

Derech Ha-rif

Excerpts from the Torah discourse delivered by The great Rabbi Yoshiyahu Yosef Pinto Shlita

For the Torah portion of Emor | Volume 26 | 15 iyar



First Shabbat Meal

This is one of the most significant Parasha portions in the Torah. It contains the details of all the holidays, including the High Holidays and details of the Bread of the Mishkan (Lechem Hapanim). The significance of the Torah portion in relation to the week is that the subject matter of the portion has a spiritual influence on that week. Hence, the portion of Emor infuses the weekdays with energies of the holidays, High Holidays, and the influence of a generous, blessed parnassah.

The influence of the Evil Inclination is great and one must henceforth bind themselves to the Torah, through Torah study, performance of Mitzvot and God deeds. But these aren't sufficient on their own, once needs Siyata Dishmaya, Heavenly Assistance to defeat the Evil Inclination and avoid his pitfalls. One's Evil Inclination never rests a moment, laying snares around every corner. The brief moment one pauses their connection to the Torah, the Evil Inclination finds an opening. As the Talmud in Yerushalmi (68a) states, "If you leave me a day, a leave you for two." Simply minimizing one's attachment to the Torah-a simple break- beckons the Evil Inclination forward.

One's service of Hashem must be continuous, ceaseless, as the kneading of dough for matzah, which cannot be halted; one must go from one Mitzva to the next, to study of Torah, to prayer, to good deeds- non stop.

Yehuda) that the world continues to exist in the merit of young children's Torah words. Commenting on this statement, Rav Pappa asked Abaye: "what about us, our Torah study?" "One cannot compare Torah words pronounced by a lad who never sinned to words of Torah pronounced by one who has tasted sin," responded Abaye.

How did the Sages of the Talmud describe themselves as individuals who have sinned? They were immensely great Sages, who had the power to revive the dead at their fingertips. How did one of the Sages make such a generalizing statement? About himself it would be understandable, because it would be out of modesty, but describing other Sages as such...

This teaches us that no matter how great a person is, if they are not intricately, incessantly bonded to Torah, mitzvot and good deeds, they can easily be influenced to sin. The battle with one's Evil Inclination is incessant and takes no prisoners. One must be as the Torah describes: "And you are bound to Hashem, your God, and behold, you are living today (Devarim 4:4)." This is what the first verse is teaching us: "Emor Veamarta: say over and repeat to the sons of Aharon..."



Soul Of the Rif

One should avoid becoming despondent at all costs, as being in a state of despondence is extremely dangerous. Despondence or sadness is a serious, weighty matter, yet everyday people carelessly express themselves without thinking twice with negative expressions such as: "I'm sad", "Life is too difficult", "Things aren't good". One should be more careful, and harness the power of sadness to progress and ascend, rather than, G-d forbid, fall into despondence and despair. There is a distinction between bitterness and despondence- a person cannot be constantly happy and sing and dance when they incur a great loss- they may be bitter, but should be vigilant not to fall to despondence. The remedy for despondence and despair is to cleave with all of one's power to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his teachings, the holy Zohar and the holy Torah



2nd Shabbat Meal

“Say to the Kohanim, the sons of Aharon, and tell them: ‘Each of you shall not contaminate himself to a [dead] person among his people.’”

One should constantly set in front of their eyes their forefathers and teachers in order to be saved from sin.

In the first verse of this week’s Torah portion there is a duplicated expression “Say to the Kohanim..., and tell them...”. The Gemara (Yevamot 114a) explains that the duplicated expression teaches that Moshe was commanded to instruct the adult Kohanim, so that they should go on and, in turn, instruct (and be held responsible for) the minor Kohanim.

A remaining difficulty is why the Torah describes the Kohanim as the ‘sons of Aharon’- for it is already at this point a well-known fact that the Kohanim are the sons of Aharon. Furthermore, in all other places we find the expression to be reversed: “the sons of Aharon, the Kohanim”. Why over here did the Torah deviate from the regular order and begin by describing them as ‘the Kohanim’ and only following this as ‘the sons of Aharon’?

Perhaps we may be able to resolve these difficulties with the following principle. The Gemara (Sota 36b) teaches that when Yosef Hatzadik withstood the temptation of Potifar’s wife, an image of his father Yaakov appeared before him, and this vision saved him from sinning.

We can explain that, similarly, the Torah is warning the Kohanim that they should constantly remember that they are the sons of Aharon, and visualize their holy forefather in order to be saved from becoming defiled.

Based on this we can also provide an alternative explanation for the duplicated expression: expression “Say to the Kohanim..., and tell them...”. The first expression “Say to the Kohanim” is to teach the basic commandment, and the second expression “and tell them” is to warn them to constantly set in front of their eyes their forefathers and teachers, as the verse (Yeshaya 30, 2) says: “Your eyes shall see your teachers”, and thus be saved from sin.

Indeed, in each of the Torah’s commandments, there is a second commandment of “I have set Hashem before me always” (Tehillim 16, 8), to constantly set in front of one’s eyes one’s forefathers and teachers, which will distance one from sin and help one be careful to avoid undesirable deeds.



Q & A with the Rif



Question:

Dear Rav, I wanted to ask: from what age my one read the Zohar?

Answer:

The Rav of Kumrana says that the Zohar may be read at a superficial level at any age. You should know that the Zohar is like a washing machine for the soul, laundering and cleansing the soul of impurities, which is what King David requests of Hashem in the verse (Tehillim 51, 4) “Abundantly cleanse me from my iniquity”.

The Zohar is a powerful cleanser and it may be read (superficially) at any age. This should be encouraged for the cleansing and purification of the soul.





3rd Shabbat meal

“Say to the Kohanim, the sons of Aharon, and tell them: ‘Each of you shall not contaminate himself to a [dead] person among his people.’”

How to raise oneself in challenging situations.

In the first verse of this week’s Torah portion there is a duplicated expression “Say to the Kohanim..., and tell them...”. Rashi comments that the duplicated expression is ‘to warn the large ones regarding the small ones’, that is to say that Moshe was commanded to instruct the adult Kohanim, so that they should go on and, in turn, instruct (and be held responsible for) the minor Kohanim.

The Noam Elimelech learns allegorically that ‘to warn the large ones regarding the small ones’ refers to the great sages, who should keep a watchful eye out (warn/teach) for those small sins that one considers insignificant in the greater context.

Perhaps we may provide another allegorical interpretation of ‘to warn the large ones regarding the small ones’ as follows. In life, there are high times, such as on the High Holidays Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur when one is in a state of ‘broad mindset’- one feels acutely spiritually enlightened and close to Hashem. There are also other times when one does not have this inspiration and is in a state of ‘constricted mindset’ and feels far away and disconnected from Hashem.

The Torah teaches that it is imperative ‘to warn the large ones regarding the small ones’ i.e. at times when a person is at a high point and feels spiritually elevated (the large ones), they should be warned and use this as an opportunity and inspiration to cope with the challenging times in which they will be in spiritual decline (the small ones). The way one can draw inspiration from the high times during low times may be understood through the following anecdote of the Baal Shem Tov.

The Baal Shem Tov was once in great spiritual decline, and the decline was so great that the only way he found to evade his ‘constricted mindset’ and return to the state of ‘broad mindset’ was not through complex study or lofty acts of Avodat Hashem (service of G-d), but through the simple recitation of the holy letters of the Aleph Bet- The Baal Shem Tov would go over and repeat the letters of the Aleph Bet, and was thereby able to restore himself to a state of ‘broad mindset’.

The way one may ascend from their low times is by heeding the command ‘to warn the large ones regarding the small ones’- by remembering their spiritual elevation and closeness to Hashem during the high times and drawing inspiration from those moments during the low times and thereby strengthening oneself and cleaving to Hashem.

This is in line with the Torah’s teaching in the verse (Shemot 10, 2) “And so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your son’s son that I made a mockery of Egypt and My signs that I placed among them- that you may know that I am Hashem”.- When a person relates the times when they were close to Hashem, and reflects on when they had cleaved to Hashem, it brings them to “know that I am Hashem” and to a state of ‘broad mindset’ where they appreciate Hashem’s greatness.

This principle is also brought elsewhere in the Noam Elimelech, where the teaching that ‘matters which leave the heart enter the heart’ is allegorically interpreted to mean that that same heart which was once in a state of ‘broad mindset’ and that state has now left it, may be remedied and restored to a state of ‘broad mindset’ by reminiscing and reflecting on those high times, and one may thereby draw strength and spiritually ascend to great heights.

We find this principle with Yosef too when he withstood the test of Potifar’s wife. The Midrash relates that an image of his father Yaakov appeared to him and warned Yosef that in the future all of Yosef’s brothers’ names would be engraved on the precious stones of the Kohen Gadol’s apron, and were he to sin, his name would not be included among them and he would be considered a ‘companion of harlots’ as the verse (Mishlei 29, 3) says ‘ the companion of harlots will lose a fortune’. Yosef was in a state of ‘constricted mindset’ and almost lost everything, but as soon as he was reminded of a time of ‘broad mindset’ he was saved from committing a grave sin.

The duplicated expression “Say to the Kohanim..., and tell them...” teaches us that during the difficult times we should remember the high times- This a tried and tested Segulah to be saved from falling to sin and various hardships and calamities a person may experience G-d forbid.



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Treasure charms from the Rif



A Segula to perform following the Chalake (haircutting ceremony held when a boy turns three years old, also referred to as ‘Upsherin’) for the child to be a Tzaddik

There is a great Segula to weigh the hair that is cut in the Chalake and donate the value of the equivalent weight in gold or silver to the poor, and pray that in this merit the child should grow up to be a Tzaddik and be G-d-fearing.



Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai

There is an Aggadah that teaches that once Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai asked Hashem: "Master of the Universe, when I pass away, who will be seated next to me in Heaven?"

For context, we must understand that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai was the Holy of Holies. When Hashem created the world and said: "Let us make Man, in Our image after Our likeness" he intended 'Man' like Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. The holy liturgical poem 'Bar Yochai' states "'Let us make Man', was said for you"- Hashem had created Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai as the exemplar human being, the yardstick all humans should strive to equate themselves to. In response to his question who would be seated next to him in Heaven, Hashem replied that a short butcher will sit next to him. That is, that a certain short butcher would be seated next to the holy Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, the exemplar human. Rabbi Shimon asked Hashem- But is this the Torah's reward?- I have spent my entire life studying and teaching Torah, I wrote the holy Zohar, secluded myself in the cave for 13 years depriving myself of food and sleep, will this be my reward, that I be seated next to the short butcher? Hashem replied that He would tell Rabbi Shimon about the butcher and his deeds, and then leave Rabbi Shimon to decide whether Hashem's judgment is fair:

This butcher would sell meat to the townspeople, and with the money he had earned from selling meat he would go to the harbor, find undervalued merchandise, purchase it, and then resell it in the town at a higher price. In this way he made himself a stable, comfortable living. One day the butcher arrived at the harbor, and saw a ship's captain who appeared somewhat agitated. He approached the captain and asked him if he had any merchandise for sale. The captain replied that he did, only that it was a highly secret merchandise and its price was 200 gold coins. The butcher was by nature a curious person and so beseeched the captain to reveal the nature of the secret merchandise. The captain replied that he could not do so, and the only way the butcher would be able to discover the nature of the merchandise would be by purchasing it. The butcher ran home, gathered 200 gold coins, and quickly returned with the sum and asked the captain to proceed with the transaction. The captain refused to hand over the merchandise, and told the butcher that in the meantime the price of the merchandise had risen to 300 gold coins. The butcher protested that they had agreed on a price of 200, and he didn't even know the nature of the merchandise he was purchasing. 300 gold coins was a very high price and amounted to the majority of his wealth-how could he spend so much without even knowing what he was purchasing? When he saw that the captain was adamant, he quickly returned home to bring another 100 gold coins.

The butcher returned to the harbor as quickly as he could with the additional 100 gold coins, but to his dismay the captain once again refused to hand over the merchandise saying that once again the price had risen by 100 gold coins. The butcher protested that raising the price for a second time was neither right nor fair, but to no avail: the captain did not relent and said that if he would not pay the full price, the deal was off and the butcher would have missed out on a rare opportunity. Seeing the captain's adamance, the butcher made all haste to get home as quickly as possible to bring the additional 100 coins the captain had requested. When the butcher returned with the additional 100 coins, the captain told him that the price had gone up for a third time and now stood at 500 coins. The butcher could not believe his ears, and exclaimed

that he did not want to be deceived any further and he was calling the deal off. On his way home the butcher started having second thoughts- perhaps the merchandise was indeed very special, perhaps it was worth it. His curiosity prevailed, and so, he went home, gathered an additional 100 coins and returned to the harbor. He approached the captain and paid him the 500 gold coins he had requested. The captain accepted the payment this time and then took him down to the lower deck of the ship, and showed him the 'merchandise' he had purchased- 300 men, women and children crowded into a space that was clearly not designed to hold half their number. When the butcher asked who these people were, the captain replied that they were some Jews who had attended a certain wedding that he had looted and taken captive. The captain went on to inform him that he didn't have much use for these people and their upkeep costed more than they were worth, and were he not to have sold them to the butcher, he would have went out to sea and thrown them all overboard to drown. The butcher's heart was filled with joy at this great Mitzvah Hashem had made available to him. He took them all to his home, and provided them with food, drink and clean clothing. He was overjoyed to fulfill the great Mitzvah of saving Jewish lives as the Mishna (Sanhedrin 4, 5) states "One who sustains a single Jewish soul, is likened to one who has sustained an entire world".

Amongst the freed captives there was one beautiful girl. The butcher arranged that his son would meet this girl, and soon enough the butcher's son and this girl had met and agreed to get married in a month's time. The butcher was extremely happy at the prospect of his son marrying this refined, beautiful girl, and made many preparations for the upcoming wedding. A month later all the preparations were done, and just as the wedding ceremony was commencing, the bride broke down in tears under the wedding canopy. The butcher approached his soon to be daughter-in-law and asked her what the matter was. The bride replied: "You are greatly charitable, and I'm very grateful to you for saving our lives, but at the wedding when we were captured, I was the bride, and I was to be married to this man who is here with us amongst the freed captives, only that our wedding was ruined by our capture. I am on the one hand glad and grateful that you saved my life, but I am at the same time very sad that the person I was to marry is here in the crowd, and I will not marry him." The butcher exclaimed: "G-d forbid, this will not be!". He took his son aside and requested that he forgive him for what he was about to do. He then proceeded to ask the bride to identify who amongst the crowd she was originally set to marry, and used all the wedding preparations to hold a splendid wedding for the bride and original groom, in place of his son. Hashem asked Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai if it was right that he be seated next to this butcher. Rabbi Shimon replied that it certainly was right. We can never know at what spiritual level a person truly is. This butcher appeared unimportant and unremarkable, they did not appear to be a great Tzaddik, particularly learned or particularly wealthy. But we can never know the true degree and exceptional character traits a person possesses. Therefore, we must be very careful with each person's honor, and never let go of any Mitzvah that come to our hand. Any Mitzvah that comes our way should be seized with two hands and completed as perfectly as possible "For you do not know the reward of the Mitzvot" (Avot 2, 1).- One cannot know the future reward of each Mitzvah, and should therefore follow through with any and every Mitzvah that comes to their hand.

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