parashah contains both the mitzvah of *parah adumah* as well as the account of the death of Aharon Hakohen. There is a similarity between them. Chazal (*Mo'ed Katan 28a*) teach that just as the ashes of the *parah adumah* atone, so does the death of the righteous atone. The ashes of the *parah adumah* purify the defiled. Defilement is the result of sin or can be the cause of sin. When a person is purified, he becomes cleansed of sin or the likelihood of sinning. Likewise, the death of tzaddikim atones for the nation.

Furthermore, the pasuk (*Bereishit* 3:19) states, “For you are dust, and to dust shall you return.” Every mortal will return to the earth. After tzaddikim pass on, their dust has the ability to atone for the nation, in the same way as the ashes of the *parah adumah*.



Measure for Measure

“This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel, and they shall take to you a completely red cow, which is without blemish, and upon which a yoke has not come”

(*Bamidbar* 19:2)

Parashat *Chukat* begins with the command to take a completely red cow, without blemish and which never bore a yoke, and bring it to the Kohen to sprinkle its ashes upon those who became defiled. This will purify them. We are not given the reason for this *chok* (*Tanchuma, Chukat* 8). We do it solely because this is what Hashem commanded.

Parashat *Balak* demonstrates how deep is the hatred of the gentiles toward the Jewish nation. Hashem had forbidden Bnei Yisrael from waging war against the nations of Ammon and Moav, due to the two precious *neshamot* which would come forth from them. These were the *neshamot* of Rut Hamoaviah, grandmother of David Hamelech, and Na’amah Ha’amonite, wife of Shlomo Hamelech (*Bava Kama* 38b). But Balak provoked Bnei Yisrael by seeking to

curse them. What was the cause of his deep hatred toward a peaceful nation who had no intention of harming him?

This can be explained by the connection between the parshiyot. If we do not comply with the *chukim* of the Torah, as epitomized by the *parah adumah*, then, measure for measure, we will be confronted with the enmity of the gentiles, who hate us for no reason other than the fact that we are Jews.

Our self-sacrifice in performing mitzvot is expressed most clearly when we observe the *chukim* of the Torah without understanding their reasons. One who does Hashem's will without questions attests to the *ahavat Hashem* enrooted in his heart. Hashem promises us that if we keep all mitzvot alike, those which we understand as well as those which are incomprehensible, we will merit special protection from the gentiles and their evil plots.



Churban Bayit Sheini – Torah Devoid of Deeds

*“This is the decree of the Torah, which
Hashem has commanded, saying”*

(Bamidbar 19:2)

The purpose of learning Torah is so that we learn the mitzvot, in order to do Hashem's will.

Chazal (*Yoma 9b*) tell us that during the times of the second Beit Hamikdash, there was a proliferation of Torah study. Nonetheless,

the Temple was destroyed, due to baseless hatred. Studying Torah is not enough; one must put into action that which he learns, as we are told (*Kiddushin* 40b), “Great is study, for it brings to action.” One who learns but fails to uphold what he learns is making a mockery of the Torah. During the second Beit Hamikdash era, the nation learned Torah assiduously, but did not put its lessons into practice. For this reason, the Land was laid to waste. “Not study, but practice is the main thing” (*Avot* 1:17).



Hashem’s Decrees Reflect His Demeanor

“This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem has commanded, saying”

(*Bamidbar* 19:2)

“This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent”

(*ibid.* vs. 14)

In order for a person to learn the Torah and observe it in all its detail, he must realize that Hashem created the world by means of the Torah, as the Zohar states (II, 161a), “He looked into the Torah and created the world.” If one observes instances which seem incomprehensible, he may not doubt Hashem’s mercy or justice. He should implant, deep within his heart, the awareness that everything is ultimately in the category of *chok*, above and beyond our understanding. We may not question that which seems illogical. Just as certain mitzvot of the Torah are *chukim*, which we must

observe without understanding them, so too, there are aspects of this world which we cannot fathom. Our perception is limited, and we are therefore incapable of comprehending everything.

The *Yetzer Hara* concentrates his attack on Torah study (see *Ramchal, Derech Eitz Chaim*). The Satan is well aware that it is Torah which upholds the world. Without Torah, the world would simply disintegrate. Therefore the thrust of his attack is concentrated on inducing man to neglect his Torah studies. A person must realize that the way to perform mitzvot punctiliously is by learning them thoroughly. In order to do the mitzvot properly and with enthusiasm, we must be engrossed in Torah study and toil in it, as the pasuk (*Bamidbar 19:14*) says, “This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent.” Only through study will a person be aroused to perform accordingly (see *Kovetz Igrot of the Chazon Ish*, I, 1-2). One who does not set aside fixed times for Torah study should not be surprised when the time will come that he approaches mitzvot with sluggishness and is not particular in their details. Torah study ensures observing halachot correctly. When Torah study is lacking, one’s mitzvah observance takes a rapid decline, *rachmana litzlan*.

Regarding the pasuk “This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent,” Chazal expound (see *Berachot 63b*), “Who merits residing in the tent of Torah? One who subjects his personal desires for the sake of the Torah’s *chukim*.” Only by eliminating frivolities and materialistic pursuits can one hope to rest in the tent of Torah. Only he has the firm faith to accept all that transpires in the world with complete belief. Hashem created this world in the best way possible. Who knows better than He how to manage it? If He has seen fit to bring a natural disaster or any type of tragedy upon the world, who are we to question His decision? Everything comes from

Him, and therefore there is a reason for everything, even if it is hidden from us at the moment.

Chazal (*Nedarim* 81a) warn us, “Beware of the children of the poor, for from them will come forth Torah.” This seems surprising. One would assume that the wealthy can afford to sit and learn, without worrying about their livelihood. But it is specifically the poor who produce Torah scholars. This is because they have nothing to occupy themselves with other than Torah. They do not have the money to purchase luxuries. As a result, Torah is their only wealth. Torah is where they find solace. Conversely, a rich magnate is constantly occupied with his business, always concerned about profits and returns. The poor man only thinks about what he will eat the next day, a small worry compared to that of the rich man, whose worries span the world.

Torah is a balm for the spirit, a remedy for all ailments. Tehillim (34:9) states, “Contemplate and see that Hashem is good.” The words of Torah are sweeter than honey and drippings of nectar. Whoever wishes to forget his woes would do well to involve himself in Torah study (see *Tanna d’vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 27). There was one day when my telephone did not stop ringing. People kept on calling, pouring their hearts out to me. At some point, I felt I could no longer listen to their suffering and misfortune. I did whatever I do when in such a situation. I made my way to the Beit Hamidrash, to draw strength from the Torah. After a few hours of productive learning, I left the Study Hall, feeling like a new man. I had renewed my energies, and was once again available to those who turned to me, without feeling depressed by their tales.



Those Who Hope to Hashem Will Have Renewed Strength

“This is the teaching regarding a man if he will die in a tent”

(*Bamidbar* 19:14)

Chazal (*Berachot* 63b) teach that Torah endures only in one who “kills himself” in the tent of Torah.

I once visited the Gaon, Rabbi Michel Yehudah Lefkowitz, zt”l, at a very late hour. I noticed that his door was open, and that he was accepting a constant flow of visitors who came for advice and salvation. The Rabbanit sat in a side room, engrossed in reciting Tehillim. I asked the Rav how he was faring. “Baruch Hashem,” he replied, “I must prepare *shiurim*. I deliver Torah lectures, even though I don’t have the strength for it.” I thought of how this giant in Torah accepts visitors, with self-sacrifice, until the wee hours of the morning. The next day, he must awaken early in order to deliver *shiurim* in the yeshiva, weak and frail as he is.

I am certain that it is precisely at times such as these, when a tzaddik is at the end of his strength, that Hashem gives him special *siyata di’Shemaya* to overcome his tiredness and continue toiling in Torah, as the *Navi* Yeshayahu guarantees (40:31), “Those whose hope is in Hashem will have renewed strength.” But one who is robust and the picture of good health will be held answerable if he does not sanctify his time for Torah study. He will be severely rebuked. He will be told to take a look at the tzaddikim who dedicated their lives for the community and for the sake of Torah, even when their strength was gone. What humiliation this person will have!



You Shall Surely Rebuke

“Then Moshe raised his arm and struck the rock with his staff twice; abundant water came forth, and the assembly and their animals drank. Hashem said to Moshe and to Aharon: Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you will not bring this congregation to the Land that I have given them”

(Bamidbar 20:11-12)

Hashem commanded Moshe to speak to the rock in order to withdraw water (ibid. 20:8), “Speak to the rock before their eyes that it shall give its waters.” But instead of speaking to the rock, Moshe struck it, as it says (ibid. 20:11), “Then Moshe raised his arm and struck the rock.” As a punishment, Hashem denied both Moshe and Aharon entry into Eretz Yisrael. Why was Aharon culpable, since Moshe was the one who disobeyed Hashem’s word by hitting the rock?

Aharon should have reproved Moshe for deviating from Hashem’s command. He should have explained the urgency of heeding His word precisely, without changing one iota. The Torah (*Vayikra* 19:17) exhorts us, “You shall reprove your fellow, and do not bear a sin because of him.” This implies that when one desists from reproofing a fellow Jew who is sinning, he bears part of the blame for that sin. This is the reason why Aharon was also punished.

Aharon was well-aware that if he refrained from rebuking Moshe, he would also be held accountable for striking the rock. But he was a humble man and did not want to insult the honor of his brother,

whom he held in great esteem. He knew he would pay a hefty price, but he felt this was the right thing to do.

It could be that Aharon felt he would be considered as giving a halachic ruling before one's teacher if he would reprove Moshe for this deed. He might even deserve death, as his two sons before him (see *Tanchuma, Acharei Mot* 6). He therefore preferred silence and the ensuing punishment. This was all due to the great honor he accorded Moshe, his Torah teacher. For this reason, Aharon was considered on par with Moshe, as the pasuk (*Shemot* 6:26) states, "This was the Aharon and Moshe" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 1:15).



Torah Is a Gift to Those Who Sustain It

“Well that the princes dug, that the nobles of the people excavated, through a lawgiver, with their staffs. From the Wilderness to Matanah”

(*Bamidbar* 21:18)

The Gemara (*Eiruvin* 54a) expounds on the words, “From the Wilderness toward Matanah,” that the Torah was given to us as a gift (another meaning of the word *matanah*). Abaye states (*Shabbat* 118b) that he was willing to prepare a feast for the *talmidei chachamim* in honor of a *talmid chacham* who completed a *masechta*. Torah was given to us as a gift (see *Tanchuma, Ki Tisa* 16). Only one who appreciates the value of a gift is considered as having truly received it. Only *talmidei chachamim*, who tasted the

sweetness of Torah, having completed an entire *masechta*, can appreciate the beauty of Torah and are worthy of making this day a festival.



The Merit of a Good Deed

“Hashem said to Moshe: Do not fear him, for into your hand have I given him, his entire people, and his land; you shall do to him as you did to Sichon, king of the Amorite, who dwells in Cheshbon”

(Bamidbar 21:34)

When Moshe faced Og, king of Bashan, he was overcome with fear. Hashem assured him that He would give him over into his hand. When Moshe had ascended to the Heavens, he triumphed over the angels, including the Angel of Death, who was ten times as strong as Og, king of Bashan. He was able to conquer them, even on their own territory. Why was he so afraid of fighting Og?

Og had one *zechut* to his credit. Generations ago, he had revealed to Avraham Avinu that Lot had been taken captive by the kings. Moshe was afraid that this merit would grant Og the power to prevail against Am Yisrael (*Niddah* 61a). Og’s intentions in informing Avraham of Lot’s captivity were far from sincere. He thought that while trying to release his nephew, Avraham would die in battle and thereby leave Sarah free for himself (*Bereishit* 42:8). Nevertheless, it was considered a good deed; to the degree that Moshe thought its merit would protect him from Bnei Yisrael.

Likewise, the *brit milah* of Yishmael stands by his progeny until this very day (*Zohar* II, 32a). Thirteen tribes descended from him, who were strong enough to confront Bnei Yisrael. Had Yishmael done *brit milah* perfectly, including *priyah*, his strength would have overwhelmed Am Yisrael completely, *chalilah*. Since this was not the case, we are struck by his offspring time and again, yet we merit resurgence.

Nevuchadnezzar is another example of a gentile whose merit stood by him. He preceded Hashem's honor to that of a mortal, and therefore merited to rule the entire world (*Sanhedrin* 96a).

How great is the merit of a good deed! How faithful is Hashem to repay those who do His wishes. If those who spent the majority of their days in dastardly deeds are nevertheless recompensed for their few good acts, all the more so will His beloved sons who constantly do His desire, be repaid.



Hashem Is the King of Glory

“Well that the princes dug, that the nobles of the people excavated, through a lawgiver, with their staffs. From the Wilderness toward Matanah”

(*Bamidbar* 21:18)

The Ohr Hachaim (*ibid.* 21:17) writes that the Torah is acquired only through humbling oneself as the wilderness, which is free to all. Chazal (*Derech Eretz Zutah* 8) tell us that the Torah endures only in one who subordinates himself to it. In *Avot* (4:5) we learn that one

may not make his Torah knowledge into “a spade with which to dig.” He may not enjoy personal glory at the expense of Torah.

The reason for this is that Hashem is the King of glory (*Tehillim* 24:10). One who represents the king also attains a measure of glory, but this must be accredited only to Hashem, for Whom we were created. We should not, *chalilah*, betray this glory by taking it for ourselves (see *Iggeret HaRamban*).

The disciples of Rabbi Akiva perished because they did not grant each other sufficient respect (*Yevamot* 62b). They were concerned only for their own honor, and in this respect, seemed to ignore Hashem's.



Balak



The Connection between Chukat and Balak

“Balak son of Tzipor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorite”

(Bamidbar 22:2)

Parashat *Chukat* contains the mitzvah of *parah adumah*, whose reasoning is concealed from us and seems illogical. Balak’s motives in hiring Bilaam to curse Am Yisrael were also unfounded. The Torah (*Devarim 2:9*) commands, “You shall not distress Moav and you shall not provoke war with them.” Waging war with the nation of Moav, as well as the nation of Amon, was taboo to our people, for Rut Hamoaviah and Na’amah Ha’amonite, the ancestors of the Messianic dynasty, would descend from them (*Bava Kama 38b*).

Why did Balak want to curse Bnei Yisrael? He was well aware that they came in peace and were forbidden from waging war with his nation, who would in the future provide spiritual giants for our people.

Balak’s move to hire Bilaam had no rhyme or reason. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai states (see *Rashi, Bereishit 33:4*) that the

animosity of the gentiles is irrational. Balak's unfounded hatred toward our people has an eternal lesson for us. We must observe the mitzvot under all circumstances, even when we do not understand them. Observing mitzvot which are beyond our comprehension indicates our love for Hashem. When Bnei Yisrael do only those mitzvot which find favor in their eyes and are easily understandable, Hashem strikes them by sending the staff of the gentiles to smite them. This is measure-for-measure. Just as people feel there is no reason to observe mitzvot that they cannot understand, the nations' constant desire to attack us is unfathomable. Even when we are at peace with the nations, never dreaming of harming them in any way, the nations of the world are bent on our annihilation.

True love of Hashem demands observing His mitzvot without distinction between those that we comprehend and those we do not.

The mitzvah of *taharat hamishpachah* is a *chok*. We cannot understand how all of the waters in the world cannot purify a woman of her *niddah* status. Only entering a kosher *mikveh* will accomplish this (*Shabbat*, 64b; *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh De'ah* 201:1). I remember an account that caused a stir in all strata of society. A woman from Ramat Gan went to immerse in the *mikveh*. She arrived late, since she had hosted guests beforehand. The *mikveh* attendant refused to allow her entry. It was late, and she was tired. The woman pleaded with her to allow her in. She would hurry up. But the *mikveh* attendant ignored her entreaties. The woman pleaded with her, stating that her husband had found it difficult enough to restrain himself all these days of separation; he surely would have relations with her that night, whether she immersed or not. But the attendant would not listen, remaining obstinate throughout. The woman returned home without immersing.

Approximately sixteen years later, the newspapers broadcasted the incident of a youth who ran over an elderly woman. Upon investigating the incident, it was discovered that this woman was the *mikveh* attendant who refused entry to the woman from Ramat Gan. And the youth? He was the child conceived that night, illegitimately, when this woman refused his mother entry into the *mikveh*.

Hashem brings a punishment measure-for-measure in order to bring people back to the proper path.

In Summary

- ◆ It is incomprehensible why Balak sent Bilaam to curse our nation. Bnei Yisrael were commanded to maintain peaceful relations with Moav. What possessed Balak to fight against them? Just as the mitzvah of *parah adumah* is a mystery, the reason for the hatred of the gentiles toward us is concealed from us.
- ◆ Hashem wants us to observe all mitzvot, those that we understand, as well as those which we do not. When we fail to keep all of the mitzvot equally, Hashem sends the nations to attack us. This irrational behavior on their part will cause us to contemplate our commitment to mitzvah observance and arrive at the conclusion that we must keep all mitzvot alike.



The Counsel of Hashem Will Endure

“He sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor to Petor, which is by the River of the land of the members of his people, to summon him, saying: Behold! a people has come out of Egypt, behold! it has covered the surface of the earth and it sits opposite me”

(Bamidbar 22:5)

When Hashem extricated His nation from Egypt, after the miraculous plagues, His Name was publicized before the entire world (*Shemot* 9:16). Likewise, when Hashem split the sea, all the nations became fearful of His might (*ibid.* 15:14). Why did Balak mention the fact that Am Yisrael left Egypt, when everyone was aware of this?

Furthermore, what is meant by the phrase that “it has covered the surface of the earth”? Am Yisrael was a small nation, as only one-fifth merited to leave Egypt.

Chazal (*Tanchuma, Balak* 11) relate that Balak was a greater sorcerer than Bilaam. He had manifold times more powers of impurity at his disposal than his counterpart. He could certainly have enlisted these forces to curse Bnei Yisrael. Why did he send messengers to Bilaam to execute this shady business on his behalf? Additionally, Balak had to humble himself to operate on Bilaam’s terms, offering him vast sums of wealth in payment for cursing the Jewish nation. Why didn’t Balak save himself this humiliation by doing the job himself?

Moreover, Balak knew that Bilaam was the prophet of the nations. Certainly, Hashem would not allow him to curse His Chosen People,

to whom He had granted the Torah. How could Balak be so sure that Bilaam would agree to curse them, against all logic?

The sefer *Shema Yisrael* quotes Rabbi Moshe MiDunner, who explains Balak's actions. The words "Behold! a people has come out of Egypt" refer to the moral morass that was Egypt, known as "the abomination of the land" for its rampant immorality. In spite of Bnei Yisrael's sojourn in Egypt, "it has covered the surface of the earth." The word עֵינַי (surface) can also mean eye. Bnei Yisrael covered their physical eyes from being affected by the defilement of Egypt.

Balak knew that where there is immorality, there is no *Shechinah*. The Angel of Destruction is given reign to do as he pleases. Balak tried to introduce sin to the Jewish nation by defiling their eyes with forbidden sights. But Bnei Yisrael were a people accustomed to protecting their eyes, since their days in Egypt. This very act of guarding their eyes from sights of defilement allowed them to rise from the forty-nine levels of depravity to the forty-nine levels of purity.

Rabbi Shlomo MiRadomsk (*Tiferet Shlomo, Balak*) writes that a person's sanctity is dependent on guarding his eyes. The more one works on protecting his eyesight, the greater he ascends in Torah and *yirah*. The heart and the eyes are the agents of sin (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 10:2). We wear *tzitzit* in order to "not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray" (*Bamidbar* 15:39).

Balak knew that preserving the purity of their eyes would protect Am Yisrael in times of trouble. The commentaries explain that their purity of sight enabled them to be distinct from the Egyptians in their names, dress, and language (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 4:25; *Pesikta Zutrati, Shemot* 6:6). Bnei Yisrael preserved their level of *tzeniut*, did not defile their speech with inanities, and their names came from sources of sanctity.

Balak told Bilaam that Am Yisrael's abstention from matters of immorality granted them redemption from Egypt. He therefore suggested that he discover a cunning way to compel them to sin, thereby removing the *Shechinah* from their midst. The *gematria* of the words הנה כסה (it has covered), is equal to that of the word עיניו (its eyes), adding one for the phrase itself. Bnei Yisrael triumphed over their enemies in the merit of guarding their eyes from improper sights. Balak turned to Bilaam, the man with one eye, to cause Bnei Yisrael to sin. Bilaam lived indecently, thereby damaging his eyesight. However, Balak thought that Bilaam's blind eye, which remained unsullied by immoral sights, would grant him the merit to overcome Am Yisrael.

Why didn't Balak himself take advantage of the knowledge that Hashem despises immorality, in order to attack the Jewish nation (*Sanhedrin* 106a)? The awareness that their chastity is their strength could be used against them. Why did Balak ask Bilaam for advice as to how best to annihilate this nation? He already knew, as he told Bilaam, that their G-d hates immorality. Besides, Balak knew that the Jewish nation is Hashem's Chosen People. How would he allow Bilaam to curse them?

The two of them knew that Hashem would never agree to curse His people. But even if Bilaam would end up blessing them, it would arouse prosecution on High. The accusing angels would claim that Am Yisrael were not worthy of these *berachot*.

This episode demonstrates Hashem's unwavering love toward His children. Balak and Bilaam were masters of evil. But while Balak's powers were hidden, Bilaam's were well-known. They represent the two different types of enemies that Bnei Yisrael face. There are those who operate against us in secret, and those who overtly try to attack us. Hashem, in His kindness, allows even the secret missions of our enemies to become public knowledge. This is what

happened with Balak. He was capable of utilizing his negative forces to covertly harm our people, without anyone being any the wiser. But blessing falls upon that which is hidden from the eye. Hashem therefore made his motives known to all by placing fear in his heart. Because Balak feared that he was incapable of waging war against the Jews, he enlisted Bilaam's help, and his plot was exposed.

This mistake was his downfall. Balak knew that Bilaam would never receive permission to curse Bnei Yisrael. Nonetheless, Hashem made him think that even a blessing from Bilaam would have the strength to cause prosecution against Am Yisrael. This thought was baseless and merely nullified his evil schemes.

The *Navi* proclaims (*Michah* 6:5), "My people, hear, now, what Balak, king of Moav, schemed, and what Bilaam son of Beor answered him." Why is the scheme attributed to Balak, when Rashi (*Bamidbar* 24:14) explicitly states that the scheme to send out young women to cause Bnei Yisrael to sin was Bilaam's? Further in the parashah, we read about the actual sin (*ibid.* 25:1), "Israel settled in Shittim and the people began to act promiscuously with the daughters of Moav." Rashi expounds, "By means of the advice of Bilaam." Was it Bilaam's advice or Balak's?

Originally, Balak had this insidious idea. He pointed out to Bilaam that Hashem hates immorality. Balak's power was of the hidden kind. But Hashem made him afraid to act on his own. Balak therefore turned to Bilaam to activate his initiative. Bilaam is the one who suggested luring Bnei Yisrael into sin with the Moabite women, but Balak was the mastermind behind this plot.

How great is Hashem's kindness toward us! He reveals the sinister plots of our enemies by making them afraid to take matters into their own hands. Were they to strike at us secretly, the damage would be all the greater, and we would have no

recourse for salvation. Once the cat is out of the bag, the blanket of secrecy removed, there is no level of blessing inherent in their plots, and we have the ability to rise up from our torment and reconnect with Hashem.

Hashem placed arrogance into Bilaam's heart, in order that he not accept Balak's offer immediately. He would first curse the nation. Even if his curse would be transformed into blessing, it would be a source of prosecution against them. The nations of the world attempt to attack us in every way possible. They try in hidden ways as well as revealed ways. They even make peace among themselves for this purpose. But Hashem protects us from their machinations. The *Navi* states (*Yeshayahu* 8:10), "Plan a conspiracy and it shall be annulled; speak your piece and it shall not stand, for G-d is with us!" In *Tehillim* (33:11) we read, "The counsel of Hashem will endure forever, the designs of His heart from generation to generation."

Balak intimated to Bilaam that he might fall into the hands of this nation which upholds the dictates of *tzeniut*. Bilaam himself was steeped in debauchery and was therefore at a disadvantage. Balak therefore rushed him, encouraging him to do battle with his one undefiled eye. He wanted him to find a way to curse or make the nation of chastity stumble in sin.

Balak came from the seed of Moav, thus called because he was born מאב (from father) of a union between Lot and his daughter (see *Rashi, Bereishit* 19:37). Lot's daughter put her father to sleep and cohabited with him, thereby conceiving this impure child. Balak, king of this nation, recognized the force of evil which controls it, and where it began. He also knew the origins of Am Yisrael's purity. He was envious of their pure lineage and therefore schemed to make them sin in this area, in order to bring them down to his own low level.

In Summary

- ◆ Why did Balak specify that Am Yisrael left Egypt? Why did he say that Am Yisrael covered the land, when they were actually a small nation? Why did Balak need Bilaam's services altogether, humbling himself in the process? And how did Balak imagine that Hashem would allow Bilaam, a prophet, to curse His Chosen People?
- ◆ The sefer *Shema Yisrael* explains that when Bnei Yisrael were enslaved in Egypt, the abomination of the land and hotbed of immorality, they covered their eyes in order that they should not observe obscene scenes. Balak knew that immorality drives away the *Shechinah*. Therefore, he wished to cause Bnei Yisrael to sin in matters of immorality. But he did not know how to go about this, as Bnei Yisrael were punctilious in protecting their eyes.
- ◆ Balak felt his powers were too limited to control Bnei Yisrael, bringing them to sin so severely. He therefore recruited Bilaam into his service. He thought that the one blind eye of Bilaam, which had remained unsullied, would be powerful enough to fight the Jewish nation.
- ◆ Why did Balak ask for Bilaam's advice, when he already knew that Hashem despises immorality? He also knew that Hashem would never agree to His nation being cursed. Balak assumed that even if Bilaam ended up blessing them, it would arouse the accusation on High that Bnei Yisrael were not worthy of blessing. In his warped mind, even blessing the nation would effectively bring them harm.
- ◆ Hashem placed fear in the heart of Balak, who was a master of impurity in secrecy. His motives became public knowledge, thereby removing any measure of blessing which settles upon something that is hidden from sight.
- ◆ Who suggested the idea to sin with the daughters of Moav? Balak mentioned it originally, but Bilaam brought it into action.
- ◆ Balak, king of Moav, realized that his nation was defiled and had its source in impurity. He wanted to avenge his illegitimate origins by

bringing Bnei Yisrael, the nation of purity and holiness, to sin in this abominable manner.



To Publicize Hashem's Righteousness

“He sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor to Petor, which is by the River of the land of the members of his people, to summon him, saying: Behold! a people has come out of Egypt, behold! it has covered the surface of the earth and it sits opposite me”

(Bamidbar 22:5)

Chazal disagree as to whether Bilaam was the son of Lavan Ha'arami, or was Lavan himself (*Tanchuma, Vayeitzei 13; Sanhedrin 105a*). In any event, Bilaam was a relative of ours, either the grandfather of the Shevatim (as Lavan was the father of Rachel and Leah), or their uncle (their brother).

Chazal (*Zohar III, 194b*) also tell us that Bilaam Harasha absorbed *tumah* directly from the Snake, the *kelippah* of *tumah*. For this reason, Bilaam's strength lay in his mouth. “Man is led in the way he wishes to go” (*Makkot 10b*). Bilaam chose the path of impurity and was therefore led along it to become the most defiled of men. He was so debased as to cohabit with his donkey (*Sanhedrin 105b*). He succeeded in earning notoriety as the chief of impurity.

Two questions arise from this. First, why didn't Bilaam want to curse the nation with the mouth that absorbed *tumah* from the

Snake? And second, why did he advise Balak, king of Moav, to send out the girls of his nation instead of doing it himself?

As mentioned above, Balak told Bilaam that although Am Yisrael had been incarcerated in a land teeming with immorality, the source of defilement and abomination, they maintained their purity through guarding their eyes. In this merit, they were redeemed with a mighty hand.

Balak knew that the way to get Bnei Yisrael to sin was by means of defiling their eyes. Nevertheless, he sent messengers to Bilaam to ask his advice as to the best way to eradicate them. If Balak knew that damaging Bnei Yisrael's eyesight would remove the *Shechinah* from their midst, why didn't he cause them to sin on his own?

Each of these oppressors posed a menace to our nation. According to the laws of nature, each on his own could have caused Bnei Yisrael to sin. But Hashem had compassion on His nation. He placed into the minds of Balak and Bilaam the thought that their individual power was insufficient to act against Am Yisrael. Bilaam, who was nurtured by the impurity of the Snake and became the chief of *tumah*, multiplying his defilement by cohabiting with his donkey, still felt he needed the help of Balak to strike at the Jewish nation. On the other hand, Balak knew that the secret to Bnei Yisrael's success lay in their eyes and understood that this was the area where he could cause them to sin, yet he still felt the need for Bilaam's advice.

Often, there are nations who have the power to harm Am Yisrael without any outside help. But Hashem, in His mercy, weakens them and divides their power of impurity so that they feel the need to join with other nations. Until these nations "get their act together," they will have suffered internal warring and dissention. This gives Am Yisrael the opportunity to be spared from their diabolical plots.

This is exactly what happened here. Although Balak and Bilaam knew Bnei Yisrael's weak spot, they each felt a weakness in attacking on their own. Until their nations, Moav and Midian united, Hashem injected arguments and dissention among their people. They ended up fighting each other, forgetting their mutual enemy.

A combination of the last letters of the name בלעם (Bilaam) with the last letters of the name בלק (Balak) spell the word עמלק (Amalek) (see *Zohar* III, 194a). Out of His mercy for us, Hashem separated the powers of impurity of these nations. This was to obviate the scourge of Amalek, who had the ability to cool off the nation's faith (*Ba'al Shem Tov* on the Torah, *Beshalach* 20). Both Balak and Bilaam drew powers of impurity from Amalek in order to attack Bnei Yisrael. They wished to damage our nation not by bearing arms, but through the eyes and mouth. They were well-aware of the fact that Am Yisrael's power rests in their eyes, which gaze at holy sefarim, as well as their mouths, which utter words of Torah. Likewise, they guard their eyes from unholy "sites."

In spite of their awareness as to how best to strike at Am Yisrael, they felt inadequate to do this it alone. They therefore decided to join forces, in order to increase the power of their impurity. But Hashem did not allow this to happen. He brought them into dispute so that they would not succeed in their devious schemes. The *Navi* reminds us (*Michah* 6:5), "My people, hear, now, what Balak, king of Moav, schemed, and what Bilaam son of Beor answered him, and [all the events] from Shittim to Gilgal – in order to recognize the righteous acts of Hashem." Hashem orchestrated the whole incident in order to save His people from this evil plot. In this manner, all generations would realize how great is the Master Conductor, Whose mercy on his children is boundless.

Balak was the first one to say that the G-d of this nation hates promiscuity (*Sanhedrin* 106a). Hashem rescued them from Egypt

because they maintained a distance from immorality (see *Yoma* 75a; *Yalkut Shimoni, Vayikra* 657). They guarded their eyes from beholding the abomination that was Egypt. Balak added that to this very day, this nation protects their eyes from indecent “sites.” He asked counsel from Bilaam, but his plans were thwarted by Hashem. Instead of merging into one indomitable force of evil, they began to argue with one another. Finally, Balak sent Bilaam from his country, most shamefully, and they became sworn enemies.

The first letters of the names בלעם and בלק spell the word בלבל (mix-up). Hashem “mixed them up,” preventing them from uniting. They are thereafter in constant battle. They yielded their mutual enmity toward Am Yisrael for the sake of internal unrest. This incident points to Hashem’s greatness in preserving His nation from their enemies.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Some commentaries contend that Bilaam was either Lavan, or a son of Lavan.
- ◆ Bilaam was the chief of *tumah*, as he had absorbed the *kelippah* of impurity from the Snake, defiling his mouth with the powers of impurity. He also cohabited with his donkey. If Bilaam was a master of *tumah*, why did he seek the help of Balak, and not simply curse the Jewish people? Why did he suggest that they send the daughters of Moav to incite the Jewish men, and not the daughters of Midian, his own nation?
- ◆ Why did Balak, on the other hand, seek Bilaam’s advice, and not harm Am Yisrael on his own? Balak was aware that their power was in guarding their eyesight from forbidden “sites,” as he himself told Bilaam, “It has covered the surface of the earth.” Our Sages explain this means that they protect their eyesight from “earthly matters.”
- ◆ Hashem intentionally weakens our enemies’ spirit, in order that they join forces with another nation against their mutual enemy, Am Yisrael. But

then Hashem causes argument and contention between them. Am Yisrael is thereby spared. Both Balak and Bilaam individually had the power to harm Bnei Yisrael, but Hashem caused them to unite, and this led to internal fighting, saving His nation from their evil machinations.

- ◆ A combination of the last letters of the name בלעם (Bilaam) with the last letters of the name בלק (Balak) spell the word עמלק (Amalek). They each drew their strength from Amalek, who wished to harm our nation. In His unbounded mercy, Hashem separated their forces, to spare Am Yisrael from their evil plots.



Misplaced Trust

“He sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor to Petor, which is by the River of the land of the members of his people, to summon him, saying: Behold! a people has come out of Egypt, behold! it has covered the surface of the earth and it sits opposite me. So now – please come and curse this people for me, for it is too powerful for me; perhaps I will be able to strike it and drive it away from the land. For I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is accursed”

(Bamidbar 22:5-6)

Balak wanted nothing more than to harm Am Yisrael. When he saw that he could not do this on his own, he enlisted the help of Bilaam Harasha, who was the prophet of the nations (*Tanna d'vei*

Eliyahu Rabbah 28). Their combined efforts would yield a surefire plan to eliminate the Jewish Problem. Bilaam suggested that Balak incite Bnei Yisrael to sin through acts of immorality, knowing that their G-d abhors promiscuity (*Sanhedrin* 106a). By sinning in this specific area, Bnei Yisrael would arouse His wrath and bring the full hand of justice upon themselves. We find that Balak did, indeed, implement Bilaam's advice (*Bamidbar* 25:1-2) and brought foreign women to seduce the Jewish men. He even brought his own daughter to arouse Bnei Yisrael to sin (ibid. vs. 15).

Bilaam, with his negative energies, knew the exact moment when Hashem is angry with His nation. He wished to exploit this knowledge to his own diabolical ends, by cursing them at that very moment (*Berachot* 7a). But of course, he did not succeed in his evil designs. Words of blessing and praise emerged from his mouth, instead. How great is Hashem's *chessed* toward us! Even when Bnei Yisrael sin, and it is a time when the Destroyer is liable to prosecute and devastate, Hashem does not allow this to happen. He does not display anger toward His children before the nations. He prevents them from harming us. Instead of Bilaam executing his wicked scheme, Hashem placed words of blessing in his mouth.

By sinning with the daughters of Moav, Bnei Yisrael demonstrated ingratitude to Hashem for all of the goodness He had done with them. The most depraved and perverted form of behavior is that of a son who displays ingratitude toward his father, who has dedicated his life to his welfare and provided for all his needs. If the son would possess some sort of conscience, he would surely realize that his behavior is despicable, denoting a genuine lack of fine *middot*.

How was it possible for Bnei Yisrael, the Generation of Wisdom (*Vayikra Rabbah* 9:1), who had merited seeing the *Shechinah* with their own eyes (see *Bamidbar* 14:14), and experiencing miracles at every moment of their lives, to display such brazenness by sinning

with the daughters of Moav? Furthermore, it wasn't members of the fringe of society who sinned, but the most elite among the nation. Zimri ben Salu, the *Nasi* of Shevet Shimon, acted most dishonorably by sinning with Kuzbi bat Tzur, before the entire nation (*Pesikta d'Rabbi Elazar* 46). If not for Pinchas, who took up for Hashem's honor by taking the spear and killing both of them, Bnei Yisrael would have been completely destroyed in the plague. It was Pinchas's zealotry for Hashem's Name that saved Am Yisrael from annihilation. How is it possible that men of such stature did not stand up to their *Yetzer Hara*, but instead, sinned in this most lewd of sins, for which a person is required to sacrifice his life rather than transgress?

Similarly, we might ask how it could be that Bnei Yisrael sinned with the Golden Calf. They had waited patiently for forty days for Moshe's return. Why, on the fortieth day, did their patience wear out? We still pay the price to this very day. One reason for fasting on the 17th of Tammuz is to atone for this sin, which occurred on that day (see *Ta'anit* 28b). This sin has brought prosecution upon our nation throughout the generations.

Sinning with the Golden Calf invested this day with powers of prosecution against Am Yisrael. On this day, the walls of Yerushalayim were broken, a breach which led to the *churban* Beit Hamikdash. Torah is a rampart (*Pesachim* 87a), shielding our nation from all harm. A breach in this wall, indicating neglect of Torah, invites the Destroyer to enter. The path to total destruction is short. The word חומה (wall) is similar to the word חמה (wrath). How deep was Hashem's anger toward Bnei Yisrael for abandoning the Torah. He had no choice but to destroy the House of His *Shechinah*.

The date of this breach was the 17th of Tammuz. Seventeen is the numerical value of the word טוב (good). The only truly good thing is Torah. As a direct result of Am Yisrael's abandoning the Torah,

the wall of Yerushalayim was broken into, eventually leading to the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash.

The root of the *churban* lay in the sin of the Golden Calf. This was the beginning of the end (see *Netzach Yisrael* 8). How did Bnei Yisrael descend to the level of sinning in this way, in a sin whose far-reaching consequences are felt by us in every generation? Could we even imagine a person who was brought up in the lap of Torah and mitzvot deciding to enter a church and bow before a statue? Just as this thought is impossible to entertain, it is difficult to us to understand how Bnei Yisrael could come to erect an idol and worship it.

Often, a person wants to test his level of endurance. Many people flirt with fate by placing themselves in peril. They want to see how much torment they can tolerate. People have met their deaths after pulling the rope a little too much. But they find it intriguing to do dangerous things in order to test how much agony they can bear. This is borne out by many dangerous sports in which people engage. There are those who dive into very deep waters, jump to great heights, walk tightropes, or do free falling. These are just examples of the lengths people will go to for the thrill of checking their stamina. Onlookers are perplexed. How could a person take his life into his own hands in order to break another record? They are literally daring death. What motivates them to act so recklessly?

Every person has an inner voice whispering, "I'll survive." True, many have attempted to climb to the top of Mount Everest and didn't live to tell the tale, but one feels that his senses are keen, and he will overcome all danger. This was how Bnei Yisrael felt when they were confronted with the allure of the daughters of Moav. They relied on their spiritual greatness to spirit them away from sin. They felt that their Torah wisdom and heights of righteousness would provide protection for them. But one who is greater than his friend

also has a greater *Yetzer Hara*. The *Yetzer Hara* is forever bent on causing the tzaddik to sin, concentrating all his powers into this objective. The goal of the *Yetzer Hara* is to convince great people to transgress (*Sukkah* 52a). When the nation observes their leaders sinning, they are sure to follow suit. “If the cedar trees were burnt, how can the moss on the wall protect itself?” (*Mo’ed Katan* 25b).

Bnei Yisrael confidently felt that they could associate with the daughters of Moav and not come to sin with them. They believed they could set boundaries before it was too late. But they were not strong enough to resist the power of sin. Chazal (*Berachot* 61a) tell us that if a person has the choice to travel the road which will lead to a lion or that which will lead to a strange woman, he should take the former path. The danger of the woman is far greater. The power of incitement of the *Yetzer Hara* is tremendous in this area. Therefore, one must be on guard at all times.

When Bnei Yisrael awaited Moshe’s return during the forty days that he was in *Shamayim*, they examined themselves to see if they were prepared to live without a leader and the Torah to guide them. They ceased anticipating his descent with the *luchot*. Removing their thoughts from Moshe Rabbeinu and the Torah led them to fashion the Golden Calf.

A person must know his own strengths, as well as his weaknesses. He should never test the waters of his endurance by diving into a situation that is too deep for him. Who knows if he will emerge safely from the *nisayon*? Every day, in *Birchot Hashachar*, we ask Hashem, “Do not bring me to *nisayon*.” Hashem never places a person in a situation that he cannot withstand (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 55:2). A person himself must ensure that he does not place himself in such a *nisayon*.

An acquaintance of mine, who wears a *kippah* and prays three times a day, once confided in me that he sinned with an Arab

woman. I was shocked. He had recently approached me for a *berachah* to be strengthened in Torah and *yirat Shamayim*. How did he reach such a low state, as to sin with a gentile woman? A person is not aware of his endurance level. He feels he can overcome any and all temptations of the *Yetzer Hara*. Therefore, he does not provide himself with enough protection and enters into perilous situations unarmed. In spite of this person's true desire to grow in Torah and *yirat Shamayim*, he was not sufficiently aware of the venomous pull of the *Yetzer Hara*, and did not take the necessary precautions to protect himself, eventually sinning abominably.

The days of Bein Hametzarim are ill-fated for punishment. Aside from the fact that the sin of the Golden Calf and the *churban* of both Batei Mikdash occurred at this time, there is another formidable factor concerning this time of year. It is the summertime, when people go to air out. Danger lurks in the great outdoors. Forbidden sights arrest the eyes. People dress scantily, due to the warm weather. The spiritual hazards are tremendous. When a person goes to walk along the seashore, he places himself in jeopardy. Just as there is one who acquires his portion in *Olam Haba* in a single instant (*Avodah Zarah* 17a), there is one who loses his portion in *Olam Haba* in a single instant (see *Be'er Mayim Chaim, Re'eh* 12). This can be the instant when one gazed at forbidden sights.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked Eliyahu Hanavi when Mashiach would arrive (*Sanhedrin* 98a). Eliyahu replied that Mashiach was sitting at the gate of Rome. He should approach him and ask his question. Rabbi Yehoshua went all the way to Rome and found Mashiach, just as Eliyahu had said. He asked when he would come and redeem Am Yisrael from their suffering. Mashiach answered, "Today." But the day came, and the day went, and Mashiach did not make an appearance. Disappointed, Rabbi Yehoshua returned to Eliyahu Hanavi and complained that Mashiach had not kept his

word. Eliyahu Hanavi responded that Mashiach was referring to the pasuk (*Tehillim* 95:7), “Today, if you but heed His call.” The day that Am Yisrael obey Hashem’s mitzvot, Mashiach will come without delay.

The word יום (day) can be split in two. The letters יו are numerically equal to seventeen, adding one for the unit, and the letter ם is equal to forty. On the 17th of Tammuz, Moshe broke the *luchot* which he had obtained after forty days in Heaven. This was on account of the sin of the Golden Calf, the epitome of transgressing the verse “Today, if you but heed His call.”

In order to merit reaching this level, we must rise in Torah, so that we can be considered on the level of אם (if), numerically equivalent to forty-one. We must advance in Torah, which was given after forty days and nights. The number one alludes to an additional level of *kedushah*, which a person should strive to attain in order to merit the positive results of “Today, if (אם) you but heed His call.”

Chazal teach us that it was in the merit of the righteous women that our nation was redeemed from Egypt, and we will also be redeemed in the future in their merit. It was the women who refused to have any part in the sin of the Golden Calf, hiding their jewelry from their husbands (*Tanchuma, Pinchas* 7). Lest we think they simply were attached to their jewelry, we should remember that when the Mishkan was erected, the women willingly parted with their gold in order to build a House for the *Shechinah* (see *Shemot* 35:22; *Rabbeinu Bachya* vs. 20). Women should take to heart the message that Hashem abhors immorality (*Sanhedrin* 106a). Conversely, He loves the *middah* of *tzeniut*, the quality which protects the vineyard of our nation from trespassers and hastens the arrival of Mashiach.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Bilaam was aware of the exact moment when Hashem becomes angry at His people. But Hashem, in His infinite mercy, prevented him from carrying out his evil intentions to curse the Jews. How could Bnei Yisrael display such ingratitude toward Hashem by sinning with the daughters of Moav? Moreover, the esteemed *Nasi* of Shevet Yehudah had relations with a gentile woman and caused the deaths of many people in a terrible plague.
- ◆ Seventeen is the *gematria* of the word טוב (good). On the seventeenth of Tammuz, Bnei Yisrael breached the walls of Torah, the ultimate good, by sinning with the Golden Calf. This led to the breach in the walls of Yerushalayim. How did Bnei Yisrael fall so low as to sin with the Golden Calf?
- ◆ A person feels inclined to test his level of endurance. He believes that where others failed, he will succeed. Bnei Yisrael were smug in their spiritual stature and were sure they would never sin with the daughters of Moav. Likewise, after waiting for Moshe's return after forty days, Bnei Yisrael considered whether or not they were able to survive without a leader. As soon as they removed their thoughts from Moshe Rabbeinu and the Torah, they sinned with the Golden Calf.
- ◆ A person should never place himself in a situation of *nisayon*. Who knows if he will manage to withstand temptation? Every day, in our Morning Prayer, we ask to be spared *nisayon*, so that we should never come to a humiliating situation.
- ◆ Mashiach will come "today, if you but heed His call." The day our nation obeys Hashem's commandments, they will merit redemption. The word יום (day) can be split in two. The letters י-ו are numerically equal to seventeen, adding one for the unit, and the letter ם is equal to forty. On the 17th of Tammuz, Moshe broke the *luchot* which he had obtained after forty days in Heaven.
- ◆ The word אם (if) is numerically equivalent to forty-one. In order to merit truly hearkening to Hashem's call, we must uphold the Torah, which was

given after forty days and nights. The number one left over hints to an added measure of *kedushah* which we are enjoined to take.

- ◆ We were redeemed in the merit of the righteous women, and in their merit, we will be redeemed in the future. The women had no part in the sin of the Golden Calf and were outstanding in their *tzeniut*.



Gratitude

“So now – please come and curse this people for me, for it is too powerful for me; perhaps I will be able to strike it and drive it away from the land. For I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is accursed”

(Bamidbar 22:6)

Balak ben Tzipor sought ways to harm the Jewish nation. He stopped at nothing and even hired Bilaam ben Beor to curse them. How did Bilaam have the audacity to even contemplate cursing our nation? Just as Moshe Rabbeinu was the greatest prophet of our people, Bilaam, *l’havdil*, was the greatest prophet among the nations of the world (*Tanna d’vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 28). As a prophet, he was aware of the fact that the world’s survival depends on Am Yisrael and the Torah, as the *Navi* states (*Yirmeyahu* 33:25), “If My covenant with the day and with the night would not be; had I not set up the laws of heaven and earth.” The world cannot exist without the Jewish nation. How could Bilaam simply ignore this reality and acquiesce to Balak’s request to curse Am Yisrael? Had he

succeeded, he would have been destroyed together with them. What was his purpose in this foolishness?

Let us observe a study in contrasts. On the one hand, Moshe, the greatest prophet of our nation, was tremendous in sanctity and purity. Conversely, Bilaam, the greatest prophet of the nations, was outstanding in his powers of impurity and wickedness. Moshe Rabbeinu constantly sought closeness with Hashem, even to the point of divorcing his wife in order to always be prepared for a Divine revelation (see *Shabbat* 87a). In contrast, Bilaam never wanted to speak with Hashem. He refused to confront the truth. He clung tenaciously to the powers of impurity, even cohabiting with his donkey (*Sanhedrin* 105b). Bilaam preferred a life of falsehood to the truth. Therefore, he constantly evaded speaking with Hashem. When Hashem ultimately spoke with him, He put him in his place by demonstrating the truth in all its starkness. While Moshe yearned to speak with the *Shechinah*, Bilaam's sole interest was knowing when the time was ripe to curse the Jewish nation. How could Bilaam have debased himself so, using his powers for evil purposes, instead of utilizing them to grow and become sanctified?

Moshe's *kedushah* was a direct outgrowth of his shining quality of gratitude. The Torah provides many examples of this. During the Ten Plagues, Moshe did not strike the water, for he felt gratitude toward it for protecting him as a baby (*Shemot Rabbah* 10:4). According to the natural order, Moshe had no obligation to show gratitude toward the water, an inanimate, unfeeling object. He should just have had gratitude toward his sister, Miriam, who shielded him from Pharaoh's agents, and Batya, who rescued him from the water. But Moshe, on his exalted level, did not satisfy himself with that. He had so sanctified himself in this wonderful quality that he felt a need to thank the water for protecting him. He therefore refused to strike it to bring about the plagues of blood and

frogs. Similarly, Moshe refrained from striking the ground to bring the plague of lice, and asked Aharon to do it in his stead. The earth had hidden the Egyptian whom he had killed, and he felt a debt of gratitude toward it (ibid. 10:7).

The quality of gratitude is a basic foundation in serving Hashem (*Michtav M'Elياهو I*, pg. 50). When a person accustoms himself to thank other people, he thanks Hashem, as well, for the myriad kindnesses He does for him throughout the day. Moshe Rabbeinu felt tremendous appreciation toward Bnei Yisrael for accepting him as their spiritual leader and thereby granting him the *zechut* to speak with the *Shechinah*. He accredited his nation with his monumental levels of *kedushah*. How did Moshe acquire such a high degree of gratitude toward Am Yisrael? It was by clinging to the *middah* of gratitude toward inanimate objects. Having mastered that level, he understood how much gratitude he was enjoined to feel toward his people, who have a *neshamah* and are created in the Divine image (see *Pardes Rimonim* 32:1).

Chazal (*Tanchuma, Matot* 3) teach, “Do not throw stones into a well from which you drank water.” A demonstration of ingratitude toward inanimate objects will eventually result in ingratitude toward Hashem Himself, *rachmana litzlan*. Moshe Rabbeinu teaches us the virtue of gratitude even to inanimate objects, which have no feeling or understanding. This is a springboard for feeling gratitude toward people, which eventually translates itself into feeling and expressing gratitude toward Hashem, Who created him and provides for his every need, every moment of his life.

Adam (אָדָם) Harishon is called by this name because it refers to his origin, the ground (אֲדָמָה). The *gematria* of the name אָדָם is forty-five, which is the *gematria* of Hashem’s Name ה-ו-ה-י with its letters spelled out. This should be a constant reminder to a person as to Who blew into him the breath of life and keeps him alive.

The Gemara (*Shavuot* 39a) states, “All of Yisrael are accountable for each other.” This accountability unites all Jews, affording them the ability to exist as a nation. A person should always feel a sense of gratitude toward his fellow Jew, even one who did not actually do him a favor. One never knows which merits of another Jew are bringing blessing to this world. We should therefore constantly feel gratitude to each and every Jew.

Bilaam was woefully deficient in this quality. The Torah (*Bamidbar* 22:23-27) relates that he struck his donkey time after time, even though he should have demonstrated appreciation for its loyalty to him. Ingratitude toward his donkey led to ingratitude toward Moshe Rabbeinu and Am Yisrael, in whose merit the entire world stood. Bilaam knew full well that if not for Moshe’s position as prophet of Bnei Yisrael, he himself would never have been chosen as prophet of the nations. This alone should have been a cause of gratitude toward our people (see *Tanna d’vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 28).

Lack of gratitude is the reason why Bilaam could fall so low as to curse Am Yisrael, the pillar of the entire world. This flaw obscured his vision from seeing the true reality. Bilaam was so malevolent that he was prepared to act against himself and his nation, as long as he managed to harm the Jews.

Gratitude is a quality which is developed gradually. It begins with small things. When a person accustoms himself to recognize the goodness in inanimate objects, and then plants and animals, he will eventually feel a sense of gratitude toward every Jew, because of the accountability which all Jews share. Habituating oneself to feel gratitude toward his fellow Jew will strengthen within him this trait, and he will eventually feel gratitude toward Hashem, in Whose image he was created.

What was the root of Bilaam’s blatant deficiency in the *middah* of gratitude; after all, he was a great prophet? It was due to his undue

pride and arrogance (see *Avot* 5:19). He could not own up to the truth and admit that he was obligated to thank Hashem for everything. Why was Bilaam held liable, when his entire essence was based on negativity? How can someone who espouses evil be held culpable for not walking the road of righteousness?

The sefarim tell us that every person possesses latent strengths. These strengths can be channeled toward the path of perfection or, *chalilah*, the path to perfidy. When Shmuel Hanavi came to anoint one of the sons of Yishai as king, he found none of them worthy. He then turned to Yishai, and asked if he had another son. Yishai replied that he did, indeed, have another son, the youngest, named David, who looked after the sheep. Hashem certainly did not intend for him to become king! he contended. Nonetheless, Shmuel had David brought before him (*Shmuel* I, 16:5-11). As soon as he laid eyes on him, Shmuel saw that David was born under the *mazal* of Mars—**מאדי** (which has the root **אדום**, red), a destiny of bloodshed. He felt that this quality was not suitable for kingship (see *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Shmuel* 124). Hashem had His plans in mind, though, and told Shmuel to anoint this very son (*Shmuel* I, 16:12). Throughout David's reign, he demonstrated to the entire world that a person can take a seemingly negative trait such as bloodshed and direct it for purposes of sanctity. David risked his life to eliminate Bnei Yisrael's enemies. He was occupied with the blood of *korbanot*, as well, for Hashem's sake. He devoted his entire life for Torah.

In a similar vein, we might ask how it was possible for Yitzchak to rely on Eisav to slaughter a kosher animal for him (*Bereishit Rabbah* 65:3). He knew that his son ate carcasses and non-kosher animals, not keeping the halachot of *shechitah*. But Yitzchak knew something about humans. A person might display wickedness and defilement, nevertheless, through improving his character, he can channel these very same strengths into matters of *kedushah* and Avodat

Hashem. Yitzchak's request was not far-fetched. Just as Eisav had the powers of bloodshed, so too, could he be punctilious in the halachot of *shechitah*, had he only desired. Many people born under the destiny of bloodshed have directed this quality toward positive pursuits. They may naturally be easily heated up, but instead of allowing themselves to be burnt up by negative traits, they are fired with the passion for mitzvot such as *shechitah* and *brit milah* (*Shabbat* 156a).

Bilaam, who was arrogant by nature (see *Avot* 5:19), should have reined in his character traits for Avodat Hashem, as the pasuk (*Divrei Hayamim* II, 17:6) states, "His heart was elevated in the ways of Hashem."

But because Bilaam did not seek truth, he fell to the lowest level possible. His pride led him to the abyss. It caused him to deny Hashem's goodness, as well as the goodness of Moshe and Am Yisrael. He tried to curse Am Yisrael, even though he knew that this would cause untold damage to the nations which he represented.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ How could Bilaam, the prophet of the nations, entertain the thought of cursing the Jewish people, when he knew that the entire world rested upon their merit?
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu constantly sought ways to cleave to the *Shechinah* and speak with Hashem. Conversely, Bilaam always sought ways to flee the *Shechinah*. He was interested only in knowing the moment of Hashem's wrath, in order to exploit it for his devilish designs.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu was endowed with the quality of gratitude. He displayed gratitude even to inanimate objects, such as the water and the earth. Therefore, he always tried to come closer to Hashem. This *middah* of gratitude is the basis for clinging to Hashem. When a person

accustoms himself to thank others for their kindnesses toward him, he becomes attuned to the multitude acts of kindness which Hashem does for him all the time. He will naturally come to thank Him for it all.

- ◆ Deficiency in the quality of gratitude obscured Bilaam's vision, to the degree that he acted contrary to his nation's best interests. He sought to curse Bnei Yisrael, upon whom the entire world stands. He was so full of himself that he had no room to admit to the truth.
- ◆ Why was Bilaam blamed for failing to display gratitude? He was so full of negative character traits; was it a surprise that he lacked this attribute? Even negative character traits can be channeled in positive streams, bringing a person to life-giving waters. David is a prime example of just such a person. He channeled the tendency to shed blood in order to fight Hashem's wars and in offering sacrifices. Similarly, Yitzchak asked Eisav to use this trait to slaughter for him an animal according to halachah. Bilaam the arrogant could very well have pulled together his pride and directed it in ways of Avodat Hashem, in the manner of "His heart was elevated in the ways of Hashem."



The Evil Plots of Our Enemies

“So now – please come and curse this people for me, for it is too powerful for me; perhaps I will be able to strike it and drive it away from the land. For I know that whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you curse is accursed”

(Bamidbar 22:6)

Balak sent messengers to Bilaam Harasha to ask him to curse Am Yisrael. He hoped that this curse would prevent Am Yisrael from spreading over the entire land. Bilaam wanted to acquiesce to Balak’s request, but Hashem appeared to him that night and warned him to keep away from such notions. “You shall not go with them! You shall not curse the people, for it is blessed!” (*Bamidbar 22:12*). But after much pleading, Bilaam yielded to Balak.

This subject raises many questions. Hashem told Bilaam that his curses would not cause damage to Bnei Yisrael, for they were a blessed nation. Bilaam did not even need this message, for as the greatest prophet among the nations, he was certainly aware of Hashem’s promise to Avraham (*Bereishit 12:3*), “I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse.” How did he have the audacity to agree to curse them, when he knew full well that all his curses were liable to tumble upon his own head? Wasn’t he afraid for his life? Additionally, Bilaam knew that as Hashem’s Chosen People, Am Yisrael enjoyed a special type of supervision. Only Hashem Himself could curse them. Why did Bilaam hide from the blatant reality, seeking ways and means of cursing the Jewish nation?

Bilaam nursed such enmity toward our nation that it distorted his thinking. He was ready to suffer the consequences, as long as he had

the chance to curse Bnei Yisrael. Deep in his heart, he knew that his curses would never take effect. Nevertheless, he wished to curse them and have his words inscribed in the Torah forever. Hashem knew what motives lurked behind his deeds. Although his curses would never actualize, Hashem refused to have them recorded for posterity in the Torah. Hashem therefore transformed Bilaam's curses into blessings.

There is a message here for all the nations of the world. They should take heed to beware of cursing Bnei Yisrael. Instead of succeeding in their scheme, they will find themselves blessing instead of cursing. The fact that Hashem converted Bilaam's curse into a blessing teaches us the tremendous power of words which are uttered and recorded. Although Bilaam's curses never took effect, their recording in the Torah could have caused us untold damage. In Hashem's unbounded love for His people, He wished to avoid this, as well.

A man once approached me and told me that his father had sent him a most scathing letter, which even contained curses. I told him it would be best for him to tear the letter to shreds and then burn the papers in the fire. There should be no remnant whatsoever of his father's strong words. Even if they wouldn't actualize, it wasn't appropriate that his father's words of blasphemy remain intact.

The sefarim (see *Shabbat* 153a) teach that after a person passes on, Hashem sends angels to hear what people say about the deceased. Hashem knows everything. He certainly knows what people think about this man. What is the purpose of sending angels to hear this?

Although Hashem knows the complete truth, He seeks witnesses in order to present the man's case before the Heavenly Court. These witnesses testify to that which He knows. Similarly, a Beit Din in this

world needs witnesses in order to condemn a person. Even if everyone knows he has sinned, without witnesses, he cannot be brought to justice. For this reason, Hashem sends His angels to this world. They collect evidence from the acquaintances of the deceased, and in this manner they can bear testimony to his righteousness or, *chalilah*, his wickedness.

Although Bilaam knew that he could never curse our nation, he wanted to leave a lasting impression in the Torah, eternalizing his words. Even though he would not have cursed them, he would have damaged their good name. Had this been the case, we would have suffered indescribably merely by the fact that his words were recorded for posterity. Bilaam's deviousness was very deep.

Bilaam ended up blessing the nation, loud and clear. Why didn't he shamefacedly bless them softly? Hashem did not demand of him to make a show of his blessings.

This, too, indicates Bilaam's tremendous hatred toward Bnei Yisrael. He broadcasted his blessing so that the nations of the world would hear it and be filled with jealousy toward Bnei Yisrael. This would incite them to curse Bnei Yisrael. He himself did not succeed in cursing them; maybe the nations of the world would have better luck.

Bnei Yisrael must know that as long as Yaakov's voice resounds in the Batei Midrashot, the hands of Eisav are incapable of harming them (*Bereishit Rabbah* 65:20). As the parashah unfolds, Bilaam realized that Hashem would not allow him to curse Bnei Yisrael. He therefore tried another ploy. He brainstormed as to how to cause them to sin. Finally, he told Balak, "Their G-d abhors immorality. If you wish to harm them, send out your daughters to cause them to sin. The Attribute of Justice will be aroused against them and harm them immeasurably" (*Sanhedrin* 106a).

The Torah (*Bamidbar* 25:1) tells us, “Israel settled in Shittim, and the people began to act promiscuously with the daughters of Moav. They invited the people to the feasts of their gods; the people ate and prostrated themselves to their gods.” Our Sages (*Sanhedrin* 106a) explain that when Am Yisrael encamped in Shittim, they heard the daughters of Moav call out to them to purchase *tallitot* and threads of wool. But it was all a deception. While the nation bought these items, the women seduced them to sin. Bnei Yisrael had never conferred with Moshe before going to make these purchases at the tents of the daughters of Moav. They self-confidently assumed that they could trust themselves not to look at forbidden sights.

How great is the power of the Satan! At first, these women would speak about business. Gradually, they alluded to matters of lust and suggested sinning together. First, though, these women insisted that Bnei Yisrael pay homage to their gods, by means of a most despicable act (see *Sanhedrin* 64a). The men were already caught in their web and could not refuse them, as the Mishnah states (*Avot* 4:2), “One sin leads to another.”

Balak wanted, more than anything, to cause Bnei Yisrael to sin. What did he do? He sent his own daughter to incite the men. When the other women would see her going, they would go along. This is similar to Pharaoh’s actions (*Sotah* 11a). His objective was to enslave Bnei Yisrael. What did he do? He left the royal palace to join them in their labor, carrying bricks on his back. When the nation saw how he participated in the labor, they joined him. This was how the decree of slavery began, first with sweet talk, and only afterward, with hardheartedness.

The Generation of Wisdom were exalted tzaddikim, the generation which saw the *Shechinah*. What possessed them to sin so disgracefully, in this most abominable way? The words “Israel settled in Shittim” will enlighten us. Chazal (see *Sanhedrin* 106a)

explain that the term “settled” refers to a laxity in Torah study. Once Bnei Yisrael slackened in Torah study, not being meticulous to observe it perfectly, their *Yetzer Hara* took hold of them, drawing them into sin with cunning and slyness, until they fell to the depths of depravity.

The Torah (*Bamidbar* 25:14) recounts that even Zimri ben Salu, the *Nasi* of Shevet Shimon, sinned with Kuzbi bat Tzur, daughter of the king of Midian. He was so entangled in the web of sin that he did not hesitate to ask Moshe if this act was permitted. Moshe replied that it was forbidden. “And who permitted you to take Tziporah, the daughter of Yitro (a non-Jew at the time)?” (*Sanhedrin* 82a). Moshe fell silent and did not have the strength to bring him to justice. Pinchas, taking up for Hashem’s honor, took a spear and, in one swift move, killed Zimri and the Midianite woman.

Of course, Moshe married Tziporah in a permitted fashion. Their marriage was before *Matan Torah*, and she had abandoned all forms of idolatry beforehand (*Shemot Rabbah* 1:32). Later, she converted according to Jewish law, accepting upon herself all of the 613 mitzvot. In contrast, Zimri was sunk in the morass of sin, his logic distorted by lustful temptation. He had no compunctions about accosting Moshe, speaking most brazenly against him.

When Bnei Yisrael weaken in Torah study, they quickly find themselves mired in sin. When Bnei Yisrael fall from their elevated level, it is a much sharper fall than that of the nations who fall (see *Megillah* 16a). The direct outcome of “Israel settled in Shittim,” i.e., became lax in Torah study, is that “the people began to act promiscuously.” Regarding Am Yisrael, there is no such thing as just sitting idly. When they are not making strides in their Avodat Hashem, they are fast slipping downward. Often, there are those who look like they are delving in Torah, but, in truth, their hearts are elsewhere.

One Shabbat, I noticed a man praying in the Beit Hakeneset. But instead of focusing on the siddur, he kept stealing glances at something in his pocket. I called him over and asked what was so interesting in his pocket. He turned red and attempted to avoid answering. But after I pressed him, he finally showed me a picture he had in his pocket, a picture of a woman. See how strong is the *Yetzer Hara!* A person goes to pray, but cannot even muster the necessary concentration to stand before his Creator in fear and submission. The *Yetzer Hara* wouldn't tell a person not to attend prayers at all. Instead, he distracts him and disturbs his prayers.

Bnei Yisrael did not visit the daughters of Moav on a whim. They initially went in order to buy fabric. But because they did not ask Moshe for permission, they were swept into the abominable sins of immorality and idolatry.

The word שיטים (Shittim) has the same root as the word שוטה (fool) (see *Sanhedrin* 106a). This teaches us that sitting idly eventually brings a person to foolishness. He has no compunctions about sinning most severely. He is not even ashamed to debase himself before the idol of Ba'al Peor, in its degrading form of worship.

The best way to combat the powers of impurity, as represented by Balak ben Tzipor and Bilaam Harasha, is only by means of the Torah.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ How did Bilaam have the boldness to curse our nation, when he knew his curses would amount to nothing? Moreover, he knew he would likely be harmed by blaspheming Bnei Yisrael, as Hashem had promised Avraham that those who curse his nation are cursed.
- ◆ Bilaam's animosity toward our nation was so great that he was ready to be harmed as long as he could curse them. He felt that even if his curse

would never materialize, it would at least be recorded in the Torah for posterity. But Hashem, in His great love for us, would not allow any such thing. He transformed the curses into blessings. How great is the written word, for better or for worse!

- ◆ Bilaam proclaimed his blessings for the entire world to hear. Why didn't he whisper them, since they were said against his wishes? From here we see the extent of his wickedness. He wanted to arouse the animosity of the nations against Am Yisrael. In their hatred, they would come to curse Am Yisrael.
- ◆ When the voice of Yaakov is heard, the hands of Eisav are powerless. When Bnei Yisrael settled in Shittim, they had become lax in Torah study. Then the hands of Eisav gained strength, causing Bnei Yisrael to sin with the daughters of Moav. Bnei Yisrael start off on a higher level than the gentiles. Therefore, when they descend in spirituality, they fall even lower than them.
- ◆ The word שיטים (Shittim) has the same root as the word שוטה (fool). Sitting idly from Torah study brings a person to act foolishly, as we find here, where Bnei Yisrael sinned most degradingly before the *avodah zarah*, Ba'al Peor.



The Supremacy of Man over Beast

“The donkey saw the angel of Hashem standing on the road with his sword drawn in his hand, so the donkey turned away from the road and went into the field; then Bilaam struck the donkey to turn it back onto the road”

(Bamidbar 22:23)

Bilaam’s donkey saw what was hidden from Bilaam himself. It saw Hashem’s angel, blocking its way, holding a sharp sword. It swerved to the side, in order to continue going. Bilaam, who was not aware of the drama unfolding before him, struck his animal time after time, but it continued along the side of the road. Finally, Hashem opened its mouth. It rebuked Bilaam, demanding, “What did I do to you that you hit me three times?” It then explained to Bilaam that it was faced with an angel of Hashem and therefore could not continue going straight. The parashah (ibid. 22:31) continues, “Then He uncovered Bilaam’s eyes and he saw the angel of Hashem standing on the road.”

Bilaam’s donkey was superior to him. It had seen an angel, which was concealed from Bilaam’s vision. Bilaam was a prophet. How could he not see what his donkey saw? Bilaam chose the path of defilement and wickedness and never considered changing his ways. His heart was set on meeting with Balak to come up with a plan for the Final Solution. Had Bilaam utilized his G-d-given powers to improve his ways, he would have merited seeing the angel from the very beginning. But he chose to cling to evil and iniquity. Hashem degraded him, therefore, by allowing his donkey to speak brazenly, rebuking him for his behavior.

Chazal (*Sanhedrin* 38a) ask a compelling question. If man is the crown of Creation, why were the animals created before him? Wouldn't man's precedence in Creation prove his superiority? Chazal explain that Hashem arranged things in this order to teach us the following. When a person goes in Hashem's ways, clinging to His Torah and observing His mitzvot, he is the crown of Creation and rules over all. He is superior to the animals, which do not have wisdom or intelligence. Conversely, if, *chalilah*, a person perverts his ways and submits to his lusts, there is no intrinsic difference between him and the animals. In truth, they are greater than he, for they preceded him in Creation.

A person is obligated to contemplate his ways, ensuring to preserve the Divine image within himself, which distinguishes him from the animal kingdom. When a person damages his spiritual self, by pursuing materialism and physical pleasures, he fortifies the animal instincts within him. Regarding him, Kohelet (3:19) states, "Man has no superiority over beast." In such a case, the person has no advantage over the animal. On the contrary, the animals are greater, for they were created first.

After WWII, my holy grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy" a, told my father, zy" a, not to leave his house until he was ready to ascend to the Holy Land. Father, to whom his father's words were holy, indeed remained in his home for the duration of forty years. He did not see the light of day during that entire time. After the first thirty years, Father had to move to a new home. His acquaintances, aware of his stringency in guarding his eyes, made a human wall around him. His eyes were covered with a blanket until he arrived at his new home in Casablanca. There he remained for ten years, until he made aliyah to the Holy Land. After so many years of not seeing the sunlight, his eyes became weak, and he had to fly to England in order to heal them.

When we were in England, Father asked me to go with him to the zoo. When we arrived there, Father first asked to see the lion, but it was asleep just then. Father looked at it with his deep gaze, and began speaking to it, “Know that you have a merit in being the king of the animal kingdom. This attests to your greatness, just as a human king is esteemed by all.” The lion seemed to understand Father’s words, for it began to stir. Then Father cried out, “How abundant are Your works, Hashem!” Father stood for a full half-hour, riveted to the lion’s cage, thanking and praising the Creator for such an awe-inspiring creature.

When we visit the zoo, do we look for Hashem’s wonders and miracles? Do we call out, from the depths of our hearts, “How abundant are Your works, Hashem!”? Or do we focus on the peripheral instead of the primary? When a person acts like an animal, he loses the sensitivity to differentiate between himself and the animals. He is not aroused to sing Hashem’s praises, for he hardly sees the wonder in His works.

Bilaam proclaimed (*Bamidbar* 23:10), “May my soul die the death of the upright, and may my end be like his!” He lived his life in a most beastly fashion, yet wished to die like Bnei Yisrael, the noblest of people. He failed to realize that in order to die honorably, one is required to live in that manner. One who falls short in justifying his advantage over the animals, by cleaving to his animalistic tendencies and developing them, will eventually reach the level of overkill. His death will reflect his life. He will die most ignobly, like an animal whose carcass is left by the wayside, with no one bothering to give it proper burial.

It behooves a person to investigate how he can, indeed, merit rising above the animalistic nature within him. His job is to erect clearly-defined boundaries. These will help him put into perspective what is important and what is minor. He will have the clarity

necessary to recognize what is permitted and worthy, and what warrants distance and dissociation. This demands a lot of hard work, for a person is naturally pulled toward the physical. Our job in this world is to elevate our spiritual selves above our physicality. Moreover, we must take our physical aspects and transform them into sparks of spirituality. This is what is meant by the command (*Yevamot* 20a), “Sanctify yourself by that which is permitted to you.” With every physical act we do, we have the ability to sanctify Hashem’s Name.

One Shabbat morning, I was brought a box of tobacco. A small sniff induced the urge to sneeze. Then and there, I decided to overcome the urge and to desist from smelling any more tobacco until after the *shmur* and the prayers. When I returned to the tobacco box afterward, I was surprised to find the box empty. I looked all around, but did not find any tobacco spilled out anywhere. This incident shook me up. I realized that everything is in Hashem’s hands. If He so desires, He blesses man’s endeavors, and if He desires otherwise, He removes success from them. Hashem removed the tobacco from me to teach me that I must erect boundaries. I must be self-disciplined enough to understand when it is the right time to smell tobacco and when it is irreverent to do so. This is nothing to sneeze at!

A dog is brazen by nature (*Yeshayahu* 56:11). It is not afraid of people. Nevertheless, it stands before Hashem, praising Him with the words (*Tehillim* 95:6, as quoted in *Perek Shirah*), “Come! Let us prostrate ourselves and bow, let us kneel before Hashem.” Each animal and bird prays to Hashem daily, singing to Him its individual song. Although a dog is naturally brazen, when the time comes for it to praise Hashem, it overcomes its natural tendencies and with utmost subservience calls out, “Come! Let us prostrate ourselves

and bow, let us kneel before Hashem.” How can the dog display such contradictory characteristics?

The secret behind the dog’s dual personality, if you will, is that it distinguishes when to employ one trait and when to employ another. With its finely-tuned sensors, it can harness its bold nature. As it stands before Hashem in song, it is aware that now is the time to act in a more measured manner. By erecting limitations around its inclinations, it is capable of subduing its bold disposition, acting diametrically opposed to its nature as it stands in supplication before its Maker.

A person contains characteristics of the animal kingdom. Why did Hashem create him this way? It is because we must sometimes muster boldness or other traits that animals possess to use in our Avodat Hashem, as the Mishnah in Avot (5:20) states, “Be bold as a leopard... and strong as a lion to carry out the will of your Father in Heaven.” The Shulchan Aruch instructs a person to “strengthen himself like a lion to do Avodat Hashem.” One can employ the characteristics of animals to properly serve Hashem. For example, boldness can be borrowed from the leopard to stand firm in the face of scoffers. But one must always define when and where each trait applies. At times, he must stand staunchly and at other times, he must bow submissively, in awe and respect of Hashem.

The bottom line is boundaries. A person should always think, “What is demanded of me now? What will bring Hashem the most pleasure? Should I employ boldness like the dog, or humbleness?” When one focuses solely on doing the will of Hashem, he will be guided from on High on the proper path, and he will walk it securely. Many animals and insects demonstrate good character. The cat has innate modesty (*Eirubin* 100b), while the ant is most diligent (*Mishlei* 6:6). We are constantly questioning ourselves, “Which traits should

we adopt, and which should we disregard, in our pursuit of the title *Crown of Creation?*”

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ How could Bilaam’s donkey see something which was kept from him, great prophet that he was? Bilaam never sought ways to improve through his power of prophecy. He preferred to cleave to *tumah* and wickedness. Therefore, his eyesight was limited, and he had to be chastised by his own animal.
- ◆ Chazal ask why the animals were created before man, who is the crown of Creation. It is in order to teach man that if he goes in the ways of the Torah, he is the beauty and purpose of the entire world. But if he corrupts his ways, he is inferior to the animals, which were created before him.
- ◆ Bilaam prayed to die the death of the righteous. But he never bothered to live the life of the righteous. His request was obviously refused. The way to really live is to erect clear boundaries, distinguishing between the primary and the peripheral, distancing oneself from materialism and becoming sanctified by that which is permitted to us.
- ◆ The dog is known for its brazen nature. Nevertheless, when it stands before Hashem in song, it proclaims, “Come! Let us prostrate ourselves and bow, let us kneel before Hashem.” It is capable of understanding that when it stands before Hashem, it must remove the cloak of brashness and become submissive.
- ◆ A person is born with animalistic features. Chazal teach us that we can learn from the characteristics of each animal. One should have the ability to know when to be bold as a leopard or strong as a lion, etc., and when to disregard these traits and simply humble himself to Hashem’s will. When a person adopts the appropriate characteristics, he is eligible for the title *Crown of Creation*.



Bilaam's Apathy

“Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey and it said to Bilaam: What have I done to you that you struck me these three times? Bilaam said to the donkey: Because you mocked me! If only there were a sword in my hand I would now have killed you!”

(Bamidbar 22:28-29)

Bilaam the rasha heard the donkey speaking to him, and he was not shocked in the least. On the contrary, he carried on a conversation with it, as though it was the most usual thing for people and animals to converse. If a person were to encounter a dog that would begin speaking, his heart would certainly skip a beat or two. I read a publication that compares Bilaam's situation to that of a person driving a car. He wants to turn the wheel right, and instead, the wheel begins arguing, stating it would prefer to go left. There is no need to describe this man's incredulity at such an experience.

Similarly, we find that Moshe Rabbeinu had a lengthy debate with the sea. The sea originally refused to split. They had a lively discussion (*Shemot Rabbah* 21:6). Moshe didn't seem fazed by this incident. It seems that Moshe was accustomed to miracles. But Bilaam was not used to such occurrences. Shouldn't he have gone into a frenzy upon hearing his beast speak? Why wasn't he daunted in the least?

My father, zy" a, told me that my esteemed grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy" a, was frequently met with miracles. A *hilula* ceremony was once prepared in honor of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. One of the participants asked for arrack to be brought to the table,

but was told that it had been finished. My grandfather asked for a jug of plain water. He proclaimed that the One Who commanded arrack to make its imbibers merry, should command the water to do the same. He passed around this jug of water, and lo and behold! Everyone drank and said that it tasted just like arrack. My father added that no one was especially surprised at this overt miracle. My grandfather was well-known for effecting miracles. This was just one of many. The pleasure increased as the contents of the jug flowed like water...

One of my father's adherents, Rabbi David Mizrachi, may he live long, suffered a terrible burn. When he was but eight years old, a kettle full of boiling water spilled on him. The doctors diagnosed him with third-degree burns. Then he was brought before my father, zy"ra, who was in the midst of preparing hot water in honor of Shabbat. This was his weekly practice. My father took some of the hot water, and ordered the parents to pour it over the boy's wounds. His parents became alarmed, but complied. And then a miracle occurred. All the boy's burns healed completely, disappearing as fast as they had come. The onlookers were not surprised at this miracle either, for Father was also acquainted with miracles, as they were part of his daily routine.

But Bilaam was not accustomed to experience overt miracles. How did he not panic when his donkey opened its mouth? Only a person who is connected to the truth and lives attached to Hashem can live a life of wonder. But one who lives lewdly will regard everything as happenstance, and never be awed by what he observes. Bilaam always lived indifferent to Hashem's existence. Therefore, he did not even notice anything unusual about the donkey opening its mouth to speak. He did not see it as an overt miracle, a message from Hashem, and was therefore nonchalant about the whole episode.

There are those who become excited in the Beit Hamidrash, learning and innovating insights with enthusiasm and raised voices. Then they leave the Study Hall and forget everything they learned. They even transgress many prohibitions. How can we understand this? It is because their eagerness and excitement are merely a charade. Hashem, Who knows the inner workings of man, knows that deep inside rests coldness and indifference. Since their zest and zeal are superficial, they quickly fade.

Apathy and indolence in Avodat Hashem are the traits of Bilaam Harasha. They are the cause of a person's downward spiritual spiral. Even *bonei Torah* are sometimes blameworthy of these traits. When a person arises in the morning and finds all of his body parts in working order, it is nothing short of a miracle. But a person is accustomed to this daily wonder, and does not wonder about it at all. I know someone who went to sleep as usual, but never woke up. We should never take for granted the fact that we wake up in the morning, hale and hearty. We should become excited over it, each day anew. And we should thank Hashem for His kindnesses with us each day, so that we do not find ourselves walking in the ways of Bilaam Harasha.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Bilaam was not surprised in the least when his donkey began speaking to him. How could he maintain his equanimity at such an occurrence?
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu, *l'havdil*, conducted a conversation with the sea when it refused to split. Moshe was not surprised by the sea speaking; he was used to miracles. Bilaam, on the other hand, was not accustomed to animals speaking with him. How, then, was he not shocked when this occurred?
- ◆ Only a person who lives with the constant awareness that there is a Creator can be enthusiastic over miracles, regardless of their frequency.

But one who does not believe does not have the necessary tools to take note of even a miracle as great as a talking donkey.

- ◆ There are many who quickly forget what they learned even though they had been very involved in it. This is because although they seemed to be engrossed in their study, they harbored a tiny portion of Bilaam's apathy. It is the mission of every *ben Torah* to eradicate any form of indifference from his heart.



Blinding Oneself to the Truth

“Bilaam raised his eyes and saw Yisrael dwelling according to the tribes, and the spirit of G-d was upon him. He declaimed his parable and said: The words of Bilaam son of Beor, the words of the man with the open eye”

(Bamidbar 24:2-3)

The Torah (*Devarim* 34:10) states, “Never again has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moshe.” Just as Moshe Rabbeinu was the greatest Jewish prophet, so too, *l’havdil*, was Bilaam the greatest prophet among the gentiles. Although these two personalities were as different as day and night, Chazal teach (*Tanna d’vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 28) that Bilaam merited unusual Divine revelations and was therefore accorded honor as the greatest prophet the nations ever saw.

Bilaam originally intended to join forces with Balak in order to curse Bnei Yisrael. But Hashem caused him to have a change of

heart. Instead of cursing Am Yisrael, he unwittingly blessed them, according to Hashem's will.

How could it be that Bilaam the prophet, who was very well aware of Hashem's existence, and recognized His great might, did not employ his powers in order to become closer to Him? Instead, he directed his energies into matters of sorcery and impurity. We would have expected Bilaam, of all people, to return to Hashem and cleave to *kedushah*. But, contrary to sound logic, and in spite of the fact that Hashem's Presence was blatantly clear, he chose to ignore it and deny it.

The sefer *Mesillat Yesharim* (2) describes two types of blind men. One is physically blind. He is a victim of circumstance, and try as he might to see with his eyes, he cannot. There is another type of blind person. This man can see very well, but willingly chooses not to see. He denies the obvious, and acts in direct opposition to it. This was the case with Bilaam Harasha. He had only one seeing eye, but he deliberately blurred his vision by denying the clear truth which stood before him. And aside from the physical blindness which he suffered from his other eye, he suffered spiritual blindness. He obscured his sight, to the extent that he did not see even that which was apparent to all.

Bilaam acted in a most irrational manner. He blinded his vision to such a degree that he became spiritually sightless. Instead of admitting to Hashem's Presence, he espoused the powers of *tumah*. Had Bilaam felt true love for Hashem, he would have naturally been drawn toward Him. But this was far from the case. He preferred to block his vision, obviating the need to recognize Hashem, and clung tenaciously to *tumah*.

What is the litmus test for one's *ahavat Hashem*? The measure of effort he invests in his Avodat Hashem. When something is very

dear and precious to a person, he will invest all his energies into it. Gedolei Yisrael dedicate all their strengths and resources for Hashem's sake, for love of Hashem fill their hearts completely. But Bilaam was not interested in investing anything for His honor. For that reason, love of Hashem never entered his heart. This chasm caused him to swerve from the path of propriety, and directed him to the trail of *tumah* and falsehood.

In Sefer *Yehoshua* (1:8) we read, "You should contemplate it (the Torah) day and night." Diligence and effort in Torah study bring a person closer to his Creator and give him a strong love for Him. Conversely, when a person ceases exerting himself in Torah and does not seek ways to sacrifice himself for Hashem's sake, he is liable, *chalilah*, to find himself in spiritual danger, with no proper protection. This is the meaning of the warning (*Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim* 873), "If you forsake Me but one day, I will forsake you for two." If one relaxes in Avodat Hashem for even one day, it will result in serious consequences.

On one of my trips to *chutz la'aretz*, I was traveling together with my daughter, may she live long. Our interest was piqued by the following scenario. A fellow traveler was engrossed in a book the entire length of the fourteen-hour journey! She didn't even take a break to sleep when the other passengers did. When the plane landed and everyone stood up, I saw her put down her book with satisfaction, pleased that she had managed to finish it. Her smile made me think she must have read some very important work. Otherwise, why was she so dedicated to complete it? To my surprise, as she got off the plane, she left her book behind. When I told her that she had dropped her book, she offhandedly waved me off, giving me a perfunctory thank you.

I was quite taken aback by her reaction. If her book was so insignificant that she could not be bothered to bring it with her, why

had she devoted so many long hours to reading it, at the expense of precious hours of sleep? Realizing that every event in this world has a lesson to teach us, I didn't allow myself to forget this incident. After mulling it over, I came to the following conclusion: When a person devotes all his energies into the frivolities of this world, he is under the impression that he is investing in something of value. But then the story comes to an end. The pleasure has passed, and a person is left with nothing but the disappointment of having wasted so much time.

The only worthwhile investment is in Hashem's Torah. When a person dedicates himself to idleness and fleeting pleasures, it is only because he has blinded himself to the truth. He is behaving like Bilaam, who ignored the truth and invested his energies into matters of impurity and nothingness.

A childless couple once approached me. They asked that I bless them with children. After I blessed them warmly, they turned to leave. Just as they were about to close the door behind them, they mentioned that they had brought along another couple, who also sought a blessing for children. This second couple were not believers, but were convinced by their friends to come. If my blessing wouldn't help, it certainly wouldn't hurt, they figured. They had nothing to lose. I blessed this couple, as well.

Approximately one year later, the first couple informed me that they merited having a child. A short while later, the second couple told me that they, too, were expecting a baby. I asked this husband if he donned tefillin. He replied that although he is a Jew, he does not believe in Hashem. Why then, I asked, did he come to me for a *berachah*? He answered that he had originally come at the request of his friend, and he was now coming to thank me. I told him that he did not have me to thank, but Hashem Alone, Who holds the key to life. Hashem was the One Who granted me the power to bless him

with salvation. I added that the appropriate way to thank Him would be to accept upon himself the mitzvah of tefillin, which would bring him to recognize Hashem. He acquiesced, agreeing to lay tefillin every day from then on.

See the vast disparity between this secular Jew and Bilaam. Bilaam acknowledged Hashem and even spoke with Him. Nevertheless, he chose to deny His existence and remained wicked. In contrast, this Jew, who originally had no association with Hashem, accepted upon himself the mitzvah of tefillin, at great personal sacrifice, the moment he heard about Him.

As stated above, there are two types of vision. There is physical sight, and there is spiritual sight. When a person blinds himself to the blatant truth, he blinds his spiritual sight. But when a person shields his eyes from forbidden “sites,” he raises the level of his vision, sanctifying it. His eyes become shades, shielding him from physical and spiritual harm.

Once, decades ago, Father, zy”a, met his friend, Mr. Cohen, and together, they enjoyed a trip down memory lane. I was a young man of about twenty-six at the time. When I saw that this conversation would last a while, I stepped outside for a short walk. As I left, I noticed Mr. Cohen remove a bottle from his bag, and offer my father a “*L’chaim*.” I returned four hours later. The bottle was still closed, and they invited me to join them in their toast. As I took the bottle to open it, imagine my chagrin at finding the entire bottom covered with tiny ants! When I showed it to the men, they effusively thanked Hashem for sparing them from this obstacle. Their eyesight was too weak for them to have noticed the ants on their own. I asked why they had abstained from drinking from the bottle the whole time that I was out. Father answered that they had wanted to include me. I have no doubt that Hashem was saving my father from sinning in the merit of his constantly protecting his eyes from negative sights.

In Summary

- ◆ How could Bilaam, giant of the gentile prophets, refuse to seek *kedushah* and *taharah*, and cling to *tumah* instead? Moreover, he wished to curse Bnei Yisrael, the Chosen People.
- ◆ The sefer *Mesillat Yesharim* states that besides for those stricken by physical blindness, there are people who willingly blind their spiritual eyesight. Bilaam is a prime example of just such a person. He blurred his vision to Hashem's existence. Had Bilaam truly loved Hashem, he would have chosen to cling to Him. But this was not the case, and therefore, he denied Hashem completely.
- ◆ The amount of love someone has for an item is measured by how much exertion he invests into it. Through delving into the Torah day and night, a person will come to connect to it with bonds of love.
- ◆ When a person shields his eyesight from forbidden "sites," he merits the great light of seeing Hashem's Presence and is thereby protected from all sin.



The Essence of Bilaam's Blessing

"Bilaam raised his eyes and saw Yisrael dwelling according to its tribes, and the spirit of G-d was upon him. He declaimed his parable and said... How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Israel"

(Bamidbar 24:2-5)

Hashem transformed Bilaam's intended words of blasphemy into blessing. This blessing has become the symbol of the Jewish

nation. Every morning, we open our prayers with this pasuk. Many Batei Kenesiot have this verse engraved above the Aron Hakodesh. There are congregations in France which greet a new *chatan* and *kallah* with these words. Why was this pasuk, from the mouth of Bilaam the rasha, chosen from among all other descriptive phrases to represent the essence of the Jewish nation, demonstrating our singularity?

Bilaam was no lover of our nation. His words emerged from the Divine spirit which rested upon him and forced him to say these things. Bilaam would never have spoken in this manner of his own accord. Hashem transformed his intentions to positive ones. When he ultimately blessed the nation, it was with sincere admiration.

Bilaam observed the high level of modesty of our people. He saw Yisrael “dwelling according to its tribes.” Rashi expounds that he saw that each tribe dwelled separately from the others; they did not intermingle. He also saw that their entrances were not aligned opposite each other so that one should not peer into the tent of his friend. Upon observing this heightened level of *tzeniut*, Bilaam converted his blasphemy into blessing.

“Seeing is believing,” they say. Bilaam had previously heard about this extraordinary nation, singled out from among all the nations to receive the Torah at Har Sinai. But now he perceived it with his own (one) eye. He noticed how the men sat in the Study Halls and were engrossed in Torah study, while the righteous women educated their children to a life of Torah and *yirat Shamayim*. Each tribe and each family maintained its separateness from the others. Above all, marital harmony was most pronounced. Bilaam was so impressed that the blessing of *Mah Tov* simply spilled from his mouth (see Rashi, *ibid.*). These words were the undiluted truth. They came from a place of purity and therefore merited to become the emblem of our nation, quoted in various settings.

The following story helps us understand the advantage of seeing over hearing. A Jew was in need of plastic surgery in order to implant missing fingers. I asked a philanthropist in Paris if he would fund the operation. He agreed and handed me an envelope full of money. I discovered that only half the cost was covered by his donation. I returned the envelope to the man, stating I preferred he hand it to the sick man himself. He tried to evade doing this, but I prevailed upon him until he acquiesced. The ill man stuck out his hand, with some fingers missing, to take the envelope. The philanthropist became nauseous at this sight, and offered to pay the entire sum. Hearing news about something is effective, but cannot be compared to seeing it firsthand.

When Bilaam saw the Torah study and the caliber of *tzeniut* of our nation, he became enthusiastic. The words of *Mah Tov* flowed forth, of their own accord. These words, said sincerely, as opposed to the rest of his blessing, which was said by coercion, have become our national insignia. His words obligated the nations of the world to take note, seeing for themselves how Am Yisrael live with purity and sanctity, never seeking to harm others, as the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 23:9) states, “It is a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations.”

Bilaam perceived the *Shechinah* among Bnei Yisrael. Their entire demeanor bespoke respect and good character. The Torah, therefore, was able to endure within them, as our Sages (*Tanna d'vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 1) teach, “Good character precedes Torah.” Furthermore, the women were extremely modest and punctilious with their children’s upbringing.

I visited the city Lyon in France and shuddered at the sight that met my eyes. Within a few short years, the face of the city has changed unrecognizably. The new generation is destitute of all things spiritual. I pondered the matter and came to the realization

that the youth are not accustomed to learning a full day. When the time comes for them to enter yeshiva and delve in Torah full-time, they become burnt-out very quickly. They are simply unaccustomed to concentrating for so many hours at a time. The younger the child, the more pliable he is. We can easily make the Torah sweet to him. But nowadays, the children learn for only half a day. In the afternoons, they throw off the burden of Torah and are left to wild abandon. For this reason, many yeshivot are not full. Many of our youth become broken after a few days in yeshiva, for they are not used to the heavy schedule.

Bilaam recognized the power of Torah study, which models a person into a model Jew. The resting of the *Shechinah* among the nation came as a direct result of the men's Torah study and the women's *tzeniut*. This caused him to pour forth such noble words. Unfortunately, when *tzeniut* is lacking, the *Shechinah* departs. I was once invited to attend a wedding. For a full month beforehand, the host pressured me into participating. When I arrived, I found the host's wife dressed most deplorably. I immediately turned on my heel and left. It was later discovered that this woman abandoned all vestiges of Judaism. Where there is no modesty, the *Shechinah* cannot rest, for it has nothing upon which to rest.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ We recite Bilaam's blessing *Mah Tov* every morning, and some proclaim it before a *chatan* and *kallah*. What is unique about it?
- ◆ Bilaam was forced into blessing the nation. Hashem converted all of his intended curses into blessing. Bilaam proclaimed this blessing of his own volition, with utmost sincerity, when he noticed our nation's outstanding *tzeniut*. Therefore, this blessing has a special advantage over all others.
- ◆ "Seeing is believing." Hearing is effective, but seeing is far superior. Bilaam had already heard about the great virtues of our nation. He had

heard about *Yetziat Mitzrayim* and all of the accompanying miracles. But when he saw how Bnei Yisrael lived, according to their tribes and families, he was most impressed. He blessed them from the bottom of his heart. Therefore, this blessing is unique.



The Man with the Missing Eye

“How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Israel”

(Bamidbar 24:5)

Bilaam recognized the *kedushah* of the Jewish nation and praised them for it, yet, at the same time, he sought to curse them and annihilate them. Furthermore, he knew very well that the secret of the world’s survival rests upon the Jewish nation. If they would be destroyed, the entire world would collapse. He knew that the existence of everything, including himself, depended upon the Torah of this nation. He was well-aware of the greatness of Bnei Yisrael, proof being that he proclaimed the blessing of *Mah Tov* with a full heart. How could he be so self-contradictory as to praise them on the one hand, yet, on the other hand, curse them at the price of bringing about his own downfall?

Bilaam was a “man with one eye.” All his life, he blinded himself to the truth. Hashem wanted him to confront the unvarnished truth at least once in his life. Therefore, He removed his free choice from him and forced him to face the truth. This prompted him to proclaim, “How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling

places, O Israel.” This maxim rings with the truth, thus we grant it a place of prominence in our lives.

Chazal (*Makkot* 10b) tell us, “Man is led in the way he wishes to go.” Whichever path a person chooses to take, for better or for worse, is the path he is led on by Hashem. This is the meaning of the Mishnah (*Avot* 4:2), “One mitzvah leads to another and one aveirah leads to another.” When a person chooses to do a mitzvah, he is drawn to do another mitzvah immediately afterward. In this manner, he walks on the proper path. Conversely, if a person chooses to sin, he is led, as a direct consequence, to do another sin, continuing on the road he chose for himself.

This is the general rule of the world. But sometimes, Hashem sees a person so mired in the muck of depravity and defilement that his eyes are obscured from all things honest. Hashem removes the screen for a brief moment by removing his free choice, thereby forcing him to go on the proper path. After having sighted the truth, fleeting as the moment was, the person has the wherewithal to raise himself from the mud and brush himself off of the dust, once again climbing the ladder that reaches His place.

When he proclaimed the blessing of *Mah Tov*, Bilaam was deprived of his free choice. He would never have said such things in his natural state. Because the truth was placed for an instant before him, he was capable of praising Bnei Yisrael in such an exalted manner.

The Ben Ish Chai (*Balak, Shanah Rishonah*) adds an insight. He states that the word *מה* (how) is numerically equivalent, adding one for the word itself, to the word *מאה* (100). Bilaam hinted to the one hundred *berachot* which every Jew is required to say each day. Why are we obligated to say one hundred *berachot* a day? The world is comprised of ten *sefirot*, with each *sefirah* composed of ten *sefirot*,

called *igulim*. In total, there are one hundred *sefirot* in the world. The one hundred *berachot*, alluded to in the word *מה*, correspond to the one hundred *sefirot*, by means of which man connects with his Creator. The word *טובו* (goodly) alludes to the Torah, the only true good. Man's connection to Hashem is by means of the Torah, called good.

Bilaam's title will always be "Bilaam Harasha." He succeeded in perceiving the truth. Nonetheless, he decided to remain wicked, inciting Bnei Yisrael to sin with the daughters of Moav. A person who admits to the precepts of truth, yet blatantly transgresses them is held all the more liable. Conversely, a person who unknowingly transgresses a *chok*, albeit not completely innocent, is held less liable. Bilaam's eyes were forced open by Hashem, and he saw the pure truth. He had the opportunity to progress through his own perception, and make a full turnabout. But he preferred to remain where he was, stuck in sin. Therefore, he has the infamous title, "Bilaam Harasha."

Once, when I was accepting audiences in London, a man came and asked for a blessing that his friend should merit having children. When I asked why this friend didn't come himself, he explained that he is a Reform Jew who does not believe in Rabbis' blessings. I blessed the man and asked to be informed when they would have a child. The following year, I found myself once again in London. This time, both men visited me. The Reform man told me that his wife was expecting a child. He came to thank me for my blessing. When I asked whether or not he wears tefillin, he shamefacedly answered in the negative. I explained to him that it wasn't me who brought blessing upon him, but Hashem, in Whose hand is the key of life. He was obligated to thank Him, not me. The man recognized the truth in my words and wholeheartedly accepted upon himself the mitzvah

of tefillin from then on, thanking Hashem for His wondrous kindness with him. (cf. p. 318)

When I noticed how he changed his entire outlook, I cried out, “Who is like Your nation, Yisrael?” See the vast difference between Bilaam, the man with one eye, who willingly blinded himself to the truth, and the nation of Hashem, who, after being guided, walk with pride on the proper path.

Why did Hashem blind Bilaam in one eye? He was trying to tell him that he must exert himself in order to see. This was not only physical sight, but also, and more importantly, spiritual sight. His lacking vision in one eye forced him to put in extra effort to see things. He was therefore capable of discerning the unadulterated truth. But Bilaam did not surmount his deficiency. He made peace with his blindness, and even added a measure of blindness to his seeing eye, obscuring it from the truth.

The letters of the name Bilaam’s (בלעם) can be divided into לע-בם. The letters לע are numerically equivalent to one hundred. These are the one hundred berachot a person is enjoined to recite daily. And the letters בם (in them) allude to the pasuk (*Devarim* 6:7) “ודברת בם – And you shall speak in them” i.e., words of Torah. Had Bilaam merely made the effort, he would have succeeded in seeing the truth, and thereby bring the entire world to teshuvah. Since one hundred *berachot* as well as Torah study are inferred by Bilaam’s name, as soon Hashem opened his eyes, he was immediately made aware of this. Evidence is that he cried out, in all sincerity, “How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov.”

The works of Kabbalah (*Megaleh Amukot, Shemot*) state that Bilaam was the reincarnation of the Snake that caused Adam and Chava to sin. His teshuvah could have effected a rectification of that sin. But because he denied the truth and cheated himself,

like the sly snake, which is more cunning than any other animal, he didn't take the hint, even though it was evident in his very name. He is therefore remembered throughout the generations, as Bilaam Harasha.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ How could Bilaam, who recognized the truth and cried out *Mah Tov*, seek to curse and annihilate Am Yisrael? Bilaam willingly blinded himself to the truth. Hashem pried his eyes open in order that he would be able to see the unvarnished truth. Only after Hashem forced him to see reality for what it was, did he bless our nation. But afterward, he returned to his wayward ways.
- ◆ The Ben Ish Chai states that the word *מה* alludes to the one hundred *berachot* a person is required to recite each day. These refer to the one hundred *sefirot*, by means of which a person connects to his Creator. The word *טובו* refers to Torah, the only true good.
- ◆ Bilaam will always be called Bilaam Harasha. He perceived the truth, but preferred to remain blind, cleaving to iniquity. Hashem made Bilaam blind so that he should exert himself in order to see spiritually. Not only did he fail to do so, but he even blinded his seeing eye.
- ◆ The letters of the name Bilaam's (*בלעם*) can be divided into *לע-בם*. The letters *לע* refer to the one hundred *berachot* that we are enjoined to recite each day, and the letters *בם* refer to *divrei Torah*. Had he only tried, he would have recognized the truth. But he preferred to deny reality. He has gone down for posterity with the disreputable epithet, Bilaam Harasha.



The Paradoxical Life of Bilaam Harasha

“How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Israel”

(Bamidbar 24:5)

Bilaam recognized the truth, loudly proclaiming, “How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Israel.” Chazal (*Bava Batra* 60a) explain that Bilaam praised Bnei Yisrael for their quality of modesty, seen by the fact that the openings of their tents faced away from each other. Bilaam also extolled the nation’s Torah learning with which they occupied themselves in the synagogues and yeshivot (see *Tanna d’vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 21).

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabbah* 29:9) relates that when Hashem gave the Torah to Bnei Yisrael, the entire world was silent. Only Hashem’s voice was heard, from one end of the world to the other. When the nations of the world saw that a great event was about to occur, they approached their prophet, Bilaam, and asked if the world was about to be destroyed. He assured them that there was nothing to fear, for, “Hashem will give might (the Torah) to His people.” When the nations asked if they were obligated to do anything, he replied that *Matan Torah* did not apply to them in any way, but only to Am Yisrael. Therefore, they could continue living as they had before (see *Zevachim* 116a).

On the one hand, we see that Bilaam recognized the power of the Torah learning of Bnei Yisrael, since he praised them for their constant toil in Torah. On the other hand, we find that Bilaam belittled the holy Torah by exempting the nations from taking action regarding it. He did not encourage them to return to Hashem and to connect with the Jewish people. Bilaam’s actions were contrad-

ictory. If he believed that Hashem and His Torah were true, why did he cool down the spiritual awakening of the nations at the time of *Matan Torah*? If he thought there was no truth to Hashem and His Torah, why did he proclaim, “How goodly are your tents...”?

Just as Moshe Rabbeinu was the greatest prophet in Am Yisrael (*Devarim* 34:10), so too, Bilaam was the greatest prophet of the nations (*Tanna d'vei Elyahu Rabbah* 28). Bilaam knew what Hashem would say to him beforehand. In this respect, Bilaam surpassed the level of prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu, who did not know what Hashem would tell him in advance (*Bamidbar* 14:19).

If Bilaam merited Divine revelation, even knowing beforehand what Hashem would say, how could it be that he was not aroused to return to Him, but instead chose the path of impurity and debauchery that is so hated by the Creator (see *Sanhedrin* 106a)? Furthermore, if Bilaam recognized the quality of modesty, proven in his praise of Am Yisrael for their modest behavior, how could he behave in a diametrically opposed manner by advising Balak to cause Bnei Yisrael to sin in acts of immorality? Upon contemplation, we find that Bilaam's entire life was a paradox. Internally, he had an intellectual comprehension of the truth, yet his actions were sinful. He was so immersed in wickedness and impurity that he was called Bilaam Harasha.

The inconsistency of his conduct can be explained by the following. Although he recognized Hashem's existence, he lacked true faith in Him. When can a person attain pure faith in Hashem? Only when he considers himself nothing in comparison with Hashem's greatness. Moshe Rabbeinu clearly understood that he merited prophecy only because of Am Yisrael. If not for them, he would not have had any Divine revelations. Conversely, Bilaam attributed everything to himself. In his haughtiness, he believed that he was worthy of receiving prophecy in his own right. Therefore, he

behaved pompously before Hashem and did not subscribe to faith in Him. The root of pure faith is humility. Only when a person feels truly small in the face of Hashem's grandeur, can faith find a place in his heart. For this reason, Bilaam lived a life of inconsistency. His arrogance made him feel he was all-important, leaving no room for faith in Hashem. He lacked the means by which to nullify himself before Him.

From the time I was a young child, I absorbed the incredibly strong faith of my father, zy"ra, in Hashem. He would always say, "*Be'ezrat Hashem, with the help of the Creator, Yitbarach Shemo...*" Whatever the case, he would cast his eyes heavenward and believe firmly that only Hashem could provide a solution for his problem.

During the first week that my parents came to live in Eretz Yisrael, my mother approached my father and told him there wasn't any milk in the house. My father replied that she shouldn't worry; with Hashem's help, milk would yet come. She added that there wasn't any meat, either. When my father heard this, he told her to prepare a shopping list. My mother obeyed and wrote a long list of everything we needed.

A few minutes later, a neighbor entered. My father handed him the shopping list and told him to go to Shlomo Weitzman and buy the items on the list. The neighbor replied that he neither knew who Shlomo Weitzman was, nor where to buy all these things. Father told him to take the bicycle that was in the entrance of the building and start riding. When the bicycle would stop, he would know that he had reached the right place. This neighbor was unfamiliar with Ashdod and could not speak Hebrew, but out of respect for my father, he agreed to go. He began riding. After a few minutes, he had a flat tire. When he got off to examine it, he was surprised to find a man standing next to him. The man asked if he needed any help. They got to talking, and the man mentioned his

name – Shlomo Weitzman. What a turn of events! This man helped him make his purchases.

I am certain that many readers will raise an eyebrow, stating this story is a figment of my imagination. I bear witness that it is 100% true and clearly points to the blind faith that Father had in the Creator, faith that he made sure to bequeath to his children from the time we were little, in regard to every aspect of life.

Just as a baby relies on his parents to provide his every need, and never worries where his next meal will come from, so should we believe and trust in Hashem, the Master of everything, Who was, is, and always will be.

Bilaam remained a rasha, who denied Hashem's existence, for he lacked true faith in Him. What blocked belief from taking root in his heart? It was his arrogance and conceit. He was simply unable and uninterested in nullifying himself before the greatness of the Creator. The Rebbe of Alexander, zt"l, says that as long as a person considers himself small, he is able to perceive the greatness, the goodness, and the kindness of Hashem. But if he considers himself big, Hashem's greatness is minimized in his eyes, and he cannot see the goodness and mercy He has toward His creatures.

The Midrash (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 3:6) relates that Merodach Baladan sent a letter to King Chizkiyahu. He opened it with words of peace to Chizkiyahu, to his G-d, and to Yerushalayim. As the messenger left, he had a change of heart and quickly called him back. "I erred by asking after Chizkiyahu's welfare before Hashem's." He stood up from his throne and took three steps to correct this oversight. He requested the welfare of Hashem first, then the welfare of Chizkiyahu and Yerushalayim. Hashem told him, "You took three steps in My honor. I will reward you with three kings who will rule over the entire world – Nevuchadnezzar, Evil Merodach, and Belshatzar."

How great is the reward for those who believe in Hashem and attach themselves to the Torah! If Merodach Baladan merited such honor, in spite of his wickedness, all the more so will those who fear Hashem and believe in Him receive indescribable reward. A person should beware of attaching himself to the *middot* of Bilaam. Although he was aware of Hashem's existence, he renounced this recognition because of the unbridled pride that filled his heart. The way to acquire faith is through humility, like Moshe Rabbeinu, who merited being the greatest prophet because he was the most humble man who ever lived.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ How can we understand the self-contradictory life of Bilaam Harasha? On the one hand, he prevented the nations from a spiritual awakening and from doing teshuvah in the wake of *Matan Torah*. But on the other hand, he recognized the qualities of the Torah, as he stated, "How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov." Similarly, Bilaam praised the modest lifestyle of the Jewish people, yet nevertheless sought to make them sin with the women of Moav.
- ◆ Bilaam, the greatest prophet of the nations, recognized the existence of Hashem, but refused to believe in Him because of his unbridled pride. In contrast, Moshe Rabbeinu was the greatest prophet we ever had, in the merit of his humility.
- ◆ Hashem is faithful to reward those who fear Him, the wicked people. If Hashem paid Merodach Baladan so generously for his demonstration of faith, how much more so will He reward His children, who fear Him and cling to Him.



A Blessing of Truth

“How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Israel”

(Bamidbar 24:5)

Are these words of Bilaam merely a description of the sight that met his eyes, or was he intending to bless our nation with them? Bilaam originally proposed to curse our people, but when he observed their exalted level of *kedushah*, his blasphemy turned into blessing. These words, then, contain blessing and are not simply descriptive.

Evidence to this is the fact that Bilaam’s words are eternalized in our national consciousness. We mention them in our daily prayer. They obviously contain a powerful blessing for us. Bilaam merited getting a glimpse of the truth, even though he did not make any life changes in its aftermath.

This matter is perplexing. If Bilaam’s words were blessing, he obviously recognized the beauty of our nation. He saw that the Jews are worthy of goodness. How, then, could he return to his ways of wickedness instead of seeking to cleave to the Jewish people? How could he be so self-contradictory as to admit to the unique sanctity of Bnei Yisrael, yet then revert to acts diametrically opposed to the blessing he just conferred?

The word *מה* (how) is numerically equivalent to Hashem’s Name *יהוה-יה-יה* with its letters spelled out. It is also equal to the *gematria* of the word *אדם* (man). The Torah, Hashem, and Yisrael are one (see *Zohar* II, 90b; III, 4b). Bilaam reached tremendous heights, meriting recognizing the three-way connection, which passes, like a silken

thread, between Am Yisrael, Hashem, and the Torah. Bilaam saw what was hidden from others. How could he remain indifferent?

Chazal (*Yevamot* 61a) tell us, “You (אתם) are called *Man* and the nations of the world are not.” Only one who occupies himself with Torah, and thereby acquires refined character traits, is eligible for the title *Man*. In contrast, the gentiles are polite and well-mannered, but their refinement does not obligate them in the least. As soon as etiquette becomes burdensome, preventing them from behaving as they wish, they shed off its yoke and behave with no constraints, like the animals of the jungle. Only the Jew, who places the words of Torah before his eyes and conducts himself according to its dictates, merits the name *Man*, equal to the Name of Hashem. Furthermore, one who hones his *neshamah*, which was engraved on High (*Kohelet Rabbah* 6:6) and contains a spark of Divinity, truly deserves to be called by the respected title, *Man*.

The letters of the word, אתם as cited above, can be transposed to spell the word אמת (truth), one of the Divine Names. There is no truth other than Torah. Only one who exerts himself in Torah study earns the quality of truth. Even one who does not learn Torah but supports Torah scholars, merits the name *Man*, for “it is a tree of life for those who grasp it and its supporters are praiseworthy” (*Mishlei* 3:18). Nevertheless, he is not among the elite of our nation, those who delve into the words of Torah.

Bilaam recognized the spiritual virtues of Am Yisrael and the truth of Torah. He even blessed the Jewish People. Nevertheless, he chose to disregard Hashem and His Torah. Since he remained unchanged after experiencing his spiritual revelation, he deserved to be called a rasha. There was no limit to the depths of depravity that he could reach.

The Torah is more precious than gold and pearls (*Tehillim* 19:11; *Mishlei* 3:15). Precious metals and stones are only as valuable as

their demand. When there is a lack of interest in them, their prices plummet proportionately. Torah is the only commodity which is stable. Its value neither becomes increased nor reduced according to those who study it. Its *kedushah* was established before the world was created and never fluctuates.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Bilaam blessed the nation in his words *Mah Tovu*. If he acknowledged the uniqueness of Am Yisrael, why did he revert to his old ways, instead of cleaving to them?
- ◆ The word **מה** (how) is numerically equivalent to Hashem's Name **יהוה-וה** with its letters spelled out. It is also equal to the *gematria* of the word **אדם** (man). The Torah, Hashem, and Yisrael are one. How could Bilaam remain indifferent after discovering this amazing truth?
- ◆ “You (**אתם**) are called *Man* and the nations of the world are not.” The name *Man* is granted to Bnei Yisrael, who constantly consider the words of Torah and act accordingly. But the gentiles are genteel only when it's convenient.
- ◆ The letters of the word, **אתם** as cited above, can be transposed to spell the word **אמת** (truth), one of the Divine Names. There is no truth other than Torah. Only one who exerts himself in Torah study earns the quality of truth. Bilaam recognized the truth in Torah, but chose to live as he wanted. Therefore, he is called a rasha.
- ◆ The Torah is more precious than gold and pearls. These items fluctuate in value according to the market, whereas Torah is stable forever, due to its pure truth. Bilaam did not change his ways. Yet his *berachah* exists for all generations, for the *kedushah* of the Torah will never be compromised.



A Man without a Nation

“How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Israel”

(Bamidbar 24:5)

Bilaam was the prophet of the nations (*Tanna d'vei Eliyahu Rabbah* 28). He was hired by Balak to curse Am Yisrael. But Hashem converted his words to those of blessing. Hashem intentionally granted the nations a prophet. This was in order to prevent them from approaching Him in the future with any grievances. They would have no recourse to complain that had they had a prophet like Moshe Rabbeinu, who led Am Yisrael in the Wilderness, they too would have kept the Torah and mitzvot. They would assert that they had transgressed the Seven Noachide Laws only because they had no spiritual mentor. Hashem, therefore, appointed Bilaam as their prophet. Consequently, these charges were categorically dismissed. In spite of their prophet and guide, they continued to sin and flout Hashem's will.

Upon reflecting the give-and-take between Balak and Bilaam, we are taken aback at their audacity. How could Bilaam show such impudence toward Hashem as to curse His children? Is there any chutzpah as great as this? Imagine a person telling the king, “I am on my way to curse your children.” Would anyone in his right mind dare to do such a thing? Bilaam was aware of Hashem's existence. He should have been scared stiff to go off to curse Am Yisrael, His beloved children, as the pasuk (*Devarim* 14:1) states, “You are children to Hashem, your G-d.”

The Zohar (III, 194a) explains that when we divide the name בלעם in two, we have the words בל עם (without a nation). Bilaam lived as

a recluse, without a nation. He was concerned only with his own interests, never taking into consideration the opinion of the public. This character flaw was what allowed him to harbor thoughts of cursing Am Yisrael. He did not have the ability to recognize Am Yisrael as the Chosen Nation, a people who live under Hashem's direct supervision. Balak's promise of wealth winked at Bilaam, obscuring his vision from anything else (see *Avot* 5:19). It was what spurred him to go to curse Am Yisrael with utmost chutzpah.

On the other end of the spectrum is Am Yisrael, a nation built on mutual responsibility and sharing the burden of others. We have a special commandment (*Shemot* 23:5), "You shall help repeatedly with him." This is in regard to seeing one's friend's donkey collapsing under a heavy load. One is enjoined to stop what he is doing in order to help his friend alleviate the donkey's burden. The essence of Am Yisrael is unity, the quality which granted them the privilege to deserve the Torah. Proof of this is that Hashem allowed Am Yisrael to receive the Torah only after they were standing at the foot of Har Sinai "as one man with one heart" (*Rashi, Shemot* 19:2), calling out together, "*Na'aseh v'nishma!*" (*Shemot* 24:7). Hashem knows that their strong point is their power of unity, and only by means of it will Am Yisrael succeed in observing the mitzvot. Therefore, He waited for them to come together as one unit before granting them the Torah.

It is interesting to observe that a person who has a contentious nature may easily transgress many mitzvot. He categorically discards many mitzvot between himself and his fellow man. Conversely, one who is at peace with those in his environment is directly strengthened in his Avodat Hashem and general mitzvah performance. He eagerly fulfills the mitzvot pertaining to man and his fellow man, for he truly loves his fellow Jew.

Am Yisrael keep their tents apart, due to their innate *tzeniut*. Nevertheless, they truly feel for each other. They set boundaries in their residences, for reasons of modesty. But their hearts are united as one, as the *Navi* states (*Yeshayahu* 41:6), “Each man would help his fellow and to his brother he would say, ‘Be strong!’” Korach doubted the leadership of Moshe and Aharon and was punished in a most unusual manner, the likes of which never happened before or after. This was because he tried to shake the very foundation of Am Yisrael: unity and mutual responsibility.

Upon granting Am Yisrael the Torah, Hashem informed them that until then, the world stood in the merit of the Attribute of Mercy. From this point on, the world would exist in the merit of Torah and mitzvah observance. At *Matan Torah*, the entire world ceased moving. The nations realized something tremendous was happening. They approached Bilaam and asked for an explanation. He calmed them down, stating (*Tehillim* 29:11), “Hashem will give might to His people.” The Torah (called might”) is what will protect all of mankind, he explained. The nations immediately responded (*ibid.*), “Hashem will bless His nation with peace” (*Zevachim* 116a). By the act of giving His nation the Torah, Hashem demonstrated that they lived harmoniously, capable of upholding the Torah and mitzvot in the best way possible.

The tzaddik, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, zt”l, once observed a disciple standing by the window, hoping to catch the breeze. “Robber!” he called out to him, “By standing there, you are thinking only of your own comfort. You are blocking the air from reaching all the others who are in the Beit Hamidrash.” Similarly, Hashem commanded us to set aside a tenth of our income for the poor (*Tosefta, Ta’anit* 9a). One who desists is, in essence, stealing. He was given the money in order to share it with others and ease their plight.

Bilaam Harasha was fully aware of the importance of peace and unity. Nonetheless, he behaved as a man with no nation. He was so absorbed in his own concerns that he turned a blind eye to others. This trait was what led him to the folly of attempting to curse Bnei Yisrael.

Bilaam was granted a gift from Heaven. He could have utilized it to benefit mankind. Instead, he chose the path of evil. There are many people blessed with wealth. They are meant to do acts of *chessed*, sharing of their bounty with their less fortunate brethren. When a person is aware of the purpose of his G-d-given gifts and generously gives charity, he fortifies the blessing with which he was endowed, causing it to increase. On the other hand, one whose eyes and ears are blocked from noticing his fellow man's situation, hoarding his money and feeling no sense of responsibility toward others whatsoever, will not have *siyata di'Shemaya* in his assets. The day will come when the wheel of fortune will turn in his disfavor, placing him at the bottom of the corporate ladder.

Bilaam opened his mouth to curse our nation, but instead of blasphemy, blessing emerged. He proclaimed, "How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Israel" (*Bamidbar* 25:1). The word *משכנותיך* (your dwelling places) is related to the word *משכן* (Mishkan). His underlying intention was that Hashem rests His *Shechinah* only where there is peace and unity. The fact that the Divine Presence resides with Am Yisrael is evidence that they are a nation of unity. Their *achdut* can bring them to the heights of Torah, for, as stated above, unity allows a person the power to observe the mitzvot to perfection.

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Bilaam, the prophet of the nations, was hired by Balak to curse Am Yisrael. How could such a great person imagine cursing the children of Hashem?

- ◆ According to the Ben Ish Chai (quoting the Zohar), the name בלעם means בל עם (without a nation). Bilaam lived for himself, never considering the public at large. Therefore, he was capable of ignoring the fact that Bnei Yisrael were Hashem's Chosen People.
- ◆ The Torah was given to Am Yisrael only after they demonstrated unity. Unity is the tool which allows people to observe the mitzvot between man and his fellow man. Even the nations of the world understood that Bnei Yisrael received the Torah in the merit of their unity.



Leisure – Harbinger of Sin

“Israel settled in Shittim, and the people began to act promiscuously with the daughters of Moav”

(Bamidbar 25:1)

Bnei Yisrael in the Wilderness were the Generation of Wisdom, who saw the *Shechinah* with their own eyes. How could they fall so low as to consort with the daughters of Moav, even bowing to their pagan idols. Rashi explains how these women would incite the Jewish men. Before sinning with them, they would order them to first bow to their idols (*Rashi, Bamidbar 25:3*). The manner of serving their god, Ba'al Peor, was most despicable. How could Bnei Yisrael, an exalted people who merited constant miracles, fall into the trap of the *Yetzer Hara*, worshipping these idols most disgracefully?

The answer can be found in the first words of this pasuk. “Israel settled” seems to imply that after forty long years in the Wilderness,

before entering Eretz Yisrael, the nation wanted to “take a break” (*Sanhedrin* 106a). When the *Yetzer Hara* notices someone relaxing, “taking it easy” in Avodat Hashem, he jumps at the opportunity to cause him to sin. He enticed Bnei Yisrael to sin with the daughters of Moav. As a direct result, they served their gods, as well.

How did they come to sin with the daughters of Moav? Originally, Bnei Yisrael wished to purchase linen from them. As they made the transactions, they became involved in discussion. Their hearts were drawn after them, and they quickly found themselves sinning together with them. Had Bnei Yisrael been studying Torah with every fiber of their being, instead of seeking to purchase linen fibers, the *Yetzer Hara* would have found no room to enter their hearts. Thoughts of sin would have never gained a foothold. As the sounds of Torah abated, the voices of the Moabite women entered their ears, enticing them to sin. This is in actualization of our Sages’ warning (*Avot* 4:2), “One sin leads to another.” Bnei Yisrael, in all innocence, set out to purchase garments of linen. But their digression from Torah allowed the *Yetzer Hara* a foothold in their hearts. In addition to sinning with the daughters of Moav, they were seduced to serve their gods, as well.

It is not enough to observe the mitzvot. We must be engrossed in Torah, constantly learning its holy words. Torah is the only thing that can prevent a person from sinning. Only Torah shields one from the *Yetzer Hara*, as Chazal (*Kiddushin* 30b) teach, “I created the *Yetzer Hara*, I created Torah as its antidote.”

There is a famous story regarding the Vilna Gaon (*Sefer Divrei Eliyahu*). His sister came to visit him, after a separation of twenty-two years. In response to her knock, he ushered her in cordially and spoke with her a bit. Imagine her shock, when, after five minutes, he stood up and bid her farewell. Upon expressing her surprise at his rush to end the visit, the Vilna Gaon explained. In

this world, he said, he was obligated to utilize every moment for Torah study. It would be a shame to waste time in idle talk. In *Olam Haba*, he assured her, there would be plenty of time to relax, but *Olam Hazeih* is the world of deed, intended to be employed toward Torah study.

People say time is money. I like to think of time as Gan Eden. Another hour spent in Torah study will multiply our portion in Gan Eden manifold.

“Man is born to labor” (*Iyov* 5:7). Man was created to work in this world not to rest. Idleness brings to boredom (*Ketubot* 59b), and boredom brings to sin (see *Avot* 2:2). We find that Yaakov Avinu wished to live in peace. He had not even actualized this desire when the tragedy with Yosef came upon him (*Bereishit Rabbah* 84:3). Hashem arranged the episode with Yosef to occur just then in order to teach us a timeless lesson. Sitting at leisure opens the door to the *Yetzer Hara*. This was the case with Am Yisrael, just before they were ready to enter the Land. In spite of their upcoming entry into Eretz Yisrael, they sat idle of Torah study and invited the *Yetzer Hara* of promiscuity and idol worship, two of the cardinal sins, to enter the camp.

The Gemara (*Megillah* 28b) states, “Whoever reviews halachot is guaranteed a portion in the World to Come.” The word שונה (reviews) has the same root as the word שינוי (change). And the word הלכות (halachot) stems from the word הליכה (walking). Learning the halachot and being scrupulous in them causes a person to notice where he is headed, always being careful to walk the straight and narrow. Before each act, he considers its ramifications. The more a person reviews the halachot, the greater the change within him, a change which will lead him closer to Hashem.

In Summary

- ◆ How did Bnei Yisrael fall so low as to sin with the daughters of Moav? Moreover, they served idols most despicably. Their sin can be traced to the beginning of the subject. The words, “Israel settled” indicate that Bnei Yisrael sought to “take a break” before entering Eretz Yisrael. When the *Yetzer Hara* sees a person loosen his grip on Torah study, he causes him to sin, as we are told, “One sin leads to another.”
- ◆ A person is created to be a worker. Idleness brings to boredom, which leads to sin. When Yaakov Avinu wished to sit in peace, the tragedy of Yosef fell upon him.
- ◆ “Whoever reviews halachot is guaranteed a portion in the World to Come.” The word שׁוֹנֵה (reviews) has the same root as the word שִׁנוּי (change). And the word הַלְכוּת (halachot) stems from the word הִלְכָה (walking). Learning halachot causes a transformation within a person, causing an awakening. He calculates his standing. This will eventually lead him on the path toward Hashem.



Out of Sight, Out of Mind

“Israel settled in Shittim, and the people began to act promiscuously with the daughters of Moav”

(Bamidbar 25:1)

Bilaam advised Balak that if he wanted to overpower Bnei Yisrael, he should sway them to sin in acts of immorality, for Hashem abhors all types of promiscuity (*Sanhedrin* 106a). If Bnei Yisrael would become involved in such sins, He would surely abandon

them. Toward this end, Balak invited the daughters of Moav, who succeeded in causing Bnei Yisrael to sin. Zimri even had the audacity to approach Moshe Rabbeinu, asking whether the Midianite woman with whom he wished to consort was permitted to him. Moshe, of course, replied in the negative. Then Zimri demanded to know who allowed Moshe to marry Tzipporah, a daughter of Midian (*Sanhedrin* 82a). Armed with this argument, Bnei Yisrael brazenly followed the daughters of Moav. But their claims held no water. Tzipporah was a righteous convert, who came under the wings of the *Shechinah*, and was considered a perfect Jewess. These women were light years apart from her. Until today, the name Tzipporah is an acceptable Jewish name, in memory of this righteous woman in our history.

Sinning with the daughters of Moav had severe repercussions. The pasuk (*Bamidbar* 25:2-3) tells us, “They invited the people to the feasts of their gods; the people ate and prostrated themselves to their gods. Israel became attached to Ba’al Peor, and the wrath of Hashem flared up against Israel.” Even the *Nasi* of the tribe of Shimon fell into sin, consorting with Kuzbi, the daughter of the Midianite king (*ibid.* 25:14-15). Hashem’s anger flared, and a plague decimated 24,000 members of the nation (*ibid.* 25:9). If not for the zealotness of Pinchas, Bnei Yisrael would have been annihilated. This is implied in the words (*ibid.* 25:11), “Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon the Children of Israel, when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel in My vengeance.”

How is it possible that the Generation of Wisdom, who received the Torah, sinned with foreign women and even prostrated themselves to their gods? We know that *talmidei chachamim* have extra stringencies placed upon them. Chazal adjure (*Avot* 1:11), “Scholars, be cautious with your words.” Likewise, it says (*Shabbat*

114a) that a *talmid chacham* who has a stain on his clothing deserves death. *Talmidei chachamim* stand at the helm of our people and are our role models. Therefore, much more is demanded of them. How, then, could a *Nasi*, the pride of the people, sin so woefully?

In Explanation of the Mitzvah of Tzitzit

Regarding the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, the Torah (*Bamidbar* 15:39) states, “It shall constitute *tzitzit* for you, that you may see it and remember all of the commandments of Hashem and perform them; and not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray.” *Tzitzit* have the power, whether worn out, or inside, to remind a person of all of the mitzvot, which is the first step in observing them.

The mitzvah of Shabbat is similar in the following way. Throughout the week, a person is occupied with his business. How can he be sure to cease all work when Shabbat enters? By remembering Shabbat, apart from observing it, he is most liable to keep it properly. Our *Chachamim* added fences to the thirty-nine *melachot* in order that we keep our distance from any form of Shabbat desecration. For example, an item whose purpose is forbidden, such as a pen, is *muktzeh* (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 308:3). One who refrains from touching a pen on Shabbat will certainly be spared mistakenly picking it up and writing (see *Mishnah Berurah* 108, introduction). Likewise, the mitzvah of *tzitzit* has the power to remind us of all the mitzvot of the Torah.

The women of Moav knew very well that they could not easily cause Am Yisrael to sin, due to their tremendous sanctity. They knew that we have the mitzvah to “not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray.” They therefore began by selling linen cloth. This opened the lines of communication between

themselves and Bnei Yisrael. The next step was to expose Bnei Yisrael to forbidden sights, until they eventually seduced them to sin. No one went headfirst into sin. It began with the seemingly innocuous. Even a *Nasi* of our nation fell to the very depths. He was drawn by illicit sights until he actually sinned. How critical it is for us to protect the sanctity of our eyes from forbidden “sites”!

The Latent Power in a Person’s Sight

The Arizal (*Ruach Hakodesh, drush 3, 7:2*) warns against the transgression of smelling the aroma of a carcass. Man’s senses are so finely tuned that they become contaminated merely by smelling the scent of unkosher meat. We find a similar sensitivity at play in the incident of Noach after the Flood. When Shem and Yefet went to cover their father, they did not suffice with merely closing their eyes, but they walked backward in order to avoid the prospect of opening their eyes and seeing Noach’s nakedness (*Bereishit 9:23*). How careful one must be to guard his eyes! A person who lives in a large non-Jewish city such as Paris must certainly be punctilious in this matter. He should allow his *tzitzit* to protect him from all forms of forbidden sights.

Chazal (*Berachot 10a*) relate a most interesting fact about David Hamelech. From the time he left his mother’s womb, he sang praises to Hashem. Why did he begin as a newborn, while still sucking his mother’s milk? An older child may not see his mother’s bare chest, for he is done with nursing. David Hamelech was so righteous that even as an infant he did not want to become negatively influenced by being exposed to this part of her body. He therefore sanctified himself with songs to Hashem. The word שירה (song) is contained in the phrase ראש יי (head for Hashem). David yearned to sanctify his mind only for Hashem. He therefore began his career as the Sweet Singer of Israel at a very young age.

A deceased man is buried in a tallit without the *tzitzit* because his *Yetzer Hara* has expired, obviating the need to remember the mitzvot. But a living person must ensure to wear *tzitzit* on his tallit in order to remember the mitzvot. We are obligated to contemplate the message of the *tzitzit*. If a person were to hear an inspiring account about one of our Torah giants, but does not arouse himself to improve his deeds, what good is the entire telling of the story? Imagine a starving man. If he will take a mishmash of food and eat it all mixed together, it will not be very palatable, to say the least. He must divide each food and eat it separately in order to get the full flavor of every dish. When a person hears a shocking story, he must consider each detail individually in order for it to make the right impression on him. Bnei Yisrael sinned in Shittim by going to buy linens from the daughters of Moav. How were they not protected by the mitzvah of *tzitzit*? They did not contemplate this mitzvah as they should have, and therefore it did not have the desired effect. Apart from wearing *tzitzit*, we must think of their message: Remembering Hashem's mitzvot and fulfilling them.

The Gemara (*Menachot 44a*) relates an incident with a man who approached a very beautiful woman. He paid her a large amount of money in order to have relations with her. He began removing his clothing. When he saw his *tzitzit*, he redressed his situation and fled. She followed him, asking if he had found something wrong with her. He answered, "I have found nothing wrong with you. But we have a mitzvah called *tzitzit*, which reminds us of all the other mitzvot. As I noticed them, I remembered Hashem's Torah, and I couldn't bring myself to sin. That is why I fled."

The woman was most impressed by our holy Torah, which has the power to stop a person even in the heat of passion. She went to the Rabbi of this man and asked to convert. He questioned her motivations in joining the Jewish nation. She replied that a religion

in which its adherents are drawn to the mitzvot even more than to women is the religion she wants to embrace. The Rabbi converted her and invited his disciple to marry her in a permitted way. By catching himself in time, he avoided sin and caused her to convert. How great is the power of *tzitzit*!

How Can We Be Saved from Sin?

How did the daughters of Moav succeed in convincing Bnei Yisrael to sin with them? It was because Bnei Yisrael did not contemplate the message of *tzitzit* as they should have. These women came with the sole intention of causing them to sin. They were not interested in selling linen at all. Bnei Yisrael should have considered why the women were selling the linen, rather than the men. Going out to purchase these garments for their *tzitzit* constituted doing a mitzvah at the expense of an aveirah. Why didn't they bear in mind the injunction (*Devarim* 23:15), "Your camp shall be holy"? By not maintaining a high standard of *tzeniut*, they slowly stumbled upon forbidden sights, until they fell into the trap of sin itself.

The Satan is a mighty force. A man must know that he is liable to be drawn after a woman into sin. Therefore, he must protect his eyes from looking at women, in order not to be allured. The entire incident with the daughters of Moav was arranged by the Satan, who sent them out in order to entice the Jewish men by a seemingly permissible transaction, which developed into a most abominable deed.

One might ask how he can ever take care of his needs; wherever one turns, there are women. If he must deal with a woman or speak to her, he should do the barest minimum necessary and finish as quickly as possible, without looking at her when not required. When I was once in Eretz Yisrael, a female security officer asked me to face

her, in order to compare my face with the picture on my passport. I told her I would prefer not to look at her. She could call over a male officer in order to do the job. She must do her job, but I must do mine, which is guarding my eyes.

We quoted the words of the Arizal, who states it is forbidden to smell the meat of a carcass, for this can have a negative influence upon a person. In a similar vein, a *niddah* is impure and her husband is required to maintain distance from her, even though she is his wife, for she transmits *tumah*. The sifrei Kabbalah (see *Tziyuni al HaTorah, Acharei Mot*) state that even handing something transmits impurity. Merely sighting *tumah* can cause defilement. Thus, it is forbidden to gaze at the countenance of a rasha (*Megillah 28a*). Looking at a wicked man transmits his *tumah* and misdeeds upon the onlooker. I felt this tangibly once on a plane ride. I had improper thoughts and I couldn't figure out why. Finally, I noticed that an apostate was sitting beside me, unwittingly touching me. His negative traits certainly rubbed off on me, adversely affecting me.

Vengeance against the Midianites

After Bnei Yisrael sinned with the daughters of Moav and Midian, Hashem commanded Moshe (*Bamidbar 31:2*), "Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites; afterward you will be gathered unto your people." Chazal (see *Yevamot 61a*) relate that when Bnei Yisrael waged war with Midian, not one Jew perished. When they returned from war, they offered a sin-offering. The fact that they all survived the war proved that they were clear of sin. Why was the *korban* necessary? The commentaries explain that it was due to their affiliation with women. Initially, Bnei Yisrael took the women as captives. Afterward, Moshe told them to put them to death (*Bamidbar 31:17*). Dealing with the women left a negative impression upon our nation, and therefore, they brought the

sin-offering (*Shabbat* 64a). How severe is even the thought of sin, and how much must one distance himself from it!

The pasuk (*Bamidbar* 25:6) describes Bnei Yisrael's sin with the daughters of Moav, "Behold! a man of the Children of Israel came and brought a Midianite woman near to his brothers before the eyes of Moshe and before the eyes of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel; and they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting." The wording here is "before the eyes of... the Children of Israel," rather than "before... the Children of Israel." The eyes are the agents of sin. One is drawn after that which he sees, being pulled like a magnet until he actually sins. How could the *Nasi* of Shevet Shimon come before the entire nation most shamelessly with the Midianite woman? He was so involved in sin that he simply lost his rational thinking. It was all due to inappropriate gazing. How careful we must be to keep away from forbidden sights!

Rabbi Yosi Haglili once passed by Beruriah, wife of the *Tanna*, Rabbi Meir. He asked her, "How does one get to Lud?" To which Beruriah replied, "Fool!" Rabbi Yosi asked why she called him a fool. She explained, "We are taught not to converse too much with a woman. You could have asked for directions with fewer words. You could have asked, 'How to Lud?' I would have understood that you wanted to get to Lud." How scrupulous one must be with every exchange he has with a woman. Many aveirot begin with speech. Then a person comes to view inappropriate matter. All the more so if the woman's intentions are sinful, as was the case with the daughters of Moav. The road to sin is very short. A woman has a special charisma, which is liable to attract the wrong audience. Even the holy *Tanna'im* were held accountable if they spoke excessively with women.

Rabbi Akiva used to mock sinners (*Kiddushin* 81a). The Satan once came, in the guise of a woman sitting atop a palm tree. Rabbi Akiva

began climbing the tree in order to reach her. When he was halfway up, the Satan called out, “I am the Satan disguised as a woman. If I would have permission, I would kill you on the spot. But I was warned against harming you.” This account is most shocking. Rabbi Akiva, of all people, was prone to sin with this woman! We certainly must protect ourselves from improper sights and constantly pray for *siyata di’Shemaya* to overcome the *Yetzer Hara* for immorality.

A man once came to me, telling me that he took counsel from a friend regarding a woman with whom he is acquainted. I asked why he didn’t seek counsel from a Rav. He explained that the woman preferred his friend over him. I told him that there was no need for advice, as she was already consorting with his friend. There are many such instances in which couples need counseling for one reason or another. They often go for help only to find out that the counselor himself wants to take the wife. A person must employ common sense to know where to turn for advice. No one should ever make light of the prohibition to converse at length with women (*Avot* 1:5). *Talmidei chachamim*, too, should limit such conversation to that which is absolutely necessary.

There are cases in which young girls consort with elderly men. This is most unnatural. Why shouldn’t a young woman be attracted to young men, in her age group? The *Yetzer Hara* has all types of tricks, some natural and some not. One who guards himself from sin will never know harm.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Upon Bilaam’s advice to Balak, the daughters of Moav caused Bnei Yisrael to sin. Even the *Nasi* of Shevet Shimon sinned, comparing Kuzbi to Moshe’s wife, Tzipporah. But there is no comparison at all. Tzipporah converted to Judaism and came under the wings of the *Shechinah* before

marrying Moshe. In the wake of this sin, the entire nation was almost destroyed. Pinchas came along and saved the day.

- ◆ How could a *Nasi* sin so overtly, when *talmidei chachamim* are enjoined to take upon themselves extra measures of sanctity?
- ◆ The mitzvah of *tzitzit* is meant to remind us of all of the mitzvot. Shabbat, too, has both aspects of remembering and observing. Without remembering Shabbat, what is the point of observing its details?
- ◆ The daughters of Moav began their charade by selling linen garments to the Jewish men. The men fell into sin by initially looking at improper sights.
- ◆ How harmful sight can be! Gazing at the face of a rasha negatively influences a person. Because improper sights have such severe consequences, the sons of Noach walked backward in order not to see their father's nakedness and did not suffice with merely closing their eyes.
- ◆ David Hamelech sang songs of praise to Hashem while yet a nursing baby. He did not want to become detrimentally affected by seeing his mother's bared chest. The word שִׁירָה (song) is contained in the phrase ראש ה-י (head for Hashem). His entire being was dedicated to Hashem.
- ◆ The Gemara cites an incident in which a man's *tzitzit* averted sin. The woman he wished to consort with was so overcome that she converted and married the man in a permitted fashion.
- ◆ Zimri brought the Midianite woman "before the eyes" of Moshe and Bnei Yisrael. This indicates that sin begins with the eyes.
- ◆ The Gemara relates that the Satan disguised himself as a woman, nearly convincing Rabbi Akiva to sin. If not for a warning from Above, he would have succeeded.
- ◆ A person should always make sure he is consulting with the right party and remember Chazal's instruction not to indulge in conversations with women.

- ◆ Sound advice to protect oneself from sin:
 - Contemplate the purpose of *tzitzit*
 - Protect the eyes from forbidden sights/sites
 - Prevent excessive talking with women
 - Keep completely distant from women of ill-repute
 - Ask Hashem for Heavenly mercy



Gazing at the Face of a Rasha

“Behold! a man of the Children of Israel came and brought a Midianite woman near to his brothers before the eyes of Moshe and before the eyes of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel; and they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen saw, and he stood up from amid the assembly and took a spear in his hand. He followed the Israelite man into the tent and pierced them both, the Israelite man and the woman into her stomach – and the plague was halted from upon the Children of Israel”

(*Bamidbar 25:6-8*)

Rashi explains that Zimri ben Salu came before Moshe Rabbeinu, asking whether the Midianite woman, Kuzbi bat Tzur, was permitted to convert. Moshe replied in the negative. Zimri responded, most

brazenly, “Your wife also came from Midian. Who allowed you to marry her?” Zimri sinned with the Midianite woman in front of the entire nation. Everyone wept, for Moshe forgot the halachah pertaining to one who has relations with a non-Jewess (*Sanhedrin* 82a). Moshe could do nothing to thwart the terrible epidemic plaguing the nation. Pinchas saw what was happening and remembered the halachah. He took the spear and in one fell swoop, killed both sinners. In this manner, he halted the plague that had claimed thousands.

Moshe was the one who brought the Torah to our nation. How could he have forgotten the halachah? Chazal (*Megillah* 28a) state that it is forbidden to gaze at the face of a rasha. For this reason, too, it states (*Avot* 1:7), “Distance yourself from a bad neighbor.” Aside from learning from his actions, merely looking at the face of a rasha can harm a person. The sefer *Chessed L’Avraham* (2:33) writes that defilement is drawn upon the one who gazes at the face of a wicked man.

Moshe became involved in a discussion with Zimri, which forced him to look at him. Zimri’s *tumah* left an impression upon Moshe, to the degree that Moshe forgot the halachah. Regarding Pinchas, though, the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 25:7) states that “he stood up from amid the assembly.” He was far away from Zimri at the time and did not see his face. Therefore, he did not receive any negative influences from him. He was thus able to remember the halachah of one who cohabits with a gentile woman.

Rashi explains that Pinchas saw the deed and remembered the halachah. Which halachah is this referring to? He had not at all forgotten the halachah regarding one who cohabits with a gentile woman. Rather, when Pinchas observed how Moshe forgot the halachah, he remembered the prohibition of looking at the face of a rasha, for it negatively influences a person.

Back in the days of the Egyptian exile, we find that Pharaoh warned Moshe to never come before him again, for he refused to release the nation. At the very beginning of Moshe's career as Hashem's emissary, he was told to try to convince Pharaoh to set the Jews free. Moshe attempted to evade this mission, until Hashem reassured him that He would give him special protection. Why did Moshe at first decline Hashem's request?

Moshe knew that looking into the face of a rasha has negative side effects. He was afraid that looking at Pharaoh would deface his *kedushah*. Hashem therefore promised to protect him from all harm. Only after receiving this promise, did Moshe accede to taking the task upon himself. The Zohar explains (see II, 34a) that the words, "Come to Pharaoh" imply that Hashem would go along with him.

The Gemara (*Chagigah* 15a and b) relates that Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes learned Torah from Elisha ben Avuyah, who defected to the point of being called "Acher" (Another) (ibid. 15a). How could Rabbi Meir possibly learn Torah from such a wicked man? Rabbi Meir considered Acher a fruit whose rind was to be discarded and its insides consumed. The face of a person is his rind, the outside trappings which hide the inner essence. Rabbi Meir took only the fruit, i.e., the Torah teachings of Acher, discarding the rind by not looking into his face.

Rabbi Meir once had evil neighbors. Their wickedness reached the point where he felt he had no choice but to pray for their death. Rabbi Meir's wife then told him it would be far more effective were he to pray that they do complete teshuvah. Rabbi Meir acceded. Indeed, these resha'im did teshuvah (*Berachot* 10a). This was the same Rabbi Meir who learned Torah from Acher. How could he succeed in learning from him, when he couldn't tolerate the corrupt nature of his neighbors?

Rebbi Meir recognized the fount of Torah that welled inside Elisha ben Avuyah. He derived whatever he could of this treasury, before it became hidden. He was careful not to perform a mitzvah at the expense of sin. Rabbi Meir truly wished to gain from Acher's Torah knowledge and transmit it to others. He therefore viewed Acher as a vessel to be used and then discarded. Due to his deep desire to draw forth from Acher's well of wisdom, he rode above the crest and succeeded in learning from him, in spite of the emotional effort involved. Rabbi Meir ascended the rungs of Torah and *yirah* because he was capable of distinguishing between the rind and the fruit. His colleagues called him, "Nehorai" (light in Aramaic), for he enlightened them in Torah and halachah (*Eiruvin* 13b). But his wicked neighbors had nothing spiritual to offer him, and he therefore prayed for their demise, until his wife stopped him.

When Moshe Rabbeinu ascended to the Heavens to receive the Torah, the angels came before Hashem with a grievance. "What is a human being doing among us?" they demanded. They wished to kill him (*Shabbat* 88b). The author of the sefer *Arvei Nachal* asks (*Korach*), "When a guest comes to visit the king, will the servants rise up to remove him? The guest comes at the invitation of the king, and it is an outright act of chutzpah for the servants to try to expel him from the royal palace. Moshe ascended by order of Hashem. How did the angels have the audacity to argue against his being there?"

He explains that mankind is the conduit between Hashem and His Creation. The sefer *Chessed L'Avraham* (4:30), written by Rabbi Avraham Azulai, zy" a, states that a person is the pipeline for all bounty in this world. When one studies Torah and performs mitzvot, blessing comes here through him. It increases and floods the world without cessation. But when a person ceases learning Torah, *chalilah*, the pipe is blocked, and he is no longer suitable to

be the agent to bring all good things from the Upper Worlds down to our physical world.

The Gemara (*Shabbat* 89a) relates that when Moshe was on High, the Angel of Death taught him the secrets of the *ketoret*, which has the power to atone for Yisrael's sins and nullify harsh decrees, preventing plague. Why would the Angel of Death do such a thing; his entire purpose is to cause death? The Angel of Death knew that his existence depends on Bnei Yisrael and the Torah. If not for mankind, who form the connection between Hashem and Creation, the angels have no chance for survival. When the Angel of Death realized this, he shared the secrets of the *ketoret* with Moshe.

The angels wished to put Moshe to death, for they feared that gazing at the countenance of a mere mortal would reduce their elevated status, to the extent that they would further be unable to serve Hashem. Hashem assured them that Moshe had ascended to learn Torah from His mouth, and would then transmit it to the entire nation. During his sojourn on High, Moshe would become elevated by the power of Torah, until he would resemble an angel. There was nothing whatsoever for the angels to fear regarding their gazing at him. Moshe became so exalted that his face was transformed into a spiritual entity. He even had no need for food or drink the entire time he was there.

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabbah* 28a) relates that Hashem converted Moshe's face to resemble that of Avraham Avinu. Why? He wished to remind the angels of the meal they had partaken with Avraham. They enjoyed a one-time meal of physical food. What should Bnei Yisrael do, surrounded as they are all their lives by folly and physicality? They surely need the Torah to protect them from pursuing materialism.

In Summary

- ◆ Zimri presented the Midianite woman before Moshe Rabbeinu, asking him if he might marry her. Moshe forgot the halachah that one who consorts with a gentile woman deserves death. How could Moshe have forgotten the halachah? Moshe, in dealing with Zimri, looked into his face, thereby becoming influenced by the defilement there. This caused him to forget the halachah. But Pinchas stood up from among the people. He had not been involved in this give-and-take and was therefore unsullied by Zimri's corruption. Pinchas saw the act and remembered the halachah. He remembered that one must not gaze at the countenance of a rasha, due to the detrimental side-effects.
- ◆ Moshe was reluctant to go to Pharaoh; for fear that gazing at a rasha would prove detrimental. Only after Hashem's promise of protection did he agree to go.
- ◆ Rabbi Meir learned Torah from Acher by eating of his fruit (i.e., his Torah knowledge), and discarding his rind. He did not gaze at the face of this wicked man, compared to a fruit peel. Because he was able to discern the good from the bad, he was called "Nehorai" (light), for he lit up his colleagues' eyes in halachah.
- ◆ The author of *Arvei Nachal* asks how the angels could imagine sending Moshe away from Heaven; he had come at the behest of Hashem Himself! Mankind is the conduit by which blessing rains down from Heaven upon Creation. The angels could not understand how a person could be charged with this exalted mission. When Moshe explained that he wished to bring down the Torah, which deepens the connection between all worlds, they were mollified. Even the Angel of Death shared the secrets of the *ketoret* with Moshe.
- ◆ The angels were afraid that gazing at a physical face would reduce their holiness. For that reason, they wished to consume Moshe. Hashem assured them that Moshe had reached the level of an angel, transforming his very countenance into a spiritual entity.

- ◆ Hashem placed the face of Avraham upon Moshe, in order to remind the angels of the repast they had enjoyed in Avraham's tent. That had been a one-time experience. What should Bnei Yisrael do, when they are constantly bombarded with foolishness and fleeting frivolities? They certainly need the Torah's protection.



The Zealousness of Pinchas

“Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen saw, and he stood up from amid the assembly and took a spear in his hand. He followed the Israelite man into the tent and pierced them both, the Israelite man and the woman into her stomach – and the plague was halted from upon the Children of Israel”

(Bamidbar 25:7-8)

Regarding Pinchas, our Sages (*Sanhedrin* 82a) state that he saw a deed and remembered the halachah. Why did he have to see the deed in order to remember the halachah? Does one have to see a deed in order to remember hilchot Shabbat? The Torah was given to us as a gift. It is clear as day that there is no pleasure greater than Torah. Torah makes one happy; it uplifts one's spirits, makes fools wise, and is more precious than thousands of gold and silver coins. There is no delight greater than understanding Torah. And just as only a wealthy man can comprehend true wealth, and only a poor man can know the taste of poverty, so too, one must involve himself in Torah in order to relish its full flavor.

Torah is more precious than gold and pearls. But at times there is the very real danger of it being received with scorn and a lack of appreciation. When this is the case, Hashem conceals the halachah from a person. If he demonstrates anguish at this, making every attempt to understand the halachah, Hashem sends him an illustration to remind him of the halachah. The words (*Bamidbar* 25:7) “he stood up from amid the assembly” indicate that Pinchas was distressed by his “sitting” among the assembly, not involved in anything productive. When Hashem saw this, He placed the image of the deed before him, so that he would remember the halachah and stand up and act.

“Because he took vengeance for his G-d” (*ibid.* 25:13). Pinchas seemingly taught a halachah before his mentor, Moshe. This warrants the death penalty (*Eiruv* 63a). Pinchas was aware of this. But he felt that sacrificing his life in order to halt the epidemic was a small price to pay for the survival of Am Yisrael. When Hashem saw his utter dedication to his nation, He told Moshe (*ibid.* 25:12), “Behold! I give him My covenant of peace.” Pinchas was motivated solely by zealotness for Hashem’s Name, driven by love for Am Yisrael. His deed was therefore not considered a sin at all.

Concerning Nadav and Avihu, the pasuk (*Vayikra* 16:1) states, “When they approached before Hashem, and they died.” Why did Nadav and Avihu deserve death for approaching Hashem, while Pinchas was blameless? It was because they acted out of ulterior motives. Conversely, Pinchas acted on behalf of Am Yisrael, and was therefore innocent. A similar case occurred when Eldad and Meidad prophesied in the camp. They predicted that Moshe would die and Yehoshua would lead the nation into Eretz Yisrael (*Sanhedrin* 17a). When Yehoshua heard this, he was outraged, telling Moshe to incarcerate them (*Bamidbar* 11:28). Moshe replied that Eldad and Meidad were not prophesying for themselves, but for the entire

nation. They did not predict that they would bring the nation into the Land, but Yehoshua. Since their prophecy was for the entire nation, and not themselves, they were not deserving of death, just as we find to be the case with Pinchas.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Pinchas saw an act and remembered the halachah. Why did he need an act in order to remember the halachah? Even though the Torah is paramount, there are those who scorn it. Hashem wanted Pinchas to see this dastardly deed and be anguished by it. His zealousness on behalf of the Torah would preserve the people.
- ◆ Pinchas was not culpable for teaching the halachah before his mentor. He did it solely for Hashem's sake, and for the sake of Bnei Yisrael. His act halted the plague.
- ◆ Nadav and Avihu offered *ketoret* with ulterior motives and were therefore put to death. Pinchas, on the other hand, acted on behalf of the nation, and was therefore spared.
- ◆ Eldad and Meidad prophesied among the people and were not punished because they prophesied on behalf of the nation. They stated that Moshe Rabbeinu would die, and Yehoshua would lead the nation into Eretz Yisrael.



Man's Purpose in This World

“Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen saw, and he stood up from amid the assembly and took a spear in his hand. He followed the Israelite man into the tent and pierced them both, the Israelite man and the woman into her stomach – and the plague was halted from upon the Children of Israel”

(Bamidbar 25:7-8)

The Kabbalists state that Pinchas was a reincarnation of Yitzchak Avinu, whereas Zimri ben Salu was a reincarnation of Eisav. It was Heavenly ordained that Pinchas should arise and kill Zimri. When Yitzchak Avinu saw his son, Eisav, sinning so severely, he should have put him to death. Since this was not the case, the two of them returned to this world. By killing Zimri, Pinchas put right Yitzchak's omission with his son, Eisav (*Rama MiPano, Gilgulei Neshamot, Likutim 6; Zohar III, 233b*).

On the subject of *gilgulim*, Chazal tell us that Moshe Rabbeinu was a reincarnation of Hevel, who had been killed by his brother, Kayin. Kayin acted out of jealousy toward his brother, whose offering was accepted by Hashem, whereas his was rejected (*Tikkunei Zohar, Tikkun 69, 99b*). Chazal add that Hevel deserved to die, because he gazed at the *Shechinah* with open eyes, when he should have closed his eyes due to its sanctity. This was an overt display of mockery of the *Shechinah*, warranting death (*Likutei HaShas*). Moshe Rabbeinu, well-aware that he was the *gilgul* of Hevel, made restitution for Hevel's misdeed by closing his eyes whenever Hashem spoke to him (*Shemot 3:6*).

I would like to relate a story here which, at first glance, seems detached from reality. I am ready to vouch for its authenticity. A well-seasoned burglar was once taken by surprise when he entered a house, to find the owner standing before him, armed. The robber, feeling threatened, shot at the householder's arm, causing the man to shoot at himself. He eventually died of his wounds. The burglar was charged with a long prison sentence. During his stay, he was awakened to return to his Heavenly Father. One night, the householder came to him in a dream, and told him that he had now found a resting place in Gan Eden. This was the story he narrated:

Fifty years earlier, they had both been living in this world, with roles reversed. The homeowner had broken into the house of the burglar and injured him. In order to make restitution, he had to return to this world as a *gilgul*. Now he had finally found peace, his sin fully rectified. One of the Kabbalists who heard this story verified it and said it contains important messages.

The Ba'al Shem Tov once encountered a frog, which began speaking to him. It was a reincarnation of a learned man who knew the Torah perfectly. But one time, overtaken by pangs of hunger, he ate without *netilat yadayim*. Therefore, he was forced to return as a *gilgul*. How great is the prosecution against one who sins intentionally! He knows he is sinning, but ignores the fact, drawn as he is after his impulses.

Each of us arrives in this world in order to rectify something. How can one know what this is? The following is the litmus test: If there is one mitzvah which the *Yetzer Hara* constantly attempts to cause him to transgress, for example, forbidden sights, speaking *lashon hara*, wasting time from Torah study, etc., and the person feels weak in this area, it is an indication that this is the point of his rectification. The *Yetzer Hara* knows this, and therefore the main thrust of his attack is on it, attempting to cause him to stumble in

this specific area, so that the person should not succeed in amending that which he previously damaged. Conversely, when a person feels a pull to a certain mitzvah, feeling he was granted the means by which to perform it properly, he is likely to find his calling in that field. For instance, a wealthy man might be drawn to donate generously to charity. In his previous state, he may have been a stingy miser, who never parted with a cent. Hashem returned his *neshamah* to this world in order to rectify the negative trait of miserliness, and even helps him overcome this trait by granting him riches and placing a love for *tzedakah* in his heart.

Who are we to calculate Hashem's intentions? Our task is to fulfill all mitzvot, easy and difficult alike. We will receive Heavenly assistance to rectify all that we must, and we will arrive at the Upper World having fulfilled our mission to perfection.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Kabbalists state that Pinchas was a *gilgul* of Yitzchak Avinu, whereas Zimri was a *gilgul* of Eisav. Yitzchak should have put Eisav to death for his many sins, but did not. Therefore, their souls returned to this world. By killing Zimri, Pinchas rectified the omission of Yitzchak Avinu. Similarly, Moshe Rabbeinu was a *gilgul* of Hevel, killed by his brother, Kayin, as a punishment for gazing at the *Shechinah* without fear. Moshe Rabbeinu was always careful to look away from the *Shechinah* whenever Hashem spoke to him.
- ◆ Every person comes down to this world in order to rectify some aspect of his life. How can he know what it is? The mitzvah which he finds difficult to observe is the one entrusted to him to perfect. Similarly, when a person feels an attraction to a specific mitzvah, and has the resources to perform it, it is most likely "his" mitzvah, entrusted to him to perfect. He was granted the Heavenly assistance to do it right.



Gems on Parashat Balak



Moav Fears Bnei Yisrael

“Balak son of Tzipor saw all that Israel had done to the Ammonite. Moav became very frightened of the people, because it was numerous, and Moav was disgusted in the face of the Children of Israel”

(Bamidbar 22:2-3)

Balak and his nation were terrified of Bnei Yisrael. Bnei Yisrael did not provoke them, for they were forbidden from doing this, due to the family ties of Lot (ancestor of Moav) and Avraham, our Patriarch (see *Bava Kama* 38b). Bnei Yisrael sat peacefully nearby, as Balak himself stated, “It sits opposite me,” implying that they were a peaceable people. Why the great fear of them?

The Moabites observed how the mighty empires of the Amorites and Bashan fell to Bnei Yisrael. They feared that they were next in line. Notwithstanding their increased adrenaline, how did the relatively weak nation of Moav dare to attack Bnei Yisrael, led as they were by the *Shechinah*?

When Bnei Yisrael are “sitting opposite me,” i.e., they are relaxing their involvement in Torah, and instead adopt the behaviors of the gentiles, they are easy prey for the destructive forces. When Yaakov’s voice ceases, the hands of Eisav are raised against him (*Bereishit Rabbah* 65:20). We find a clear illustration of the direct connection between laxity in Torah and sin by the pasuk (ibid. 25:1) which states, “Israel settled in Shittim and the people began to act promiscuously with the daughters of Moav.” When Bnei Yisrael wish to sit idly, resting from their toil in Torah, while learning customs that are distinctly opposed to Torah, the ire of the gentiles rises against them, and they are attacked (see *Megillah* 13b). Even the weakest among the nations receives Divine help in fighting us.

The enmity of our enemies is so strong that they are even prepared to make peace between themselves in the face of their mutual enemy – the Jews. Rashi (*Bamidbar* 22:4) describes how Moav and Midian were always at odds with each other (see *Bereishit* 36:35), but because they had a common adversary, they put their differences aside, in order to join forces against the Jews.

Balak turned to the sages of Midian for advice about the Jewish Problem. He compared Am Yisrael to a wild ox, which devours all of the grasses in its environment. Bnei Yisrael had the power to eliminate all of the nations in their path to Eretz Yisrael.

The pesukim continue (*Bamidbar* 22:5), “He sent messengers to Bilaam son of Beor to Petor, which is by the River of the land of the members of his people, to summon him.” In these words are hidden the key to our power. This is what grants us protection from our enemies. Although they will make peace among themselves in order to annihilate us, they will never triumph over us. The word פתורה (to Petor) contains the letters of the words פה תורה (a mouth of Torah). When Bnei Yisrael’s mouths are filled with words of Torah, the nations are powerless against them (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 65:20).

And the word הנהר (the River) is numerically equivalent, adding one for the word itself, to the word ארס (venom), containing similar letters to the word ראש (head). When Bnei Yisrael fill their mouths with words of Torah, they emit venom, like the venom of a snake. When their heads and mouths are involved in Torah study, compared to light, the nations of the world cannot hold a candle to them. Their Torah learning is as potent as a snakebite, capable of killing. But when Bnei Yisrael grow lax in their Torah study, they are easy prey to the nations of the world.



The Wickedness of Balak and Bilaam

“Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey and it said to Bilaam: What have I done to you that you struck me these three times?”

(Bamidbar 22:28)

As Bilaam went on his way to confer with Balak regarding the Jewish Problem, his donkey pushed his foot against the wall, refusing to budge. It saw an angel with an unsheathed sword before it. Bilaam could not understand why his animal halted and struck it time after time. After three strikes, Bilaam was out. The donkey opened its mouth, asking Bilaam why he hit it three times. Rashi (ibid.) explains that “three times” is an allusion to the three times a year that Bnei Yisrael ascend to the Beit Hamikdash. It was telling him he would never overcome this nation.

The donkey gave Bilaam specifically this message in order that he should realize that it was not some sort of magical power of

impurity that spoke from its throat, but Hashem Himself, Who had commanded Am Yisrael to celebrate the three festivals.

Bilaam should have taken note of the fact that a mere beast saw an angel of Hashem, and spoke empowered by Hashem rather than by ordinary powers of impurity. This should have propelled him to awaken and abandon his ways of wickedness. But Bilaam remained unchanged, not seeking to improve himself. For this reason, he will be immortalized as Bilaam Harasha.

Balak, king of Moav, was an even greater rasha than Bilaam. When he noticed the powers of purity enveloping Am Yisrael, he devised a way to harm them. Toward this end, he invited the chief of impurity, Bilaam himself, whom he felt was capable of implementing his devilish designs. Balak's malevolence takes on greater proportions in light of the fact that Bnei Yisrael were warned against attacking Moav. Balak not only broke this unspoken peace treaty, but sought ways and means of bringing Bnei Yisrael down from their exalted levels.

See how wicked Balak was. Instead of using the opportunity of crossing paths with Am Yisrael to recognize the beauty of Torah, he preferred to shut his eyes like the blind man. He and his nation saw themselves as people of power, not reflecting on the mortality of man, who ends up as food for the worms.



Recognizing All Miracles

“Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey and it said to Bilaam: What have I done to you that you struck me these three times? Bilaam said to the donkey: Because you mocked me! If only there were a sword in my hand I would now have killed you!”

(Bamidbar 22:28-29)

How could Bilaam remain unmoved at the clear miracle of his donkey opening its mouth and talking to him? Moreover, Bilaam got involved in an argument with it, threatening to kill it if only he had his sword with him.

How far removed from the truth is one who lacks fear of Hashem and good *middot*! He is like a blind man in the dark, obscured from seeing the truth for what it is. He will certainly never take the message inherent in miracles to heart, repenting for his misdeeds.

Bilaam should have been overwhelmed at the sight of his donkey, which merited seeing an angel of Hashem, something concealed from himself. But Bilaam’s wickedness did not allow him to admit that his donkey reached a higher level than him.

In order for a person to be capable of seeing the unvarnished truth, feeling wonder over it, and allowing it to prompt him to do teshuvah, he must possess real *ahavat Hashem*. Tehillim (84:3) states, “My heart and my flesh pray fervently to the Living G-d.” A person who does not become excited at the constant renewal of his body on a daily basis, but, rather, views it as the most natural thing, will not be capable of being amazed when a “big” miracle occurs. He

has already accustomed himself to take Hashem's deeds for granted, the large and the seemingly small.

I was very moved on one of my visits to Rav Shach, zt"l. He told me, in a most simple manner, "For a person to feel closeness with Hashem and truly believe in Him, he must realize that the fact that he wakes up every morning, hale and hearty, has the ability to move his arms and legs, and can speak, is nothing short of a tremendous miracle." I was touched by these sincere words, said with firm faith. The constancy of these miracles should not minimize them. Ignoring one's steady survival and daily rejuvenation dulls his senses. When overt miracles will be shown to him, he will not have the tools with which to carve a niche of amazement, for he has adopted an attitude of apathy.

Bilaam accustomed himself to view Hashem's constant miracles as ordinary routine, nothing to get excited over. Therefore, even when his donkey opened its mouth after seeing the angel, he remained indifferent. He was not capable of showing wonder at Hashem's miracles, and was certainly not capable of doing teshuvah in their wake.

Let us look at this wonderful world with wide open eyes. Let us notice the Hand of Hashem in all His works. It is only through Him that everything exists. Chazal teach (see *Chulin* 7b) that one does not move his hand in this world unless he was granted permission Above. Every move we make attests to Hashem's management of the world. For this alone, we should be in awe, thanking Him constantly. A thinking person should contemplate Hashem's handiwork and thank Him for every small detail of his life, even those which he is used to and seem natural. By accustoming oneself to thank Hashem for the seemingly insignificant things, a person will be aroused to thank Him for the unusual, out-of-the-ordinary occurrences. This is borne out in our Shabbat Morning Prayer, "The soul of every living

being shall bless Your Name, Hashem, our G-d; the spirit of all flesh shall always glorify and exalt Your remembrance, our King.”



Ignoring the Whole Truth

“How goodly are your tents, O Yaakov, your dwelling places, O Israel”

(Bamidbar 24:2-5)

Bilaam blessed Am Yisrael when he noticed that they encamped according to their tribes, and their tents faced away from each other (ibid. 24:2). This prompted him to proclaim the famous prayer of *Mah Tovu* (*Bava Batra* 60a).

If Bilaam observed the virtues of Am Yisrael, why didn't he go on to notice the attributes of Moshe Rabbeinu, whose face shone with the splendor of the *Shechinah*?

Often, a person sees part of the truth, but refuses to see it in its entirety. Bilaam saw the true beauty of our people, taking especial note of their innate *tzeniut*. But he neglected to take note of the whole truth, refusing to concede to the *Shechinah* which hovered over Moshe Rabbeinu. This is why he maintained his status as a rasha.



The Protective Qualities of Modesty

“Israel settled in Shittim and the people began to act promiscuously with the daughters of Moav”

(Bamidbar 25:1)

The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 106a) recounts that the devious plot was initiated by Bilaam Harasha. He told Balak that Hashem abhors promiscuity. Bnei Yisrael were in need of linen garments. He suggested they instate young women of Moav to sell these cloths, and eventually lead Bnei Yisrael to sin.

Bnei Yisrael were safely ensconced in the confines of the camp. They had the *Shechinah* with them. They should never have left this safe cocoon in order to purchase material for *tzitzit*. On the contrary, buying *tzitzit* at the expense of breaching the boundaries of *tzeniut* was too steep a price to pay. It was a mitzvah at the expense of an aveirah. It was all a ploy of the Satan. He drew them by what seemed like a mitzvah, and eventually caused them to sin. Kohelet (10:8) states, “He who breaks down a wall will be bitten by a snake.” Bilaam was a *nitzotz* of the Satan and the Snake. The Zohar (see III, 194b) expounds that Bilaam was the snake that bit our nation due to the breach in the wall of their *tzeniut*.

On one of my trips by plane, the stewardesses swarmed about us, offering various types of services and food. I explained that we weren't interested in their food or drink, for reasons of kashrut. Nonetheless, as if led by the Satan, they returned to me time and again. This is the way of the Satan. He attempts to create a crack in the wall of our resistance. Once the crack is formed, it is not difficult for us to fall in, prey to his plots.



Beware of Sin

“Israel settled in Shittim and the people began to act promiscuously with the daughters of Moav”

(Bamidbar 25:1)

The word שטימ (Shittim) is related to the word שטות (foolishness). Bnei Yisrael’s sinning with the daughters of Moav was caused merely by folly and lack of caution (see *Sanhedrin* 106a). The Midrash (*Tanchuma, Balak* 18) describes how the girls of Moav would appear at their stands to sell their wares, dressed immodestly. Bnei Yisrael, in need of linen cloths, hurried to their stalls. Once there, they were stalled, eventually falling into the trap of sin. Had the Jewish men spent a few moments in forethought, they would have foregone the urge to purchase these garments, obviating the entire tragic episode. It was a שטות in שטימ which could have easily been avoided.



Tzipporah's Trustworthiness

“Behold! a man of the Children of Israel came and brought a Midianite woman near to his brothers before the eyes of Moshe and before the eyes of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel; and they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting”

(Bamidbar 25:6)

Rashi expounds on the words, “Before the eyes of Moshe”: Zimri said to him, “Moshe, is this [woman] forbidden or permitted? If you will say she is forbidden, who permitted the daughter of Yitro to you?”

Zimri's charge against Moshe Rabbeinu was chutzpah of the first degree. Tzipporah had undergone full conversion and was an extremely righteous woman. How can she be compared with the daughter of the king of Midian, a defiled gentile, as far from the Jewish way of life as possible?

The author of *Sefer Hapeliah* asks how Moshe, who was equal to all Am Yisrael, could marry Tzipporah, a convert. One would expect that a man of Moshe's caliber, who spoke to Hashem face-to-face, would marry a woman with impeccable lineage. How could the leader of our nation marry the daughter of the priest of Midian?

There was no natural way for any kosher Jew to marry Tzipporah, the righteous convert from Midian. The country of Midian was steeped in idolatry. Furthermore, Bnei Yisrael were steeped in the defilement of Egypt, forbidden from leaving. However, Hashem observed Tzipporah's piety, choosing to change her ways and

abandon the comfortable lifestyle of her father's home in exchange for joining the hunted nation of Bnei Yisrael. Hashem arranged for Moshe to come to Midian and marry her, extricating her from the defilement of her environment. Had Moshe not been sent there by Hashem, upon fleeing Egypt after killing the Egyptian, who knows if Tzipporah would have merited marrying a kosher Jew? Therefore, Hashem placed the thought in Moshe's mind to escape to Midian. Once there, he married Tzipporah according to Torah law.

On one of my trips, Rabbi Benisti, shlita, brought before me two black African girls. Their mother was Jewish; their father was not. Rabbi Benisti related that by Divine Providence, he knew this family, almost completely assimilated in the wilds of Africa. Had he not concerned himself with maintaining their Jewishness, procuring kosher food for them, etc., these two girls would have had no one to fend for them. Who knows what their end would be. They look like ordinary black Africans, while Jewish blood courses through their veins, and they are halachically Jewish children.

Similarly, Hashem knew that Tzipporah must be extracted from the defilement of Midian, in order that she not completely lose her Jewish identity. Moshe came to her rescue, marrying her according to halachah. Who would dare cast aspersion upon the Jewishness of the wife of our great shepherd?

No one in the nation dared doubt Tzipporah's legitimacy. Only Zimri, heated up with passion for sin, lost all sound reasoning, displaying overt brazenness toward Moshe as he doubted his marriage. When Hashem saw this, He decided to put a stop to it. He placed boldness in the heart of Pinchas, so that he acquired superhuman strength to do what needed to be done. By his daring deed, he removed the great humiliation which had been placed upon Bnei Yisrael. This was the humiliation of immorality, coupled with suspicion of Tzipporah's authenticity.

Physical Organs Correspond to the Organs of the Soul

“Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen saw, and he stood up from amid the assembly and took a spear in his hand”

(Bamidbar 25:7)

My holy forebear, Rabbi Chaim Vital, zy”a, states (*Sha’arei Kedushah* 1:1) that man’s body is comprised of 613 parts, corresponding to the 613 mitzvot. Each body part corresponds to a different mitzvah. And just as in the body there are 613 organs, so too, the *neshamah* contains 613 organs, paralleling the 613 mitzvot.

This was very difficult for me to comprehend. The *neshamah* is a most elevated, spiritual entity. What connection can it have with the 613 physical parts of the body?

I thought over the matter and arrived at the conclusion that the body is physical mass. It is naturally drawn to materialism, not to mitzvot. Since the body does not want to part with its natural urges and temptations in favor of observing mitzvot, Hashem created the *neshamah*, corresponding to the organs of the body. The organs of the *neshamah* are spiritual, granting power to the body to overcome materialism and observe mitzvot. If not for these vital organs, the body would never be pulled to do mitzvot. How dreadful that would be! Hashem, Who knows our makeup, created spiritual organs in man’s *neshamah*. These are what motivate him to keep the mitzvot, which correspond to them.

For this reason, the pasuk (*Eichah* 3:23) states, “They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.” The *neshamah*, which

enters the body anew each morning, fuels it so that it can triumph over its materialistic nature and hurry to accomplish mitzvot. The *neshamah*, with its powers of purity, descends, sanctifying the body (see *Eitz Chaim* 29:3). [See the explanation of the Arizal in his sefer *Likutei Torah, Ha'azinu*].

When Pinchas took note of what was transpiring with Zimri and the Midianite woman, he hurried to grab the spear and, sparing not a moment, killed both of them in one fell swoop. The pasuk (*Bamidbar* 25:7) states, “He stood up from amid the assembly and took a spear in his hand.” The Zohar (see III, 237a) asks why the Torah emphasizes that he took a spear in his hand. Would we think he held the spear in his foot, or any other limb? The meaning behind these words is that Pinchas took himself in hand. He sanctified Hashem’s Name with all his body parts.

The *gematria* of the word בידו (in his hand), adding one for the word itself, is equal to that of the word גידו (his limb). Pinchas harnessed all his body parts for the purpose of fulfilling the injunction (*Devarim* 17:7): “You shall destroy the evil from your midst.” From where did Pinchas gain the determination to act so zealously? It was from his *neshamah*, comprised of 613 organs which affect the physical organs, as explained above.



The Name Pinchas

“Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen saw, and he stood up from amid the assembly... and pierced them both...”

(Bamidbar 25:7-8)

Rashi explains that Pinchas saw the deed and remembered the halachah. A person's name indicates his essence. For this reason, it is of paramount importance to deliberate carefully before naming a baby. His development will follow the name he was given. Elazar, father of Pinchas, surely saw his son's future when he named him. The name פִּינְחָס (Pinchas) can be divided into the words פִּנְסָה חַי. The word פִּנְסָה is numerically equivalent to the word פָּנִים (face). Pinchas saw the brazen face of Zimri facing toward Moshe Rabbeinu, charging Moshe of marrying Tzipporah unlawfully (*Sanhedrin* 82a). Pinchas remembered the halachah, and took up for Hashem's honor, killing Zimri.

The word פִּנְסָה also hints to Moshe's face (פָּנִים), and the Ten Commandments that he received from Hashem – א-ל חַי הָעוֹלָמִים –



Pinchas



The Reward for a Mitzvah Is a Mitzvah

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon the Children of Israel, when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel in My vengeance. Therefore, say: Behold! I give him My covenant of peace”

(Bamidbar 25:10-12)

Hashem commanded Moshe to inform Pinchas that in reward for taking up for Hashem’s honor and killing Zimri ben Salu, the *Nasi* of Shevet Shimon, together with Kuzbi bat Tzur, he would merit His covenant of peace. Pinchas would become the emblem of peace, and bring much peace to the world.

Upon reflecting on Zimri’s sin, one wonders at the reaction of the people. Instead of taking action, decrying this dastardly deed, they cried over the shame of it. They were petrified into inactivity.

Zimri's dishonorable act was more abominable in light of the way he presented his case to Moshe. He mockingly challenged Moshe's own marriage with Tzipporah, who was known by all to be a most righteous woman. She dedicated her life and family for the sake of Klal Yisrael. Nonetheless, Bnei Yisrael, including Shevet Shimon, Zimri's tribe, remained silent, making no endeavor to correct matters.

Just as there is physical tiredness and depression, when a person is not lucid enough to act appropriately, so is there a spiritual lethargy, which obscures one's ability to save the situation. Bnei Yisrael found themselves in this condition. They simply did not know how to react to Zimri's brash act.

Pinchas was the one who saved the day. He stood out from among the others, standing up for Hashem's sake. He grabbed his spear and slew the two sinners together. The word רומח (spear) is composed of the letters רמ"ח, a reference to the 248 limbs in a person's body. Pinchas gathered his limbs together, under the control of his mind. In this manner, he succeeded in breaking through the paralysis which had gripped the nation. With his swift act of killing the sinners, he halted the epidemic which had already claimed 24,000 lives (*Bamidbar* 25:9). Hashem performed twelve miracles on behalf of Pinchas, enabling him to achieve his goal of eradicating defilement from the camp of Israel (*Tanchuma, Balak* 21).

Similarly, we find that when Yaakov Avinu was at Har Hamoriah, he "lifted his feet" (*Bereishit* 29:1). Why doesn't it simply state that Yaakov went? When Yaakov realized that he was at Har Hamoriah, a place where the *Shechinah* is most concentrated, he became paralyzed and could go no further. He was so engulfed with *kedushah* that he could not tear himself away from the place. But he

knew he had a mission of going to Charan. He therefore had to actually lift his feet in order to leave.

Chazal (*Kiddushin* 39b) teach, “The reward for a mitzvah is not in this world.” In this world, we can enjoy the fruits of our labor regarding mitzvot between man and his fellow man. But the reward for mitzvot between man and Hashem are reserved completely for the World to Come. How can we understand that Pinchas was rewarded in this world for fighting Hashem’s battle?

The reward granted to Pinchas in *Olam Hazei* is worlds apart from the reward a king would ordinarily grant a loyal subject. A citizen of Morocco once saved the king from an attempted assassination. As a token of his gratitude, the king appointed this man to a prestigious position in his kingdom. Their constant contact would serve as a reminder to the king that this man saved his life. The reward accorded to Pinchas was of an entirely different nature. It was along the lines of (*Avot* 4:2), “The reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah.” In the merit of promoting peace among Am Yisrael, Pinchas was rewarded with becoming the peacemaker between Bnei Yisrael and their Heavenly Father (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 771). One mitzvah leads to another until a wealth of mitzvot is accumulated, which is reserved for *Olam Haba*.

A woman, let’s call her Mrs. Cohen, once complained to me that her husband was so absorbed in Torah study day and night that he was detached from his surroundings. Registration for yeshivot was taking place, and their son asked his father if he would put in a good word for him in a prestigious yeshiva, in order to guarantee him a place for the upcoming year. The man reassured his son that he had nothing to worry about. He would make every attempt to get him into the yeshiva of his choice. After a few days, the woman asked her husband if he had inquired into the yeshiva. He replied that the

entire matter had escaped his memory. He would take care of it now, he said.

The next day, Mr. Cohen was traveling on the bus. A very distinguished-looking man sat next to him and posed a difficulty in his Torah study, which had been bothering him for a long time. Mr. Cohen offered him a satisfying solution. As they continued talking, Mr. Cohen said that he was seeking a yeshiva for his son for the upcoming year. The other man mentioned that he worked at a specific yeshiva and told the father he had nothing to worry about. He would arrange for his son's acceptance. It would be their privilege to accept the son of such a learned father.

We see, time and again, how one who involves himself in Torah study has his needs provided by others (see *Berachot* 35b). Furthermore, "If someone takes upon himself the yoke of Torah, the yoke of government and the yoke of worldly responsibilities are removed from him" (*Avot* 3:5). One who dedicates himself to the cause of Torah and Hashem's glory receives special *siyata di'Shemaya* to have his needs fulfilled. Pinchas brought about a tremendous *kiddush Hashem* and therefore merited future opportunities for promoting peace, without any effort involved. These opportunities would increase his Heavenly reward manifold.

How did Pinchas merit such greatness? It was due to the fact that "he stood up from amid the assembly" (*Bamidbar* 25:7). Pinchas was sitting among the Sanhedrin, the Torah giants of the nation, and speaking in words of Torah. Conversely, the rest of the nation "settled in Shittim." They reached the nadir of sin by transgressing with the daughters of Moav and paying homage to their idols. Wasting time from Torah study will bring a person to terrible sins. Sitting idle can bring one to serving idols. Indolence invites the *Yetzer Hara*, who seduces a person to sin. Conversely, Pinchas sat among the great men and thereby merited sanctifying Hashem's

Name. He received the singular blessing of “My covenant of peace” (*Bamidbar* 25:12).

Regarding Yaakov Avinu, Rashi expounds (*Bereishit* 37:2), “Yaakov sought to dwell in tranquility, but then, the ordeal of Yosef sprung upon him.” How unsettling can be the desire to settle! Yaakov merely sought to sit in peace, without actually doing it, and he was smitten with the incident of Yosef. All the more so should one be concerned about suffering when he sits idly, not intending to spend his time in Torah and mitzvot.

How far does the transgression of *bitul Torah* extend? Does one transgress every time he closes his sefer? I would like to suggest that one never really closes his sefer. Even after he has ended his learning session and left the Beit Hamidrash, he can still be attached to his study. His mind can be connected to Torah at all times. He should view the time away from Torah study merely as an intermission between sessions, in order to re-energize himself for further study with renewed vigor. When a person eats or sleeps, he should feel that he is not merely indulging in physical pleasure, but fortifying his body in order to serve Hashem to the best of his ability.

“In the way a man wishes to go, he is led” (*Makkot* 10b). If Hashem observes a person who truly desires to walk in His ways and observe His mitzvot, He grants him the strength to fulfill these desires. David Hamelech proclaims (*Tehillim* 119:62), “At midnight I arise to thank You for Your righteous ordinances.” David Hamelech awoke each night, precisely at midnight, in order to sing and give praise to Hashem (*Berachot* 3b).

Chazal (*ibid.*) relate that a harp hung in David’s room. A northerly wind would come and blow through its strings. This would awaken David at midnight. This miracle shows us how Hashem helps those

who wish to do His will. They often receive *siyata di'Shemaya* above the laws of nature, in order to enable them to continue on their road of righteousness.

Pinchas, who demonstrated by his bold act that he wished to preserve peace, merited another mitzvah. Hashem gave him more opportunities to bring peace between Bnei Yisrael and their Heavenly Father.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ How could Moshe Rabbeinu and Bnei Yisrael witness Zimri's crime and remain indifferent? Just as there is physical depression, so is there spiritual depression. Bnei Yisrael were in a stupor and could not react properly.
- ◆ Pinchas acted zealously for Hashem's sake and was granted the covenant of peace. But there is no reward for mitzvot between man and Hashem in this world.
- ◆ His reward was not material, but spiritual. It was in fulfillment of the Mishnah, "The reward for a mitzvah is a mitzvah." Hashem gave him more opportunities to bring peace among the nation. His Heavenly reward was thereby increased manifold.
- ◆ Pinchas sat among the Torah teachers, not the rest of the nation, who sat idly in Shittim. The rest of the nation fell to the level of sinning with the daughters of Moav and the idol of Ba'al Peor.
- ◆ The word רומח (spear) is composed of the letters רמ"ח, a reference to the 248 limbs in a person's body. Pinchas gathered his limbs together, under the control of his mind. In this manner, he succeeded in breaking through the paralysis which had gripped the nation. Similarly, we find that "Yaakov lifted his feet." In spite of the *kedushah* of the place which kept him transfixed, Yaakov moved on, knowing this was what was demanded of him.

- ◆ Is a person expected to spend all of his waking hours in Torah study? Even after one closes his sefarim, he is still considered involved in Torah if his heart and mind are on it. When he takes care of his physical needs, it is only in order to “recharge his batteries” for further Torah study. He has not ceased learning at all.
- ◆ “One who wishes to be purified is helped from Above.” A northerly wind blew on the strings of David’s harp, awakening him exactly at midnight to sing and praise Hashem. “In the way a man wishes to go, he is led.”



Performing to Perfection

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon the Children of Israel, when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel in My vengeance. Therefore, say: Behold! I give him My covenant of peace”

(Bamidbar 25:10-12)

In this verse, the Torah spells the name פינחס (Pinchas) with the added letter ך, unlike in other verses, where this letter is omitted. Moreover, in the above-quoted pasuk, the word שלום (peace) is written with the letter ך divided in two (*Kiddushin* 66b). A Sefer Torah with even one letter partly erased is invalid. But this word

has one letter written split purposely, and is not rendered invalid. What is the reason for this broken letter?

The reward for a mitzvah is not in this world (*Kiddushin* 39b). This world is the world of doing; the Next World is the world of receiving reward (see *Eiruvin* 22a). Why did Hashem change His ways by offering Pinchas reward for his zealousness while he was yet in this world?

The Mishnah (*Avot* 2:4), “Do not believe in yourself until the day you die” will provide an answer. A person should never feel he has already reached perfection. As long as he lives, he is liable to sin, thereby reducing his spiritual level. Perfection is only in the World to Come, but *striving* for perfection is the work of this world. If a person does not strive for perfection while yet in this world, he will never attain it in the World to Come. It is crucial to toil and expend energy in order to fulfill the purpose for which we were placed here. After a successful journey, one will arrive at his Destination perfect.

Bearing this in mind, one should act with the correct intentions. When he does a deed in the best way possible, it will propel him toward his goal. Often, a person does not act with true *yirat Shamayim*, but a desire for respect from others who might see him. Deeds done in this manner are obviously incomplete, for they lack their main component.

When Pinchas took up for Hashem’s honor by taking the spear and killing the *Nasi* of Shevet Shimon and the Midianite woman, there were those who charged him with being insane, or, alternatively, desiring to override Moshe, who had forgotten the halachah at the time (see *Torat Chaim, Sanhedrin* 82b). Therefore, Hashem added the letter ’ to Pinchas’ name. This letter, borrowed from Hashem’s own Name, proved to one and all that Pinchas acted with the spirit of Hashem. His sole intention was to restore

Hashem's honor, which had been desecrated. This letter indicates the perfection of Pinchas' deed, done altruistically and guided by *yirat Shamayim*. Ulterior motives played no role in his act.

The word שלום (peace) shares a root with the word שלמות (perfection). Rewarding Pinchas with the blessing of peace pointed to the perfection of his deed. Since no one in this world can achieve complete perfection, the letter ך of this word is split. All good intentions aside, perfection is reserved only for the World to Come. One must make himself worthy of it while yet in this world, the world of deed. He must emulate Pinchas who did his deed with the right intentions and the genuine motive to reinstate Hashem's desecrated honor.

Hashem wished to prove to everyone that Pinchas acted righteously, not spurred by any personal motives whatsoever. Therefore, He repaid part of his reward in this world. Had Pinchas displayed signs of acting with ulterior motives, Hashem would never have made this distinction.

It is well-known that Pinchas is Eliyahu Hanavi (*Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 46; see *Rabbeinu Bachya, Bamidbar* 25:11). He has two cloaks, one is this-worldly, and one is other-worldly (see *Zohar* II, 197a). Since Pinchas, in the guise of Eliyahu Hanavi, has a Heavenly aspect, it was appropriate to appoint him part of his reward in this world, distinct as he is from the rest of humanity, who receive their reward in the World to Come.

As the parashah continues, the Torah describes the five daughters of Tzelafchad, who came before Moshe requesting their father's inheritance, for he left no sons. The pesukim (*Bamidbar* 27:1-4) state, "The daughters of Tzelafchad, son of Chefer, son of Gilad, son of Machir, son of Menashe, of the families of Menashe son of Yosef drew near – and these are the names of his daughters:

Machlah, Noah, Chaglah, Milkah, and Tirtzah.” Rashi (ibid.) expounds, “But further on it says, ‘Machlah, Tirtzah...’ with their names listed in a different order. This tells us that they were all of equal importance.” The *Ba'al Haturim* (ibid. 27:7) adds that these women were wise, learned, and filled with the spirit of Hashem. They fortified themselves to bring their case before Moshe, requesting their father’s inheritance.

If the daughters of Tzelafchad were correct, and the halachah was in their favor, why didn’t the Torah make a point of teaching it to us previously? If the halachah is, indeed, that in a case where there are no sons, the daughters are the rightful inheritors, why didn’t Moshe know it beforehand, instead of having to ask Hashem now?

Hashem wanted these daughters to get the credit of the halachah becoming clarified through them (*Sanhedrin* 8a). A worthy deed comes about through a meritorious person (ibid.). The fact that they were the ones through whom the halachah was taught indicates that they were not motivated by greed or the desire for fame. Their father’s honor impelled them to make their request. They wanted him to have a remembrance in this world. The fact that the halachah was established through their act was proof that their intentions were pure, driven by the desire to reach perfection, and not, *chalilah*, out of conceit.

As the parashah continues, we read that Hashem told Moshe (*Bamidbar* 27:18), “Take to yourself Yehoshua son of Nun, a man in whom there is spirit, and lean your hand upon him.” Further, we read (ibid. 27:23), “He leaned his hands upon him and commanded him, as Hashem had spoken through Moshe.” Hashem had commanded Moshe to place only one hand upon Yehoshua, but Moshe placed both hands upon him, as Rashi expounds (ibid.), “Generously, much more than he had been commanded.” Why, indeed, did Moshe place both hands upon Yehoshua? Rashi explains

that Moshe can be compared to a vessel which is full and brimming over; he generously filled Yehoshua with his wisdom. Moshe wanted to do Hashem's will to perfection, appointing Yehoshua in the best way possible, in order that he would succeed in his task and lead Am Yisrael appropriately. Just as it is clear that Moshe wished to fulfill Hashem's command to perfection, with no ulterior motive, so too, Pinchas, as well as the daughters of Tzelaḥad, acted with the desire to attain perfection. They therefore merited some of their reward in this world, as proof of their righteousness.

The Torah (*Bamidbar* 25:12) states, "Therefore, say: Behold! I give him My covenant of peace." The pasuk does not state, "Say to him." Hashem wanted this message to be given to all Klal Yisrael, not only Pinchas. This was in order to prove his righteousness, and that he had acted without any ulterior motives. For this reason, he merited Hashem's covenant of peace (שלום) indicating his perfection (שלמות).

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ In this verse, the Torah spells the name פינחס (Pinchas) with the added letter ׀, unlike in other verses, where this letter is omitted. Moreover, Hashem granted Pinchas His covenant of peace. The word שלום (peace) is written with the letter ׀ divided in two. What is the reason for this? Additionally, Hashem's way is to repay reward in the World to Come. Why did He see fit to repay Pinchas in this world?
- ◆ The letter ׀ refers to Hashem's Name. It attests to Pinchas' piety. He performed to perfection out of the desire to sanctify Hashem's Name. He never intended to lord over Moshe or the nation. The word שלום (peace) hints to perfection (שלמות). The letter ׀, though, is split to indicate that perfection can never be achieved in this world. Doing one's deeds in the best way possible will guarantee perfection in *Olam Haba*. Hashem made a partial payment to Pinchas in this world, in order to indicate his righteousness and perfection of deed.

- ◆ The halachah was clarified through the daughters of Tzelafchad. This proved to all that their request was altruistic, in order to honor their father's name. Moshe Rabbeinu, likewise, leaned both hands upon Yehoshua, instead of the requisite one, for he wanted to appoint him as leader in the best way possible. Just as Moshe's act was perfect, with no foreign motives, so were those of Pinchas and the daughters of Tzelafchad.
- ◆ Hashem commanded Moshe to tell Pinchas that He was granting him His covenant of peace. The wording is, "Therefore, say," and not, "Therefore, say to him." This message was for all of Klal Yisrael, to prove to all that Pinchas acted altruistically.



The Zealousness of Pinchas

"Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon the Children of Israel, when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel in My vengeance"

(*Bamidbar 25:11*)

Hashem richly rewarded Pinchas for his zealousness for Hashem's honor. The pasuk (*Bamidbar 25:12*) states, "Behold! I give him My covenant of peace. And it shall be for him and his offspring after him a covenant of eternal priesthood, because he took vengeance for his G-d, and he atoned for the Children of Israel."

Pinchas' trait of zealousness drove him to act as he did, in spite of the risk to his life. His sole motivation was to avenge Hashem's Name, removing disgrace from Bnei Yisrael. His zealousness was in place, proven by the fact that as soon as he eliminated Zimri and Kuzbi, the plague ceased. Hashem blessed him with peace and priesthood, for himself and his children forever.

The Midrash (*Tanchuma, Bechukotai* 5) relates a puzzling incident regarding Pinchas. The Judge, Yiftach, came back from battle victorious. He vowed to sacrifice the first thing that came out of his house. In gratitude to Hashem, he believed it would be a kosher animal, worthy of offering on the altar. Instead, it was his daughter, come to greet her triumphant father. Yiftach felt he had no recourse but to put her in solitary confinement for the rest of her life.

Pinchas, the Kohen Gadol, felt it was beneath his dignity to go to Yiftach in order to nullify his promise. He claimed that if Yiftach wished to release his daughter from her captivity, it behooved Yiftach to come to him, the High Priest, and not the other way around. Due to his arrogant attitude, the Divine spirit left Pinchas. This is most intriguing. Pinchas was the great zealot of Hashem, as depicted in this parashah. He saved our nation from destruction through his self-sacrifice. How could he not take pity upon Yiftach's daughter, left in isolation for the rest of her life, simply because her father objected to coming to him to nullify his promise?

Yiftach was punished for his refusal to come before the Kohen Gadol, but Pinchas was punished, as well. He should have gone to Yiftach as an act of compassion for the girl, whose life was ruined on account of her father's vow and his undue pride.

Pinchas was consistent in his zealousness throughout his long career. When he heard of Yiftach's vow, he considered it an act of humiliation to Hashem and a disgrace of the Torah. What would

Yiftach have done had a donkey emerged? Throughout his life, Pinchas avenged Hashem's honor. He wanted to demonstrate that Yiftach's vow was a dishonor to Hashem.

Pinchas anticipated Yiftach's arrival. Yiftach would remove the cloak of conceit and seek ways of nullifying his vow, thereby rectifying the desecration to Hashem's Name. When he saw that Yiftach was not forthcoming, Pinchas acted stringently with him and refused to come to him. Pinchas was motivated by the wish to uphold the honor of Hashem's Name. He wanted others to see and learn, so that they should not repeat Yiftach's fatal mistake, and the *chillul Hashem* that resulted.

Pinchas was, once again, stimulated by genuine motives. Therefore, the *Shechinah* left him only temporarily. It returned later on, when he returned to this world as Eliyahu Hanavi. We find that Eliyahu Hanavi lowered his dignity before Achav after he had killed the prophets of Ba'al (*Melachim I*, 18:46). Eliyahu subjected himself to the king, in spite of his greatness. This is evidence that Pinchas/Eliyahu's refusal to approach Yiftach did not stem from arrogance. He was driven only by Hashem's honor. He wanted to teach the lesson that this type of vow is a sin which warrants repentance. Nevertheless, Pinchas was punished by the Divine spirit leaving him, for he should have displayed more compassion toward Yiftach's daughter.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Pinchas took up for Hashem's honor by killing the *Nasi* of Shevet Shimon together with the Midianite woman, thereby halting the epidemic. He received tremendous reward for this act.
- ◆ Why did Pinchas adamantly refuse to come toward Yiftach and nullify his vow, instead, demanding that Yiftach come to him?

- ◆ Pinchas did not act out of arrogance, *chas v'shalom*. Pinchas returned as Eliyahu Hanavi. Eliyahu showed honor to King Achav, proving that he never acted out of personal honor or arrogance.
- ◆ Pinchas refused to come to Yiftach in order to teach that one should never make such a vow.



Zimri's Dastardly Deed

“Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon the Children of Israel, when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel in My vengeance”

(*Bamidbar 25:11*)

Through acting with self-sacrifice, Pinchas managed to halt the epidemic that swept through Am Yisrael. For this, he was richly rewarded. By contemplating how dire the situation was, and specifically the behavior of Zimri, we will understand how crucial the act of Pinchas was in saving the day.

Zimri brazenly appeared before Moshe Rabbeinu with a Midianite woman. He asked whether she was permissible to him. Moshe answered in the negative. Then Zimri countered, “Who allowed you to take Tzipporah from Midian as a wife?” (*Sanhedrin 82a*). How could he compare Tzipporah to this Midianite? Tzipporah was a kosher convert, a *tzaddeket* who married Moshe, completely

sanctified for Hashem. In her righteousness, she saved Moshe's life from a snake, as she grabbed the knife to circumcise her son (see *Rashi, Shemot 4:24*). In this manner, Tzipporah rescued Moshe Rabbeinu, the future Redeemer of our nation. In direct contrast, Kuzbi bat Tzur caused Bnei Yisrael to sin in immorality and idolatry. Where is the connection?

Furthermore, Zimri should have been plagued by the sight that met his eyes. He surely realized that the epidemic running rampant in the camp came in the wake of sinners like himself. Not only did he not take heed, he continued in his heinous acts. He was blind to those who fell at his side.

When a person falls into the clutches of sin, he is blind to all that goes on around him. He has sunk so low that all rationale has left him. An example would be a person who is so ravenously hungry that he eats without *netilat yadayim*. Once a person allows himself to yield to temptation, it blocks his eyes to anything else. He does not consider the transgressions involved, only his base impulses. Zimri did not put much thought into his terrible deed. He only sought ways to permit it.

How far must we keep from anything that smacks of sin! The power of aveirah is so great that it can drive a person to the depths, making him blissfully unaware that he is sinning, allowing him to sense only his urge to act as he wishes.

As Bnei Yisrael were falling prey to the plague, Zimri had the gall to approach Moshe Rabbeinu with the Midianite woman in order to justify his act. His boldness knew no bounds (see *Tanchuma, Balak 20*). We find similar behavior regarding Amalek, after *Yetziat Mitzrayim* (see *Ki Teitzei 9*). The pasuk (*Shemot 15:14*) states, "Peoples heard – they were agitated; terror gripped the dwellers of Pelasht." The entire world trembled in fear of Hashem, after

hearing about the Splitting of the Sea. As Amalek attacked Am Yisrael, most fearlessly, they cooled off our faith (*Ba'al Shem Tov, Beshalach* 20). The other nations were too shocked to fight against Amalek. When a person is taken aback by a sudden act, he is shocked into stillness.

Zimri, likewise, weakened the power of the Beit Din of Klal Yisrael, who were present when he made his claim. For this reason, Pinchas hurried in his act of zealousness, without waiting for the Beit Din to convene.

The parashah begins with the lineage of Pinchas (*Bamidbar* 25:11): "Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen". Rashi explains that his lineage is traced back to Aharon, even though that fact was well-known, because the tribes were humiliating him, saying, 'Did you see this son of Puti, whose mother's father fattened calves for idolatry, yet he killed the prince of a tribe of Israel!'

At the time of Zimri's death, Bnei Yisrael witnessed a number of miracles. Although Pinchas pierced them with his spear, the sinners remained alive. This was an overt miracle, wrought on behalf of Pinchas, the Kohen. Although Zimri was slain, he remained in the same condition as before, so that the people would realize why he was put to death. Also, Zimri's tent was protected by 24,000 guards. Pinchas walked in alone with his spear, overpowering them all (*Tanchuma, Balak* 21).

The plague ceased only after Zimri died. In spite of the numerous miracles surrounding his death, Bnei Yisrael had grievances against Pinchas. They claimed he descended from an idol worshipper, for his mother was a daughter of Yitro. They demanded to know how he dared kill a prince of Israel.

How did Bnei Yisrael fail to see that the epidemic ceased as soon as Pinchas killed Zimri, thereby saving them all from annihilation?

Not only did they not notice this, they had the audacity to grumble against him. Besides, Yitro had left his idols long before, in order to become a righteous convert. How dare they call him a calf-fattener?

How great is the influence of a rasha on his environment. The people saw Zimri sinning and being put to death, and were negatively influenced. They even encouraged him to sin, trying to protect his tent when he was in the heat of sin. Chazal (*Sanhedrin* 82b) state that he sinned more than four hundred times.

When one assists a fellow Jew in sinning, he “takes his side,” fending for him against those in opposition. This is why they saw only what they perceived as negative in Pinchas. Their support of sin obscured their vision. Hashem purposely ascribed Pinchas’ lineage to Aharon Hakohen, so that the nation would realize that they were mistaken in their assessment of him, and to impress upon them that only in his *zechut* did they survive the plague.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Studying the vengeance of Pinchas against Zimri will enable us to understand just how critical it was for Am Yisrael.
- ◆ How is it possible to compare the accursed Midianite woman, who caused men to sin, with Tzipporah, the tzaddeket, the righteous convert who married Moshe? Furthermore, Zimri saw the dead all around him, yet still kept on sinning.
- ◆ Transgressions block one’s vision from seeing the truth. One should flee them like the plague.
- ◆ As a direct result of Zimri’s dastardly deed, weakness overcame Am Yisrael, including the Beit Din. This was similar to the situation with Amalek, who cooled off the faith and fear of Bnei Yisrael as they attacked them after the Exodus from Egypt. For this reason, Pinchas acted zealously, not asking for any advice.

- ◆ The blindness which envelops sinners includes those who support him. In spite of observing many miracles in the act of Pinchas, including the fact that he brought the epidemic to a halt, Bnei Yisrael mocked him, claiming his maternal grandfather had fattened calves for idolatry. They supported Zimri in sin, thereby becoming blind to the truth.



The Additional Letter ׀

“Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon the Children of Israel, when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel in My vengeance. Therefore, say: Behold! I give him My covenant of peace”

(Bamidbar 25:11-12)

The name of Pinchas is written here with an additional letter ׀. Chazal (*Zohar*, III, 215b) explain that this letter alludes to Hashem’s Name.

Removing the letter ׀ from the Holy Name יהוה-י leaves יהוה, with a *gematria* of sixteen, the numerical equivalent of the Name חב״ו. This is an acronym of the words of the pasuk in Iyov (20:15), “חיל בלע ויקיאהו” – He devoured wealth, but will disgorge it.” When a person sins with wasted seed, *rachmana litzlan*, the *kelippah* devours this seed, and it is considered a sin (*Pri Eitz Chaim, Kriyat Shema al Hamitah*, 5). In order to do proper teshuvah, the sinner must immerse in a *mikveh*. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, zy”a, explains

that when a person is completely under water, he cannot breathe. His is then considered dead. When he emerges, he is like a newborn, free of sin. His “death” atoned for all his sins. After he has become purified, the *kelippah* disgorges the seed, returning it to the person. This is all by the power of the Holy Name חב"ו (see *Middot, Hamtakat Hadin* 54).

A Jewish actor was famous for his playboy personality. One day, he was inspired to do a complete turnaround. He became a *ba'al teshuvah*. He abandoned his dubious past, grew in his beard, and behaved with abstention and self-affliction. He would fast two days a week. One day, he went to immerse in the *mikveh*, where he met his death. His pure soul ascended to Heaven, empowered by the force of חב"ו. It is possible that Hashem was afraid he would revert back to sin if allowed to live.

When Zimri ben Salu sinned with the Midianite woman, he allowed the forces of impurity control over his seed. By piercing Zimri with his spear, Pinchas intended Zimri's death to atone for his sin, rectifying the seed by means of the Name חב"ו.

This was, indeed, Zimri's atonement. Regarding the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 25:14) “The name of the slain Israelite man who was slain with the Midianite woman was Zimri son of Salu,” the Ohr Hachaim asks why Zimri was called an “Israelite man.” He says it is in order to teach us that no Jew ever goes lost. The most seasoned sinner still has hope for repentance. The Ohr Hachaim continues that Zimri's death completely separated him from the Midianite woman, with no impression of sin adhering to him at all. His death cleansed his soul. Therefore, he is rightfully called an “Israelite man.”

The Kabbalists write that the great *Tanna*, Rabbi Akiva, was a *gilgul* of Zimri (*Rema MiPano, Gilgulei Neshamot* 20:2). And Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 disciples were reincarnations of the 24,000 people

who perished in the plague that swept through our nation in the wake of the sin.

Pinchas merited summoning the powers of the Holy Name חב"ו in order to atone for Zimri's sin. For this reason, Pinchas merited the added letter ׀ to his name. Without the letter ׀, Hashem's Name is numerically equivalent to sixteen, just as the Name חב"ו, the Name employed by Pinchas in rectifying Zimri's sin.

The Letter ׀ Refers to Eternity

Hashem promised Pinchas (*Bamidbar* 25:12), "Therefore, say: Behold! I give him My covenant of peace." The covenant was that he would live forever (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 771). The Zohar (II, 190a) states that Pinchas was Eliyahu Hanavi, who ascended to Heaven alive in a whirlwind. He continues to live until this very day. The letter ׀, taken from Hashem's Name, granted Pinchas the power to live forever, just as Hashem lives eternally.

We find that Yehoshua, too, had the letter ׀ added to his name by Moshe Rabbeinu. His name was originally Hoshea (הושע), and was then changed to Yehoshua (יהושע), as the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 13:16) states, "Moshe called Hoshea son of Nun Yehoshua." Why, then, didn't Yehoshua also merit living eternally, as Eliyahu did?

Yehoshua did not receive this letter by his own merit. Moshe Rabbeinu wished to protect him from the plot of the spies and therefore conferred it upon him. In contrast, Pinchas received this letter through his own exertion, "when he zealously avenged My vengeance." Pinchas risked his life to sanctify Hashem's Name. Zimri had 24,000 bodyguards. Pinchas did not fear them and went to kill Zimri at the risk of his own life. For this reason, he earned his stripes, or, in this case, his letter. This is the ׀ which grants him eternal life.

Hashem also added the letter ׀ to the names of the families of Bnei Yisrael, as we read further in the parashah. For instance, the family of Shimon is called Shimoni, and the family of Yitzhar is called Yitzhari. But they, too, did not merit this letter and its supernatural qualities as Pinchas did. Hashem did it for a completely different reason. He wished to silence those who claimed that the Jewish women surely cohabited with Egyptian men when their husbands were out all day working as slaves. These people said that the members of the next generation were therefore illegitimate. Hashem added the letter ׀ from His own Name to theirs, to prove their pure lineage (see *Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 773*).

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Hashem added the letter ׀ to the name of Pinchas.
- ◆ Hashem's Name ה-ו-ה-י is numerically equivalent to twenty-six. After removing the letter ׀, which was added to the name of Pinchas, the remaining letters ה-ו-ה are numerically equivalent to sixteen, the *gematria* of the Name חב"ו, the force employed by Pinchas in rectifying Zimri's sin of wasted seed.
- ◆ This additional ׀ from Hashem's Name enabled Pinchas to live forever, for Hashem's Name is eternal. Pinchas earned this letter, and therefore it had this effect. This was not the case with Yehoshua, who received an additional letter ׀ from Moshe as protection from the plot of the spies. Similarly, the names of the families of Bnei Yisrael received an added ׀, attesting to their kosher lineage. It did not have the power of the ׀ which Pinchas merited, for it was not earned by their own efforts.



Altruistic Affection

“Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon the Children of Israel, when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel in My vengeance. Therefore, say: Behold! I give him My covenant of peace”

(Bamidbar 25:11-12)

Pinchas' name, usually spelled without a letter ך, is written here in its full version. Chazal (Zohar III, 215b) explain that Hashem added a letter of His own Name to that of Pinchas to prove that Pinchas acted with pure motives in killing Zimri. Pinchas was present when Zimri brazenly asked Moshe who had allowed him to marry Tzipporah, after Moshe had invalidated his union with Kuzbi of Midian (*Sanhedrin* 82a). Pinchas could not tolerate Zimri's rebellious attitude and the way he compared two incomparable women. He therefore took his spear and pierced Zimri and Kuzbi, thereby killing them. Pinchas acted only for Hashem's sake. He could not bear watching someone sin so blatantly, before the entire nation. Proof of his righteousness is the fact that the epidemic stopped in its tracks.

The gaon and tzaddik, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, zt"l, writes in his sefer *Michtav Me'Eliyahu* (III, 168-169) that a person's level of love of Hashem is measured by whether or not he loves other objects, as well. It is impossible to love Hashem while loving materialism. True love must have only one focus. Pinchas loved only Hashem, with all his heart and soul. This force energized him with the power to kill

Zimri *l'shem Shamayim*. Hashem added the letter ם to his name, attesting to his altruistic intentions.

One of my visits to Argentina coincided with the world-wide football Super Bowl. I told the people that it was impossible to be glued to their television screens, obsessed with the game, while harboring love of Hashem in their heart. One must come at the expense of the other. I must mention a point in the favor of these people who stood stalwart in their faith, refusing to watch the game on Shabbat. This is what took place. The game was reaching its climax, and the tension reached a peak. The entire world was watching to see who would win the final round. A few Jews approached me, asking who would claim victory. I answered that the next day was Shabbat. In my lecture that afternoon, I would reveal who would win. The men exchanged embarrassed glances. One of them finally gathered the courage to clarify that at that very hour, the fateful game would be taking place. They couldn't possibly attend my *shiur*.

I wouldn't give up. "But tomorrow is Shabbat! Television is prohibited!" They explained that they either turn on the set before the onset of Shabbat, or have a gentile do it for them on Shabbat. I remained in my position, "It is an act of *chillul Shabbat* to watch television then." But they refused to forfeit this pleasure. I used my powers of persuasion, finally convincing them to attend the *shiur*, where I would reveal the final winners.

Out of curiosity, the people attended the *shiur* in droves, Jew and non-Jew alike. After the *shiur*, even the gentiles told their friends that they were impressed by the beauty of Torah, as reflected in the *shiur*. This was how my *shiur* progressed: I opened with words of Torah. After some time, I asked the attendees if they wanted to know who would win the game. "Certainly!" they cried out in unison. I answered, "We won! We did not compromise on Shemirat Shabbat.

We did not gaze at the television, but, instead, came to a Torah lecture. We overcame our *Yetzer Hara*. We cannot commit a transgression and then claim to love Hashem. We cannot love football together with Him.”

A person cannot cherish money at the same time that he loves Hashem. Let us remember that money will not escort a person on his Final Journey. Recently, a classmate of my son, Moshe, was killed in a car accident while crossing the street. His father is as rich as Korach, but what does all his wealth accomplish? The only things he will take to the Next World are his Torah study and good deeds.

The best proof that we truly love Hashem is devoting our lives for Him and sacrificing something we really love for the sake of our love of Hashem, just as Pinchas did. Wouldn't a person make sure to awaken in time for a flight? This proves he can get up on time for prayer. When a person really feels attached to something, no effort is too great for the sake of that object.

In Summary

- ◆ Hashem added the letter ״ to the name of Pinchas, proof that his deeds were for Hashem's sake.
- ◆ One has the ability to perform for Hashem's sake alone when he has no other interests.
- ◆ It is impossible to love Hashem completely, while exhibiting love toward other things.



From the Life of Pinchas

“Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon the Children of Israel, when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel in My vengeance. Therefore, say: Behold! I give him My covenant of peace”

(Bamidbar 25:11-12)

Pinchas was promised that he would live forever (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 771*). The Zohar (II, 190a) states that Pinchas returned as Eliyahu Hanavi, who ascended to Heaven in a storm. He lives until today. After his father, Elazar the Kohen Gadol, passed away, Pinchas was appointed to succeed him as Kohen Gadol (see *Vayikra Rabbah 37:4*). He stood at the helm of our nation during the days of the Judges. How tremendous is the reward for one mitzvah! Pinchas was rewarded with eternal life in the merit of acting zealously for Hashem’s sake.

We find that Pinchas served as the Kohen Gadol for a long period of time. He still served in that capacity in the days of Yiftach, one of the last Judges before the era of the Kings. It was in the days of Yiftach that Pinchas was demoted from his position, vanishing from the scene of history, until the days of Achav. Then he returned in the guise of Eliyahu Hanavi, who eventually ascended to Heaven in a whirlwind, before the eyes of his disciple and successor, Elisha.

The Reason Why Pinchas Lost His Status as Kohen Gadol

During the days of the Judge, Yiftach, Am Yisrael lived under the

threat of Amon. Yiftach was the one designated to fight this nation, since he was the leader. Before leaving to war, he promised that if he returned victorious, he would offer as a sacrifice the first thing that emerged from his house. The first one to greet him upon his return was his daughter (see *Shoftim* 11:3-34).

Yiftach was in a quandary. He knew it is forbidden to offer a human sacrifice (not that he wanted to). On the other hand, he wanted to keep his promise. He felt he had been victorious only in the merit of this vow. The *talmidei chachamim* suggested he might be able to nullify his vow by approaching the Torah Sage of the time, Pinchas the Kohen Gadol. Yiftach felt that appearing before the Kohen Gadol was an affront to his honor as Judge of the nation. He requested that Pinchas appear before him. But Pinchas likewise felt this was an insult to his stature. He therefore refused to come to Yiftach.

Yiftach saw that Pinchas was not forthcoming, yet he felt that his vow was binding. He took water and food and placed it in a tower, where he locked up his daughter. It was there that she breathed her last. Commentaries state that Yiftach's act was similar to offering her as a sacrifice. Hashem was angered that Yiftach refused to humble himself by going to Pinchas to nullify his vow. Yiftach was punished in a most bizarre manner. From that day on, his limbs became detached from his body, one at a time, until he expired (*Bereishit Rabbah* 60:3). This was measure for measure for not employing his limbs in going to seek Pinchas. Pinchas also aroused Hashem's anger by not coming toward Yiftach to nullify his vow. He could have rescued the pitiful girl. Hashem removed the mantle of High Priesthood from Pinchas (see *Kohelet Rabbah* 10:16), thereby confiscating his *ruach hakodesh*.

Pinchas remained in this state until Hashem appointed him, once again, to lead Bnei Yisrael. This time, he returned in the form of

Eliyahu. It was during the days of Achav, and idol worship was rampant in the nation. Izevel, wife of Achav, had all the prophets put to death. Finally, Eliyahu gathered the nation at Har HaCarmel, proving to them once and for all, that Hashem is the G-d of the world (*Melachim I*, 18:19-39).

Subsequently, Eliyahu Hanavi complained to Hashem about the low spiritual level of Am Yisrael, stating (ibid. 19:10), “I have acted with great zeal for Hashem, G-d of Legions, for the Children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant; they have razed your altars and have killed Your prophets by the sword, so [that] I alone have remained, and they now seek to take my life.” Hashem was angered with Eliyahu Hanavi for speaking derogatorily about Bnei Yisrael. Instead of praying on their behalf and asking for mercy upon them, he leveled accusations against them. Hashem told him he would not be a prophet any longer, and sent him to anoint Elisha in his stead (ibid. 19:16). After anointing Elisha and teaching him how to lead the people, Eliyahu was swept up in a whirlwind, before the shocked eyes of Elisha (see *Melachim II*, 2:11-12). Eliyahu was done with his mission on Earth and was thus taken up to Heaven alive.

An Additional Punishment

The Midrash (*Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* 28) relates that Eliyahu received an additional penalty for speaking *lashon hara* about his people: he was designated as the Angel of the *brit*. Eliyahu must appear at every *brit* that Bnei Yisrael make. For this reason, we prepare a special chair for him.

What was the punishment in this? Isn’t it a *zechut* to participate in the *simchah* of a *brit milah*? The Ben Ish Chai explains that when Eliyahu descends to attend a *brit*, Hashem is teaching Torah on High. He does not stop the *shiur* in order to wait for Eliyahu’s return.

Eliyahu thereby misses some points in the study from the mouth of Hashem. Herein lies his punishment.

The Zealousness of Pinchas in Shittim and of Eliyahu in the days of Achav

The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni, Melachim* 217) recounts that Hashem was angered that Eliyahu spoke negatively about Bnei Yisrael. He told Eliyahu, “You state that you acted with great zeal for My sake. You already acted zealously for Me in Shittim, by killing Zimri ben Salu.”

Hashem had a grievance toward Eliyahu. He explained it to him: “Your zealous act today is unlike that in Shittim. There, while risking your life for My honor, you prayed that with your act, Zimri’s sin would be atoned. You prayed for Me to have mercy on Zimri. Yet, now, you act zealously against Bnei Yisrael, without asking for My mercy upon them.”

Zimri, indeed, received forgiveness through his death. The Ohr Hachaim writes (*Bamidbar* 25:14) that Zimri is referred to as “the Israelite man.” With his death, he merited atonement. He rests in peace with the rest of the Jewish nation.

The correct way to spell the name פנחס is without the letter ׀. When a man with this name wishes to divorce his wife, the Beit Din is most precise in spelling his name correctly. If his name is spelled wrong, the *get* is invalid. But when the Torah relates the incident of Pinchas’ zealousness for Hashem’s honor, his name is spelled with an additional letter ׀. Chazal (*Zohar* II, 215b) explain that Hashem added this letter from His own Name ה-ו-ה-׀ to prove that Pinchas acted solely for His sake.

Removing the letter ׀ from the Holy Name ה-ו-ה-׀ leaves the word ה-ו-ה, which has the *gematria* of sixteen, the numerical equivalent of

the Name חב"ו. This is an acronym of the words of the pasuk in Iyov (20:15), "חיל בלע ויקיאהו" – He devoured wealth, but will disgorge it." When a person sins with wasted seed, *rachmana litzlan*, the *kelippah* devours this seed. After he has done teshuvah, the *kelippah* disgorges the seed, returning it to the person. This is all by the power of the Holy Name חב"ו.

By gaining the additional letter ך, Pinchas was a partner in the rest of Hashem's Name, so to speak, numerically equivalent to sixteen, alluding to the Name חב"ו. With his act of murdering Zimri, Pinchas rectified the sin with this Holy Name, left over when he extracted the ך from Hashem's Name י-ה-ו-ה.

Hashem's charge against Eliyahu was that he did not attempt to rectify Bnei Yisrael's sin during the days of Achav as he had in the form of Pinchas, when Bnei Yisrael sinned in Shittim. This indicated a flaw in his zealotry in the later days. Only when Pinchas rectified the sin of Zimri did he demonstrate pure altruistic intentions, unadulterated with the desire for honor or other ulterior motives. Therefore, Pinchas merited the additional letter ך from the Name of Hashem. He acted solely out of love for Hashem.

Hashem told Eliyahu that because he merely killed the false prophets but failed to correct their sins, he did not display the same level of zealotry for Hashem's Name as previously. His refusal to approach Yiftach to annul his vow, ostensibly out of respect for Hashem's honor, was not considered zealotry at all. It was a manifestation of protecting his own glory. The sorry results proved how fatal his mistake was.

How easy it is to fool oneself into believing he is acting with courage and zeal, claiming he is taking up for Hashem's honor, when in reality, this is not the case. Pinchas, the leader of the generation, erred twice, thinking he was acting *l'shem Shamayim*. Hashem

rebuked him for this and punished him. A person must always weigh his actions, examining whether or not they are for the sake of Heaven.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Pinchas received the reward of living eternally in the merit of his zealousness in killing *Zimri l'shem Shamayim*. The Zohar states that Pinchas returned as Eliyahu, who lives forever.
- ◆ Yiftach vowed that if he returned victorious from war, he would offer as a sacrifice to Hashem the first thing that emerged from his house. His daughter came out first to greet him. Yiftach waited for Pinchas to nullify his vow. But the prophet refused to come. Yiftach locked his daughter in a tower until her dying day. Hashem punished Yiftach most severely. His limbs fell from his body, until he expired. Hashem punished Pinchas by confiscating the High Priesthood from him and pronouncing him a nomad.
- ◆ Pinchas re-emerged as Eliyahu in the days of Achav. He complained to Hashem about the low spiritual level of the nation. As a result of this *lashon hara*, Eliyahu was demoted from being a prophet and was instructed to appoint Elisha in his place.
- ◆ Eliyahu was also punished by having to be present at every *brit*. In this manner, he misses learning Torah with Hashem during that time.
- ◆ Pinchas displayed altruistic motives in his zealousness in Shittim. While killing Zimri, he prayed for atonement. But his zealousness during the days of Achav did not come with any request for the peoples' pardon.
- ◆ The Holy Name **ה-ו-ה** has a *gematria* of sixteen, just like the remaining letters **ה-ו-ה** from Hashem's Name after removing the letter **י**, which was added to the name of Pinchas. This Holy Name rectifies the sin of wasted seed. When Pinchas killed Zimri, he employed this Name with the letters **ה-ו-ה**, to atone for Zimri's sin.



The Covenant of Peace

“Therefore, say: Behold! I give him My covenant of peace”

(Bamidbar 25:12)

As reward for taking up for Hashem’s honor and removing shame from Bnei Yisrael, Pinchas was granted His covenant of peace. Additionally, he and his progeny would wear the mantle of priesthood forever. Why is the word שלום (peace) written in a Sefer Torah with the letter ך split in half? If even one letter of a Sefer Torah is damaged or written incorrectly, the entire Sefer Torah is invalid and may not be used. But this split letter ך does not render the Sefer Torah invalid. Tradition dictates that scribes write this letter in two halves. What is the reason for this?

Hashem does not reward a person in this world (*Eiruvim* 22a). Reward for a mitzvah is reserved for the World to Come. In this case, Hashem veered from His usual custom and repaid Pinchas while he was yet in this world. Why?

The broken letter ך points to the fact that the reward Pinchas received in this world was not complete. Pinchas, who was later Eliyahu Hanavi (*Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* 46), ascended alive to Heaven (*Melachim* II, 2:11). But Eliyahu does not rest in peace. Hashem sends him down to this world from time to time, whether for a *brit milah*, the Seder Night, or other occasions. Eliyahu would certainly prefer to rest comfortably under the wings of the *Shechinah*, basking in the light of Hashem. But he was given this mission to fulfill. He must exert himself to leave his place on High and visit here, every so often.

Since his reward is not complete, it is not considered as though he received it already in this world. He received partial payment, in

the form of the priesthood, which his progeny inherited from him. This was in order that Am Yisrael would unequivocally know that Pinchas acted only to remove shame from Bnei Yisrael. Chazal (*Tanchuma, Balak* 21) add that Pinchas could never have overcome all the guards standing watch at the entrance of Zimri's tent. If not for Hashem's help, he would have fallen dead before them. When Hashem observed his steadfastness in acting on His behalf, He cloaked him in the *neshamot* of Nadav and Avihu (see *Zohar* III, 217a). They, too, served Hashem zealously. Their *neshamot* invested him with supernatural powers, allowing him to vanquish the guards and to kill Zimri and the Midianite woman in one strike.

Hashem rewarded Pinchas partially in this world, in order to teach us the lesson that his motives were pure. He was not motivated by personal interest whatsoever. But his reward is not complete, hence the split letter 'ו in the word שלום. Additionally, Hashem compels Pinchas to descend to this world on occasion, preventing him from studying Torah from Hashem Himself.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why is the letter 'ו in the word שלום split in half in a Sefer Torah? Furthermore, why did Hashem repay Pinchas in this world, which is unusual?
- ◆ The split letter 'ו indicates that Pinchas' reward was incomplete. Pinchas is Eliyahu, who ascended alive to Heaven. Hashem compels him to return to this world every so often, when he would rather bask in the glory of the *Shechinah*.
- ◆ Since Pinchas' reward was incomplete, it was not considered given in this world. Hashem gave him part of his reward while yet here in order to teach one and all that he acted with pure motivations.



The Unconditional Love of Moshe Rabbeinu

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Harass the Midianites and smite them”

(Bamidbar 25:16-17)

Hashem commanded Moshe to wage war against the Midianites, for they caused Bnei Yisrael to sin with idolatry and immorality. Moshe Rabbeinu attempted to recruit the people to fulfill Hashem’s word (ibid. 31:3-4), but Bnei Yisrael were loath to respond. They tried to dodge the draft and had to be literally forced into battle by Moshe (*Tanchuma, Matot 3*).

Considering this incident in light of the following will arouse our admiration for Moshe, our ever-loyal shepherd. Hashem told Moshe (ibid. 31:2) that after this war with Midian, before the nation was to enter the Land, he would breathe his last, not meriting to enter the Promised Land. Armed with this knowledge, Moshe could have easily delayed his death by procrastinating in recruiting soldiers. I remember when the king of Morocco was fatally ill. He spent fortunes to get the best doctors in the world so that he could live longer, but was unsuccessful. *L’havdil*, Moshe was well-aware of the fact that the war with Midian was the last ordeal the nation would undergo before entering Eretz Yisrael. By delaying it, he would prolong his own life.

However, Moshe knew that every day in the Wilderness posed trials for the nation, which were likely to bring them down from their high spiritual level. He feared they would fall so low as to lose their merit to inherit the Land. The benefit of the nation stood at the forefront of Moshe’s mind. He ignored all personal interests and dedicated himself totally for the sake of the nation. His objective

was that they maintain their elevated level and merit inheriting the Land, which has special Divine supervision that protects the Jewish spirit and keeps it alive. With his noble act, Moshe bequeathed to all generations the meaning of the phrase *unconditional love*. It means neglecting one's personal agenda and placing the good of the other first and foremost in one's order of priorities. This is the only way to foster true love.

The Beit Hamikdash was destroyed on account of baseless hatred (*Yoma* 9b). It is difficult to understand this concept. Unconditional love is comprehensible. One loves his friend, so he gives to him, with no thought of physical recompense. But what does one gain from baseless hatred?

If one desists from unconditional love, he is likely to descend to the level of baseless hatred. If a person is not constantly seeking to love his fellow man and do kindness with him, the moment it seems that his friend is acting unjustly toward him, he will not judge him favorably. The road to baseless hatred will be very short.

The way to attain unconditional love is hidden in the words of Bilaam Harasha, as he blessed our nation (*Bamidbar* 24:5), "How goodly are your tents, Yaakov, your dwelling places, Israel." As he observed their tents facing away from each other, he perceived the secret of our nation, guided by the tenets of *tzeniut* (see *Bava Batra* 60a). A person is naturally jealous of his friend's acquisitions. When he sees what transpires in his fellow man's home, he becomes envious, as "the grass is greener on the other side." This feeling can swell into baseless hatred. By ensuring that their entranceways faced away from each other, Bnei Yisrael reduced the chance for this abominable *middah* to enter their homes.

The Midrash (*Sifri, Beha'alotcha* 11) tells us that Eisav naturally hates Yaakov. What is the source of this enmity? Yaakov never did

wrong to Eisav. Yaakov represents the pillar of Torah, personifying its maxim of pleasantness and peace (*Mishlei* 3:17). Eisav's attitude toward Yaakov is the epitome of baseless hatred: irrational, and defying all logic. Since Eisav chose the approach of hatred, Hashem hates him, measure for measure, as the pasuk (*Malachi* 1:2-3) states, "I loved Yaakov, but I hated Eisav." The word "hate" is very intense. It is not used in regard to any sinners. This is because Hashem never gives up on anyone, always anticipating that person's repentance. But Eisav lives with a deeply-ingrained animosity toward Am Yisrael, the Torah, and anything that hints to *kedushah*. Hashem has proclaimed that He despises Eisav in order to teach how hateful is the *middah* of baseless hatred to Hashem, Whose signature is peace.

We learn unconditional, boundless love from our leader and redeemer, who sacrificed his own personal desires for the sake of the nation. Moshe craved more years of life, yet did not tarry in recruiting people to fight the Midianites so that they could enter the Land sooner. Moshe also knew that were he to enter Eretz Yisrael, he would immediately build the Beit Hamikdash. His prayers would have the power to keep the Beit Hamikdash standing forever. What would happen when the Jews would eventually slip into sin? If Hashem would not have had the option of casting His wrath upon the sticks and stones of our Temple, He would have cast it upon Bnei Yisrael themselves, wiping them out completely (see *Eichah Rabbah* 4:14). Moshe loved his people too much to allow that to happen. He preferred to rush to war with Midian, thereby hastening his own death at the borders of the Land. All of this was due to his tremendous, uncompromising devotion to his people, the sheep of his flock.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Moshe had to force Bnei Yisrael into war with the Midianites, who had caused them to sin. Hashem told Moshe that immediately after this war,

he would die. Moshe did not procrastinate, claiming that the people were reluctant to fight. He did as Hashem commanded, without taking his personal interests into account.

- ◆ Moshe was intent on the nation entering Eretz Yisrael as soon as possible. He knew that the longer they remained in the Wilderness, the greater the spiritual danger. He ignored his personal desires and rushed them into war, so that they could enter the Land at the earliest possible opportunity.
- ◆ Moshe teaches us the true meaning of unconditional love, the direct opposite of baseless hatred. What is the source of baseless hatred? It is the result of a lack of unconditional love.
- ◆ Bilaam praised our nation with the words, “How goodly are your tents, Yaakov.” He observed how their tents faced away from each other. This averts the negative trait of jealousy and baseless hatred.
- ◆ Moshe knew that if he were to enter Eretz Yisrael, he would build the Beit Hamikdash, and it would have the power to remain standing forever. When Hashem would be angered by His nation, He would have no recourse but to annihilate them. Therefore, Moshe rushed the people into war so that they could enter the Land without him. When Hashem would subsequently be angered by their deeds, He would cast His anger upon the Temple, and His nation would live.



Hashem's Name Is in Every Jew

“It was after the plague – Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen, saying: Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel, from twenty years of age and up, according to their fathers’ houses, all who go out to the legion in Israel”

(Bamidbar 26:1-2)

After the plague which swept through Am Yisrael in the wake of the sin of Zimri ben Salu and Kuzbi bat Tzur, Hashem commanded Moshe and Elazar, son of Aharon, to count the people. Rashi explains that Hashem told them to do this specifically now. After wolves run rampant among the sheep and make off with many of the flock, the shepherd takes a count of how many he has left. Hashem, our Shepherd, wished to check how many of His sheep remained intact after the epidemic.

It is interesting to note that each family's name is written preceded by the letter 'ה and followed by the letter '. For example (*Bamidbar 26:5*), “חֲנוֹךְ מִשְׁפַּחַת הַחֲנוּכִּי לְפִלּוּא מִשְׁפַּחַת הַפְּלוּאִי” – Of Chanoch, the Chanochite family; of Palu, the Paluite family.” Rashi (*ibid.*) expounds that the nations would humiliate the Israelites and say, “Why do they trace their ancestry by their tribes? Do they really think that the Egyptians did not have their way with their mothers? Just as the Egyptians ruled over the Israelites' bodies, so did they rule over their wives!” Rashi explained that this is why Hashem placed His Name in theirs, with the letter 'ה on one side of the family name and the letter " on the other side, as if to say, “I testify about them that they are children of their fathers.” How do

these two letters indicate this? The letter ך in the word אִישׁ (man) and the letter ך in the word אִשָּׁה (woman) spell Hashem's Name ה-י hinting to the fact that the *Shechinah* rests among a husband and wife who live in sanctity (*Sotah* 17a). By adding these letters to each *shevet's* name, Hashem testified that their children were conceived legitimately, through sanctified marriages.

Hashem added His Name to each family's name to indicate their pure lineage. He stamped the nation with his kashrut certificate, so to speak. It is nothing short of miraculous that although the Egyptians enslaved the Jews, they did not gain control over their wives. Each woman remained loyal to and under the supervision of, her Jewish husband. This wonder is heightened by the fact that the Egyptians ensnared our people with soft words (*Sotah* 11b). Women are lured by words of sweetness and gifts of money and jewelry. Yet they refused to be enticed by the Egyptians and stayed staunchly devoted to their husbands.

The Torah relates only one exception. This was the case of Shelomit bat Divri (*Vayikra* 24:11; see *Yalkut Shimoni* 773). She was molested by an Egyptian due to her exceedingly outgoing nature (*Vayikra Rabbah* 32:5). Since this instance was unique, the Torah publicizes it. She was the only one who became defiled by an Egyptian, due to her lack of *tzeniut*.

The Torah begins by describing Creation: "In the beginning of G-d's creating the heaven and the earth" (*Bereishit* 1:1). Rashi asks, in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak, why the Torah does not begin with the first mitzvah (*Shemot* 12:2), "This month shall be for you..." Rashi explains that it is in order to silence the nations of the world who claim that Am Yisrael captured the Land of Israel. Am Yisrael would be able to reply that the entire world is Hashem's. He created it, and He allocated it to whomever He saw fit.

Can we really approach the nations who are bent on sequestering the Holy Land with this response? Will a pasuk in the Chumash quiet their prosecutions regarding who is entitled to this country? Does it have the power to prevent their constant desire to wage war with us? Anyone with common sense knows that the result of showing them this pasuk will only be laughter and scorn.

Similarly, does adding the letters ״ and ׳ן to the names of Bnei Yisrael prevent the mockery of the nations regarding their lineage? It would seem just as irrational as the above scenario.

The following pasuk (*Tehillim* 39:7) sheds light on this subject. “Only in shadowy darkness does man make his way.” When do Bnei Yisrael merit Hashem acting as their “shadow”? When they are united, feeling mutual responsibility toward each other, and respecting one another. The image of Hashem which accompanies a person is the Divine spark within him (see *Pardes Rimonim* 32:1). This is invisible to the eye. It is similar to a shadow produced by the sunlight, which is attached to and follows a person. But as soon as the image of Hashem is removed from a person, he loses his Divine spark and dies (see *Zohar* I, 217b). Without this image, a person cannot live. Sin, like death, causes the Divine image to depart from a person. For this reason, sinners are called dead even in life (*Berachot* 18b). Just as a shadow blocks the light of the sun, sins block the light of Hashem’s glory from shining upon them. They may be physically alive, but they are spiritually dead.

The image of Hakadosh Baruch Hu within a person is not visible, as the pasuk (*Shemot* 33:20) states, “No man can see Me and live.” Human beings do not have the ability to see the *Shechinah*. Chazal (*Bereishit Rabbah* 8:10) relate that the angels mistook Adam Harishon for a god. Hashem’s Name was embedded within him and His *Shechinah* so clearly surrounded him. However, when they saw him sleep, they realized that he was a mere mortal, who had a

spiritual *neshamah* from on High. Adam was surrounded by the *Shechinah* only until he sinned, when he was yet perfect. But after sinning by eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, he descended in spirituality and the *Shechinah* was not manifest upon him anymore. The angels now understood that he was a physical creature. Hashem had impressed Him with His seal in order to save him from sin and the excessive materialism of this world.

The Name ה-י, with which man was created, is numerically equivalent to the word גאווה (*grandeur*). In Tehillim (93:1) we say, “Hashem has reigned, He has donned grandeur; Hashem has donned strength and girded himself.” Chazal (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 251*) expound that the word “strength” refers to Torah, to which another pasuk in Tehillim attests (29:11), “Hashem will give strength to His nation.” Hashem’s grandeur is in the worlds Above, for there He sits and delves in the Torah. When does His strength increase? When his sons go in His way and exert themselves in Torah. Likewise, Hashem’s pride is strengthened when the twelve tribes are united in harmony. Hashem’s Name ה-י, hinting at pride, becomes fortified when His children learn His Torah. The other letters of His Name ה-ו, adding one for the Name itself, are numerically equivalent to twelve, the number of the tribes. Unity among us brings down the *Shechinah*.

When a person connects to his Creator, attaching himself to His *middot* by doing acts of kindness, he draws Hashem’s Name upon himself. The Name ה-ו-ה-י, written out in its full version, is numerically equivalent to the word אדם (*man*). When the Divine spark is apparent in a person, all creatures fear him. The gentiles are afraid of him. They do not have the boldness to cast aspersions upon the lineage of a kosher Jew who has the Name ה-י connected to his. Likewise, when Hashem’s Name is within a person, the nations are so overcome with fear that they cannot open their

mouths against us regarding our Holy Land. They perceive the uniqueness of the Jew who stands before them, bearing the insignia of Hashem. They immediately reach the conclusion that this singularity awarded them possession of the Holy Land.

But when a person distances himself from Hashem and the Torah, he sheds the cloak of the Name י-ו-ה , which alludes to Hashem's grandeur and the unity of Am Yisrael. He no longer represents the perfect creature. Instead of the esteemed name אדנ , hinting at Hashem's Name, he is referred to as (*Tehillim* 92:7), "A boor cannot know, nor can a fool understand this." He does not have the ability to respond to those who claim he was conceived out of wedlock.

Unfortunately, today we tangibly sense how all the nations attempt to chase us out of our land. They claim we stole it from them. Pesukim from the Torah, backed by archeological digs, are not powerful enough to repudiate the charges they dredge up against us. They rightfully demand how we can prove our ownership of Eretz Yisrael by means of the Torah when we don't follow the Torah. "Is the Torah merely a book showing ownership of the Land, but not important enough for you to uphold its laws?" They also assert, "How can we trust your words when we can't discern the image of Hashem upon your faces? You claim to be the Chosen Nation, created in the Divine image and meritorious of the Holy Land. But we don't see the Divine image upon you. Why then should we believe you?"

As much as it hurts, the allegations of the Arabs are true. For this reason, they succeed in inflicting injury upon us, time after time, in painful and humiliating ways. We see the fulfillment of the following prediction (*Devarim* 11:29): When Am Yisrael adhere to Hashem and observe His Torah, Eretz Yisrael provides them with protection. But when they exchange the dictates of Torah for the customs of the nations, not only does the Land not afford them protection, it

hurries to disgorge them and does not allow them to live in peace and security (*Vayikra* 18:28).

It is forbidden to use the Torah as a “spade with which to dig” (*Avot* 4:5). We may not use the Torah merely as proof of our ownership of Eretz Yisrael, while ignoring everything else written in it. One who does not uphold the words of Torah has left the camp of our people. He has forsaken the tribes of Hashem (יה-י), as well as the Name יה-ו-ה-י. He is no longer numerically equal to that Heavenly Name in its full spelling. He is merely called אדמה (earth), numerically equal to fifty, alluding to the fifty gates of impurity which he embraces.

When Am Yisrael do Hashem’s will, the nations respect them and are afraid to attack. A prime example of this is the incident with Alexander the Great. When he saw the face of Shimon Hatzaddik, he perceived the Divine spirit resting upon him. He was overcome with fear and prostrated himself before him (*Yoma* 69a). Similarly, when the *Navi* came before Eglon king of Moav with a message from Hashem, Eglon stood up to his full height (*Shoftim* 3:20). Also, when Moshe and Aharon came before Pharaoh the rasha, he feared them because he perceived Hashem’s Name upon them.

When my holy grandfather, the tzaddik, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy”a, walked in the street, Jew and gentile alike would stand up before him in awe and fear. The distinguished members of society would kiss his pure hand, requesting a blessing.

Hashem’s image is concealed within a person, according to the pasuk (*Shemot* 33:20), “No man can see Me and live.” But there are individual tzaddikim upon whose faces Hashem allows Himself to be perceived. This is why they evoke fear and respect. When a person merits discovering the light of the world, his reward is manifold. In this manner, Hashem’s honor is publicized and fortified in the

world, even among the gentile nations. Abundance of blessing rains down in the merit of this light, able to eradicate the sovereignty of the nations and hasten the coming of our Redeemer.

Korach exploited the Name ה-י which he had within him for self-aggrandizement. He used it to create dissention between himself and Am Yisrael, due to his undue pride. He removed the protective garb of the Name ה-ו-ה-י, exchanging it for the cloak of materialism. Therefore, he was swallowed by the earth, denoting his earthliness. Hashem created man from earth and blew a living *neshamah* into him. With his *neshamah*, man is meant to transform his physical nature into a spiritual entity. But if a person fails to fulfill his mission, he is considered dust of the earth. This is why the resha'im are considered dead even in life (*Berachot* 18b). Korach fell lower and lower, until he was considered a rasha. The pasuk in Tehillim (1:1) states, "Praiseworthy is the man who walked not in the counsel of the wicked." The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 750) says that "the wicked" refers to Korach, as the pasuk in Bamidbar states (16:26), "Turn away now from near the tents of these wicked men," in regard to the tents of Korach and his cohorts.

Humility is the opposite of arrogance. Concerning Moshe, the most humble of men, the pasuk (*ibid.* 12:3) tells us, "והאיש משה ענוי – מאד מכל האדם אשר על פני האדמה" – Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth." Moshe elevated himself from the level of earth to the level of Adam Harishon before his sin. This was by sanctifying his physicality into a spiritual entity. He emulated Hashem, also called a "man," as the pasuk (*Shemot* 15:3) states, "ה' איש מלחמה" – Hashem is Master (Man) of War."

Moshe is described as האיש (the man), as was stated above (*ibid.* 12:3), "Now the man Moshe." The letters ה-ו-ה-י of the word והאיש are numerically equivalent to twenty-one. Adding the five letters of the

word totals twenty-six, the *gematria* of the Name ה-ו-ה-י. The leftover letters of the word שׁוֹהֵאִי spell שׁא (fire), for Hashem is an all-consuming fire. Not only did Moshe merit being cloaked in the Name, ה-ו-ה-י allowing him to speak to the *Shechinah* directly, but his face radiated with the fire of Hashem. This was a one-time event, never to be repeated in all of history.

When the time of Moshe's demise arrived, Hashem Himself buried him (*Sotah* 9b). The ground was incapable of absorbing this man who rose above all earthliness, greater than any other man who ever lived. Although tzaddikim are interred in the earth, they are called living even after death (*Berachot* 18a), and their dead bodies do not defile others (see *Midrash Mishlei* 9). Chazal cite the example of Eliyahu Hanavi involving himself in the burial of Rabbi Akiva. The Sages asked him, "You are a Kohen. How can you become defiled by the dead in this manner?" Eliyahu replied, "Tzaddikim are called living even after they die. Therefore, their bodies do not defile others. Resha'im, on the other hand, are called dead even as they live. After they die, the earth swallows them."

Praiseworthy is the person to whom Hashem reveals His Name, just as He did upon each and every family that had pure lineage, unadulterated by the Egyptians. The name פִּינְחָס contains the letter ׀ from the Name of Hashem Himself, to indicate that Pinchas acted solely for Hashem's sake in killing Zimri in his zealousness. Similarly, Moshe added the letter ׀ to the name of Yehoshua, telling him (*Sotah* 34b), "May G-d save you from the plot of the spies." With the additional letter ׀ from Hashem's Name, he would overcome the trait of arrogance which the spies possessed. How powerful is the evil of pursuing honor. It is capable of driving a person out of this world.

In the parshiyot of *Matot* and *Masei*, the name of each *Nasi* is written before the title *Nasi*. This teaches us the following lesson:

The main facet of the *Nasi* is his name, the reputation he has made for himself. Although he may be at the apex of adulation, a prince among his people, what is paramount to record about him is the extent to which he has refined his character and subjected himself to his Creator and to his nation.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ After the epidemic which struck Bnei Yisrael, Hashem commanded that they be counted. This is similar to a shepherd who counts his remaining sheep after a wolf made off with some of the flock.
- ◆ The Torah records each family, preceded by the letter 'נ and followed by the letter 'ב. This is testimony that Bnei Yisrael's lineage was pure and not defiled by the Egyptians. The only exception was the case of Shelomit bat Divri, who brought degradation upon herself through her lack of *tzeniut*.
- ◆ Rashi asks why the Torah begins with the account of Creation rather than the first mitzvah, which is sanctifying the new month. It is in order to squelch the accusations of the nations, who claim that Am Yisrael seized the Land illegally. Hashem created the entire world and can therefore allocate it as He sees fit, granting Eretz Yisrael to His Chosen People.
- ◆ How can we be so naïve as to believe that we can succeed in silencing the claim of the nations for Eretz Yisrael merely with first sentence of parashat *Bereishit*? Similarly, can the spelling of each family with the additional letters of 'נ and 'ב still the allegations of the nations that Egyptian blood was mixed into the Jewish nation?
- ◆ We might answer based on the pasuk (*Tehillim* 121:5), "Hashem is your protective Shade at your right hand." Hashem grants a person life by protecting him with His *Shechinah*. When this protective shade is removed, the person perishes. Sin removes this shield, and therefore *resha'im* are considered dead even as they live.

- ◆ The Name of Hashem can be divided in two. The first two letters ה-י are numerically equivalent to the word גאון (grandeur), which belongs solely to Hashem, as the pasuk in Tehillim states, “Hashem has reigned, He has donned grandeur; Hashem has donned strength.” Since Torah is the only real strength, we can say that Hashem’s grandeur is strengthened when we study Torah. The letters ה-ו, adding one for the unit itself, have the *gematria* of twelve, alluding to the twelve tribes. Unity among our nation fortifies Hashem’s grandeur.
- ◆ When a person attaches himself to Hashem, His Name of ה-י is connected to that person, and all the nations are afraid to prosecute or persecute him. But when one distances himself from Hashem and His Torah, he invites the gentiles to level allegations against him.
- ◆ Moshe was the most humble man on the face of the earth. He raised himself from the level of “earth” to that of “man.” He earned the title *Man*, emulating Hashem Who is called *Man* of War. When Am Yisrael serve Hashem with humility, they elevate His grandeur, thereby meriting that Hashem fights their battles and silences the accusers.



Surrounding Bnei Yisrael with Sanctity

“These are the families of the Reuveni; their count was forty-three thousand, seven hundred and thirty. These are the families of the Shimoni; twenty-two thousand, two hundred”

(Bamidbar 26:7,14)

The Torah counts Bnei Yisrael according to their *shevatim*. Each tribe amounted to a round number. Rav Yonatan Abergel, shlita, asks how it could be that each *shevet* numbered an exactly round

number. It could be that they did not amount to exactly these numbers, but the Torah just rounded off their numbers, similar to what we find regarding the lashes given to one who transgresses a negative commandment (*Makkot* 22a). There, we are told that the offender would receive forty lashes when, in reality, he was struck only thirty-nine times.

But this does not seem to be the case here. In parashat *Shemot*, the pasuk (1:5) states, “And all the persons who emerged from Yaakov’s loins were seventy souls.” But previously, in parashat *Vayigash*, we find that Yaakov’s family numbered sixty-nine people (*Bereishit* 46:8-20). Rashi explains that Yocheved was the seventieth member, born between the gates of Egypt. It seems that Hashem ensured that Yocheved was born before the nation entered Egypt, in order that they should amount to seventy souls. This is proof that the Torah was precise in its counting regarding Yaakov’s family. Therefore, it does not seem correct to state that after the epidemic, the numbers of our people was rounded off. We can suggest that Hashem commanded them to be counted when their numbers were round, but we still remain with the question: Why is so much emphasis placed on a round number?

Kabbalah teaches that there are ten *sefirot of kedushah*, by means of which a person connects to Hashem. If not for these *sefirot*, a person would not manage to stand before Hashem. According to the sefer *Da’at U’Tevunah* of the Ben Ish Chai (see 17:1), the light of Hashem is so blinding that it is capable of consuming the entire world in an instant. It is by means of the ten *sefirot* that this light is somewhat dimmed, little by little, so that the universe is not scorched by the sanctity of the *Shechinah*. This can be compared to a person wearing sunglasses in order to screen the bright sunlight, shielding his eyes from its strong rays.

The tzaddik, Rabbi Avraham Azulai, zy" a, in his sefer *Chessed L'Avraham* (4:30) states that a person stands at the center of Creation. Through him, all Heavenly blessing is transmitted to this world. The entire world was created for the sake of mankind. When a person goes in the way of Torah and mitzvot, he upholds the world. But if he, *chalilah*, brings damage to the world through his misdeeds, the damage is tremendous, for it affects all worlds, weakening the power of blessing that comes to the world.

Every *sefirah* is comprised of ten *igulim*, which might be described as circles of holiness, one inside the next. The outer *igul* is the largest, and the inner one, the smallest.

Am Yisrael is a nation that is unified between man and his fellow man and between man and Hakadosh Baruch Hu, by means of the ten *sefirot*, which are interdependent. This being the case, the numbers of each *shevet* must be round, like the *sefirot* themselves. What derives from this is that the world was made for each and every Jew, and he stands at the center of Creation. He is the pipeline through which blessing flows upon the entire world. Each Jew has an intimate connection with the ten *sefirot*, as is indicated by the fact that each *shevet* numbered a round number.

This is all on condition that there is harmony among the people. When that is the case, their round numbers are qualified to influence the world in a most positive way. But when there is dissention among the nation, their numbers are separated and incapable of bringing down abundance upon the world. For this reason, the Torah was given only after Bnei Yisrael were as one man with one heart (see *Rashi, Shemot* 19:2).

One of the Admorim states that the matzah that we eat on Pesach is round rather than square in order to teach us to be unified, like a complete circle. Similarly, we invite all who are hungry to join us at our Seder, in order to promote unity.

The quality of unity is paramount to our nation. Bnei Yisrael were not redeemed from Egypt until they were completely united. The Beit Hamikdash was destroyed on account of baseless hatred, after the walls of unity crumbled. The rectification of this will be (*Yeshayahu* 1:27) that “Zion will be redeemed... and those who return to her through righteousness.” By means of righteousness among our nation, the quality of unity will return to our people, awarding them the ultimate redemption.

On Erev Tishah b’Av, at the last meal before the fast, we have the custom of eating a boiled egg (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 552:5), and some eat round beans. Our severance from Hashem was due to the disgraceful trait of baseless hatred which prevailed among our people. Their unity was breached, and the wholeness of the *igulim* was damaged. This gave power to the *kelippah* to overpower the forces of *kedushah*, eventually causing the *churban* of the Beit Hamikdash and the exile of our nation. Eating round foods at the outset of Tishah b’Av serves as a reminder to us to be unified in order to rectify what we damaged in the Upper *sefirot*.

The Arizal (see *Eitz Chaim* 18:5) states that at the time of the destruction, the negative forces took control over the *sefirah* of *hod*, as the pasuk regarding the *churban* states (*Eichah* 1:13), “כל היום דוה” – sick throughout the day.” The letters of the word דוה (sick) can be transposed to spell the word הוד (*hod*).

The *igulim* of the *sefirot* bring down blessing upon the world when Am Yisrael are unified. When we study Creation, we see that all the elements are essentially round. For example, the luminaries such as the sun, the moon, and the stars, as well as the planets, are all round. Man’s body, too, is comprised of circles. The head, fingers, arms, legs, and the *oht brit kodesh* are round. This reminds man that he stands at the center of Creation, and through him, abundance

showers upon all matter. But this is only on condition that he lives in harmony with his fellow man and Hashem.

We find that when the Torah recounts the numbers of our nation, Shevet Shimon falls far behind the others (*Bamidbar* 26). This was because they sinned in immorality with the daughters of Midian, due to the advice of Bilaam. But after they did teshuvah, Bnei Yisrael did not reject them. The nation once again was complete, together forming *igulim* around the *Shechinah*.

Yaakov Avinu, father of the Shevatim, is the third leg of the *Merkavah* (*Ma'arechet HaElokut* 4). His image is engraved on the Throne of Glory (*Tikkunei Zohar, tikkun* 22, 65b). The term of מיתה (death) is not used concerning him, but rather גויה (expiration) (*Bereishit* 49:33; *Zohar* I, 248b), which is the term used regarding the passing of tzaddikim (*Bava Batra* 16b).

Yaakov's entire household descended to Egypt. The Torah calls them "souls," as they were like one soul (*Vayikra Rabbah* 4:6) united in harmony. Their purpose in traveling to Egypt was in order to become united with their brother, Yosef. They needed the power of the round number to complete their unity. This was accomplished by the birth of Yocheved as they entered Egypt. When Bnei Yisrael numbered seventy souls, they were completely united.

There is another facet to their round number. Bnei Yisrael were about to enter Egypt, the "abomination of the land," where everything was imbued with defilement (see *Safra, Acharei Mot* 13). Therefore, Hashem attached them to Himself in order to protect them by means of connection to the holy *sefirot*, which are also round. In spite of their decadent environment, they were thus able to preserve their purity. This is why Yocheved was born just before they entered Egypt.

When Hashem told Yaakov Avinu to descend to Egypt, he was very much afraid (*Ramban, Bereishit 46:1*), until Hashem promised him twice that He would return with him. Yaakov feared that the uneven amount of souls in his household, sixty-nine, would impair the wholeness and unity of his children. Without peace and harmony there is a real threat to their survival. Therefore, Hashem promised to be at his side and protect him. Hashem kept His word. The completion of Yaakov's offspring came in the form of the birth of Yocheved, bringing their total to the round number seventy.

Hashem informed Yaakov that just before his death, Yosef would close his eyes for him (*Bereishit 46:4*). All of Yaakov's sons would recognize Yosef's greatness and grant him this honor. This would be an indication of the peace and brotherliness which would reign among his sons, allowing Yaakov to rest in peace.

The numbers of each *shevet* was truly a round number, a hint to their level of peace and unity. It also alluded to the connection between Am Yisrael and Hashem, by means of the *sefirot*, which are drawn in the merit of unity.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ What was the reason that each *shevet* totaled a round number?
- ◆ There are ten *sefirot of kedushah*. The Ben Ish Chai explains that their purpose is to connect a person with his Creator in the correct manner. The radiance of the *Shechinah* is too strong for us to bear. The *sefirot* weaken it somewhat, enabling us to benefit from its life forces.
- ◆ Each *sefirah* contains ten *igulim*, one inside the other. When the number of the people totals a round number, they can connect to the *sefirot*. Roundness indicates unity and wholeness. Therefore, each of the *shevatim* numbered a round amount. For this reason, also, Bnei Yisrael numbered seventy upon their entry into Egypt.

- ◆ Am Yisrael survives only when there is unity. The Torah was given only after Bnei Yisrael were as one man with one heart, and the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed on account of a lack of unity. The future rectification will occur by means of unity, for righteousness unifies the people.
- ◆ In one place, the pasuk states that Yaakov's household numbered sixty-nine, and in another place; seventy. Rashi explains that they were sixty-nine when they descended, and with the birth of Yocheved between the walls of Egypt, their numbers rose to seventy. Yaakov was worried when he descended to Egypt, because his household contained an uneven amount of members. Hashem promised him His protection. He kept His promise by giving him Yocheved, born at the borders of Egypt.
- ◆ Here, too, each tribe numbered a round number, for their strength lay in their unity, connecting them with the round *sefirot*, and, ultimately, Hashem Himself.



The Gift of Torah

“On the day of the first-fruits, when you offer a new meal-offering to Hashem on your Festival of Weeks, it shall be a holy convocation to you; you shall not do any laborious work”

(Bamidbar 28:26)

Rashi expounds that the festival of Shavuot is called “the day of the first fruits” because of the Two Breads offered then, which are the first of the meal-offerings from the new wheat crop.

Why doesn't the Torah write that the festival of Shavuot falls on the 6th of Sivan, in commemoration of *Kabbalat HaTorah*, which transpired then? Furthermore, what is so significant about the first fruits of the wheat harvest, to warrant naming this holiday after them?

The fact that the Torah does not give an exact date for this festival teaches us that receiving the Torah is not delegated to one specific day. Each and every day, a person is enjoined to accept the Torah anew, as Rashi (*Shemot* 19:1) states, "That the words of Torah should be new to you as if it was given today." The festival of the Giving of the Torah has no calendar date, because it is ongoing.

The festival of Shavuot is called *Chag Matan Torah*. The word *matan* (מתן) is closely related to מתנה (a gift). The Torah is full of obligations and constrictions; how can it be considered a gift?

There are some items which all can perceive as good. On the other hand, some things can be appraised only by a discerning eye. Only an expert can appreciate their true value. A prime example of the latter is the Torah. At first glance, it seems like a burden and a bondage, but those in the know, who delve into its life-giving waters, recognize it for its true worth.

If an ignoramus was given a mud-encrusted coin, he would discard it immediately. He would have no idea that he was handling a veritable treasure. A wise man, in contrast, will understand that underneath the dirt lies a hidden mine, which is capable of making him a wealthy man.

Torah is more precious than gold and silver. Only after one removes the mud of materialism from himself can he perceive the beauty of Torah and truly comprehend that it is the most valuable gift possible, in all worlds.

I once traveled by train to the city, Lyon. A man sat beside me and when he saw my religious garb, asked whether I had heard of the Pinto family. I replied in the affirmative, without letting on who I was. Then the man began cursing Rav Pinto. When I asked why he responded like this, he replied that because of Rav Pinto, his son no longer helped him in his business on Shabbat, interested only in eating together with him.

When I heard this man's bitter diatribe, I began describing the beauty of Shabbat, and our obligation to preserve it. Shabbat is one of the mitzvot which afford a person pleasure in the here and now. As I continued, I saw his angry expression change to one of understanding and agreement. He suddenly stated that he would like to ask Rav Pinto's apology. I told him he could apologize on the spot.

In order to take pleasure in a gift and really enjoy it, one must first fully appreciate its value. This man had no knowledge of Shabbat and therefore derided it viciously. But just as soon as it was explained to him, his eyes lit up, and he began to appreciate what a special gift Shabbat is for mankind.

Chazal (see *Ramban, Bamidbar* 10:35) tell us that after *Matan Torah*, Bnei Yisrael fled Har Sinai like a young child flees from school. How could Bnei Yisrael escape from Har Sinai after witnessing the amazing miracles which were revealed to them there just a short while beforehand? Bnei Yisrael recognized the value of Torah, as they proclaimed, "*Na'aseh v'nishma*," but they did not fully appreciate the depth of Torah. Since they had not yet tasted Torah and observed its mitzvot, their appreciation of it was superficial. They fled Har Sinai, for they had not yet fulfilled all of the Torah. This prevented them from fully recognizing its value.

We are all endowed with love of life. For this reason, it is natural to invest tremendous efforts in order to continue living. A man who

was present at the great tsunami saw his son swept up by the waves, with no prior warning. He thought his entire world had collapsed. He quickly recovered his senses and began crying out to Hashem in prayer. After two days, he was sure that his son was gone. Imagine his delight at finding his son in a secure, safe place.

This man said that from then on, he appreciates the value of life, a priceless commodity. He said, "A person cannot know the true meaning of life until he nearly loses it." At times of danger, a person is aroused to cry out to Hashem for salvation. After he is saved, he realizes what could have happened.

Bnei Yisrael felt that they truly appreciated the Torah. But at the time of test, they succumbed. They chose to flee Har Sinai, as their appreciation of Torah was not yet deeply rooted in their consciousness.

In order to grasp the greatness of Torah, granting it due honor, we must place it before us always, in line with the pasuk in Tehillim (16:8), "I have set Hashem before me always." This will enable us to constantly accept the Torah upon ourselves. The festival of Shavuot is called חג הבכורים (the Festival of the First Fruits), for a person should always prefer (לבכר) the study of Torah above all else. The Written Torah and the Oral Torah are compared to the Two Breads, as the pasuk in Mishlei (9:5) states, "Come and partake of My food." This is the Torah, as vital for our survival as bread is for the body. Just as a person has especial love toward his firstborn, so must he display love and preference for both the Written and the Oral Torah.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Why doesn't the Torah specify the date of the festival of Shavuot? It is because *Kabbalat HaTorah* has no specific date. Every day of a person's life, he must accept the Torah anew. The name Shavuot (lit. Weeks)

refers to the seven weeks between Pesach and Atzeret. Each day must be utilized to receive the Torah again.

- ◆ Torah is called a gift, although, at face value, it seems like a burden. Only those who delve in Torah merit recognizing its inherent sweetness and incomparable value.
- ◆ Bnei Yisrael fled Har Sinai because they did not appreciate the value of Torah. This was because they did not observe it completely. Only one who fully appreciates Torah can view it as a gift and observe it every moment of his life.
- ◆ Shavuot is also called the Festival of the First Fruits (חג הבכורים). A person must place preference (לבכר) upon the Written Torah as well as the Oral Torah, both compared to the Two Breads.



Gems on Parashat Pinchas



The Torah, Hashem, and Yisrael Are One

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon the Children of Israel, when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel in My vengeance”

(Bamidbar 25:10-11)

Hashem attested to Pinchas the Kohen, grandson of Aharon the Kohen, that he killed Zimri ben Salu as well as the Midianite woman, out of zeal for His Name. Hashem did not want people to say that Pinchas acted out of a desire for glory.

Pinchas tangibly felt the pain of Hashem at the great misdeed which had occurred. He arose to avenge His Name with no personal motives whatsoever. The Torah testifies to his pure motivations. Only a person who is so connected to Hashem that all of his aspirations are solely for His sake can truly feel His anguish. He feels the suffering of Bnei Yisrael as well, for when a person hurts Hashem

by sinning against Him, he causes the *Shechinah* to recede, causing damage to the entire nation. Sin brings catastrophe upon the world.

Chazal (see *Zohar* II, 90b; III, 4b) teach that the Torah, Am Yisrael, and Hashem are one. This means that it is the goal of each and every Jew to weave these three threads into a solid bolt of fabric. Kohelet states (4:12), “A three-ply cord is not easily severed.” A person must constantly beware the *Yetzer Hara*, whose entire purpose is to detach him from the Torah, Am Yisrael, and Hashem Himself.

Zimri originally severed himself from Bnei Yisrael by leaving the camp to take a Midianite gentile for himself. By transgressing the prohibition of illicit relationships and mocking the Sages, he forsook the Torah. And by sinning with the gentile woman, he cut off all ties with the *Shechinah*. This is a prime example of the wily ways of the *Yetzer Hara*. He does not convince a person to break away all at once. Rather, he slowly but surely eats away at the cord which connects him to his roots, until the person finds himself dangling by a very thin thread, torn away from the security of Am Yisrael, the Torah, and Hashem.

In contrast, Pinchas attached himself to these three elements. The fact that the Torah traces his lineage to his father, Elazar Hakohen, and his grandfather, Aharon Hakohen, proves his strong ties with Am Yisrael. It is in praise of himself, his father, and his grandfather Aharon, who loved peace and always pursued it (*Avot* 1:12). Likewise, we find that Pinchas was bound to the Torah by the fact that he recalled the halachah when others forgot it (*Sanhedrin* 82a). And the words, “He zealously avenged My vengeance” affirmed that he was connected to the *Shechinah* and acted only for Hashem’s sake. He felt the suffering of Am Yisrael, who would suffer were the

Shechinah to recede from their midst. He also felt the sorrow of the Torah, which was desecrated by Zimri. Praiseworthy is Pinchas the Kohen, who succeeded in acquiring a strong connection with these three pivotal pillars.



A Kingdom of Kohanim

“Their counts were twenty-three thousand, every male from one month of age and above, for they did not count themselves among the Children of Israel, for an inheritance was not given them among the Children of Israel”

(Bamidbar 26:62)

While Bnei Yisrael were counted from the age of twenty and above, the tribe of Levi was counted from the age of one month and above. Why, then, do we find that Shevet Levi was so small in number? There are those who suggest that the Aron in their midst posed a responsibility which was often too great to bear. Others state that the sons of Kehat would often battle over the privileges of the Mishkan. Hashem did not approve of this and struck them.

The Kohanim and Levi'im were considered a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (*Shemot* 19:6). They were the noblemen at the forefront of our nation. The tribe of Levi served as an example to the people as to how one should behave and serve Hashem. Just as the aristocracy is always less numerous than the populace, the sons of Levi numbered less than the other *shevatim*. This ensured the

respect of the nation. A rare object is greatly valued. Hashem purposely made Shevet Levi small in number in order that they be honored by the people. This would encourage the nation to seek guidance from them. In a similar vein, Bnei Yisrael are the smallest of all nations. Hashem made them few in number, for He wants them to maintain their elevated status. “Good things come in small packages.”

The tribe of Levi subsisted on the gifts of *terumot* and *ma’asrot* that the nation contributed to them. Hashem Himself was their inheritance (*Devarim* 18:1-2). Had Levi numbered many, they may have come to argue over the allocation of the tithes and the Avodah in the Mishkan. Hashem wanted them to be supported respectably, and that each one should have his set task.

The tribe of Shimon was smaller even than that of Levi. Levi numbered only twenty-three thousand people, and regarding Shimon, the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 26:14) states, “These are the families of the Simonite: twenty-two thousand, two hundred.” Their numbers had been reduced in the plague that resulted from their sin with the daughters of Midian (*Rashi, Bamidbar* 26:13). Shevet Shimon had originally been the largest tribe, but the sins of immorality and idol worship reduced their numbers until they were in the minority.



Honor Will Eventually Come

“The daughters of Tzelafchad... drew near... and they stood before Moshe, before Elazar... Why should the name of our father be omitted from among his family because he had no sons? Give us a possession among our father’s brothers. And Moshe brought their claim before Hashem”

(*Bamidbar 27:1-6*)

Tzelafchad died by stoning for the sin of gathering wood on Shabbat. Beit Din put him to death for his blatant desecration of the Shabbat, in order to warn others not to copy him. Tzelafchad had five daughters of marriageable age. But no one wanted to marry a daughter of this sinner.

The daughters of Tzelafchad, although cast out of the camp, remained silent. Until the Land was apportioned. Then their voices were suddenly heard. They approached Moshe, demanding their father’s rightful inheritance, for he died without a son to succeed him, and they themselves were not married. Moshe Rabbeinu did not know how to respond, for such a case had never before occurred. When he asked Hashem how to deal with it, he was told (*Bamidbar 27:7*), “The daughters of Tzelafchad speak properly. You shall surely give them a possession of inheritance of their father to pass over to them.”

A new halachah came to light because of the daughters of Tzelafchad (*Sanhedrin 8a*): Daughters inherit their father’s land if he did not leave any sons. In what merit did these women deserve this

honor? Furthermore, they were ostracized no longer, and they succeeded in marrying and establishing homes of their own.

In asking for a portion in the Land, the daughters of Tzelafchad veered from their usual custom of remaining in the shadows, as the honor of a princess is within (*Tehillim* 45:14). They could not stand idly by when they risked forfeiting a portion of the Land. Hashem awarded them His approval. Am Yisrael wished to marry into their family. Chazal (see *Eiruv* 13b) teach that whoever flees honor will be pursued by it. Additionally, Torah is acquired by one who humbles himself before it (*Derech Eretz Zuta* 8). The daughters of Tzelafchad, who always walked humbly, merited revealing a halachah.



The Festival of Sukkot

“And on the fifteenth day of this month is a festival; for a seven-day period matzot shall be eaten”

(*Bamidbar* 28:17)

“On the day of the first-fruits, when you offer a new meal-offering to Hashem on your Festival of Weeks, it shall be a holy convocation to you; you shall not do any laborious work”

(*ibid.* vs. 26)

“On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, there shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall do no laborious work; you shall celebrate a festival to Hashem for a seven-day period”

(ibid. 29:12)

The three festivals, in their order, are: Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. The festival of Sukkot commemorates the seven Clouds of Glory with which Hashem enveloped our nation when they left Egypt (*Sukkah* 11b). Why, then, don't we celebrate Sukkot immediately after Pesach, waiting instead, until after Shavuot and the Yamim Noraim?

Only on an empty stomach, can one fully appreciate a satisfying meal. On a full stomach, he can't even look at a full plate of food. When Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, they were sated with tremendous miracles. They had witnessed the Ten Plagues, the Splitting of the Sea, the descent of the manna and the *selav* straight from Heaven, the pillars of fire and cloud, as well as the Well of Miriam.

Had Bnei Yisrael been instructed to celebrate Sukkot immediately after Pesach, when we recount the many details of the Exodus, the impression of the Clouds of Glory would likely have drifted away. They were accustomed to miracles; this was just one in a full chain of wonders. But after some months, when the impact of Pesach had somewhat dissipated, Am Yisrael became reinvigorated, ready to build their sukkot and sit in them, thanking Hashem and praising Him for the great miracle of embracing them with the Clouds of Glory, which shielded them from all harm.



Matot



The Purity of a Promise

“Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Children of Israel, saying: This is the thing that Hashem has commanded: If a man takes a vow to Hashem 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”

(Bamidbar 30:2-3)

Rashi expounds that the phrase “he shall not desecrate his word” means “he shall not profane his word,” that is, he shall not make his words profane.

Parashat *Matot* begins with the prohibition of taking an oath which one has no intention of keeping. Afterward, the Torah details the ways of nullifying a vow that one finds too difficult to keep. We are warned that one who breaks his promise without officially nullifying it is akin to one who swore falsely.

A single girl is under the authority of her father (ibid. 30:4-6), and therefore, her father can nullify her vow. Similarly, a married woman

is under her husband's jurisdiction (ibid. 7-16), and therefore, her husband can nullify her vow. Her father relinquishes control over her when she marries. Vows should be regarded with due gravity. A person should take all measures necessary to ensure that he keeps his promise, never making his words profane.

The pesukim reveal just how serious vows are. It is difficult, then, to understand how a vow can be nullified in a relatively simple manner. A vow is like a contract. If one wants to invalidate his signature on a contract, he expects to pay a hefty fine. How is it that Hashem allows us to nullify vows in a seemingly simple manner, despite the seriousness of making a vow?

Hashem's word carries the weight of a vow. If there would be no way to abolish harsh decrees which were pronounced against us, by the power of tefillah and teshuvah, the world could not exist. The universe must be based upon the premise of annulling vows. This opens for us the opportunity for teshuvah, rectifying our misdeeds and even rescinding evil decrees which were already enacted on High (see *Mesilat Yesharim* 4). A prime example of this is the sin of the Golden Calf. After Am Yisrael sinned, Hashem wished to destroy the entire world and create a new generation, who would recognize Him. But the power of Moshe's prayers repudiated this decision. Moshe succeeded in convincing Hashem to regard Bnei Yisrael in a favorable light.

In the Morning Prayers, we say, "Blessed is He Who speaks and does; blessed is He Who decrees and fulfills." Hashem's word is absolute. Nevertheless, His unending mercy opens for His children a window to repentance, in order that they atone for their sins and thereby remove from themselves difficult decrees.

The mouth is complex. It consists of the lips, cheeks, teeth, tongue, pharynx, and throat. These parts allow one to eat food and

thereby nourish himself. Aside from cutting, chewing, and swallowing food, the mouth has another purpose. This is speech, which is achieved by air moving the vocal cords located at the back of the mouth. In this manner, sounds and words are created, allowing people to interact verbally.

The mouth, then, serves two objectives. The first is of a physical nature – eating. And the second can be harnessed for spirituality, by speaking words of Torah. A person spends a maximum of two hours a day eating. After approximately twenty minutes or half an hour, one already feels satiated and has no energy to eat any more. This being the case, the rest of the day can be spent in learning Torah, the act which elevates the mouth and sanctifies speech. Similarly, a person can consecrate his words by refraining from *lashon hara* and other harmful speech. Taking upon oneself a *ta'anit dibbur* will purify his mouth tremendously.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asks (*Yerushalmi, Shabbat 1b*) why Hashem created one mouth which accomplishes opposing missions. One would think that two mouths would be more effective, as one could be designated for eating and the other for Torah study. Does it make sense to use the same towel to wipe one's mouth that he uses to wipe his shoes? Had he been present at Har Sinai, he states, he would have requested two separate mouths.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai resolves his difficulty. We cause so much damage with only one mouth, defiling it with evil speech and false promises; imagine what would happen if we would own two mouths. Who knows how low we would fall if we had one mouth designated completely for mundane matters!

Rashbi's words demonstrate the tremendous sanctity of which the mouth is capable. How careful we must be not to defile it, but to maintain its purity by abstaining from wrong words and making sure to keep our promises.

The Gaon, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, asks what the intrinsic difference is between our generation of *bnei Torah* and previous ones. In the past, our nation produced giants of the spirit, whereas nowadays, only select individuals succeed in rising above materialism and sanctifying themselves with the Torah. He replies that prior generations were like stones, remaining still where they were placed. When the Torah students would diligently study of a specific mitzvah, they would learn it well, and it remained etched into their consciousness all their lives.

In contrast, the *bnei Torah* of our times are lacking backbone. They have no stability, swayed as they are by the winds of the time. They are strict in one area of observance, but they quickly abandon it for another mitzvah. In this manner, they are prevented from acquiring spiritual gains. “A jack of all trades is master of none.” For this reason, the Torah tells us, “He shall not desecrate his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth shall he do” (*Bamidbar* 30:3). A person should always be firm with his resolutions, not switching from one subject to the next at whim.

The parashah later discusses Bnei Yisrael’s sin in immorality with the daughters of Midian, and how they were punished. What is the connection between vows and immorality? A man must, at times, completely remove himself from physicality. Often, a person makes a vow in order to transcend a specific area of materialism, similar to the *nazir*, who separates himself from wine and other related physical pleasures. One who observes a *sotah* receiving retribution is recommended to keep away from wine (*Sotah* 2a). This is in order that the negative impression of the *sotah* should not leave an impact upon him and he does not fall spiritually.

The Ramban (*Bamidbar* 6:11) asks why a *nazir* must bring a sin-offering at the end of his Nazirite period. He did not sin; on the contrary, until now he was elevated above everyone else. Why, then,

is he commanded to bring a sin-offering? The Ramban replies that the very fact that the *nazir* decided to end his period of serving as a *nazir* indicates that he is beginning to slide downward. Otherwise, why does he wish to annul his vow and return to the world of wine? Bringing a sin-offering will both atone for this inappropriate desire and offset any negative effects caused by this pleasure, helping him maintain his great heights.

Vows make a fence around a person. As he scales the mountains of spirituality, vows provide him with a safety net from sin. We may say that Am Yisrael sinned with the daughters of Midian because they did not make protective barriers around their Avodat Hashem in order to guard themselves from transgression. They failed to make vows and were therefore unworthy of Heavenly assistance, as we are taught (*Yoma* 38b), “One who comes to purify himself is aided from Above.” This led directly to the disaster with the daughters of Midian. Bnei Yisrael did not remain within the secure confines of their camp, but went out in order to purchase fabric from the Midianites. They eventually sinned in immorality and *avodah zarah*.

Taking upon oneself a vow is a way of distancing himself from the materialism of this world and protecting himself from sin. When a person does not keep the gates tightly sealed, he is liable to fall downwards.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Parashat *Matot* records the matter of promises and vows. How can it be so easy to annul vows if they are such serious matters?
- ◆ Nullification of vows is crucial for the preservation of the world. Hashem’s decrees are like vows. Without the opportunity to annul vows, we would never have the opportunity for teshuvah, and, with it, to rescind harsh decrees.

- ◆ Hashem created man with a mouth that has two opposing tasks, eating and speaking. Rashbi asks why we were not created with two mouths, one for each job. He answers that we find ourselves sinning so severely with only one mouth; imagine how much we would transgress with a mouth designated only for mundane matters.
- ◆ Vows are for the purpose of keeping people away from sin. Therefore, a *nazir* who wishes to end his Nazirite period must bring a sin-offering, to atone for the conclusion of his vigilance in matters of physicality.
- ◆ The parashah concerning vows is connected to the incident with the Midianite women, since it teaches that if one refrains from placing spiritual fences around himself, he might sin severely.



The Sanctity of Speech

“If a man takes a vow to Hashem 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”

(Bamidbar 30:3)

The Gemara (*Bava Batra* 4a) relates that Bava ben Buta told King Hordus to raze the Beit Hamikdash in order to renovate and expand it. Hordus agreed to this plan. This is not an indication that one may destroy a Beit Hakeneset, a miniature Sanctuary, in order to build a new one in its place (*ibid.* 3b). The lesson from this is that one must uphold whatever he says. If King Hordus promised to rebuild the Beit Hamikdash, he was obligated to keep his word. If an ordinary

man is required to keep his word, all the more so, is a king obligated to do so.

Hordus was under the authority of the Roman emperor. When he shared his plans with the emperor's representatives, they forbade him from taking this step. But Hordus was a man of his word. What did he do? He sent emissaries, ostensibly to consult with the Roman Empire regarding this matter. By the time these messengers returned, the Beit Hamikdash was standing in its full glory.

How careful we must be to keep our word! Hordus was a convert of the Edomite tribe. Nonetheless, he exerted himself to keep his promise. All the more so should we, children of the Jewish nation, be careful in this matter.

“He shall not desecrate his word” teaches us that one must respect what comes out of his mouth, never allowing his words to be profaned.

When a person is punctilious with his speech, he elevates himself to the level of the angels, whose speech is Holy of Holies. How are their words completely sanctified? By not being defiled by the physicality of eating. A person, on the other hand, is composed of flesh and blood, in whom spirituality and physicality rule together. He must have food in order to survive. But he can transcend the physical and reach the level of angels. He accomplishes this by observing that which he says. This will remove the element of profanity from his speech and grant it the level of purity and saintliness. Words that emanate from the mouth of a tzaddik who is involved in Torah and mitzvot are pure and perfect.

The mundane speech of a *talmid chacham* is Torah (see *Sukkah* 21b). The mouth of the tzaddik is so sanctified through his Torah study that even his everyday talk is pure. One who enters a perfume

shop will emerge with a pleasant fragrance, even if he did not purchase anything. The mouth of the tzaddik is constantly involved in Torah study. Therefore, even when it speaks commonplace talk, this speech has *kedushah*.

Yitzchak Avinu was considered a perfect offering. Therefore, whatever entered his mouth became holy. We cannot aspire to reach his level, our Patriarch who was willing to sacrifice his life for His Master. However, let us at least sanctify our physicality somewhat by being careful with what emerges from our mouths. They should be words of Torah and *kedushah*. And we should always make sure to keep our words, never allowing them to become profaned.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Hordus, the king who originated from an Edomite tribe, made sure to fulfill his promise and rebuild the Beit Hamikdash. All the more so, should we, of pure lineage, maintain whatever we say.
- ◆ When a person is punctilious in fulfilling his promises, he ascends to the level of angels, whose words are holy of holies. This is because they do not defile their mouths with mundane food. Although mankind depends on material food, he can transcend materialism by keeping his word and ensuring that words of Torah and mitzvot emanate from his mouth.
- ◆ The mouths of tzaddikim are sanctified, to the extent that even their everyday words are holy. This is similar to one who enters a perfume store. He leaves with a fragrant smell even if he made no purchase. Yitzchak Avinu was a perfect sacrifice. Therefore, whatever he consumed became holy. Let us try to emulate him in our own humble lives, by watching what we say and keeping our word.



The Battle with Midian

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites; afterward you will be gathered unto your people”

(Bamidbar 31:1-2)

Moshe was commanded to avenge Am Yisrael’s trampled honor, due to their sin with the daughters of Midian. Moshe’s demise was dependent on this war; after he did battle, he would pass on.

Moshe could easily have procrastinated, thereby prolonging his life. Had he delayed fulfilling Hashem’s command, he would not have been culpable, for this was a one-time, individual request to him alone.

Why did Hashem link the battle with Midian to Moshe’s death? The connection of these two incidents serves as a lesson for Am Yisrael. Notwithstanding the fact that this was a personal, one-time command, which Moshe could have postponed, he never considered that option. He stood staunch as a faithful soldier, rushing to do Hashem’s bidding, fighting the Midianites as he had been commanded.

Moshe’s behavior teaches two pivotal principles. The first is to execute a task as soon as possible. After some time, it is likely that it cannot be performed as perfectly as previously. This is in line with Chazal’s teaching (*Avot* 2:4), “Do not say, ‘When I am free, I will study, for perhaps you will not become free.’” One may have the opportunity to sit and learn Torah, but his *Yetzer Hara* tries to convince him that he is tired. “You can study Torah later,” he

claims. But later never comes. Suddenly, a million and one different things pop up, and he does not manage to learn a single thing all day.

Moshe shows us that although he could have forestalled his fate, he hurried to fulfill Hashem's command.

Another lesson to be gleaned from Moshe's diligence is the following. Every person has his own mitzvot. These are commandments custom-made for him to fulfill, irrelevant of the rest of the 613 mitzvot. He is enjoined to perform them, each in accordance with his circumstances and skills. For instance, one who has connections with the ruling authority and can be influential in redeeming captives is enjoined to give this mitzvah his all. He will be granted tremendous reward for what he does. Others, who do not hold the ropes of the government in their hands, cannot be expected to accomplish in this area. One who beautifies the mitzvah designated to him, doing it in the most effective way possible, will be duly recompensed by Hashem. Everyone should seek out the mitzvot which his life conditions have made accessible to him. He should do his utmost to perform them, in spite of any difficulty involved. Regarding these mitzvot, we are told (see *Mechilta, Bo 9*), "Do not delay a mitzvah which has come your way."

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Hashem specified that Moshe's death was dependent on doing battle with Midian to indicate that it was a personal mitzvah, only for Moshe himself.
- ◆ Moshe hurried into battle, even though he could have tarried. He thereby indicated to Am Yisrael how much *mesirut nefesh* a person should employ in order to fulfill Hashem's word.

- ◆ Moshe teaches us two basic principles by his punctual performance of this mitzvah. The first is that one should do mitzvot at the earliest possible opportunity. The second is that every person has mitzvot which are custom-made for him. He will not be held accountable for refraining from fulfilling them, but performing them will bring him great reward.



You Are Not Free To Withdraw from It

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites; afterward you will be gathered unto your people”

(Bamidbar 31:1-2)

Why did Hashem command Moshe to fight the Midianites instead of Himself going to war against them, as He did against the Egyptians? We can learn a lesson from this incident. Often, we hear that someone is suffering or undergoing an ordeal. What is our immediate reaction? We give a sigh and say that Hashem will help. But do we lift a finger to help the person? Certainly Hashem will release the downtrodden from their misery. But this does not absolve one from stretching out his hand to his fellow man, rescuing him from the depths of disaster.

Hashem wants us to make the first move, and after that, He will come to the aid of the victim. This is in line with the Midrash (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:3), “Open for Me the opening of a needle hole, and I will open for you the opening of a banquet hall.” Bnei Yisrael are responsible for each other (*Shavuot* 39a). If my friend falls upon

hard times, I have a part in his suffering, and I am required to feel a measure of his pain. This is the meaning of responsibility toward a fellow Jew. When Hashem sees that one makes an overture of offering help to his friend in need, He completes the job, as our Sages teach (*Avot* 2:16), “You are not required to complete the task.” But one must always keep in mind (*ibid.*), “Yet you are not free to withdraw from it.”

Bnei Yisrael sinned with the daughters of Midian due to a spiritual deficiency. Hashem wanted them now to fight against the Midianites in order to rectify the damage. Then He, for His part, would help them vanquish their enemies.

The Torah (*Devarim* 21:10) states, “When you will go out to war against your enemies, and Hashem, your G-d, will deliver him into your hand, and you will capture his captives.” The Zohar (*Ki Teitzei*), as well as other commentaries (*Alshich, Devarim* 15-17; *Ketav Sofer, Devarim* 21:10) explains that the war here is referring to the war against the *Yetzer Hara*, our number one enemy. Hashem enjoins us to go out to battle against him on our own. If one girds himself with strength, fighting his *Yetzer Hara* head-on, he is guaranteed that Hashem will deliver him into his hands, and he will be held captive in his domain.

When Adam Harishon ate of the Tree of Knowledge, he did it with pure motives. After being warned not to eat of it, he was tempted to do just that, with the following rationale: “Hashem has given me all the good this world can afford, without my having to work for it. What type of reward can I expect for that?” He purposely sinned by eating of the forbidden fruit, inviting the *Yetzer Hara* to enter him. He felt that constantly battling an inner inclination, and triumphing time after time, would earn him tremendous reward. He would be spared the bread of shame, having won his bread through his own merit. One cannot compare a free gift with the reward one has

earned for his hard work. Payment in remuneration for a job well done is manifold times more precious in one's eyes than a free gift for which he did not labor. Although Adam was originally enjoined to guard Gan Eden, and would have received reward for this, the return for more difficult labor is obviously more rewarding.

Hashem wants a person to take the first step toward Him, small as it may be. This step will grant him tremendous *siyata di'Shemaya*. It goes without saying that if one succeeds in combating his *Yetzer Hara* by acting meritoriously, the taste of victory will be much sweeter than had he passively sat by, overcoming his inclination, but without any real effort on his part. Additionally, returning battle-weary from a serious scuffle with the *Yetzer Hara* causes one to be more careful in the future. He will not allow himself to come close to a *nisayon*.

This was an important reason for the command to Bnei Yisrael to battle the Midianites. The war effort would force them to think of the implications of their dastardly deeds, which resulted in this state of affairs. From now on, this sin would never be repeated. Now we can easily understand Moshe's wrath with the nation when they returned from this war with captive women of Midian. They were placing themselves in the same perilous position as previously, liable to sin with them as in the past. Therefore, Moshe commanded them to put to death any Midianite woman who had had relations with a man.

In Summary

- ◆ Why did Hashem instruct Moshe to recruit the nation for war against Midian, instead of fighting for them, as He had done in Egypt? Hashem always wants a person to make the first move, and afterwards, gives him Divine help to finish the job in the best way possible. This is borne out in the saying, "Open for Me an opening of a needle hole..."

- ◆ Going out to war provided a *tikkun* for the damage Bnei Yisrael had previously caused. This would arouse them to do teshuvah for their sin. For this reason, Hashem wanted them to fight their own battles.
- ◆ Payment in remuneration for a job well done is manifold times more precious in one's eyes than a free gift for which he did not labor. For this reason, Adam decided to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. By allowing the *Yetzer Hara* to enter him, he would be challenged by *nisayon*, time after time. And by overcoming these trials, he would merit reward justly earned and not received as a free gift.
- ◆ Combating one's *Yetzer Hara* causes a person to be more cautious in the future.



Remember the Torah of Moshe, My Servant

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Take vengeance for the Children of Israel from the Midianites; afterward you will be brought in unto your people”

(Bamidbar 31:1-2)

Hashem asked Moshe to avenge Bnei Yisrael's honor from the Midianites, who caused them so sin in immorality and to worship Ba'al Peor. Hashem added that after this war, Moshe would pass on. His passing was contingent on the war. The pesukim seem to indicate that Hashem was giving Moshe a choice in the matter. He told him that he could fight the Midianites if he wanted to, but his death would be imminent. Conversely, delaying this war would prolong his life.

Naturally, a person tries to live as long as possible. All the more so, a man of the stature of Moshe Rabbeinu, by whose name the Torah is called, as the *Navi* proclaims (*Malachi* 3:22), “Remember the Torah of Moshe, My servant.” Torah is the Torah of life. Certainly, Moshe Rabbeinu, whose name is intrinsically linked with the Torah, desired life.

It is interesting to note that although there are numerous parshiyot named for various people, the righteous as well as the wicked, such as: Pinchas, Korach, Balak, Yitro, and Chayei Sarah, we find no parashah named after our leader, Moshe. Why?

The entire Torah revolves around the persona of Moshe Rabbeinu. It is not possible to specify one parashah to be named after him. Thus the Torah itself is called by his name. In spite of Moshe’s desire to lengthen his days in this world, he acceded to Hashem’s request and began drafting the people for battle. He did this with full knowledge that this would be his last earthly accomplishment. The pesukim (*Bamidbar* 31:5; see *Rashi*, *ibid.*) denote that Am Yisrael were reluctant to enter into war, and Moshe had to convince them. Moshe’s greatness shines forth once again. He knew that this war would be his last, but he did not consider his personal interests (*Rashi* *ibid.*, 31:3), making Hashem’s desire his own.

Why did Hashem connect the war against Midian with the death of Moshe Rabbeinu? We can base our answer on the Midrash (*Tanchuma*, *Korach* 11) regarding the pasuk, “Moshe is truth and his Torah is truth.” The word אמת (truth) contains the letter מ, numerically equivalent to forty. These are the forty days which Moshe spent in Heaven, learning Torah from Hashem Himself with utmost *mesirut nefesh*. The word אמת also contains the letters א and ת, alluding to the twenty-two letters of the Torah, which begin with the letter א and end with the letter ת.

Moshe's entire essence was Torah. He was the one chosen to ascend and receive the Torah to bring down to Am Yisrael. It seems obvious that Moshe would want to live, as the Torah which he represented is the Torah of life. But Hashem hinted to him that if he were to remain living, it would not be good for the nation. In the words of the above pasuk, "אחר תאסף אל עמך – afterward you will be brought in unto your people," the word אחר (afterward) is an allusion to the סטרא אחרא (the *sitra achra*). This force of evil would seize Moshe's place and continue seeking ways of causing Am Yisrael to sin. This would cause a tremendous deficiency in the truth of Moshe, which flowed from the Torah.

For this reason, Hashem entreated Moshe Rabbeinu to fight the Midianites, even though this would herald his own death. As long as the Midianites remained unpunished and Moshe Rabbeinu lived, the forces of evil were in control, looking for ways to cause Am Yisrael to sin. But Moshe's death and burial across from Ba'al Peor would provide protection for his nation from sinning any longer with that *avodah zarah*. The *sitra achra*, too, would perish, and all threats looming over Bnei Yisrael would vanish.

Moshe Rabbeinu, who put the good of the nation before his own concerns, responded immediately to Hashem's request and did his utmost to recruit the nation for battle. Rashi (*Bamidbar* 31:3) comments that although he had heard that his death depended upon the matter, he acted with joy, and did not delay. And, indeed, after this war, Hashem took Moshe's life, as the pasuk (*Devarim* 34:5-6) says, "So Moshe, servant of Hashem, died there, in the land of Moav, by the mouth of Hashem. He buried him in the depression, in the land of Moav, opposite Beit-Peor..." It would seem correct to say that Beit-Peor is a reference to Bilaam ben Beor, who had, together, with Balak ben Tzipor, instigated the sin of Am Yisrael with the daughters of Midian and the idol worship of Ba'al Peor.

With Moshe's death and burial by the *Shechinah*, opposite Beit-Peor, came the demise of the *kelippah* of the *sitra achra*, which was buried alongside him and was under his complete authority. In this manner, Bnei Yisrael were avenged for the damage Midian brought upon them.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Hashem ordered Moshe to wage war against the Midianites and told him that afterward, he would pass on. How could Moshe execute this mission so diligently, knowing that he was hastening his own demise? Also, why isn't there a parashah in the Torah which is called by Moshe's name?
- ◆ Moshe sacrificed his entire being for the Torah. Therefore, one parashah called by his name would be inadequate. Instead, the entire Torah is named after Moshe, as the pasuk states, "Remember the Torah of Moshe, My servant." Moshe constantly sought ways of fulfilling the desire of Hashem. It was only natural that here, too, in spite of the steep price, he willingly fulfilled Hashem's will to perfection.
- ◆ What is the connection between the war with Midian and the death of Moshe? Moshe is truth and his Torah is truth. Moshe placed the good of the nation above his own personal good. Knowing that the forces of evil were seeking to destroy Am Yisrael, Moshe was ready to die for their sake, in order to preserve the nation and the Torah.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu was buried opposite Beit-Peor, the place of Bilaam ben Beor. When he died, the *kelippah* of impurity died together with him. In this manner, perfect vengeance was taken against the Midianites.



The Final Tikkun

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Take vengeance for the Children of Israel from the Midianites; afterward you will be brought in unto your people. Moshe spoke to the people saying: Arm men from among yourselves for the legion that they may be against Midian to inflict Hashem’s vengeance against Midian”

(Bamidbar 31:1-3)

Hashem asked Moshe Rabbeinu to wage war against the Midianites, thereby avenging Am Yisrael, who had sinned with the daughters of Moav. This sin had caused them to spiral downward. Immorality led to the worship of Ba’al Peor. This is in line with the Mishnah (*Avot* 4:2), “One sin leads to another.” Hashem wanted to annihilate the gentiles who had instigated sin, attempting mightily to coerce Am Yisrael to transgress Hashem’s will. One cannot compare one who seeks sin with one who is forced into it. Our Sages (*Ketubot* 13b) state, “There is no guarantee [of protection] from immorality.”

The daughters of Moav approached Bnei Yisrael under the guise of doing business transactions. But it was only a ruse to entice them to sin. Had Bnei Yisrael been immersed in Torah study, it would have had the power to protect them from sin. But since they weakened in their Torah study, they were not afforded its protection. They sinned with these women, and an epidemic broke out as a result, claiming twenty-four thousand lives. There are those who state (*Rema MiPano, Gilgulei Neshamot* 20:2) that the *neshamot* of these people were reincarnated in the twenty-four thousand

disciples of Rabbi Akiva. The Torah study of these giants rectified their previous negligence.

There is a blatant difference between what Hashem told Moshe and the message Moshe delivered to the people (*Tanchuma, Matot* 3; *Chizkuni, Bamidbar* 31:3). Hashem ordered Moshe to wage war with the Midianites in order to avenge Bnei Yisrael, as the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 31:2) states, “Take vengeance for the Children of Israel.” But we find that Moshe told Bnei Yisrael that their goal was to avenge Hashem, as he said (*ibid.* 31:3), “To inflict Hashem’s vengeance against Midian.”

We can resolve this inconsistency in the following manner. Moshe, in his keen understanding of his people, realized that were he to turn to the nation with the request to fight for the vengeance of the fallen masses, they would categorically refuse. “What benefit would there be?” they would ask, “The dead will not come back to life. And besides, Hashem is the G-d of vengeance (*Tehillim* 94:1). He will surely avenge their honor.” Therefore, Moshe changed the wording from the outset, asking them to return Hashem’s sullied honor. Bnei Yisrael could not refuse. They acquiesced to his request, albeit reluctantly, knowing that their leader would be taken shortly afterward.

If Bnei Yisrael were unenthusiastic about entering a war with the goal of reinstating Hashem’s honor, how much more would they hesitate to fight for the honor of their fallen brethren. How severe is the sin of immorality in Hashem’s eyes, and how grave are its repercussions! In the future, Hashem will take vengeance upon all those nations that impacted us negatively with their perverse cultures, causing Bnei Yisrael to sin so terribly and producing the death of untold numbers.

In parashat *Tetzaveh*, the Robe of the Ephod is described as follows (*Shemot* 28:32): “Its head-opening shall be folded over within

it, its opening shall have a border all around of weaver's work – it shall be for it like the opening of a coat of mail – it shall not be torn.” Kabbalistically, this pasuk is explained (see *Chemdat Yamim, Yom Hakippurim* 4) in the following way. After a person dies, a *tikkun* for the *oht brit kodesh* is performed upon him. This purifies him from related sins, for the punishment in the World to Come is extremely severe. I asked a student why it is the custom to do this *tikkun* before burial. I answered that one who defiles the *oht brit kodesh* is akin to one who defiles the entire Torah. In each drop of seed lies the potential for life. A person is created with 248 organs and 365 sinews, corresponding to the mitzvot of the Torah. Moreover, the *gematria* of the word ברית (*brit*), adding one for the word itself, is equal to תר"ג, the 613 mitzvot of the Torah.

When a person who desecrated his *brit* will arrive on High, all of the *neshamot* which were created will demand restitution for their shame. Woe to the humiliation of that scene! For this reason, the custom is to make a *tikkun* for the *oht brit kodesh* to minimize the punishment.

The Ben Ish Chai states (see *Sha'ar Ruach Hakodesh, tikkun* 20, 14:3) that if one cohabits with a gentile woman, she attaches herself to him like a dog. And even after death, the shadow of this dog does not leave him, hounding him in the grave. The Ben Ish Chai continues (see *Benayahu ben Yehoyada, Bava Batra* 4a) that the *neshamah* of the Jew is hewn out from under the Throne of Glory, whereas the *neshamah* of a gentile derives from public property. Since their origins are so different, they cannot reside together. Hashem forbids mixed marriages, because this breaches the bounds separating the private domain from the public one, causing Am Yisrael to forfeit their status as the Chosen Nation. When one immerses in a *mikveh*, he purifies himself of the *kelippah*, which

then disgorges all of the *neshamot* created by wasted seed and returns them to him, completely rectified.

The first mitzvah of the Torah is (*Bereishit* 1:28), “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth.” This mitzvah is crucial, for it completes the count of 613 mitzvot. One who desists from reproducing observes only תר”ב of the mitzvot, the letters of the word ברית, rearranged. It is as if he went to war against Hashem. Chizkiyahu Hamelech did not want to marry, for he saw with *ruach hakodesh* that he would father Menashe, who would sin and cause the masses to sin. Hashem was angered by this decision. Yeshayahu Hanavi delivered Hashem’s message that Chizkiyahu would lose his share in the World to Come. When Chizkiyahu realized just how precious this mitzvah is in Hashem’s eyes, he married and established a family. He thereby earned more years of life, returning to full health after his deathly illness.

The Torah (*Yevamot* 76a) lauds Yaakov Avinu, who never saw a drop of *keri* in his life. For this, he merited becoming the chosen of the Avot (*Bereishit Rabbah* 76:1). Yosef Hatzaddik is thus named because, “The tzaddik is the foundation of the world” (see *Zohar* III, 236a). In spite of Potiphar’s wife’s constant and varied seductions, Yosef staunchly guarded himself and overpowered his *Yetzer Hara* like a lion. Yosef drew strength from the image of his father, Yaakov, to withstand temptation.

We might add the following thought. The ashes of the *parah adumah* purified the defiled. Shlomo Hamelech tried to understand the meaning behind all the *chukim* of the Torah (*Yoma* 14a), and he succeeded. But when he came to the mitzvah of *parah adumah*, he was stopped in his tracks by a red light. Regarding this mitzvah, he proclaimed, “I thought I could become wise, but it is beyond me” (*Kohelet* 7:23). However, perhaps we can try to glean some inspiration from this mitzvah.

Hashem created Adam Harishon from the earth and then blew the breath of life through his nostrils. He thereby taught him that he came from earth and would return to earth. Avraham admitted to this by stating (*Bereishit* 18:27), “I am but dust and ash.”

Adam Harishon was created pure and clean of all sin. He did not even need the purification process of the *brit milah*, for he was created circumcised. But after sinning, he became defiled. He began tugging at his foreskin, desiring to be with Chava. Chazal (see *Zohar* I, 52a and b; *ibid.* 89b) explain that until he sinned, he had no evil inclination whatsoever. Only after he sinned, did he become defiled and under the influence of the *Yetzer Hara*. The urge for immorality was most prominent. Every sin, throughout the generations, is rooted in the sin of Adam Harishon, who sinned with the forbidden fruit, ingesting with it, the *Yetzer Hara* for immorality.

The *Middat Hadin* dictates that one should die immediately upon sinning (see *Mesillat Yesharim* 4). But Hashem is long-suffering. In his great kindness, he awaits the teshuvah of the sinners (*ibid.*). If a person finds himself contaminated by a dead body, or any other source of defilement, he should accept it as a Heavenly sign that he has sin on his hands, and he must do teshuvah in order to purify himself properly.

The *parah adumah* represents blood, which is the life force within a person. And the ashes allude to mankind, who comes from dust. When one sins, he deserves to die. When he is sprinkled with the ashes of the *parah adumah*, his flesh and blood become revitalized and purified. This process reminds him of his sins. He is considered to have died, returned to the ground, and become resurrected. He is like a new being. He is like Adam Harishon at Creation, circumcised and pure, clean of all sin.

In Summary

- ◆ Hashem asked Moshe to wage war against the Midianites in order to restore Bnei Yisrael's trampled glory, after they sinned with the daughters of Moav, by the suggestion of the Midianites.
- ◆ Why did Moshe change from what Hashem had told him, telling the nation they were avenging Hashem's honor? He knew that they would refuse to wage war merely to avenge the blood of those who fell in the plague. They would counter that the dead would not be brought back to life in any event. But fighting Hashem's battle was an idea that won their hearts.
- ◆ Parashat *Tetzaveh* contains a pasuk which refers to the *tikkun* of the *ohl brit kodesh*, which is done to a man before burial. It atones for wasted seed, akin to defiling the entire Torah. Every drop of seed contains untold *neshamot*, each containing 613 organs, corresponding to the 613 mitzvot.
- ◆ The Torah lauds Yaakov Avinu, who never saw a drop of *keri* in his life. His son, Yosef, merited protection from the wiles of Potiphar's wife because he was inspired by the image of his father, who was so vigilant in this area.
- ◆ The ashes of the *parah adumah* purified the defiled. The red heifer hints to the lifeblood of man. Its ashes symbolize man's humble beginning, as dust of the ground. When the ashes are sprinkled on a person, his flesh and blood become reinvigorated, and he is like a new person, free of sin.



Improper Thoughts Are the Tools of Sin

“Moshe and Elazar the Kohen took the gold from them, every fashioned vessel”

(Bamidbar 31:51)

“Moshe and Elazar the Kohen took the gold from the officers of the thousands and the hundreds and brought it to the Tent of Meeting, a remembrance for the Children of Israel before Hashem”

(ibid. vs. 54)

When the soldiers of Am Yisrael returned from doing battle with the Midianites, they brought back lots of loot. This included many women, together with their jewelry of silver and gold. This war was one of vengeance against the Midianites for sending their daughters to incite Bnei Yisrael to sin. When Bnei Yisrael were near the plains of Moav, they patronized the Midianites, purchasing linen cloth from them. The Midianites, in their diabolical plan to incite Bnei Yisrael to sin, sent their daughters to make the sales. But this was merely a deception. Through dealing with them, Bnei Yisrael fell into a sin that they had no business doing. Through their sweet talk, the daughters of Midian seduced the Jewish men into sins of immorality and *avodah zarah*. As a direct result of these sins, and specifically the sin of the *Nasi* of Shevet Shimon with Kuzbi bat Tzur, an epidemic erupted among Am Yisrael, killing a vast number of people (see *Shemot Rabbah* 30:21). Only after Pinchas the Kohen took up for Hashem’s honor by killing Zimri and Kuzbi did the epidemic abate. Twenty-four thousand lives were claimed in the plague.

Hashem told Moshe to recruit men to fight against the Midianites in retribution. When these men returned from battle, they brought with them enormous amounts of booty, including women who wore heavy jewelry. Bnei Yisrael were well aware of the fact that immorality had taken its toll on them in the past (see *Shemot Rabbah* 30:21). Therefore, they were warned against sinning with them again. They were instructed to take the people captive with utmost caution.

Moshe took one look at the Jewish soldiers who returned with Midianite captive women and became extremely upset. How could they take the risk of any interaction whatsoever with these women, after the recent calamity? Although they did not sin with them now, these women certainly placed inappropriate thoughts in their minds (*Shabbat* 64a), especially as the men were removing the heavy jewelry from them. Moshe rebuked Bnei Yisrael, stating that they should have left these women behind in Midian, for they posed a terrible threat to the nation. It was only by Divine help that they did not actually sin with them.

The Gemara (*Yoma* 29a) states that improper thoughts are more severe than sin itself. Every sin begins with an incorrect thought. After one transgresses, thoughts of teshuvah beset him, and he is overcome with a yearning to return once again to his Heavenly Father. But after just thinking sinful thoughts, one does not hurry to do teshuvah. He feels that he did not actually sin; what is there to repent? But these improper thoughts are liable to fester, bringing more sinful thoughts in their wake. Who knows if in the future, a person will have the strength to withstand his *Yetzer Hara* and keep away from actually sinning?

For this reason, Moshe Rabbeinu reprimanded the nation for taking captive the daughters of Midian. This act alone led to

improper thoughts. Only by a miracle were they spared sinning once again.

When Moshe saw that he had forgotten certain halachot due to his anger at Bnei Yisrael, he realized he had judged them too harshly. Bnei Yisrael had not sinned with these Midianite women at the time of war, proof being that they all returned alive. And Pinchas, who joined them in battle, killed Bilaam ben Beor. In any event, the soldiers told Moshe that the jewels they looted should be atonement for any inappropriate thoughts (*Shabbat* 64a), and Moshe accepted them.

Regarding the jewels which Moshe and Elazar accepted, the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 31:51) states, “Moshe and Elazar the Kohen took the gold from them, every fashioned vessel.” What is the implication of the term “every fashioned vessel”? Moshe Rabbeinu wished to hint to Am Yisrael that the jewels which they brought before him were considered atonement for improper thoughts concerning the daughters of Midian. These thoughts were like tools which could cause sin. Moshe was transmitting the message that one must be cautious even in his thoughts, that they should not contain a trace of lust. These types of thoughts are the weeds which germinate misdeeds. It is well-known that the eye sees, the heart desires, and the actions follow (see *Rashi, Bamidbar* 15:39).

Due to the significance of the subject, Moshe preserved these jewels in the Ohel Moed as a constant reminder for Bnei Yisrael. Whenever they would see these ornaments, they would immediately do teshuvah for improper thoughts. This would prevent such thoughts from fermenting into wrongdoing, *rachmana litzlan*.

An aveirah does not just spring forth from nowhere. It begins with the initial stages of gazing at inappropriate “sites.” This leads to wrong thoughts. Wrong thoughts create the tools by which one

actually sins. Therefore, in order to uproot this malady from its source, one must ensure the purity of his eyes. Then they will not cause him to stumble, implanting in his mind negative thoughts.

Who can assess the damage wrought by improper thoughts, as they carry off a person to who-knows-where? I can personally testify, with tremendous pain, throughout my years of assisting the public, to awful, hair-raising stories of couples that broke up. This was because they did not safeguard their home adequately, but allowed all the filth of the outside world to penetrate. When the eyes see and the heart desires, who can stop a man from being unfaithful to his wife?

A woman once came to me in hysterics. Her husband had left her for another woman. After a little probing as to how her house was run, she confided in me, albeit shamefully, that every evening, she and her husband would watch pornographic videos. She herself was lured by the frivolity and promiscuity displayed on the screen. All the more so, her husband, as men naturally have stronger urges than women. He could not withstand the enticement and acted out with strange women.

Let no one delude himself into thinking that negative thoughts are the lot of those far from Torah and mitzvot. Even I, called by the people a “Rav,” and sporting a full, white beard, am absolved of nothing. If I don’t stand guard, I am likely to be plagued by improper thoughts. With great sorrow, I can attest the following about myself. On one of my flights, we had a stopover in London. There was an enormous screen on the wall, displaying the news of the Gulf War, which was taking place then in Israel. Out of sympathy for my suffering brethren living in the Holy Land, I found myself following the broadcast, delivered by an old woman. For the next five years, I could not rid my mind of this woman’s image. Whenever I stood up to pray, her picture would pop into my head, and I would see her

publicizing the news which was already not so new. Only after tearful tefillot to Hashem to remove this vision from my view, did He have mercy on me and do so. The Chafetz Chaim says that one must be careful even regarding an old woman, and even an old man must always be on the lookout, watching where his eyes wander.

Everyone, regardless of status or age, must guard his eyes well, so that they do not solicit unwelcome thoughts. I am often invited to weddings across the globe. The invitations frequently contain plane tickets and even hotel reservations. Whenever I reply that I will attend, it is always on condition that the *kallah* is dressed modestly. I am a Rav, but I am still a human being. How can I stand before a *kallah* who is more revealed than concealed? Due to the weightiness of this matter, I have various shawls in my room, with which women who come to speak to me can cover themselves appropriately. I do not want to find myself, *chalilah*, involved in a mitzvah which is done through an aveirah.

Moshe was angered by the nation for putting themselves into a state of *nisayon*. He claimed that they should have been satisfied with whatever loot they received, and should not have placed themselves into the hands of temptation. How carefully must one guard himself, so that he does not fall into the trap of *nisayon*! Caution demands, at times, personal sacrifice, but in the long run, it brings a person tremendous reward.

I once found myself traveling a two-hour journey by train. When I got onto the train, the only vacant seat was across from an immodestly-clad woman. The entire train was full of the same, so, out of lack of choice, I sat there. But instead of writing my Torah novellae, as I had originally intended, I decided to take a catnap. Were I to remain awake, I realized, although I would be involved in my writing, I was liable to glance around. Who knows what would happen to me then? I stubbornly forced myself into a deep sleep, in

spite of the anguish that niggled at me for wasting my time sleeping, when I could have been writing words of Torah. I knew this was the correct step to take. At the end of the day, I would be happy that I had stayed on the right track!

I would like to end this essay by mentioning a letter written by an avrech who learns in our institutions in Eretz Yisrael. He writes not with ink, but with blood. He pleads for advice as to how to extricate himself from the terrible predicament in which he finds himself. Every woman in the street attracts his eye, causing him to gaze at her fixedly. I can testify to this young man's authenticity. He learns Torah diligently. Nonetheless, his *Yetzer Hara* looms large and constantly connives ways to bring him to sin. He knows that improper sighting results in wrong thoughts, which are the tools of sin. Therefore, he asks for a way to protect his eyes, so that he should not fall into sin.

I think that every person should have a special tefillah in which he entreats Hashem for Divine help to protect his eyes from improper sights. In this manner, through tefillah and Torah study, which is the antidote for the *Yetzer Hara* (*Kiddushin* 30b), Hashem will help him to keep his eyes pure and sanctified.

In Summary

- ◆ When Bnei Yisrael brought before Moshe the gold of the Midianite women whom they had taken captive, he rebuked them severely. He felt that they should not have taken these women captive, for they posed a spiritual threat. Bnei Yisrael had already sinned once with devastating results; they should have been more careful.
- ◆ Moshe chastised them, stating that although they had not actually sinned with these women, they had certainly entertained improper thoughts

regarding them. Wrong thoughts can be worse than sin itself. After one sins, he is beset with remorse and does teshuvah. But one does not see the necessity of doing teshuvah for merely thinking wrong thoughts. He therefore continues following the lusts of his heart.

- ◆ Bnei Yisrael brought the jewels as atonement for the improper thoughts that they had previously entertained. The words “every fashioned vessel” teaches us that wrong thoughts are the tools which eventually cause one to do the actual sin itself.
- ◆ “The eye sees and the heart desires...” One must guard his eyes very well, so that he should not fall into negative thoughts, which can germinate into misdeeds.



The Gentle Words of the Wise Are Heard

“The children of Reuven and the children of Gad had abundant livestock – very great. They saw the land of Yazer and the land of Gilad, and behold! – the place was a place for livestock”

(Bamidbar 32:1)

“They said: If we have found favor in your eyes, let this land be given to your servants as a heritage; do not bring us across the Jordan”

(ibid. 32:5)

When Shevet Reuven and Shevet Gad reached the Jordan, they found the vast expanses of grasslands perfect for pasturing their

many flocks. They asked Moshe for permission to settle the area, instead of entering Eretz Yisrael with the rest of Bnei Yisrael. The land east of the Jordan was lush and green, just the right place to raise their numerous herds. Moshe heard their request and asked (*Bamidbar* 32:6), “Shall your brothers go out to battle while you settle here?” He reprimanded them for even thinking of placidly pitching their tents here, while their brethren risked their lives to capture the Land. After these two tribes pledged to aid their fellow Jews in war, before settling this area, Moshe Rabbeinu agreed to their request and allowed them to do as they wished.

Throughout the Torah, we find various cases in which Moshe’s ire was roused. But here he did not become angry at Bnei Reuven at all. Their request raises question, and maybe even wrath. But Moshe maintained his equanimity. All he asked of them was to first help their fellow Jews in battle before settling this area. We do not find that Moshe asked Hashem for permission for these tribes to settle here. This, too, is surprising. Moshe always asked for Hashem’s advice at every step, as we find in the following scenarios: Pesach Sheini (*ibid.* 9:8), the daughters of Tzelafchad (*ibid.* 27:5), the one who gathered wood on Shabbat (*ibid.* 15:34-335), and the son of the Egyptian who blasphemed the Holy Name (*Vayikra* 24:12). Why did Moshe veer from his usual custom and reply of his own accord?

I would like to respond with a general answer, which contains a life lesson. Although these tribes might have deserved a sound rebuke, Moshe desisted from getting angry at them. He knew that anger is an abominable trait, proof being that whenever he had become angry, he immediately forgot the relevant halachot (*Rashi, Bamidbar* 31:21). As he constantly searched for improvement, Moshe refrained from becoming angry at Bnei Yisrael. We are taught (*Shabbat* 30b), “The *Shechinah* rests only in a state of joy.” When a

person is angry, happy feelings depart and, as a result, the *Shechinah* leaves him, as well.

Notwithstanding his self-control, Moshe gently admonished these tribes. He stipulated that they must first come to their brothers' aid. Only after the nation was safely settled in Eretz Yisrael could Bnei Reuven and Gad claim this land. Since Moshe did not become angered at them, Hashem's *Shechinah* remained with him, speaking from his throat. He had no need to ask advice from the *Shechinah*.

My holy grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Pinto, zy" a, never got angry, even when people behaved wrongly. He would rebuke them pleasantly. Since words which emanate from the heart penetrate the heart, his words were met with acceptance, even though, and especially because, they were not said in anger. We are small and far from such levels of tzaddikim, like the east from the west. At times, we need to employ a measure of anger to educate our children or disciples. Nevertheless, we can gauge the quality of our anger. Is it under our complete control, focused on the matter at hand, in order to educate our children with respect for Torah, or does it perhaps contain an element of personal interest, such as self-aggrandizement? For this reason, Kohelet (9:17) states, "The gentle words of the wise are heard." One who delivers his rebuke with gentleness, without losing himself, proves his wisdom and fear of Heaven.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu did not allow himself to become angered over the request of the two *shevatim* who wished to remain east of the Jordan, although they were deserving of it. He veered from his usual custom and did not confer with Hashem regarding their request.

- ◆ Moshe knew that the quality of anger is abominable and liable to make him forget the halachah. Therefore, he made sure to admonish these *shevatim* gently.
- ◆ Moshe Rabbeinu did not ask for Hashem's advice, for it was Hashem's voice which emitted from Moshe's throat. This was because Moshe was able to preserve Hashem's *Shechinah* within himself by distancing himself from the trait of anger.



Shevet Menashe Protects the Other Shevatim

“The children of Reuven and the children of Gad had abundant livestock – very great. They saw the land of Yazer and the land of Gilad, and behold! – the place was a place for livestock They said: If we have found favor in your eyes, let this land be given to your servants as a heritage; do not bring us across the Jordan”

(Bamidbar 32:1)

The tribes of Reuven and Gad had abundant flocks and cattle. They therefore asked Moshe if they could settle the land east of the Jordan and not enter Eretz Yisrael with the rest of the nation, for this land was conducive to raising livestock. Moshe admonished them with the words, (*Bamidbar 32:6*), “Shall your brothers go out to battle while you settle here?” They accepted his words and replied that they would first help their brothers in battle and only

afterward would they settle the land of Gilad, east of the Jordan. Moshe agreed to this plan, stating that it is appropriate for the holy *shevatim* to bear a sense of responsibility toward each other. Only after their brothers would be securely settled in the Holy Land would they settle the land east of the Jordan.

Although Moshe took these tribes to task for their insolent attitude in desiring to settle their land before Eretz Yisrael was conquered, Hashem was not angered in the least. Hashem seemed to have even agreed to their request and did not oppose their settling this land even before Eretz Yisrael was conquered and divided.

Rabbi Solomons, shlita, Rosh Kollel of our institution in Paris asked me why the tribe of Menashe is not included in the request to settle this land. Only after the entire incident, do we find that Menashe joined the other two tribes. Moreover, only half this tribe settled east of the Jordan, a phenomenon we find nowhere else. Why was this tribe split in half?

The entire tribe of Menashe was originally meant to settle in Eretz Yisrael. After the tribes of Reuven and Gad asked to settle east of the Jordan and Hashem accepted their request, Moshe understood that he could not prevent this. They had already staked claim to this land in their capture of Sichon and Og. Moshe merely stipulated that first they would help their fellow Jews conquer Eretz Yisrael, and only afterward could they settle this land. Still, Moshe feared for their spiritual fate. He was afraid that they might intermarry with the neighboring nations. The first letters of the names גַּד and רְאוּבֵן spell גַּר (stranger), whereas the last letters spell נָד (move). These two tribes were decreed from Heaven to be wanderers in foreign lands. Maybe this was why they demonstrated a desire to remain outside Eretz Yisrael.

Am Yisrael is responsible for each other, as their *neshamot* are carved from one source. Therefore, Moshe instructed the tribe of מְנַשֶּׁה (Menashe), whose name contains the letters of נְשָׁמָה (*neshamah*), to divide themselves in two. One half would settle in the land of Gilad and provide protection for the tribes of Reuven and Gad, fortifying their connection to the *neshamah* of Am Yisrael. The second half of Menashe would inherit a portion in Eretz Yisrael. The half remaining in *chutz la'aretz* would draw *kedushah* from their counterparts in the Land, thereby influencing Bnei Reuven and Gad, as well.

Hashem acted with loving-kindness toward the two tribes by providing them with half of the tribe of Menashe, alluding to the *neshamah* of Am Yisrael. Hashem was not angry at these two tribes, for they were predestined to live nomadic lives in foreign lands. When Moshe Rabbeinu saw that Hashem was satisfied with their request, he understood that it came from Hashem and he should therefore agree to it.

The Arizal writes (*Pri Eitz Chadash*, Introduction to Tefillah) that there are twelve gates in *Shamayim*, corresponding to the Twelve Shevatim. It is through these gates that the tefillot are accepted. Each gate has its own name, based on the *shevet* it represents. For this reason, it is of utmost importance that every community maintains its own *nusach* of tefillah, as handed down by its fathers. Over the course of time, the *shevatim* have become spread apart. After returning to Eretz Yisrael, each community preserved its own specific tefillot. As each community comes from another *shevet*, it is of utmost importance to keep the tefillot as exact as possible. This is so that the tefillot can go through the appropriate gates, where they came from, and be accepted in *Shamayim*. When one adopts the version of prayer of another tribe, his prayers cannot ascend through the gate designated for his *shevet*.

Although one must demonstrate mutual caring and responsibility toward our fellow Jews, each *shevet* and group in Am Yisrael must stand by its own particular customs and traditions. They must make every effort to maintain their specific *nusach* in tefillah. This in no way minimizes their unity and harmony. In the Wilderness, the *shevatim* encamped around their specific flags, not all grouped together under one umbrella flag. This is borne out in the pasuk in Shir HaShirim (2:4), “My encampment about Him is love.” When each tribe bears its own banner, preserving its heritage, love is created among Bnei Yisrael. On the contrary, recognition of the uniqueness of each tribe in Am Yisrael motivates the desire to help others with the gifts with which one was endowed. The tribe of Menashe is a prime example of this. Their name alludes to the *neshamah*. They came to the aid of the two tribes of Reuven and Gad and protected their *neshamot* from intermingling with the neighboring nations, even though they certainly preferred to sit securely in the Holy Land.

We find in parashat *Masei* (36:1-4) that Bnei Menashe came to Moshe with a complaint. Why should their portion be smaller than that of the others? they demanded. If the daughters of Tzelafchad, who received their father’s inheritance of the land in place of sons, would marry men from other tribes, their portion would be passed on to the tribes of their husbands. In this manner, Menashe’s land would shrink considerably. Moshe Rabbeinu acknowledged the truth in their words, and therefore ruled that the daughters of Tzelafchad must marry men from their own tribe – Menashe. He stated (ibid. 36: 7), “An inheritance of the Children of Israel shall not make rounds from tribe to tribe; rather the Children of Israel shall cleave every man to the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers.”

Why didn’t the tribe of Menashe approach Moshe immediately after he promised the daughters of Tzelafchad a portion of land,

stating their fear that their land would be diminished when the girls married men of other *shevatim*? Why did they wait until the apportioning of the Land to state their claim?

We find that although Bnei Reuven and Gad wished to dwell east of the Jordan, outside the *kedushah* of Eretz Yisrael, only for the sake of their livestock, they risked their lives on behalf of their nation. Adding to Moshe's entreaty that they help fight for the Land, they were at the forefront of the battle. Not only did they fight shoulder-to-shoulder with their fellow Jews, they waited to return across the Jordan until the war ended and the Land was apportioned according to Yehoshua's lots (*Yehoshua* 22:1-9). Reuven and Gad did not hurry to settle their land east of the Jordan, but waited another seven years, casting their lot together with that of their brethren, as each tribe received his allocated land. Instead of rushing to settle their tents by the lush pastures of the river, they put themselves in the same boat as their fellow Jews, above and beyond the call of duty.

Bnei Reuven and Gad realized that the main feature of the *kedushah* of Eretz Yisrael is acquired not by merely chasing out the enemy and dividing up the land, but by actually living there. They therefore waited until all the *shevatim* were settled in the Land, so that they themselves could also absorb some of its inherent holiness. Noticing their tremendous desire to become influenced by the *kedushah* of Eretz Yisrael, Moshe commanded Menashe to split themselves up. One half would live in Eretz Yisrael, and the second would settle with Reuven and Gad. The half in the Holy Land would affect the other half, who would then carry the *kedushah* over to the two tribes living beside him.

The tribe of Menashe, recognizing the holiness of the Land, wished to settle it as one. But Moshe commanded them to divide themselves in half. They accepted his order with love. But they were

afraid that if their inheritance of the Land would be diminished due to the daughters of Tzelafchad, their gateway to Heaven, parallel to their portion of land, would also become minimized. This thought terrified them. For this reason, they approached Moshe only here, after the apportioning of the Land, when they were notified that they had to divide themselves between Eretz Yisrael and east of the Jordan. This, coupled with the fact that the daughters of Tzelafchad might marry into other *shevatim*, frightened them. They were worried about their gate of prayer on High.

Bnei Reuven and Gad, who did not merit a portion in Eretz Yisrael, merited closeness with the half of Shevet Menashe who dwelled in their midst, due to their dedication in helping to conquer the Land. Menashe became their unifying force, through whom their tefillot ascended to Heaven.

Hashem always precedes the malady with the remedy. He knew that His children would eventually be exiled from their land. He therefore placed two and a half *shevatim* in *chutz la'aretz* from the outset. They brought the *Shechinah* with them. By means of the half-*shevet* of Menashe east of the Jordan, the tefillot and *kedushah* of the half remaining in Eretz Yisrael was transmitted to all who were outside the camp.

The initials of the names **גד ראובן מנשה** spell the word **מגר**, which means to destroy. By settling the two and a half *shevatim* east of the Jordan, Hashem preceded the remedy for the *galut*. Our nation succeeded and will, in the future, continue to succeed, in destroying and subduing all the enemies who seek our harm.

In the merit of the *shevatim* who resided outside the Land, the *kedushah* of Eretz Yisrael influenced *chutz la'aretz*. This was a form of preparation for the future *galut* of all the *shevatim*. In spite of their exile from their Land, they merit Hashem's Presence among them.

When the tribes went into exile, Hashem joined them. He proclaims (*Tehillim* 91:15), “I am with him in distress.” When Am Yisrael is in *galut*, so is the *Shechinah*.

For this reason, parashat *Matot* is read during the Three Weeks, between the 17th of Tammuz and Tishah b’Av, days of mourning the *galut* and the *churban*. Reading this parashah provides us with a timeless message. Hashem, in His undying love and unlimited mercy, purposely placed the two and a half *shevatim* outside of Eretz Yisrael. This drew the *kedushah* of Eretz Yisrael further than its physical boundaries. Similarly, the pipelines of blessing, corresponding to each *shevet*, through which their tefillot ascend to Heaven, are effective in *chutz la’aretz*, as well. This is due to the sphere of influence of Shevet Menashe. In this merit, the tefillah of any Jew in the Diaspora is able to be accepted and actualized. For this reason, all turn toward Eretz Yisrael while praying, asking that the sanctity of the Land spread upon them, affecting them and bringing their prayers Above.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ When Bnei Reuven and Gad asked for a portion outside the Land, Moshe was bothered by their request. But we do not find that Hashem was disturbed at all. Also, why don’t we find mention of the tribe of Menashe together with Reuven and Gad, when they requested a portion of land?
- ◆ When Moshe saw that Hashem was satisfied with the request of the two *shevatim*, he understood that it was acceptable. But first they would have to help their fellow Jews fight for the Land. The tribe of Menashe had no interest in settling east of the river. For that reason, they are not mentioned initially. They truly desired to live in Eretz Yisrael. But Moshe explained that their name hinted to their essence – the *neshamah* of the nation. They would therefore be split in two; the half dwelling in the Land influencing the other half with the *kedushah* of Eretz Yisrael.

In turn, the half living across the Jordan would influence the two *shevatim* residing there.

- ◆ Why did Shevet Menashe complain about the daughters of Tzelafchad only after the dividing of the Land, and not when the daughters actually received their father's portion? Every *shevet* has a gateway through which its prayers ascend heavenward. Shevet Menashe knew that their portion, as well as this gateway, would be reduced, due to the incident with the daughters of Tzelafchad. Now, after Moshe asked them to divide up and join the two tribes east of the Jordan, they feared that their inheritance, as well as their gateway of prayer, would be diminished even more.
- ◆ Placing the two and a half *shevatim* outside the Land was a way of preceding the malady with the remedy. The *kedushah* of Eretz Yisrael was expanded. When Bnei Yisrael would eventually be exiled from their Land, the *Shechinah* would be accustomed to shine upon them, even in *chutz la'aretz*.



I Remember the Kindness of Your Youth

“So Moshe gave to them – to the children of Gad, and the children of Reuven, and half the tribe of Menashe son of Yosef – the kingdom of Sichon king of the Amorite, and the kingdom of Og king of the Bashan; the land with its cities in the boundaries, and the cities of the surrounding land”

(Bamidbar 32:33)

The tribes of Reuven and Gad asked Moshe Rabbeinu for permission to settle the land east of the Jordan. After stipulating that they must first aid their brothers in their battles for the Land, Moshe allowed them to settle the former empires of Sichon and Og. Knowing that living outside Eretz Yisrael demands added protection, Moshe provided them with half the tribe of Menashe, who alluded to the *neshamah* of the nation. The name מְנַשֶּׁה has the same letters as the word נִשְׁמָה. The other half of the tribe, dwelling in Eretz Yisrael, would affect their brethren over the borders with the *kedushah* of the Land, which, would, in turn, spread upon all those residing in *chutz la'aretz*.

When the first Beit Hamikdash was destroyed, the first to be exiled were those tribes residing east of the Jordan (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 22:6). Our *Chachamim* state (see *Nedarim* 22:1-2) that whoever dwells outside the borders of Eretz Yisrael is considered to be living in *galut*. The decision of the two tribes to stake claim to the land east of the Jordan was the beginning of the *galut*, and after the Temple was destroyed, they were the first to be banished from their land.

The *haftarah* of parashat *Matot* relates the harsh words of Yirmeyahu to Bnei Yisrael. He predicted that there would be destruction if Bnei Yisrael would cleave to their ways of wickedness. Suddenly, in the midst of the words of rebuke, Yirmeyahu (2:2) told the people, “Thus said Hashem: I recall for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, your following Me into the Wilderness into an unsown land.” What is the connection between the previous words of chastisement and this pasuk, full of praise for Hashem’s beloved nation? They seem to be in direct contradiction.

No matter how much a son angers his father, he will always remain his son. The incident which incurred the father’s wrath is never powerful enough to erase all of the past favors and kindnesses which they did for each other. When two friends fight, it is natural that they forget all previous good times. But when a father is angered, even very deeply, there will always remain a spot of love in his heart toward his son.

Hashem is our compassionate Father. Although Bnei Yisrael sinned severely and neglected His Torah, to the degree that they deserved exile, their love still stood before Him. Hashem always remembered, even in His deepest anger, the kindness of their youth, when they followed Him in the desolate Wilderness. Hashem purposely planted this pasuk among the words of reproof in order to encourage His nation. They should never think all is lost. Although it is true that they veered from the proper path, He provided them with a window to teshuvah, an opening by which they could return to their Heavenly Father and serve Him whole-heartedly, just as they had in their early days.

This pasuk, then, serves as a consolation to Bnei Yisrael. They should not allow themselves to become mired in mourning to the extent of despair. On the contrary, they should invigorate

themselves with the knowledge that there is hope. They may have fallen, but Hashem is ready and waiting for them to return to Him.

When a disciple sins against his mentor in a serious way, his teacher could be so angry that he is unwilling to accept the student's apology, and casts him away. Not Hashem. He is like a merciful father, prepared to accept the teshuvah of His sons, in spite of their serious sins. Mentioning their positive points at a time of wrath is the prime indication that He still loves them. They can always do teshuvah and return.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The two and a half tribes east of the Jordan were the first to be exiled at the time of the *churban*. The very fact that they dwelled there was considered the beginning of the *galut*.
- ◆ The *haftarah* of parashat *Matot* relates the gloomy prophecy of Yirmeyahu Hanavi. But in the midst of it, he mentions the kindness that Bnei Yisrael did with Hashem by following Him blindly into the Wilderness. What is the connection between the admonition and Hashem's love for His people?
- ◆ Although Hashem is at times angered by His nation, He loves them as a father does a son. The fact that He remembers their kindness in the Wilderness opens a window of hope for them. Hashem always awaits their return to Him, no matter how they far they may fall.



Gems on Parashat Matot



The Word of a Jew

“He shall not desecrate his word”

(Bamidbar 30:3)

My father, zy”a, would say that the word of a Jewish person is like an oath. A person is comprised of three elements: *ruach*, *nefesh*, and *neshamah*. The *neshamah* is the Divine image within him (*Pardes Rimonim* 32:1), as the pasuk (*Bereishit* 2:7) states, “He blew into his nostrils the soul of life.” Man is part of Creation, yet, when he studies Torah, he becomes partners with Hashem in Creation, as the Zohar (II, 90b; III, 4b) states, “Hashem, the Torah, and Yisrael are one.” The *Navi Yirmeyahu* (33:25) proclaims that the entire world stands only in the merit of the Torah: “If My covenant with the night and with the day would not be; had I not set up the laws of heaven and earth.”

Rabbeinu Bachya (*Bamidbar* 22:2) elucidates that there is no king without a nation. Hashem does not reign without the support of His nation, Yisrael. On the other hand, there is no nation without a king, as is attested to in *Avot* (3:2), “If people did not fear the government, a person would swallow his fellow alive.” Bnei Yisrael and Hashem,

therefore, are interdependent. How does Hashem demonstrate His qualities of mercy and favor? By showering them upon Am Yisrael! Therefore, in Tehillim (68:35) it says, “Whose grandeur is upon Yisrael.” Furthermore, in Tefillat Shacharit (*Vehu Rachum*), we lament, “How long will Your strength be in bondage and Your splendor in the enemy’s power? Arouse Your strength.” We ask Hashem to reveal His kingdom upon us, for we each need the other.

Regarding Hashem, it says (Tefillat Shacharit, *Baruch She’amar*), “Blessed is He Who speaks and does.” Merely speaking contains an element of doing. Hashem’s speech is so significant that He regards it as a promise. Since we are partners with Him in Creation, our speech, too, carries the weight of an oath. One would do well to precede even ordinary speech with the phrase, “*Bli neder* – Without promising.”



Guarding Our Speech

“He shall not desecrate his word”

(Bamidbar 30:3)

Another place which stresses the importance of our words is the commandment (*Devarim 23:24*), “You shall observe and carry out what emerges from your lips.” Every utterance of a Jewish mouth has the status of an oath. My father, zy”a, would constantly warn us to be careful with our speech. The reason for the weightiness of our words is the following (*Pardes Rimonim 32:1*). A Jew has a Divine spark within his *neshamah*, akin to the angels themselves. Bnei

Yisrael merited proclaiming, as a promise, “*Na’aseh v’nishma*,” a concept heretofore exclusive to angels (*Shabbat* 88a). The festival of *Matan Torah*, therefore, is called שבועות (Shavuot), derived from the word שבועה (promise). How stringent one must be with his words, especially in Eretz Yisrael, where the *kedushah* is all the greater, and there are mitzvot which can be done only there.

One who degrades his speech breaches the boundaries of *kedushah*, for he profanes his words. When the barriers are down, who knows what can enter? The Gemara (*Nedarim* 91:2), dealing with vows, ends with the incident of a man who sinned in immorality. The very word נדר (vow) implies its grave meaning. It is similar to the word גדר (fence), for it provides a measure of protection and sanctity. The above-mentioned Gemara refers to terrible sins which can result from breaching the barriers erected by vows.

A man in Morocco arrived home to find a stranger with his wife. The adulterer removed a knife, ready to slay the husband, who was saved by a miracle. One who breaks down the barriers will not stop at anything. From illicit relations, he will come to murder. Adultery itself contains an element of murder. This is taught by the words of the *Navi* (*Yechezkel* 23:37), “And there is blood on their hands,” which refers to wasting seed, specifically one who has relations with a married woman and produces an illegitimate child.

The Gaon Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin was asked what the difference is between our generation and previous ones. He replied that the *talmidei chachamim* of yore were like a stone which sits in one place, never moved. They were settled and did not shift. But nowadays, they are like seeds blown by the winds, moving from place to place, going with the flow of the current times. In this manner, all borders are blurred. We are enjoined not to desecrate our word, but to maintain its stability in a shaky world.

Rabbeinu Hakadosh stated that he merited his greatness due to sighting the back of Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes when they used to sit in rows to hear the Torah leader's *shiur*. He claimed that had he merited seeing his face, he would have become even greater (*Eiruvin* 13b). Why, indeed, did he not look at his face? Rebbi completely subjected himself to his Torah teacher. Wherever he was placed was where he remained. He did not look anywhere else, like a stone standing still, unmoving.



Life and Death Are in the Power of the Tongue

How do parshiyot *Matot* and *Masei* connect to parashat *Devarim*, which follows them? These parshiyot describe Hashem's command to Moshe to wage war against the Midianites and in this manner, avenge Am Yisrael who fell into sin with their daughters. This was the result of the king of Midian accepting the diabolical plan of Bilaam ben Be'or, who suggested that he cause Bnei Yisrael to sin in immorality, which is abhorrent to Hashem (*Sanhedrin* 106a). He knew that Hashem would surely punish His nation severely for this sin.

This incident demonstrates the power of speech, capable of building towers, and, conversely, toppling worlds. Bilaam's words were so powerful that they caused the death of twenty-four thousand of our nation.

Moshe was aware of the intrinsic strength of the spoken word. Wishing to strike while the iron was hot, when Bnei Yisrael still

smarted from the results of Bilaam's counsel, Moshe gathered the people and stressed the significance of speech. He warned them against using Hashem's Name to swear in vain. Swearing falsely is an unpardonable sin.

After the parshiyot of *Matot* and *Masei*, which signify the power of speech, we read parashat *Devarim*, which begins with the words, "These are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel." Only by the power of "the words," i.e., words of Torah, the words of the Living G-d, can one be punctilious with what he says. This is the thread which winds its way through these parshiyot, which imply the significance of the power of words, for better or for worse.



Suffering – For the Sake of Elevation

What is the connection between the parshiyot of *Matot* and *Masei*? They are both read during Bein Hametzarim (the three weeks between the 17th of Tammuz and Tishah b'Av). The word מטות (*Matot*) is similar to מכות (strikes) and מסעי (*Masei*) denotes נסיעה (travel). In order to prompt a person to ascend in Torah, Hashem strikes him. The suffering and pain induce a person to make a personal accounting. He comes to the realization that it is only the Torah which can rescue him from his troubles. If he arrived at this state, Hashem wants to awaken him to fortify himself by means of traveling toward Torah.

We are living in a wanton generation. There are no boundaries; everything goes. People do as they see fit, not answerable to anyone else. The Torah was given in the Wilderness, an ownerless place.

One should renounce ownership over himself in order to accept the Torah. Unfortunately, the situation today is completely reversed. Instead of subjecting oneself to the dictates of the Torah, a person allows himself to do as he pleases, left to wild abandon and his own desires. His *Yetzer Hara*, holding the reigns, will lead him straight down the path to purgatory.

When a person feels any sort of ache, he takes a painkiller. But the afflictions of the World to Come will not be reduced by any pill. Gehinnom burns in full fury. This is the world of action and correction. *Olam Haba* is where a person pays up for his misdeeds.

Imagine a person leaving the supermarket with overflowing bags without paying a cent for his purchases. As he passes the guard on his way out, he is told to submit his receipt as proof of payment. He obviously does not have one, so he cheerily tells the man that he is willing to pay now for the things he took. He will certainly pay a fine for not paying earlier, which will far exceed the cost of the items.

This is how it is in our world. We must work on our *middot* while we are yet here, repairing the rifts. But if a person neglects to take care of this task, he will find that later is too late. Death is a one-way street. For this reason, Hashem strikes a person while he is yet in this world, in order to wake him up to mend his ways, cleaving to Torah and earning his portion in eternity.



Masei



The Connection between Matot and Masei

“These are the journeys of the Children of Israel who went forth from the land of Egypt according to their legions, under the hand of Moshe and Aharon”

(Bamidbar 33:1)

The juxtaposition of the parshiyot of *Matot* and *Masei* hints to the following: When Hashem observes someone becoming lax in Torah, He brings *matot* (lit. tribes, related to *makkot* – blows or suffering) upon him. This is in order that he should begin *Masei* (travels). He should travel to the destination of Torah. Ohr Hachaim (*Shemot* 19:2) explains, “They traveled from Refidim (רפידים) ” to mean that Bnei Yisrael traveled away from being lax in Torah (רפיון) , together with the Torah.

The last letters of the words מטות and מסעי are numerically equivalent to 410, which is also the *gematria* of the word קדוש (holy). Hashem strikes a person in order to move him along the road of Torah, which has the power to sanctify him.

The words **מטות** and **מסעי** both start with the letter **מ'**, which is numerically equivalent to forty. This is an allusion to the Torah, given after Moshe spent forty days and nights in *Shamayim*. One who distances himself from Torah brings suffering upon himself, directed at keeping him on the right road.

My mother, may she live and be well, told me about a woman who was found to have a growth in her throat, *rachmana litzlan*. The doctors recommended immediate surgery. The night before the scheduled surgery, this woman visited the grave of my holy father, zy" a, and began weeping bitterly. The night was especially cold, but this woman felt a certain warmth in the location of the grave, which contradicted the wintry weather. She placed her hands upon the grave and then rubbed them on her neck. (Many people have stated that in the area of my father's grave, it is especially warm).

After she returned home, her throat was itchy throughout the night. The next morning, she awoke and was admitted to the hospital, as planned. The doctors examined her and discovered that the malignant growth was nothing more than a lump of fats. Only a week before, the doctors had sadly informed her that they had found dangerous tumors. Now they told her that there was nothing wrong with her at all.

The woman could not remain unchanged in the face of the miracle she had undergone. She made a complete turnaround in her lifestyle, living as a Torah Jew. Hashem often brings suffering upon a person in order to awaken him to do teshuvah.

In a similar vein, a Rosh Kollel from Ashdod told me the following. A man, let us call him Mr. Cohen, had related to him that he was once in the vicinity of my father's grave in Ashdod. Since he was a Kohen, he was forbidden from entering the cemetery itself. Instead, he asked a man who was passing by to light a candle as a merit for

his sick brother, who was scheduled to undergo surgery in Tel Hashomer Hospital. The man informed Mr. Cohen that his brother had already undergone surgery, and the doctors had found nothing wrong. When Mr. Cohen asked how this stranger knew all this, the man simply walked away, leaving him bewildered.

Mr. Cohen made his way to the hospital and discovered that the doctors had, indeed, operated and found nothing suspicious. He approached the Rosh Kollel, all excited, telling him this narrative. He asked whether the Rosh Kollel knew who this man was, describing him as exceptionally tall and impressive-looking. The Rosh Kollel asked at what time the incident occurred, and he said at approximately eight o'clock. The Rosh Kollel then said that it certainly could not have been anyone from the kollel. He had no idea who the good messenger could have been. He suggested that maybe Mr. Cohen had merited a Divine revelation. It could be that the entire scare was a false alarm. But it rang with truth, for it was intended to awaken Mr. Cohen and his family to do complete teshuvah.

When Hashem wants to bring His child back, He first taps him on the shoulder, so to speak, in order to wake him up. But if this does not work, Hashem hits the person harder, until he finally realizes that this is a Heavenly signal, sent in order to arouse him from his spiritual slumber. He is being stirred to search his ways (see *Kiddushin* 20a). This is similar to the method of *tzara'at*. At first, Hashem brought it on the walls of the house. If a person failed to read the handwriting on the wall, the spots would appear on his utensils. From there, they would travel to his clothes, until they appeared on the person himself. This was all in order to cause him to do complete teshuvah (*Rambam, Tumat Tzara'at* 16:10).

These parshiyot are read during Bein Hametzarim. They are able to ignite a spark in man's heart, to help him improve his actions

during these auspicious days. At the time of the *churban*, Am Yisrael cried bitterly. Yirmeyahu Hanavi told the nation that had they wept before the *churban*, Hashem would have prevented it from taking place, and Bnei Yisrael would never have been exiled (*Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim* 883). But Am Yisrael's tears could not wash away what was already done. One should read these parshiyot during the weeks of Bein Hametzarim and take a lesson from them. He should awaken on his own, so that Hashem will have no need to strike him with various forms of anguish, until he finally gets the message. "He Who said *Enough* to His world, should say *Enough* to our tribulations."

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ The connection between the parshiyot of *Matot* and *Masei* is that if a person is not traveling forward, i.e., ascending the ladder of Torah and *yirat Shamayim*, Hashem will strike him to get him to move.
- ◆ The last letters of the words **מטות** and **מסעי** are numerically equivalent to 410, which is also the *gematria* of the word **קדוש** (sacred). Hashem strikes a person in order to move him along the road of Torah, which has the power to sanctify him. The words **מטות** and **מסעי** both begin with the letter **מ'**, numerically equivalent to forty. This is an allusion to the Torah, given after forty days and nights. One who is not involved in Torah receives "blows" to make him travel toward it.
- ◆ Hashem brings suffering upon a person to awaken him to study Torah and do mitzvot. At first, these are light taps. But if he does not get the message, the taps become stronger. This is similar to *tzara'at*, which would first come on a person's house, then his possessions, until they gradually came upon the person himself.
- ◆ These parshiyot are read during Bein Hametzarim, for they are capable of awakening a person to do teshuvah and thereby merit the ultimate *geulah*.



The Journeys

“These are the journeys of the Children of Israel who went forth from the land of Egypt according to their legions, under the hand of Moshe and Aharon. Moshe wrote their goings forth according to their journeys at the bidding of Hashem, and these were their journeys according to their goings forth”

(Bamidbar 33:1-2)

Every single word in the Torah contains a message for generations. What is the message in the detailed description of Bnei Yisrael’s journeys in the Wilderness?

The itemization of their journeys teaches us a fundamental principle. Whatever happens to a person was decreed on High. Every step he takes on this journey called life was already pre-ordained before he was born. Chazal support this concept (*Chulin* 7b) with the maxim, “One does not stub his finger below unless it was announced on High.” Just as every blade of grass has an angel appointed to it, striking it constantly and commanding, “Grow!” (see *Bereishit Rabbah* 10:6), so too, is every incident in this world done with Divine intervention, managed by Hashem, Who is the cause of everything.

This raises a question. How can the world continue existing on the seventh day, the day that Hashem rests? How do the elements of Creation continue functioning according to plan, when Hashem desists from labor? The sun continues shining, the rains fall, and water flows in the seas. It is possible only due to the condition that Hashem made with the elements during the six days of Creation. He stipulated that they would continue operating even on the seventh

day, when He rests. The continuation of the world as we know it on Shabbat is due solely to Hashem's constant intervention. Hashem merely rests from creativity on that day. But He maintains Creation every single moment of every single day.

The Splitting of the Sea was due to the condition which Hashem made with the sea during the six days of Creation. He told it at that time, that when Am Yisrael would leave Egypt, with the Egyptians hot at their heels, it would have to change from its current nature and split (*Bereishit Rabbah* 5:5). When the time came for the sea to fulfill this condition, turning into dry land, it refused to comply. Klal Yisrael had not yet received the Torah; in what merit should the laws of nature be bent for them? But none of the sea's arguments held any water. Hashem made a condition, when it was originally created, that it would split at the right time. See how great is Hashem's supervision in the world, and how everything flows from His word!

Every journey of Am Yisrael is recorded in detail, to emphasize Hashem's existence in the world. Every one of them was pre-ordained on High and executed according to His word. There is no happenstance in this world; everything is according to Hashem's command. At times, one encounters "their goings forth according to their journeys," and at other times, "their journeys according to their goings forth." Man is led on the road he chooses to travel.

The initials of the words אלה מסעי (These are the journeys), adding one for the phrase itself, are numerically equivalent to the word במ (in them). This is a reference to the words (*Devarim* 6:7), "ודברת במ – You shall speak in them." These are the words of Torah, also called journeys, for man is always enjoined to travel in the way of Torah. One who goes in the way of Hashem and upholds His word, merits the wonderful promise at the end. The words אלה

מסעי end with the letters ה-י , the Name of Hashem. Hashem will be with him, lighting up his way before him.

The wording of the pasuk (*Bamidbar* 33:2) seems difficult to comprehend. It says, “And these were their journeys according to their goings forth.” A person goes forth in order to journey, not the other way around. Why is the pasuk phrased this way?

At times, one has no intention of traveling. He merely leaves his home. But Hashem wants him to travel, so he ends up doing just that. And at times, a person has all sorts of travel plans, but because Hashem wills otherwise, all his plans are cancelled. We hear stories of people who were scheduled to fly, but because Hashem did not want them to, they missed their flight and remained at home. Everything is pre-written on High. Hashem is the One Who decides where a person should be at any given time. This, then, is the definition of, “their journeys according to their goings forth.” Bnei Yisrael traveled with no idea where they were going. They trusted Hashem implicitly.

If everything is decreed on High, it would seem that man has no free choice whatsoever. Hashem is the One Who determines how one’s life should look. Why, then, are we told in the Torah (*Devarim* 30:15), “See – I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil.” This seems to indicate that a person chooses his behavior. Doesn’t this contradict what was stated above, that Hashem decides how a person’s life will proceed?

Everything is in Hashem’s hands. He decides who will be rich and who will be poor, who will have children and who will remain childless. These are matters which are not in our hands. But there is one area completely in our control. This is the level of our *yirat Shamayim*. Chazal (*Berachot* 33b) tell us, “Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven.” A person’s situation

changes according to the choices he makes. Our Sages (*Eiduyot* 5:7) state, “Your deeds will bring you close, and your deeds will distance you.” Man is given the exclusive right to choose the path he wants to take. Will he cleave to Hashem and walk on the right road, or, *chalilah*, abandon the path of the Patriarchs and take a different turn?

At the end of the parashah of the journeys, we read the pesukim (*Bamidbar* 33:3-5), “They journeyed from Ramses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month – on the day after the Pesach-offering – the Children of Israel went forth with an upraised hand, before the eyes of all Egypt. And the Egyptians were burying those among them whom Hashem had struck, every firstborn; and on their gods Hashem had inflicted punishments. The Children of Israel journeyed from Ramses and encamped in Sukkot.”

A study of the journeys of Bnei Yisrael in the Wilderness reveals that this travel from Ramses to Sukkot is the most itemized. The Torah includes the date, as well as a description of the Egyptians at the time. What is so significant about this journey that it is recorded in detail, different from the rest of the journeys?

Parashat *Masei* is always read during the days of Bein Hametzarim. This provides us with a timeless lesson. Whenever Am Yisrael find themselves in difficulty and beset with hardship, they should conjure up that first journey of our nation in the Wilderness. The Egyptians were in hot pursuit, but Hashem struck them soundly, silencing them for good. When Am Yisrael recollect that original *geulah*, recalling Hashem’s salvation, they will be aroused to do complete teshuvah. This teshuvah will hasten the ultimate *geulah*.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ What is the reason for the Torah’s recording of each journey of Bnei Yisrael in the Wilderness?

- ◆ The listing of the journeys teaches us that man's travels in this world are all pre-ordained from on High. Chazal tell us, "One does not stub his finger below unless it was announced on High." Bnei Yisrael never knew when they would travel and when they would encamp. Everything was decided on High. The twists and turns of man's life are determined by Hashem.
- ◆ Hashem rests on the seventh day, but Creation continues functioning. Hashem placed this element of nature into its very creation. A condition was made with the sea, too, at the time of Creation. Hashem told it to veer off course and split when Bnei Yisrael would be pursued by the Egyptians.
- ◆ The words "their journeys according to their goings forth" seem incomprehensible. A person does not decide to travel in order to go out of his house. On the contrary, he leaves his home in order to get to where he needs to go. Why does the Torah word the pasuk this way? It is in order to attest to Bnei Yisrael's blind faith in Hashem, traveling according to His word, without knowing where they were going.
- ◆ If everything is pre-ordained, it seems that man does not have free choice. But the Torah states, "See – I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil." This seems to imply that man has free rein to choose good or evil.
- ◆ Regarding the natural order of events, man has no free choice whatsoever. He cannot decide when day will come, and what the weather will be. The only thing in his control is his level of *yirat Shamayim*. He alone is responsible for his spirituality. Chazal state, "All is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven." For this reason, we are told, "Choose life."



Traveling the Road of Life

“These are the journeys of the Children of Israel who went forth from the land of Egypt according to their legions, under the hand of Moshe and Aharon”

(Bamidbar 33:1)

“And the Egyptians were burying those among them whom Hashem had struck, every firstborn; and on their gods Hashem had inflicted punishments”

(ibid. vs. 4)

The Torah details the travels of Bnei Yisrael from the day they left Egypt until the day they entered Eretz Yisrael. Why does the Torah go to such lengths in this description, itemizing each and every journey of Am Yisrael in the Wilderness? What can we glean from this? Furthermore, the Torah makes note of the fact that when Am Yisrael left Egypt, the Egyptians were busy burying their dead, who had perished in the plague of the firstborn. Why is this important for us to know?

A person must recognize his purpose in this world, the reason why he came here. What a shame that there are those who waste their lives on frivolities and foolishness. One hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is preferable to the entire life of *Olam Haba* (*Avot* 4:17). When one serves Hashem in this world, he merits a wonderful reward in the World to Come.

This is the reason why the Torah details Bnei Yisrael's journeys in the Wilderness. The primary purpose for their release from Egypt

was in order to arrive at their final destination, Eretz Yisrael. But their encampment in the Holy Land was subject to their involvement in Torah and the mitzvot which are dependent on the Land. Hashem put His children through the travails of their travels in the Wilderness so that they would truly appreciate the sweetness of the Land flowing with milk and honey. When they would reach their final destination, after all the ordeals on the way, they would have a clear understanding of the suffering which *galut* entails.

Exile from the Land is far more painful than the journeys by Hashem's word in the Wilderness. With all the tribulations, the nation was surrounded by the Clouds of Glory, they were fed by the *manna* from Heaven, and their thirst was quenched by the Well of Miriam which accompanied them throughout. Although Hashem protected Am Yisrael under the wing of His *Shechinah* in the Wilderness, they suffered the difficulties of the road. At times, just as they had completed setting camp and settling down, the Cloud would rise, indicating that they must take apart their tents and pack up once again, continuing to travel. But there is no comparing their inconvenience then to the plight in which they would find themselves after they disobeyed the Voice of Hashem and were exiled at the time of the *churban*.

Now we might understand why the Torah records that the Egyptians buried their dead. This world is like the land of Egypt. The Torah provides us with a map to navigate its intricate highways and byways. It advises a person that when he is confronted with the foolishness of this world, and his *Yetzer Hara* seems to loom large before him, he should try with all his might to overcome it. By surmounting his *Yetzer Hara*, he scales the mountains of Egypt, rising above them. A person should spend all his life in the pursuit of Torah, called a "journey." The Ohr Hachaim explains the words (*Shemot* 19:2) "They traveled from Refidim" to mean that Bnei

Yisrael traveled away from a weakening in Torah and accepted upon themselves involvement in Torah. One should constantly be in a state of traveling upon the roads of Torah, reaching greater and greater heights. Then, even when he rests, it is in order to gain renewed strength to continue in his pursuit of Torah and mitzvot.

A method of reaching greater levels in Torah is by constantly remembering one's day of death. This will help him bury his passions, which are merely momentary and of no lasting value. This is alluded to in the station *Kivrot Hata'avah* (lit. Burying Passion). The Torah states that the Egyptians were involved in burying their dead just as Bnei Yisrael were leaving their land, to indicate that Bnei Yisrael, too, were involved in the burial process. As they were abandoning the land of abomination in order to receive the Torah, they were laying to rest their lusts for physical pleasures. As an aid in combating their *Yetzer Hara*, they kept in mind the maxim (*Avot* 3:1), "Know whence you came, whither you go, and before Whom you will give justification and reckoning."

Bnei Yisrael knew very well from whence they came. They emerged from backbreaking labor. The Egyptians had afflicted them so brutally that Bnei Yisrael forgot the meaning of freedom. Only with Hashem's tremendous kindness did they emerge from bondage to liberty.

They also knew whither they went. They were on the way to receiving the Torah. If not for Hashem's desire to grant them the Torah, they would not have merited release from Egypt, for they had stood at the precipice of the fiftieth gate of *tumah*, the point of no return (see *Shelah, Pesachim, Matzah Ashirah* 33). Bnei Yisrael, too, understood that they would ultimately have to give justification and reckoning to Hashem.

They would have been held accountable had they failed to bear in mind these three things. During the plague of darkness, many of

our nation perished. They had refused to take the message of this Mishnah to heart, and did not protect themselves from sin.

The life of a Jew is one long journey. Each act is defined as a good turn or, *chalilah*, the opposite. If one goes on the positive path, increasing his Torah study and mitzvah observance, he is considered walking in good, elevated ways. But if he chooses materialism and frivolities, he becomes enmeshed in the thorny brambles on the roadside.

The first journey which Bnei Yisrael took upon leaving Egypt was saturated with faith in Hashem. They should have continued on this path until they received the Torah. But they swerved off the road, sinning seriously. They tested Hashem regarding the water, and slackened in their Torah study. Finally, Amalek attacked, causing tremendous damage and, eventually, the fashioning of the Golden Calf (see *Sefat Emet, Yitro* 635). Hashem's Name will not be complete until the nation of Amalek is completely eradicated (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot* 268). Even at *Matan Torah*, Amalek prevailed. This is evident in the fact that Bnei Yisrael did not wait for Moshe to descend with the Tablets, but, instead, formed the Calf. This merely added to their suffering. They fell lower and lower, eventually speaking *lashon hara* about the Land. They were decreed to spend forty years in the Wilderness on account of that sin. But their tribulations did not end there. Due to their many sins, Am Yisrael were exiled from their land.

Since Am Yisrael disgraced the Torah when they were in the Wilderness, they were decreed to spend forty years in travel. The initials of the words **מטות** and **מסעי** are numerically equivalent to eighty, an allusion to the Torah, given after forty days and forty nights, which they disgraced. The word **מסעי** can be divided into **ע"י** (eighty) and **ס"מ** (an allusion to the *kelippah*). By forsaking the Torah, given after eighty time periods, Bnei Yisrael allowed the

kelippah a foothold to disturb their Avodat Hashem, until they were finally banished into exile.

If we divide the word *מטות*, we have *מ"ט* and *ות*. The letters *ות* are numerically equivalent to the word *בדת* (in the religion of). As Bnei Yisrael disobeyed Hashem and angered his emissaries, Moshe and Aharon, time after time, they damaged the *מ"ט* (forty-eight) *middot* which they had established upon leaving Egypt. And they caused damage *בדת משה* (to the religion of Moshe), which was bequeathed to them at Har Sinai.

Hashem desired that Bnei Yisrael remain a holy nation, and their camps be sanctified throughout their journeys, until they would reach the Holy Land. There, they would become elevated even more, until they would be a nation that dwells alone and not considered among the gentiles (*Bamidbar* 23:9). This is indicated by the fact that the last letters of the words *מטות מסעי* are equivalent numerically to 410, just like the word *קדוש* (holy). Through keeping Torah and mitzvot, Bnei Yisrael become Hashem's holy camp, as the pasuk (*Devarim* 23:15) states, "Your camp shall be holy."

———— In Summary ————

- ◆ Why does the Torah detail the journeys of Bnei Yisrael in the Wilderness? And why does the Torah mention that the Egyptians were busy burying their dead when Bnei Yisrael left their land?
- ◆ Bnei Yisrael's goal in the Wilderness was to receive the Torah and reach the Promised Land. All their hardships in the Wilderness were nothing compared to the suffering at the time of *churban* and *galut*. In the Wilderness, they merited Hashem's supervision and open miracles. Living in the Land is contingent upon Torah study and mitzvah observance. Without these, Am Yisrael is banished from their Land and suffer exile.

- ◆ This world is similar to Egypt, the land of filth and abomination. In order to traverse safely, one must bury his materialistic desires. Mention of the Egyptians burying their dead transmits the message that Bnei Yisrael must bury their lusts.
- ◆ In order to combat the *Yetzer Hara*, Am Yisrael must constantly consider the maxim “Know whence you came, whither you go, and before Whom you will give justification and reckoning.” They came from Egyptian slavery, were going toward *Matan Torah*, and would, in the future, give justification to Hashem. One who fails to contemplate these three points will face a fate similar to that of those who perished in the plague of darkness.
- ◆ All of life is a road. One must ensure that he travels on the right road, not, *chalilah*, the wrong path. Am Yisrael began on the right track, but after weakening in Torah, Amalek pounced upon them and caused them to sin with the Golden Calf. They deteriorated further, sinning with the sin of the spies. They were slated to spend forty years in the Wilderness. They were eventually exiled from their land, due to their many sins.
- ◆ Hashem’s desire is that Am Yisrael fulfill their mission statement: “Your camp shall be holy.”



The Cities of Refuge

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: When you cross the Jordan to the land of Canaan, you shall designate cities for yourselves, cities of refuge shall they be for you, and a killer shall flee there – one who takes a life unintentionally... 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”

(Bamidbar 35:7-14)

Hashem commanded Moshe to tell Bnei Yisrael that as soon as they entered the Land, they were to designate six cities of refuge. Three of these cities would be located within the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael, whereas the other three would be east of the Jordan, where the *shevatim* of Reuven, Gad, and half of Menashe had settled. Moshe explained that these cities were intended for those who had killed unintentionally. The murderer could escape to any of these cities and find security from the relatives of the victim, who might seek to avenge his death. The murderer had to remain there until the Kohen Gadol would die.

Who is called an unintentional murderer? One who killed another by accident. For instance, a person was standing on a ladder, chopping off branches from a tree, and the saw slipped from his hand, landing squarely on the head of a passerby, thereby killing him. Obviously, he had no intention of killing the man. This type of

murderer had to flee to the city of refuge to save himself from the dead man's relatives.

Two questions come to mind regarding this topic. First of all, the three cities of refuge designated to the tribes east of the Jordan seem to be a reward of sorts. Did those tribes who preferred the grasslands of the Jordan over the sanctity of the Holy Land deserve to be awarded cities of refuge?

The second question was posed by my teacher and mentor, Rabbi Shammai Zohn, zt"l. He asks why the entire road leading to each city of refuge was marked with many signposts. Once a year, they would ensure that all the roads were in good repair. Yet, during the times of pilgrimage to Yerushalayim, Bnei Yisrael were not commanded to erect signposts on the roads leading there. There is no place more sanctified and significant in the entire Land of Israel than Yerushalayim, where the Beit Hamikdash stood.

It could be that after an unintentional murder in Eretz Yisrael, the murderer would take refuge with his friend living east of the Jordan. For this reason, Bnei Yisrael were charged with designating cities of refuge there, too. This way, the perpetrator would be protected from the wrath of those avenging the death of the victim.

The signposts on the road to the cities of refuge pointed to Hashem's mercy upon His creatures, while foregoing His own honor. For the sake of the unintentional murderers, Hashem commanded the nation to erect signs, but for the sake of reaching Yerushalayim, He did not. Let us behave in the ways of Hashem. Let us also have compassion upon others, as the Midrash states (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 245*), "Just as He is merciful, so should you be." Just as Hashem foregoes His honor for the sake of His people, so should we sacrifice our personal honor for the sake of others.

Hashem's willingness to forgo His honor is also illustrated by the following account (*Bava Metzia* 59b). There was an oven belonging to a man named Achnai. Rabbi Elazar ruled it was pure, whereas the other Sages ruled it was impure. Rabbi Elazar brought proofs to support his claim, but the other Sages refused to accept his ruling. Finally, a Heavenly Voice emerged, stating the halachah followed the opinion of Rabbi Elazar. Rabbi Yehoshua countered that since the time that the Torah was given at Sinai, it is no longer in Heaven. We do not accept Heavenly arbitration. When the Sages met Eliyahu Hanavi and asked for Hashem's reaction to this incident, he replied that Hashem laughingly proclaimed, "My children have bested Me." This narrative indicates Hashem's tremendous humility. As soon as He brought the Torah down to Earth, He loosened His grip on it, allowing those who toil in its study to determine halachah, even if it is different from the Heavenly ruling.

Why does Hashem concern Himself so much with the honor of His creatures, ignoring His own honor? He wishes to teach us that we, too, must demonstrate mercy toward our fellow man. One who concerns himself with the honor of his comrade will concern himself with Hashem's honor, as well. If one is not stringent with the honor of his fellow man, whom he observes and whose plight he notices, he certainly will not respect Hashem, Who has no form.

Often, one acts out of ignorance. He does not sin intentionally, but merely because he is unaware of the halachah. A woman who hails from Morocco once told me that she purified herself from her *niddah* status by pouring buckets of bathwater upon herself. When I informed her that no amount of water in the world would purify her unless she immersed in a kosher *mikveh*, she innocently replied that she is merely continuing the custom of her mother, who taught her to do this. This woman did not willfully transgress; she violated the halachah from a lack of knowledge.

However, a person should not soothe his conscience by stating that he is an unintentional sinner. One who increases his unintentional sins does not merit forgiveness, for he should have learnt the halachot and avoided future sins. A person is not absolved of exerting himself by claiming he is not familiar with the laws. He is obligated to go to the Beit Hamidrash and open the sefarim. He must learn the halachot thoroughly. One who constantly does aveirot unintentionally will eventually become an intentional sinner. He intentionally refuses to learn the Torah's teachings.

A garage mechanic must learn the secrets of his trade in order to become proficient in them. Similarly, a Jew is not eligible for this title if he has not gone to the Beit Hamidrash to learn the halachot. After 120 years, a person will stand before the Heavenly Tribunal and will be asked all sorts of pointed questions about his life. If he never bothered to study the halachah, and therefore sinned time after time, he will be answerable. His mistakes happened only because he neglected to deepen his awareness of halachah.

The Beit Hamidrash is a city of refuge, providing shelter for one who constantly sins unintentionally. He should remain there until he knows the halachot perfectly. Just as an unintentional murderer must remain in the city of refuge until the death of the Kohen Gadol, so must this man remain within the walls of the Beit Hamidrash until his *Yetzer Hara* is eradicated. Only then, can he leave this city of refuge.

The *Yetzer Hara* does not begin his attack by tempting a person to commit serious sins. He knows that the person would never listen. At first, he convinces him to transgress seemingly insignificant things. The thin thread of suggestion becomes thicker and stronger as the person repeats these misdeeds. He eventually becomes roped in, liable to transgress even the three cardinal sins.

Regarding Yehoshua Kohen Gadol, it says that the *Yetzer Hara* stood at his right side to cause him to sin. This is surprising. According to the above, the *Yetzer Hara* stands at a person's left side, at first attempting to seduce him to sin in small matters. Certainly the *Yetzer Hara* did not expect to overcome someone as great as Yehoshua Kohen Gadol.

Let us first understand the meaning of the *Yetzer Hara* standing at the right of a person. It means that the Evil Inclination appears in the guise of a tzaddik and great *talmid chacham*. He tries to trap the person by causing him to be especially stringent in halachah, thinking that he is waging a zealous war for Hashem's Name. In this manner, the *Yetzer Hara* ensnares a person to sin. For this reason, it is imperative that we analyze our deeds most carefully. Do we act with the desire to sanctify Hashem's Name and avenge His honor, or do foreign motives adulterate our deeds? Do we seek honor, wealth, and the like? We are guaranteed that Hashem helps one who truly wishes to become purified, and he is protected from sinning even unintentionally. When Hashem sees a person's efforts to increase his Torah knowledge, He pays him handsomely and shields him from sin.

————— In Summary —————

- ◆ Hashem commands Bnei Yisrael to designate cities of refuge for those who would sin unintentionally. Why were three cities of refuge established east of the Jordan? This would seem to be a reward for those tribes who did not want to enter Eretz Yisrael. Moreover, there were no signs on the road to Yerushalayim, whereas clear signposts dotted the landscape toward each city of refuge. Why was this so?
- ◆ Hashem commanded the people to establish cities of refuge east of the Jordan in case an unintentional murderer would flee the borders of Eretz Yisrael and desperately seek a city of refuge.

- ◆ The roads to the cities of refuge were marked by road signs, whereas the roads toward Yerushalayim were not marked at all. This demonstrates that Hashem is not exacting with His honor, but is most stringent with the honor of His creatures. We should take this message to heart, behaving in a like manner.
- ◆ After the Torah was given to us, it is no longer in Heaven. It is under the jurisdiction of those who toil in its study. They alone decide the halachah. This is another indication of Hashem's respect for His people.
- ◆ One who killed unintentionally must exile himself to a city of refuge. One who constantly sins unintentionally will not be able to exonerate himself. He will be held accountable for his actions, for it is his responsibility to learn what is permissible and what is forbidden. One should not allow himself to become accustomed to sinning unintentionally, for this causes him to sin intentionally. A person should combat his *Yetzer Hara*, until he has defeated him completely. This is done through toiling in Torah study in the Beit Hamidrash.
- ◆ Often, the *Yetzer Hara* approaches a person on his right side. This means that he disguises himself in the form of a *talmid chacham*, telling the person that for the sake of Heaven, he must behave in a specific manner. But this is nothing more than a trap to make him sin. A person must be finely tuned to the machinations of the *Yetzer Hara*, never letting down his guard and slipping into his net.



Gems on Parashat Masei



Bnei Yisrael Became a Nation in the Wilderness

“These are the journeys of the Children of Israel, who went forth from the land of Egypt according to their legions, under the hand of Moshe and Aharon”

(Bamidbar 33:1)

The Torah is known for its succinct style. It is generally sparing with words. Only those things which are necessary for future generations, which teach some sort of lesson to Klal Yisrael, are recorded. Why, then, does the Torah record in detail all of the stations where Bnei Yisrael encamped in the Wilderness? What is the message for us in these passages?

The Wilderness was where Bnei Yisrael became a nation. All that transpired to them during their forty-year sojourn helped build them into Hashem’s Chosen People. The Torah details the specifics of each journey, along with what transpired there. Everything that happened to them facilitated the eradication of their dependency on Egypt and fashioned them into a G-d fearing people.

Bnei Yisrael left Egypt at the brink of the fiftieth gate of impurity (see *Shelah Hakadosh, Pesachim, Matzah Ashirah* 33). When Bnei Yisrael stood at the border of Eretz Yisrael, they had transformed their levels of defilement into those of sanctity. What was it that enabled them to successfully shake off the shackles of their former identity, identifying instead with purity? It was their journeys in the Wilderness that afforded them this accomplishment. Each journey purified them further, consolidating them into a unique, unified nation, connected with cords that cannot be severed, to Hashem and His Torah.

Each station and journey of Bnei Yisrael in the Wilderness provided them with a lesson and a *tikkun*, both timely and timeless. They were taught how to behave and how to cleave to Hashem in any situation and at all times.



Praiseworthy Is Peace

“Then Aharon the Kohen went up to Hor Hahor at the word of Hashem and died there, in the fortieth year after the Children of Israel went forth from the land of Egypt, in the fifth month on the first of the month. Aharon was one hundred and twenty-three years old at his death on Hor Hahor. The Canaanite king of Arad heard – he was dwelling in the south, in the land of Canaan – of the approach of the Children of Israel”

(Bamidbar 33:38-40)

Some of the journeys of Bnei Yisrael in the Wilderness are recorded in detail, whereas others are just mentioned, without recording what transpired there. As Bnei Yisrael traveled from Kadesh to Hor Hahor, Aharon passed away. The Torah then tells us that the Canaanite king of Arad “heard” of the approach of Bnei Yisrael. Rashi explains that they were emboldened to attack Bnei Yisrael since the Clouds of Glory had departed with Aharon’s death.

This entire incident is clouded in ambiguity. If the Canaanites were heretofore afraid to attack Bnei Yisrael, on account of the special protection Bnei Yisrael received via the Clouds of Glory, how did they have the audacity to strike when these clouds were taken? Did they really believe that Hashem’s Divine protection depended only on whether or not there were physical clouds protecting the nation? The physical clouds were merely a symbol of His shield. It is self-understood that He supervises Bnei Yisrael constantly, cloud

or no cloud. Why, then, did the Canaanites see fit to fight when the clouds were removed?

Bnei Yisrael exist in the merit of their unity. The entire world is founded on the principle of peace, without which it would crumble into oblivion. Aharon exemplified the trait of peace, as the Mishnah (*Avot* 1:12) encourages us to emulate him by “loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them closer to the Torah.” Whenever there was dissention among friends or spouses, Aharon would step in to restore the peace. He increased love among Bnei Yisrael. The incident of Korach highlights Aharon’s good nature. Although Korach blasphemed Aharon, Aharon remained silent and did not respond. Due to Aharon’s tremendous love for peace, when he passed away, the entire House of Israel, men, women, and children, mourned his death.

The Canaanite king of Arad heard of the death of Aharon, the great peacemaker. His nation therefore felt they could overpower Bnei Yisrael and subdue them. They believed that the removal of the Clouds of Glory indicated that the protection offered by Aharon, with his pursuit of peace, had been removed from Bnei Yisrael, as well. They felt sure that they would triumph.

Chazal (*Yalkut Shimoni, Melachim* I, 213) teach that Shaul Hamelech’s soldiers fell in battle because they spoke *lashon hara* among themselves. In contrast, the soldiers of Achav, who was wicked and caused others to sin, returned safely from the battlefield. This was because they maintained peace among themselves. This teaches us a tremendous lesson. As long as we are unified, the nations cannot attack us. But when we weaken the fabric of our nation, through rips of rift, we are no longer united. Our enemies are given the power to tear us apart. The Canaanites thought that the departure of the Clouds indicated that peace

among Am Yisrael had similarly departed. This was an open invitation to do battle with them.

If Achav Harasha's soldiers merited Hashem's protection, in spite of his crooked ways, how much more so will Hashem protect those who serve Him in unity.



Glossary



Achdut - unity

Ahavat Hashem - love of Hashem

Ahavat Yisrael - love of one's fellow Jew

Akeidah - the Binding on the Altar of Yitzchak

Avak lashon hara - speech that can lead to lashon hara

Aveirah, aveirot (pl) - transgression

Avodah - Service in the Temple; or service of Hashem, specifically referring to prayer

Avot - Patriarchs (Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov)

Avrech, Avrechim (pl) - young Torah scholar

Ayin hara - evil eye

Ba'al Teshuvah, ba'alei teshuvah (pl) - (lit. master of return) one who has returned to Jewish observance

Ba'alei Mussar - Masters of Ethics

Bachur, bachurim (pl.) - unmarried Torah student

Bavel - Babylon

Be'ezrat Hashem - with the help of Hashem

Beit Din - rabbinical court

Beit Hakeneset, Batei Kenesiot (pl) - house of prayer, synagogue

Beit Hamidrash, Batei Midrashot (pl) - house of study

Beit Hamikdash - the Holy Temple

Ben, bnei (pl) - son

Berachah, berachot (pl) - blessing

Bitul Torah - time wasted from Torah study

Bnei Yisrael - the Children of Israel

Brit milah - circumcision

Chachamim - (lit. wise people) - Sages, teachers

Chag - Jewish festival

Chalilah - G-d forbid

Chametz - leavened bread, which is forbidden to be eaten on Pesach

Chas v'shalom - May G-d have mercy

Chashmonaim - Hasmoneans

Chassid - righteous person

Chatan - groom

Chavruta - study partner

Chazal - our Sages, may their memory be for blessing

Chazan - cantor, one who leads the prayers

Cheshbon hanefesh - spiritual accounting

Chessed - acts of kindness

Chet Ha'egel - sin of the Golden Calf

Chillul Hashem - desecration of Hashem's Name

Chinuch - education

Chok, chukim (pl) - commandment that cannot be explained according to human reasoning, decrees, statutes

Choshen - Breastplate of the Kohen Gadol

Chuppah - wedding canopy

Churban - destruction (of the Beit Hamikdash)

Chutz La'aretz - Diaspora

Derech erez - proper behavior, character refinement

Emunah - belief, faith

Eretz Yisrael - the Land of Israel

Erev - the eve of (Shabbat)

Gadol - person of stature in Torah

Galut - exile

Gan Eden - Garden of Eden; Paradise

Gematria - numerical value

Gemilut chassadim - acts of loving-kindness

Genizah - holy manuscripts requiring burial

Ger - proselyte

Get - bill of divorce

Gilgul - a reincarnation

Hachnasat Orchim - welcoming guests

Haftarah - reading from the Prophets after the Torah reading on Shabbat

Hakadosh Baruch Hu - Hashem

Halachah, halachot (pl) - Jewish law

Halachic - according to Jewish law

Hilchot - the laws of...

Hilula - celebration conducted on the anniversary of a tzaddik's death

Hod - glory

Kabbalah - hidden facets of the Torah

Kabbalat HaTorah - the receiving of the Torah

Kallah - bride

Karet - punishment of being cut off from Hashem

Kashrut - food permissible by Jewish law

Kedushah - holiness

Kelippah - force of impurity

Keri - seminal emission

Keruvim - Cherubs, which were on top of the Ark in the Beit Hamikdash

Ketoret - incense

Ketubah - marriage contract

Kiddush Hashem - sanctification of Hashem's Name

Kodesh Hakodashim - Holy of Holies, the innermost section of the Beit Hamikdash

Kohen, Kohanim (pl) - priest

Kohen Gadol - high priest

Kollel(im) - Torah institution for married men

Korban, korbanot (pl) - offering, sacrifice

Kriyat Shema - the recital of the Shema

L'havdil - to separate the holy from the mundane

L'shem Shamayim - for the sake of Heaven

Lashon hara - evil speech, slander

Luchot, luchot habrit - the Tablets of the Covenant

Mashiach - the Messiah

Matan Torah - the Giving of the Torah

Mazal - destiny

Melachot - the thirty nine categories of "work" forbidden on Shabbat

Menorah - Candelabra in the Beit Hamikdash

Merkavah - Chariot, a Kabbalistic term

Mesirut nefesh - self-sacrifice

Mezuzah - parchment containing Torah verses, commanded to be affixed to every doorpost

Middah - trait

Middat Hadin - Divine Attribute of Justice

Midrash - homiletical teachings of the Sages

Mikveh - body of water for ritual immersion and purification

Minchah - the Afternoon Prayer

Minhag - custom

Minyan - quorum of ten men necessary to conduct prayers

Mishkan - the Tabernacle

Mitzrayim - Egypt

Mitzvah, mitzvot (pl) - good deed; commandment

Mizbeach - Altar

Motzi shem ra - derogatory words that are untrue

Muktzeh - an item that is forbidden to be moved on Shabbat (lit. "set aside")

Mussar - Jewish ethics

Nachat - joy or pleasure from another's accomplishments

Nasi, Nesi'im (pl) - prince, leader of the Jewish people

Navi - prophet

Nefesh - soul

Neshamah, neshamot (pl) - soul

Netilat yadayim - ritual washing of the hands

Netzach - eternity

Niddah - a woman who became impure due to her menstrual cycle; the mitzvah concerning this

Nisayon, nisyonot (pl) - test, challenging situation

Nitzotz - sparks

Nusach - version

Olam Haba - the World to Come

Parah adumah - the red heifer

Parashah, parshiyot (pl) - chapter

Pasuk, pesukim (pl) - verse

Pikuach nefesh - life-threatening situation

Pirkei Avot (or Avot) - the Chapters of the Fathers

Rachmana litzlan - May G-d's mercy be upon them

Rasha, resha'im (pl) - evil person

Ruach hakodesh - Divine spirit

Sanhedrin - the High Court

Sefarim hakedoshim - holy books of Torah thought

Sefer - book

Sefer Torah, Sifrei Torah (pl) - Torah scroll(s)

Sefirah - behavior by which we perceive Hashem

Segulah - act or talisman to gain merit

Seudat hodayah - festive meal of thanksgiving to Hashem

Sha'atnez - mixture of wool and linen

Shacharit - the Morning Prayer

Shamayim - Heaven

Shas - the thirty-six volumes of the Talmud

Shechinah - Divine Presence

Shechitah - ritual slaughter of animals

Shemoneh Esrei - prayer containing eighteen blessings, recited three times a day

Shevet, shevatim (pl) - tribe

Shidduch - marriage proposal, marriage partner

Shiur - Torah lecture

Shlita - may he live many good years, Amen
 Shofar - ram's horn
 Shomer - guard
 Shtreimel - fur hat worn by Chassidim
 Simchah - joyous event
 Sitra achra - the Satan
 Siyata di'Shemaya - help from Heaven
 Sugya - a topic in Gemara
 Sukkah - temporary dwelling, which is used on the festival of Sukkot

 Ta'anit dibbur - abstention of speech for a specified period of time
 Taharat hamishpachah - Laws of family purity
 Tallit - prayer shawl
 Talmid chacham, talmidei chachamim (pl) - Torah scholar
 Tamei - defiled, impure
 Tannai'm - Sages of the Mishnah
 Tefillah - prayer
 Tefillin - phylacteries
 Teshuvah - repentance
 Tikkun - rectification
 Treifah - non-kosher
 Tumah - impurity
 Tzaddeket - righteous woman
 Tzaddik, tzaddikim (pl) - righteous man
 Tzara'at - a spiritual impurity which comes because of lashon hara
 Tzedakah - charity
 Tzeniut - modesty
 Tzitzit - four-cornered garment with fringes, worn by men and boys

 Urim V'tumim - Stones worn on the breastplate that transmitted Hashem's message to the nation

Yam Suf - the Sea of Reeds

Yerushalayim - Jerusalem

Yeshiva - rabbinical college

Yetzer Hara - evil inclination

Yetziat Mitzrayim - Exodus from Egypt

Yirah, yirat Shamayim - fear of Heaven

Zav - a state of impurity due to certain bodily emissions

Zechut - merit

Zt"l - May the memory of the tzaddik be for a blessing

Zy"a - May his merits stand by us