

Derech Ha-Rif

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

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First Shabbat Meal

“The nation gathered unto Aharon and exclaimed: ‘get up and make for us a deity.’”

One must be extra cautious with Torah scholars not to cause them any harm or insult, Heaven-Forbidden.

In the Torah portion of Ki Tisa, Aharon is approached by members of the Jewish nation with the request to form an idol to lead the Jewish people from where Moshe, so to speak, had left off. How did Aharon agree to their demand - with only minimal opposition? Shouldn't he have opposed it with every effort?

The lesser known element of the episode of the Golden Calf is that before arriving with their request to Aharon, the group of people that wanted the idol just earlier presented their request to Hur, Aharon's brother in law. When Hur vehemently refused to heed to their request, they retaliated and murdered him. Aharon was fearful that those very same people might repeat their senseless crime on him and thought it would be a very grave sin for the Jewish Nation. Causing harm to a Torah scholar is especially grave, far more so than causing harm to one who isn't learned.

To illustrate the gravity of this point is a story in the Talmud (Eravin 63a) of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, who once told his mother that his greatest student would perish within that year. His mother, Emma Shalom, asked for an explanation to his remark, to which Rabbi Elazar answered that his student has overstepped a very critical boundary and stated a Halacha in the presence of his teacher, himself. Slighting a Torah scholar is an especially grave sin and one must be very careful not to arrive, Heaven Forbid, at such an act.

Aharon preferred to create the Golden Calf and potentially cause them to come to sin rather than refuse and almost certainly cause them to harm him. Disrespect or harm caused to a Torah scholar is an especially grave sin and one must make every effort not to come to such a situation.

The Talmud in Shabbat (149b) teaches that a person who was the cause of someone's punishment will not have the merit to reside in Hashem's presence. How then did Rabbi Elazar put himself in situation in which his prime student would be punished on his behalf?

The answer is quite straightforward: Torah Scholars are not included in this statement (of Shabbat 149b). The Jewish nation is likened to a dove and the Torah Scholars to the dove's wings; if the wings are harmed, the dove is done for. The nation's Torah Scholars are what keep the nation on the right path and lasting throughout the generations, so causing them harm is especially harmful to the entire nation. This analogy gives insight into understanding the severity of slighting Torah Scholars and why they are omitted in the teaching brought in Shabbat 149b.

In conclusion, one must be very careful with Torah Scholars and respecting them.



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Soul Of the Rif

Every living person must know that part of being a Tzaddik is to answer 'yes' in response to requests to help and assist people, such a person is praised. To say 'no' is not a good thing, it is a harsh thing. To grapple and deliberate between good and bad and to decide to do that which is good is the greatest thing. Every time a person has doubts between doing good and bad, and chooses the good, this subjugates the inclination, which itself is a tremendous merit.

The Jewish people and most of the world are defined as in-between people (neither Tzaddikim nor Resha'im), they constantly need to contend between good and bad. The more a person knows to determine and take the good side and not fall into evil, their merit is double and they receive incredible reward.



2nd Shabbat Meal

And Aharon called out and he said, 'A festival to Hashem tomorrow' (Shemot 32:5)."

One performing Teshuva for a sin which they did, is cause for a festival for Hashem.

Perhaps it is possible to expound further from this week's portion and suggest as follows: We see that the Jewish people came to Aharon and asked him to make gods for them. They said, "Arise and make for us gods who will go before us, for this man, Moshe, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him." The Gemara (Shabbat 89a) states that the Satan went and showed the Jewish people the coffin of Moshe, and, as it were, his funeral and that Moshe was being buried. The Satan told them that Moshe had died. Aharon saw that their situation was deteriorating, he told them to bring their rings and the jewelry of their wives, as he thought that the women would not want to give it up and Bnei Yisrael would not bring them. However, the Satan intervened and many members of the nation gathered their gold and jewelry and brought it to Aharon, he threw it into the fire, and such is how the golden calf was formed.

When they made the calf, Aharon said to Bnei Yisrael, "A festival to Hashem tomorrow." There is an enormous difficulty which can be asked on this. This day was the worst in Jewish history, they sinned to Hashem on the very worst level, in equivalence, this was like the sin of eating from the tree of knowledge. About this sin, Hashem said, "And on the day of My accounting, I will bring their sin to account against them (Shemot 32:24)." During every distress and problem which a person faces in any generation, part of this is a punishment to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf, this has been the case from that fateful day until today. If a person becomes angry that their head or their teeth hurt them, part of the pain is to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. If a person loses money, they feel pain, part of the pain is to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. Aharon stood and said, "A festival to Hashem tomorrow" - how could this be true, there was immense destruction in the world, which would be a long term cause of immense mourning? It is possible to answer with a tremendous concept. Our Sages teach (Avoda Zara 4b) that the Jews only made the Golden Calf to give an opening to those who perform Teshuva.

If many people sin together, they would claim that Hashem will not forgive them [even if they perform Teshuva], so Hashem points to the precedent of Bnei Yisrael, who did this enormous sin, the severest of all sins, and nonetheless, were forgiven by Hashem. As our Sages say (Shabbat 88b): During the sin of the Golden Calf, the Jewish people were comparable to a bride who committed adultery during her wedding. It was as if Hashem was marrying the Jewish people, and the Jewish people's sin [with the Golden Calf] during the wedding was like a bride committing adultery.

Aharon saw this and said, even with all of the evil which the Golden Calf entails, we are now learning that there is a concept and possibility of Teshuva. Bnei Yisrael did the most severe sin, and despite this, Hashem forgave them. Aharon saw that this was a low time, of incomparable destruction, but "there is a festival to Hashem tomorrow." This was because tomorrow, when Moshe will descend, there will be a Tikun (repair) and they will repent in Teshuva, this will be a cause for a celebration to Hashem. Bnei Yisrael learnt a tremendous concept here: If a person makes a proverbial Golden Calf, and afterwards performs Teshuva, Hashem will forgive them for the sin like He did with the Golden Calf, therefore there will be a festival to Hashem the next day, for people will arise and be awakened to perform Teshuva, which will be a great cause of festivity before Hashem.



Q & A with the Rif



Question:

Dear Rabbi, for a person who is divorced and had children with his ex-wife, is it advisable for him to keep a good relationship with his divorcee or a cold connection which suffices in regard to the children?

Answer:

It is definitely good to have a good connection with everyone, it is forbidden to break bridges. In regard to every bridge in life, you never know when you will need it. Therefore, it is forbidden for people to have arguments with each other thereby breaking their connections, in everything one needs to have a bridge. If a window is broken, as much as one repairs it, marks of damage will remain, one needs to know how to act with wisdom in order to maintain good relations with people. However, if a person is divorced, he needs to act with understanding in terms of how he deals with her in order not to offend his second wife, and not go in a direction which can lead to problems, remaining on good terms with one's ex-wife is a very important thing.





3rd Shabbat meal

In Life, A person must know that they are halfway through the journey, and there is a better half still ahead of them.

In this week's portion, we see how Hashem commanded Moshe, instructing him that Bnei Yisrael should each donate a half Shekel to the Mishkan. There is a key question which must be asked, why were they only to give a half Shekel and not a whole Shekel as they may have wanted? It is easier to count whole Shekalim and not halves. Therefore, why did Hashem command that they give half Shekels?

This can be explained through a tremendous concept. Whenever a person starts to encounter a difficult situation in life, they must know that the current reality is not all that they will face during their lifetime, rather they will not need to deal with that thing forever. A person needs to know that they are only halfway into their journey. The difficulty and bad things which a person encounters are only part of the journey, soon enough, better days will come and a person will pass their current challenge. If for example, a person suffers ill health, it is forbidden for them to despair, in a short while they will hopefully be healthy and life will be good for them.

Therefore, the entire foundation of the Jewish people is represented by the half shekel. It teaches us that the current half is not good, but the other half, i.e., another time which will come, will be good. A person does not need to stare and focus on the tough time in which they currently find themselves, as a better and satisfying half is still to come.

There is a Mashal (parable) brought by the holy Sefarim of a prince who lived a very pampered life. He lived in a golden palace, entirely removed from this world; his father, the king, guarded his son in every way. One day when the prince was eating bread, he thought to himself and wondered how the bread had been formed and where it had come from? With no idea about anything, he assumed that bread grew on trees, just as fruits and vegetables grow. One day the prince went out of the palace and passed through a place where they were growing wheat and barley. He saw a farmer plow the field, and he had no idea why he did so. As such, he became angry and scolded the workers, saying that the ground was of such a nice appearance and now they had ruined it by plowing it.

Several days later, he passed once again and saw the farmer take seeds of wheat and barley, and scatter them in the ground. The prince asked why the man was throwing these seeds and dirtying the field. A few days after this, he came by to see the farmer fertilizing the ground, once again he did not understand why the farmer was doing this. After a longer period of time, the prince passed the field and wheat and barley had grown in the meantime. Upon seeing the crops, the prince was overjoyed. He then saw the farmer come and harvest everything and became infuriated with him. It was then that they explained to the prince why this was being done, during this time, it became clear to the prince that the bread which he had been eating did not grow on trees; in order for the bread to reach him, it needed to undergo the entire process which the farmer had been performing.

The same is true in regard to matters of Emunah (faith) in Hashem. If a person looks solely at the plowing of the field, they will not understand any of it. It is like the prince passing the farm who had never seen plowing or planting before.

He thought that the farmer was simply making holes in the ground. Were he to look and see that he was throwing seeds into the ground, he would also not be able to comprehend the purpose behind this. When halfway through the journey, a person does not understand. Only at the end, when a person receives bread and rolls do they have the ability to understand the root behind events.

A person needs to know a critical concept. In life, one cannot look at things and judge them when one is halfway through, as doing so will achieve nothing. If a person opens a business and after a month decides that it has not succeeded and that they will therefore close it, such a person will never succeed. If a person opens a Gemara and starts learning and upon encountering something they do not understand they opt to close it right away, they will never succeed. A person who wishes to succeed needs to look from the beginning until the end, and not at the halfway stage. Judging based on how things stand while they are still on the journey will not gain a person anything. If a person is sick and they only look at what pains them now, they will have complete despair and be unable to recover. When a person runs a business, and looks only at the current situation, they will lack the strength to continue onwards. If a person only works based on the here and now, with no eye to the future, they will lack the strength to continue forwards. One who wishes to succeed needs to look at all from a general and all-encompassing perspective, not only half or a quarter of the thing.

This is what the half Shekel teaches us, the concept of Emunah is half. One who has half now cannot think that the half is everything, another half will come. If this half was difficult, then the next one will be better, a person has a whole journey to undertake in order to reach that.

Based on this, we can understand why the silver of the half shekels was used to build the Adanim (sockets) of the Mishkan (Tabernacle). The Adanim supported the Mishkan, they were made of the half Shekels which symbolize Emunah. The foundation of the building and of the Jewish people is Emunah. If a person has faith, they will have the strength to survive and to pass through things, to withstand and handle everything difficult that they encounter. If a person lacks Emunah, they will not be able to withstand anything and will be unable to succeed.

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Treasure charms from the Rif



A Segulah (charm) for livelihood

It is known that if one recites the prayer 'Bameh Madlikin' on Friday night with precision and in a pleasant tone, it will serve as a Segulah for livelihood.



The fourth Post Shabbat meal

Storys from the Rif

Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, known after his seminal Sefer (book) as the 'Noam Elimelech,' was an exceptionally pious Rabbi, whose greatness we simply cannot fathom.

Rabbi Meir Abuhatzzeira would say that it is imperative for every home to contain a copy of the Sefer Noam Elimelech. He explained that the Sefer would serve as a safeguard for the home's wellbeing. If one opens the Sefer, one will notice that the words are often accompanied by asterisks, shaped like stars. Sixteen years ago, one of the Noam Elimelech's descendants consulted with us and raised his desire to remove the asterisks from the design to make for a cleaner print going forwards. He mentioned that the asterisks seemed to be meaningless, lacking in significance.

We responded that he should leave the asterisks in place, in line with the way that the Noam Elimelech had originally formulated his Sefer. We explained that all the Noam Elimelech's descendants until then had kept the asterisks in the Sefer and now was no time to change. The individual listened, but despite our advice, he proceeded to reprint the Sefer without the asterisks. On the very day that the newly adapted Sefer was printed, that same man passed on from this world.

Rav Dov Ber of Mezeritch, was the chief disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidut. When the Baal Shem Tov passed away, the Maggid took his place, filling the mantle of leadership for the Chassidim. Once the Maggid himself passed away, the Noam Elimelech was appointed to lead the Chassidim in his place. Upon the Noam Elimelech's appointment, the Chassidim were delighted that he had accepted their request to lead them. Indeed, it is recounted that after the Noam Elimelech was appointed in the Maggid's place, the disciples made a large feast to celebrate his appointment. After the feast, the Noam Elimelech went to rest, and was still asleep after four hours.

The students were distressed, aware that their former teacher, the Maggid, had never slept for four consecutive hours. The students approached Rav Zusha of Anipoli, the Noam Elimelech's brother, and voiced their concerns. They explained that the Maggid only ever slept for an hour or so at a time and would never have slept for four consecutive hours; how could it be that their new Rabbi could indulge in such lengthy sleep?!

Rabbi Zusha listened to the students and instructed them to follow him. He proceeded to the room in which the Noam Elimelech was sleeping and placed his hand over the Mezuzah. The moment his hand touched the Mezuzah, the Noam Elimelech rose in fright from his bed. The students were alarmed, unable to comprehend what they were witnessing; they asked Rav Zusha to explain. He explained that the Noam Elimelech was so attached to G-d, that even when he slept, his thoughts totally surrounded Hashem - personifying the mantra "I set Hashem before me constantly (Tehillim 16:8)." As such, when the Mezuzah, representing G-d's presence, was covered, the Noam Elimelech was startled, unable to bear being in a room in which G-d's presence was covered for even a moment.

Below is a further story involving the Noam Elimelech: Before the Noam Elimelech passed away, he gave the following parting instructions to his son. He instructed his son that if any harsh decrees were to be imposed upon the next generation of Jews, his son should engage in a mystical practice, through which he would be able to reach the Noam Elimelech's Neshama (soul) in Heaven.

The Noam Elimelech explained to his son that if he were to engage in such a practice, he could be assured that the Noam Elimelech would pray on the generation's behalf and assist them.

The Noam Elimelech passed away, and sure enough a terrible edict was issued against the Jewish people. The Tzaddikim of the generation approached the Noam Elimelech's son and beseeched him to execute the mystical practice which his father had entrusted him with, in a bid to elicit the Noam Elimelech's prayers. The Noam Elimelech's son readied himself to perform the practice, and once ready, he performed it.

When he performed it, his Neshama ascended to Heaven, to the exalted home of his father, and he related all the dreadful decrees affecting the Jews of his generation. The Noam Elimelech replied by reciting a single verse: "G-d, we experience Your kindness in Your temple (Tehillim 10:48)." With that, his son's Neshama descended to Earth, and he began contemplating the meaning of the verse. He understood it to mean that when one "experiences G-d," referring to G-d's Middat HaDin (Attribute of Justice), then if one attached oneself to G-d's "temple" in faithfulness, one would see that it is fact "kindness" rather than justice.

Many times, one is inclined to view a challenge to be a product of Middat HaDin; however, if one attached oneself to Hashem, one will appreciate that the challenge is in fact totally for his good and a kindness from Hashem.

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