

Derech Ha-Rif

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

For the Torah portion KI-TAVO | Volume 79 | 18 ELUL



First Shabbat Meal

Even the curses and suffering that a person experiences turn out to be blessings for him in the end.

In this week's portion, we read about the curses, which are frightening and awful. There is a Halachic discussion as to who should be called up for this portion, should a person be called up? Some have the custom not to call anyone up for it, rather whoever wishes to come up can do so. Others say that the Rabbi of the synagogue should come up; every place has its custom of what it does for the curses.

The Zohar says something which is not straightforward at all, namely that the root of all the curses which are stated in the weekly portion are in fact blessings. The question may be asked, curses are a harsh thing, they are read in a quieter voice. If a person curses his fellow, does this contain any sort of root of blessing? Therefore, what is the meaning of the statement that the root of the curses is a root of blessing?

Perhaps, it is possible to say a tremendous concept. When a person has any sort of trouble or problem, they become disgruntled. In such cases, often, a person is angry and declares that everyone is guilty, this one caused it and this factor caused it. A person always has someone to blame for things. However, one needs to know that at a time when a person has trouble or problem, buried deep within it is great salvation. There are two reasons why problems and difficulties come to a person. One reason is because of a Gilgul (transmigration/re-incarnated soul) about whom such things were decreed. On account of the soul in a person, they need to undergo this.

A moment before the soul of a person descends into this world, it is found in a unique room in heaven, and Hashem shows it many types of human life. This is comparable to a movie, one type of life is shown and then another type of life. Hashem gives the soul the possibility to choose the type of life that it wants, and the good and bad are found there, joy and sadness, who they will live with and who they will marry; all is found inside.

The life a person has is the life that they chose for themselves. All suffering is that which a person chose, and this is the subject of a person's life. There can be Tikkunim (repairs) and there can be Gilgulim, but these are what a person chose, and he has nothing about which to complain and ask questions to Hashem. He chose his path, therefore a person needs to rejoice that he is completing and perfecting that which he needs to repair.

When a person has a problem or trouble, this is because he did some sin; Hashem brings him challenges and tests in order to pass them properly and recompense that which he did which was not good. If a person stole, he must pay back. Likewise, if a person lied, he must pay back. In this world, a person can pay back for what he did. If a person thinks that he can do things in life and not pay for them, this is a severe and enormous error. One may not pay today, but in a month or a year, one will inevitably pay. There is a notebook in heaven, in which everything which a person does in this world is recorded.

Therefore, if a person has a problem, this comes either from a Gilgul or from a sin which a person did and is paying for. Both of these are good things, as when a person pays in this world, he repairs whatever he ruined or damaged through his sin. A person needs to be happy rather than sad about this. Based on this, it is possible to explain the teaching of the Zohar that the curses in the weekly portion of this week come from a root of blessing. These curses lower the evil, they cause a person to have a possibility of repair, whether this be needed because of a past Gilgul or because of a sin that a person did now. Either way, things are repaired through one's difficulties.

When a person has a financial debt and it is difficult for him to pay and he does so, the day on which he pays the debt becomes a day of great joy. Even though a person lacks and does not have money now, he has paid his debt. There is no doubt like the resolving of doubts. When one has a doubt which he has solved, or a debt which is paid, there is nothing greater than a solved problem. Therefore, the root of the curses in this week's portion come from a root of blessing, because they remove difficult things from upon a person.



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Soul Of the Rif

Oftentimes, a person thinks that a problem which has happened to him is truly a problem. Yet, after some time has passed, he understands that the given problem is not a problem; it is in fact a salvation. "Man sees the eyes and Hashem sees the heart (Shmuel II, 16:7)." We see what is good with our eyes, this is what we see to be correct, but Hashem sees the long term.

We already mentioned that it is forbidden for a person to evaluate his life in terms of a given day, week, month or year. Life is measured in terms of a complete life rather than short periods. A person who builds their life and measures his own life or that of others based on a day, a week, a month or a year, is making a huge error. Life is measured by the yardstick of a whole lifetime. Everyone enters the world with a full life to live and to make their repair in the world. When a person completes their task and makes their intended refinement, he reaches great achievements and the greatest things.



2nd Shabbat Meal

“And all the peoples of the Land will see that the Name of G-d is called over you and they will be afraid of you (Devarim 28:10).”

Through the power of the Mitzva of Tefillin, we raise the Mitzvot we performed without intention and sufficient concentration.

In this week's portion, the holy Torah tells us “And all the peoples of the Land will see that the Name of G-d is called over you and they will be afraid of you.” The Talmud (Menachot 35b) expounds on this verse: Rabbi Elazar the Great said, “This refers to the Tefillin of the head.” It is necessary to understand why this verse refers specifically to the head. What is unique about the head Tefillin that the Torah says about them “And all the peoples of the Land will see that the Name of G-d is called over you and they will be afraid of you?” The Torah (Devarim 20:8) says, “And the judges will continue to speak to the people, and they will say, “Who is the man who is afraid and faint hearted? He should go and return to his house and not cause his brothers' hearts to melt.” The Torah says that before people go out to war, the officers gather the nation and say that one who is afraid should go home rather than go to war, so that he does not cause his brethren to be afraid in war. Our Rabbis explain that the “man who is afraid and faint hearted” is stated about a person who spoke between putting on the Tefillin of the arm and the Tefillin of the head. We must understand why the Torah says that it is better for one who spoke between the Tefillin of the head and the Tefillin of the arm not to go out to war. Does a person have damage or a great sickness as a result of this, to the point that he is able to weaken his brothers' hearts in war and affect them? What is the greatness of the head Tefillin which is not stated about anything else?

Tefillin have immense power, and our holy Rabbis say that even at the time that Tefillin are being produced, a hair from a calf is to be left with which to stitch the Tefillin. This hair is to remain without importance, but it is to be on the outside of the Tefillin. Let us ask, a calf reminds of the golden calf, and now at the time of prayer, we seek mercy from Hashem, we need mercy and for our judgment to be sweetened.

Why do we need to stitch the Tefillin and leave one hair which protrudes outwards? Why do we need to remind the accuser of our sin at the time that we pray? It would be better not to mention the golden calf and leave it conceptually far away? Rather, our holy Rabbis teach us a key concept which we need to engrave before our eyes and live it with the strongest level of mental awareness, namely, that the Tefillin are the greatest symbol. It is known that the Talmud (Brachot 6b) says that Hashem Himself wears Tefillin. The Talmud says there: Rabbi Yitzchak said: How do we know that Hashem places Tefillin? As it says, ‘Hashem swore with His Right Hand and with the arm of His Might (Yeshaya 62:8).’ The power of the Tefillin, which are the scepter of the king, is given to us to use it. One needs to know that every Jew has an upper aspect in thought which is pure, and this cannot be

affected by any damage at all. For every Jew, it makes no difference if he has sinned and descended or fallen into the worst and lowest place, there is a point within every Jew which cannot be ruined, it remains holy and pure. The verse says, “And a little [more] and there is no Rasha [wicked person] and you will understand about his place and he is no more (Tehillim 37:6).” There is a small point in which there is no wickedness in any Jew, a Jew remains pure. The Jews reached the forty-ninth level of Tumah (contamination) but not the fiftieth during their time in Egypt. They did not descend to the final point, for wickedness does not succeed in getting there. From the aspect of this Tzidkut (righteousness) within a person's head, one can connect all of his deeds and raise them to an elevated place. We place Tefillin on the place that we do because there is a point in the head of every Jew which will never descend. On account of this, it says, “And all the peoples of the Land will see that the Name of Hashem is called upon you and they will fear from you.” This is because in every Jew, there is this fine part which cannot be touched by any wickedness, and together with this, we tie the Tefillin of the arm, we connect the deeds which we have done with improper intent, incomplete things which were done improperly and we unite them with our other deeds through the Tefillin of the head and the hand. The Tefillin shel Rosh have the pure and holy point. The hand Tefillin serve to unite the actions which we have done with improper intention, and Hashem considers good intention as an action. We combine these things together, and then the power of Tefillin is great and most elevated. Therefore, by way of Tefillin, all that we have done improperly with our hands, is linked to our other actions when we place Tefillin. After this, we unite everything with this pure point by placing the head Tefillin. Hashem considers a good intention to be equivalent to action, everything is raised to a higher place, for the sake of the Holy One. The power of Tefillin is to gather all that we have done in the past, the actions we have done with proper intention as well as those done with improper intention and to connect them together with the unique thought in our heads, raising them all to Hashem. Therefore, when we leave over the hair of a calf, this is like the scapegoat on Yom Kippur, which prevents accusation being leveled against the Jewish people. This is like the taking of Mayim Acharonim (water with which we wash our hands at the end of a meal), which are given to the Satan (Devil). So too, Tefillin, because of their great accolade, lead the Satan to accuse, so he is given a hair of a calf in order that he leave us alone and not accuse us. This is the uniqueness of Tefillin, that they can raise a person to incredible levels and raise a person to mighty things. Therefore, the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 17a) says: The sinners of Yisrael who commit sins with their bodies, who are they? Rav said, “A head which does not place Tefillin.” This is because it does not have the power to raise itself to unify itself to ascend and climb to the highest levels.

Q & A with the Rif



Question:

Dear Rabbi, I become very angry at home and this disturbs my wife and children. Every time I try to do Teshuva for this and I pray, but I then fall into the same mistake once again. This is very difficult for me. Does the Rabbi have any advice for me?

Answer:

You said that you get angry at home and this affects your wife and children. First of all, you cause pain to yourself, because at the moment that a person becomes angry, one should know that the holy Sefarim write that at that moment, there is something (perhaps financial) which is headed your way and at the moment you become angry, you kill this off, i.e., you lose this gain you would otherwise have had.

Many times, a holy Neshama is born into a person, for example, after one has performed a Mitzva. This Neshama needs to take you to incredible worlds, and every time one gets angry, these holy Neshamot with which you have ascended and become stronger leave a person.

Anyone who becomes angry is dominated by all sorts of Gehinnom (Nedarim 22a) and it is as if he has served idols (Shabbos 105b). Tzaddik, you need to know that you have a great soul. The Evil Inclination comes to you with anger to destroy you, will you let him win? You need to know that you are in a battle. First save your own life, and then consider the fact that you are causing great pain to your wife and children, which is not a straightforward matter at all.





3rd Shabbat meal

Every great thing starts at the beginning of the journey, not the end.

In this week's portion, we find that Hashem commands us about the Mitzva of Bikkurim (bringing one's first fruits to the Beit HaMikdash). This unique Mitzva is one about which our holy Rabbis teach that its merit enabled us to settle in Eretz Yisrael.

After toiling and working hard in the field, a Jew goes down and sees the first fruit has ripened. He takes a thread and places it on the fruit and dedicates it to Hashem. The fruit continues to grow and sprout with the thread on it until the festival of Shavuot. He then brings the Bikkurim with joy and praises Hashem, offering the fruit before him.

For many years, we have had the following difficulty. The Mitzva of Bikkurim starts to apply to the fruit even before it is fitting to eat. While it is still small, why do we place a thread on it and wait? Why do we not wait until the fruit grows and sprouts and then sanctify it to Hashem? After that, we can bring it to Hashem and fulfill the Mitzva of Bikkurim.

This issue is also sharpened in light of the Mitzva of Challah (separating the first of one's dough). Every Jewish woman when preparing dough for bread or Challot for Shabbat, separates Challa when she kneads. Why does she not do so once whatever she is making is fit to be eaten? She can then separate an honorable section as Challah to Hashem? Why is the separation performed at the point of kneading and not when the baking is completed? Likewise, why is Bikkurim performed before the fruit is complete? There is a great lesson and tremendous concept hidden here, which is a lesson for every Jew. Every great thing starts from far away, and at the beginning of the journey, not the end. With Challah, one starts when it is dough and separates Challah at that point in time. The Mitzva of Bikkurim starts when the fruit is green and unripe. So too, with every Mitzva and good deed, a person should not wait until the end.

In regard to the Mitzva of Tzedakah (charity), the Torah says, "You shall surely give him and not have bad heartedness when you give to him (Devarim 15:10)." It is necessary to understand the choice of wording, "You shall surely give to him." It is possible to explain that when a person makes money, he should accept upon himself from the first moment to consider how much of the money is his own and how much belongs to Hashem. He should separate Maaser (a tenth) or a Chomesh (A fifth) or other gifts which he accepts upon himself to give.

From the first moment, he should take all the money which is allocated for donations and separate it. Through this, he will live with the knowledge that he has no connection to this money. This money is simply with him but is not his, and this is the meaning of "You shall surely give." Immediately upon receiving the money, one should give and detach himself from the money in every possible way. Then, when he actually hands over the money to a poor person, this is the second giving described in the verse. The Torah continues, "You shall not have bad heartedness when you give to him" – it should not pain a person because what one is giving is not his own, and he is aloof and removed from this money.

This is the key concept of many prominent and important Mitzvot. Already at the beginning, a person should stand firmly in his mindset. Therefore, Rosh Chodesh is a great day for atoning for one's sins, a unique day of all the days of the month and it defines the direction of the month. Just as the separation of Challah is the beginning and it gives direction, the same is true of the Mitzva of Bikkurim, at the beginning of the sprouting and growth of the fruit. We are drawing near to the beginning of the year, to the great and important day of Rosh Hashana. During that day, within our prayers, we say, "Today is the birthday of the world." We write the following words for fear, but with proof and intelligent feeling that the Jewish people are one that undergoes ascents and descents, times of pride and times of lowness, both individually and nationally. Our Rabbis say that when the Jewish people ascend, they ascend to the highest extent, and Heaven forbid, in the opposite direction, the same is also true.

We are entering a historic time in the path of the Jewish people, a time at which we need great mercy from Heaven, and the collective need to be united. People need to cling to each other and know that we have no one to rely on other than our Father in Heaven. "Her oppressors were the head (Eicha 1:5)." We have returned to times when those who pursue the Jewish people and its Torah are in charge. The next verse talks about Bein HaMetzarim – between the troubles, a term used for the period between Shiva Asar BeTammuz and Tisha Ba'v, times such as these will be times of Bein HaMetzarim.

We have just a few days until Rosh Hashana, in which to strengthen ourselves and to maximize the time of "My Beloved has gone down to His garden (Shir Hashirim 6:2)." In the remaining time between now and Yom Hadin (the Day of Judgment), we must know to light the spark of the coal in the Jewish heart, which has never been extinguished and never will be extinguished. It is the Bitachon (trust) of the eternity of Yisrael. Today is a new day, in which the awareness and understanding need to be strong, with awakenings of the beginning. It is an old war which is renewed and we must do as our Rabbis and fathers did.



Treasure charms from the Rif



In this week's Parasha, our Rabbis teach us that there is a tremendous Segulah (charm) to protect oneself from all negative things during the entire year. Ezra, the Scribe, divided up the Parshiot in the Torah in such a way that the first lots of curses are recorded before the Festival of Shavuot, and the second lot of curses appear before Rosh HaShanah. It is written in the holy Sefarim that when man goes to Synagogue on the Shabbat of Parashat Ki Tavo and hears the curses being read from the Torah, one should have a particular Kavana (intent). Upon hearing the curses, they should have the intention that if anything reminiscent of the curses is due to strike them, it should be thwarted in the merit of them hearing the curses. The verse, "this year and its curses should come to a close," marks the stopping point of all bad things in the world. From this verse onwards, we have a new story, in which curses are transformed to blessings.



The fourth Post Shabbat meal

Storys from the Rif

One can potentially close themselves off from blessing and Divine Assistance through their mouth.

The Mishna (Pirkei Avot 4:3) writes: "Do not despise any man, and do not discriminate against anything, for there is no man that has not his hour, and there is no thing that has not its place." This Mishna is interpreted to mean that one should accord honor to everyone. Moreover, it instructs us that each of us experience positive periods in life and negative periods, but no matter how difficult things can seem, we can surmount them.

Sometimes we are prone to seeing a base person, and discarding any sense of hope for their future development, which can lead us to internally ridicule them. The Mishna castigates this behavior, and instead demands of us to respect one and all, and certainly to never disgrace them.

The Chafetz Chaim, one of our greatest sages, who among other things spearheaded the movement combatting Lashon Hara (Evil Speech), recalled the following story. He said that one day he traveled by train from a distant city to his hometown of Radin. On the train, he was sitting next to a gentleman who, not recognizing him, struck up a conversation with him. The Chafetz Chaim inquired as to where the gentleman was heading, to which he responded the following. He explained that he had had a dream in which he had been strongly encouraged to travel to Radin to bask in the radiance of the Chafetz Chaim. He had therefore collected his meager funds together, and left his day job, in order to travel to Radin to visit the saintly sage.

Upon hearing this the Chafetz Chaim responded, saying that in truth the Chafetz Chaim was not as great as the world made him out to be. He explained that the Chafetz Chaim was simply an ordinary person who had faults just like all human beings. The man couldn't believe his ears! He became outraged and began yelling at the Chafetz Chaim, reprimanding him for besmirching the tremendous sage and Tzaddik.

Eventually the train reached Radin and the two men went on their way. Later that evening the man left his lodgings to go to the Chafetz Chaim's Yeshiva to join the venerated sage for Arvit. When he entered, he saw the sage sitting at the front, and to his horror it was the same gentleman who he had ridiculed on the train! The man immediately surged towards the Chafetz Chaim, with tears in his eyes, and begged him for forgiveness, explaining that he hadn't known his identity on the train. He explained that he had yelled at him, purely to uphold the glory of Torah and its scholars.

The Chafetz Chaim rose and replied that he was in fact grateful to the man, for the experience had afforded him an insight into understanding Lashon Hara. He explained that the incident had taught him that contrary to conventional wisdom, even speaking negatively about oneself is included within the remit of Lashon Hara.

Often people put themselves down, and aside from the negative psychological effects this causes, it is also considered Lashon Hara. When one insults oneself, one is in fact committing a grievous sin. The sin of Lashon Hara is one of the most severe sins in the Torah. When one speaks Lashon Hara, one builds a wall between himself and Hashem, and cuts himself off from Hashem's blessings in all areas of life. Indeed, on occasion one may require financial sustenance, or blessing in other areas, but he simply precludes himself from being able to receive it due to this terrible sin. Let us all strive to refine our speech and become fitting receptacles for Hashem's blessing.



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