

THE PATH TO FOLLOW

No 96
RE'EH
29 AV 5765
SEPTEMBER.3.2005

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Responsible of publication Hanania Soussan

HASHEM IS THE SOURCE OF BLESSING

(by **Rabbi David Hanania Pinto** שליט"א)

The Torah states, "See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing, that you hearken to the commandments of the L-RD your G-d...and the curse, if you do not hearken to the commandments of the L-RD your G-d" (Deuteronomy 11:26-28). Some questions arise when we examine these verses, while at the same time some moral lessons become clear.

First of all, the text begins with the singular re'eh ("see"), yet it continues in the plural and finishes in the same way: "That I present lifneichem [before you] today" (v.32). Secondly, why does the text have to say that Hashem will send us a curse? If He sends us a blessing when we perform His commandments, it is obvious what will happen if we fail to perform them. That is, since the very opposite of a blessing would come upon us in that case, why the need to explicitly mention a curse? Thirdly, the way that the blessing is formulated in the text differs from the way the curse is formulated. For the curse, the verse states: "And the curse, if you do not hearken to the commandments." Hence the blessing should also have been formulated in the same way, namely: "If you hearken" (as opposed to "that you hearken"). This implies that we will certainly receive a blessing!

From this text we learn just how good Hashem is and how much goodness He bestows upon His creatures. As the Ramak said, "One who is good is accustomed to doing good." Therefore nothing bad will ever come from Hashem; He only sends us what is good. In the natural order of things, everyone wants to live in peace and tranquility. There is almost no one on earth who wants to experience hardship and have Hashem send him misfortune and suffering. In fact we pray each day to avoid such things when we recite, "Do not bring us into sin...or into temptation." Normally when a person experiences some hardship or problem, he quickly loses his calm and says, "I can't overcome this! It's ruining my life! How can I continue to live like this?" His life ends up in complete turmoil, to the point that his faith in Hashem begins to diminish. On the other hand, everyone must

realize that Hashem does not bring hardship upon a person if he cannot withstand it. As the Sages have said in explaining the verse, "He gives snow like wool" (Psalms 147:16), if Hashem sends a person snow and frost, He also compensates by sending wool to cover and warm him. If some misfortune or problem arises for a person, Hashem knows that he is capable of overcoming it and can continue serving Him with all his 248 limbs and 365 sinews.

Furthermore, it often happens that a person is inundated with hardships, leaving him with the impression that he is actually being cursed. He feels that, far from such events being good, they are actually curses, ones that have come upon him because he has not been worthy of G-d's love. This is not true in the least! We must understand that even events that appear to be a curse are only a blessing, meaning that Hashem does not bring curses upon men. Instead, if a person experiences some tragedy or mishap, he must realize that Hashem only wants his good, as we are taught: "Whatever the All Merciful does is for the good" (Berachot 60b). As we have said, nothing bad comes from Hashem, only good. Therefore whatever appears to be a curse is but a blessing from Him. If we look closely, we will see that all this appears in the verses we shall soon cite.

The Torah states, "I present before you today a blessing and a curse" (Deuteronomy 11:26). This means that even something that we believe is a curse is nothing but a blessing. In fact Hashem wants to give us nothing but blessings. This is why the verse states with respect to the blessing, "that you hearken," for the Holy One, blessed be He, truly wants to bestow every possible good upon us. He knows that we will certainly obey His words and carry out His commandments. This is why He tells us "the blessing, that you obey," for we shall certainly receive blessings because we will, in fact, obey His words and carry out His commandments to perfection.

However if a person wants blessings to rest upon him, he must make himself into "vessel that can contain blessings." He must prepare himself

to be a vessel for the blessings that Hashem will pour upon him. How can a person do this? Two things are needed, both of which are mentioned in the verses that we have cited.

The first, which is a well-known requirement, is Torah study. When a person engages in Torah study, he receives all the blessings mentioned in the Torah. This is because the Torah itself is a source of blessing. Hence Hashem will definitely pour an abundance of blessings upon a person when he studies it. The second requirement is unity. When Jews are perfectly united, when they express their love for one another and are guarantors for each other, Hashem sends blessings upon them in abundance. Not only that, but no nation can stand up to them.

The verse testifies to this by using the singular re'eh ("see"). This means that if we are all united, Hashem will place before us – before all the Jewish people – an abundance of blessings. Furthermore, when the Jewish people are united and some misfortune occurs to an individual, another person will come and encourage him. That individual will then realize that his problem is not so serious, and he will regain courage.

Although we will certainly merit blessings when we hearken to Hashem's voice, we must still ask ourselves what will happen if we don't obey Him. If the Torah had not stated, "The curse, if you do not hearken," a person could think: "I'll do whatever I want and nothing will happen to me." It is in response to such an attitude that the verse states: If you do not hearken to the voice of Hashem, you will receive curses from Him, for Hashem does not forgo His demands. As the Sages have said: "Anyone who says that the Holy One, blessed be He, is disregarding [of sin], his life may be disregarded" (Bava Kama 50a).

Consequently we should learn a life lesson here, as well as a moral teaching. In other words we must study Torah, live in harmony with one another, obey Hashem's voice and perform His commandments to perfection. In this way we will become suitable vessels for containing blessing, and we will merit the blessings of Hashem for all time.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

Tzeddakah Will Strengthen You

“You shall surely open your hand” (Deuteronomy 15:11).

The Gemara recounts the story of King Monobaz, who gave his and his father's treasures to tzeddakah during years of scarcity. The Gemara states, "His brothers and his father's household came to him and said, 'Your father saved money and added to the treasures of his fathers, and you are squandering them.' He replied, 'My fathers stored up below and I am storing above.... My fathers stored in a place that can be tampered with, but I have stored in a place that cannot be tampered with.... My fathers stored something that produces no fruit, but I have stored something that does produce fruit.... My fathers gathered treasures of money, but I have gathered treasures of souls.... My fathers gathered for others and I have gathered for myself.... My fathers gathered for this world, but I have gathered for the future world'" (Bava Kama 11a).

Tzeddakah is so great, in fact, that it can annul evil decrees.

The Arizal was once sitting with his disciples in the field where the prophet Hosea was buried, and there he revealed the secrets of the Torah to them. In the middle of his explanation the Arizal said, "Hurry and collect a large sum of money for tzeddakah, and send it to a certain poor man who is imploring Hashem for help. His voice is ascending on high and breaking through all the heavens. The Holy One, blessed be He, is filled with anger against this entire town, which took no pity on him. I heard it being proclaimed in Heaven that the locusts will come against all the surrounding areas of Sefat to destroy the produce of the fields. Therefore hurry and perform this tzeddakah, for perhaps by its merit Hashem will annul the decree." The disciples hurried to amass a large sum of money, which they brought to the poor man in question. When they entered his home, they found him sitting down crying. They asked him why he was weeping, and he told them that he had a pitcher with which he used to draw water, one that was critical to his family's survival. Yet today it broke and he didn't have any way of replacing it, since he was penniless. They immediately gave him the money, and he greatly rejoiced and blessed them. The Arizal said to his disciples, "You have nothing to worry about. The decree has already been annulled. Because of the mitzvah of your tzeddakah, there is no reason to fear the locusts anymore." Let us also pay more attention to this important mitzvah!

We know that if a person does not give tzeddakah as he should, he may have to spend his money on other things, such as medical expenses for example. Therefore it is preferable to give tzeddakah and merit eternal life than to use one's money for medication in times of pain and suffering. Related to the statement in our parsha, "You shall not close your hand against your destitute brother. Rather, you shall open your hand to him" (Deuteronomy 15:7-8), the Sages have said: "When a person enters the world his hands are clenched, as though to say, 'The whole world is mine, I shall inherit it.' However his hands are spread open when he takes leave of it, as though to say, 'I have inherited nothing from the world'" (Eicha Rabba 5:14§1). This is why the Torah states, "You shall not close your hand against your destitute brother. Rather, you shall open your hand to him," for the day will come when we will open our hands in spite of ourselves. Therefore it is better to open them beforehand, while we are still alive, to give tzeddakah to the poor. This will be to our merit in this world and the World to Come.

The Decline of the Generations

“You shall not do everything that we do here today, every man whatever is right is his own eyes” (Deuteronomy 12:8).

What is usually meant when we say that a person must not do "whatever is right in his own eyes"? It means that he must not steal, murder, and so on. Yet what does the Torah mean by using this expression? In the time when bamot (high places) were allowed, it was permissible to offer sacrifices at Shiloh, but not to have individual high places. The gaon Rabbi Zalman of Sochatchov Zatzal said, "From here we can see the decline of the generations. In former times the expression, 'Every man [doing] what is right in his own eyes,' meant that people were not to offer sacrifices upon the high places, whereas today it means something quite different!"

Blood Like Water

“You shall not eat it. You shall pour it onto the ground like water” (Deuteronomy 12:24).

Would it not have been sufficient for the Torah to say that we must not consume blood? Why the need for the additional, "You shall pour it onto the ground"? Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky Shlita said that this contains an allusion to the kashering of meat, for it must be kashered in a perforated vessel, not a closed one. When meat is kashered in a closed vessel, the salt soaks up the blood and accumulates at the bottom of the vessel. The meat then reabsorbs the blood and become treif. Hence the need for a perforated vessel, that we may "pour it onto the ground." The Rambam writes in Shemoneh Perakim that when a person has a desire to do something forbidden, he should not say, "I do not want to [perform this forbidden act]." Instead he should say, "I do indeed want to do it, but I will not because my Father in Heaven has forbidden it." With regards to the logical commandments, such as the prohibition against stealing, it is obvious that a person should not say, "I do indeed want to steal." However for commandments that cannot be understood logically, one should say: "I do indeed want to, but Hashem has forbidden it." It is in this way that we can explain the statement, "You shall pour it onto the ground like water." With regards to this commandment, we should not rush to throw the blood away because it is revolting. Rather, we should imagine that it is like pristine water, for would anybody throw away such water? Obviously not! As a result, we should throw the blood away as if it were pristine water that we wanted to drink, yet refrained from doing so because Hashem prohibited it.

Far From Hashem

“If the road will be too long for you, so that you cannot carry it...then you may exchange it for money, wrap up the money in your hand, and go to the place that the L-RD your G-d will choose” (Deuteronomy 14:24-25).

This passage deals with the ma'asser sheni (second tithe), which a Jew must eat in Jerusalem. However if such a journey were too long to undertake, such as for a person living in Tiberias who owned a vineyard, what was he to do? He had to sell his grapes for money, and with this money he was to purchase food in Jerusalem and eat it there in a state of ritual purity. The Yalkut HaGershoni gives a figurative explanation for this passage: "If you feel that the road is too far – that the service of Hashem is burdensome – and that it is difficult for you to come to the Temple, do you know the reason why? It is because 'the place [hamakom – one of Hashem's Names] is too far from you,' meaning that you have distanced yourself from Hashem. The proof is in the verse itself: 'Wrap up the money in your hand, and go to the place [hamakom].' The money doesn't seem overly burdensome to you! The reason for your estrangement from Hashem is obvious: It is because 'the place...is too far from you.' That is, Hashem is too far from you."

No Greater Blessing

“The blessing, that you hearken to the commandments of the L-RD your G-d” (Deuteronomy 11:27).

The Ohr HaChaim states that obeying the Torah brings extraordinary pleasure and nourishment to the soul, as it is written: "Listen, and your soul will be rejuvenated" (Isaiah 55:3). The soul of one who partakes of the Torah will tell him that he is greatly indebted to the Holy One for having given him such a marvelous gift. Needless to say, there is no reason to ask for further reward, since there is no greater blessing than the study of Torah.

– Aish Dat

Tilting the Balance

“See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse” (Deuteronomy 11:26).

The word "see" is written in the singular, whereas "before you" is in the plural. Why the difference?

The Chatam Sofer cites the Rambam in stating that a person should consider himself as being half guilty and half innocent. If he does a good deed, he tilts the balance to the side of merit, and if he does evil he tilts it to the side of guilt. Furthermore, it is not only himself that he should consider in this way, but the entire world as well. If he does a good deed, he tilts himself and the entire world

to the side of merit, and conversely if he commits a sin he tilts himself and the entire world to the side of guilt.

According to this, says the Chatam Sofer, we may understand our verse as saying: "See" – you, the individual person, I place before you a blessing and a curse. The blessing of the entire community depends upon your actions. You should imagine that you and the entire world are half meritorious and half guilty, and that the slightest one of your actions can tilt the balance to one side or the other.

Leaving the Imrei Emet Speechless

"When the L-RD your G-d brings you to the land to which you go to possess, then you shall lay the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal" (Deuteronomy 11:29).

Why does the word *venatata* ("then you shall lay") end with the letter *hei*, which is grammatically incorrect? It is because it is stated that one who offers a gift to his friend should always do so with kindness. The addition of the letter *hei* shows that the blessing is given with kindness. The Rebbe of Ger, the Imrei Emet, said that other than on two occasions, nobody ever left him speechless. What happened on those occasions? The Rebbe was an extremely punctual man, scheduling all his activities to the minute. Because he allotted himself a certain time for eating, if his meal wasn't ready on time he would go without eating, for he had no time to spare. Every moment was counted. One day as he was going home to eat, he met a chassid who began speaking to him. When the Rebbe told him that he really didn't have time to talk, the chassid said: "For twenty years I've been taking care of my sick daughter, and the Rebbe can't devote a single minute to talk to me?" It was the first time that anyone had silenced the Rebbe. The second time happened in the city of Ger, where there lived a Jewish man who was over 90 years old. He suffered from blindness, and from time to time he would let out a sigh over the bitterness of his fate. One day the Rebbe said to him, "Why are you sighing? It is written, 'The days of our years are 70 years, and if with might, 80 years' [Psalms 90: 10]. Thus for you each day is a gift, so why are you complaining?" The Jew replied, "Rebbe, is it not written that one who gives a gift to his friend should do so with kindness?"

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

All Their Words Are True and Upright

"I will set your window with ruby and your gates of carbuncle stones" (Isaiah 54:12).

This verse contains one of the promises that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to us through His servants the prophets, promises that will be fulfilled with the advent of the Final Redemption. The Gemara recounts that Rabbi Yochanan was once explaining that "the Holy One, blessed be He, will in time bring precious stones and pearls that are 30 by 30 [cubits], and He will cut out from them [openings] 10 by 20 [cubits] and set them up in the gates of Jerusalem." The Gemara goes on to say that one of his students heard this and sneered at him: "[Jewels] the size of a dove's egg cannot be found. Are [jewels] of such a size to be found?" After a certain time, this student was on a ship as it sailed out to sea, and there "he saw the ministering angels engaged in cutting precious stones and pearls that were 30 by 30 [cubits], and on which were engravings of 10 by 20 [cubits]. He said unto them: 'For whom are these?' They replied that the Holy One, blessed be He, would in time set them up in the gates of Jerusalem. He came before Rabbi Yochanan and said to him: 'Explain, my master. It is becoming for you to expound. As you said, so have I seen.' He replied to him: 'Raca, had you not seen, would you have believed? You are sneering at the words of the Sages!' He set his eyes on him, and he turned into a heap of bones" (Bava Batra 75a). This story teaches us that none of the words of the prophets in their promises to us will be left unfulfilled. All their prophecies will be completely fulfilled, and we must believe in them with all our hearts, for Hashem's word will always come to pass.

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

Forbidden Mourning Customs

"You are children to the L-RD your G-d. You shall not cut yourselves and you shall not make a bald spot between your eyes, for you are a holy people to the L-RD your G-d" (Deuteronomy 14:1-2).

The Ramban commented on the reasons for this mitzvah: "In my opinion the purport of the expression 'for you are a holy people' [is to state] an assurance of the eternal existence of the souls before Him, blessed be He. The verse declares: 'Since you are a holy people and the treasure of G-d – 'neither does G-d respect any person, but He devises means by which he who is banished is not an outcast from Him' [I Samuel 14:14] – therefore it is improper for you to make incisions in your flesh and tear your hair for the dead, even if 'he perishes in youth' [Job 36:14]. Scripture, however, did not prohibit weeping for the dead, since it is natural to cry when parting from loved ones and when they go on a journey even in life." He ends by stating, "From this verse, there is support for our Rabbis in prohibiting excessive mourning for the dead" (Ramban on Deuteronomy 14:1).

All Jewish believers can derive encouragement from these verses during the most difficult of times, when they find themselves in the presence of the dead. If a person knows that everything happens according to G-d's will and through His providence, he will have no reason to afflict himself or feel regret. As Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra wrote, "Once you realize that you are the children of the Eternal and that He loves you more than a father loves his child, you should not cut yourselves for anything that He does, because whatever He does is for your good, although you may not understand it, just as little children do not understand their father, yet rely on him." Sforno explains that we must not express excessive anxiety or grief to a relative of the deceased if there is someone who is even more closely related to him. Because we are the children of Hashem and He is our eternal Father, it is not appropriate to display excessive anxiety or grief for anyone who has died. In fact this is what non-Jews do, for they tear out their hair and gash their skin when a loved one dies, acting as if they had completely lost their minds. However the Jewish people are G-d's chosen ones, and they know how to accept all difficulties with faith, even when justice strikes them. Hence there is no reason for excessive sorrow, such as by pulling out one's hair or lacerating one's skin, the mourning practices of the other nations. It is said that when Rabbi Nachum Zev was nearing his final day, although he was still young and had daughters whom he had yet to marry off, he said to them: "You must realize that I have no worries about what will happen to you after I die. You are leaving the care of one man and entering the care of the Holy One, blessed be He, the Father of orphans and avenger of widows."

GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

Those Who Lose Out

When a person arrives before the celestial court, a book will be opened before him. In that book will be inscribed all the deeds that he performed during his lifetime. On the day of reckoning many people will find unearned merits inscribed in their ledgers. They will say, "We have not performed these good deeds." They will then be told, "These are the good deeds of people who have spoken against you." Likewise people whose merits have been taken away will be told, "You have forfeited your good deeds when you spoke against others." Similarly, some will find offenses in their ledgers that they never committed. They will be told, "These are the offenses committed by the people that you spoke against."

A TRUE STORY

Running From Sin

It is written, "If your brother, the son of your mother, will entice you" (Deuteronomy 13:7).

This verse alludes to the prohibition against isolating oneself with a woman. It is said that Rabbi Zalman of Vilna was in his room one Shabbat studying Torah. Suddenly a woman entered his study, unaware that Rabbi Zalman's wife was not there at the time. Because Rabbi Zalman was afraid of transgressing the prohibition against isolating himself with a woman, he quickly arose and ran outside, without wasting a single moment. When the woman had entered, Rabbi Zalman had been in his socks, shoeless, and it was in this way that he ran outside, without taking the time to put his shoes on! It was snowing quite severely, yet Rabbi Zalman stood outside and remained in the snow with only a pair of socks covering his feet. Then, fearing the prohibition against wringing out material on Shabbat, he took off his socks and stood in the snow barefoot. The piercing cold did not prevent him from observing the prohibition against isolating himself with a woman.

A MATTER OF EDUCATION

Lowering Yourself in Order to Progress

It is written, "If your brother...is sold to you...you shall not let him go away empty.... If he says to you, 'I will not go away from you' because he loves you...then you shall take an awl" (Deuteronomy 15:12-17).

For the seventh year of a Hebrew slave's term of service, the Torah gives him two possibilities: (1) He can go free, in which case he has the right to be presented with gifts; or (2) He can stay, in which case his ear is to be pierced. The Torah fixed the maximum time that a Hebrew slave can work to six years, not more, for he must not start the seventh year as a slave and end up in perpetual servitude. He must also not go free like a slave, in a lowly state. Instead he should leave with a feeling of satisfaction, which will give him a higher status. When the Children of Israel left Egypt, Hashem also kept His promise to Abraham, namely that they would not leave in an abject state, but rather with great possessions. Furthermore, a slave who chooses to remain with his master for more than six years must endure the lowering of his status by having his ear pierced. Without such piercing, he might continue to work longer than six years, which is not fitting for a Jew. Hence it is only by a change in his status – becoming a marked slave – that he may continue to work as one.

Many students refuse to actively participate in their own education because they are afraid that failure would mean true debasement. They prefer instead to not study or actively participate, for in this way some doubt would remain as to the true cause of their failure, rather than their inabilities becoming obvious. With regards to this subject, the Sages have stated: "The bashful person cannot learn" (Perkei Avoth 2:5). The solution to this problem is: 1) To prove to such students that individuals who have succeeded were not born with success, but instead did not avoid taking risks. In this way they will become more aware that it is only by risking failure that we have a chance of success. 2) To create an atmosphere in which they view a lack of participation as being something worse than participation without success, for refraining from participation closes all avenues to success. In the same way that the lowering of a slave's status by having his ear pierced elevates the honor of a Jew, the abasement of a student who refrains from participating elevates the honor of those who do. Nevertheless, we must be careful with students who experience difficulties in learning or suffer from a serious lack of self-confidence. They require personalized attention, and in such cases it is not enough to simply tell them encouraging success stories or simply to create an atmosphere conducive to participation.

EISHET CHAYIL

Sons Who Are Great In Torah

When a woman follows Hashem's ways and conducts herself modestly, she merits having sons who will become talmidei chachamim, just as the verse states: "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your house, your children like olive shoots around your table" (Psalms 128:3). We must remember that if a woman remains at home, she will merit having sons who will be like olive trees. Why does Scripture compare her children to such trees? The Chida explains that just as olives can be eaten for their fruit, used for their oil, or dried up, so too with regards to the sons of a modest woman: Some will know Scripture, others Mishnah, while still others will know Talmud.

The Midrash states that when a woman conducts herself according to Jewish customs, she merits having sons who know Mishnah, Scripture and perform good deeds. Just as the oil of the olive tree is pure and olive branches cannot be grafted onto other trees, the sons of a modest woman will be pure, and no blemish will be found in them. The holy Zohar states: "A woman should cover her hair in the four corners of her house. When she does this, her children will be 'like olive shoots around your table.' As the olive does not shed its leaves either in winter or summer, but ever retains its superiority over other trees, so her children will excel over all other children. Furthermore, her husband will receive blessings from above and from below, will be blessed with riches, with children, and with children's children" (Zohar III:126a).

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Shemuel Salant – The Rav of Jerusalem

The gaon Rabbi Shemuel Salant, the son of Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch, was born in 5576 in the city of Bialystok. From his early years he was known as a great gaon, studying with Rabbi Tzemach Shapira of Keidan and later at the famous Volozhin yeshiva.

After having been struck by tuberculosis, Rabbi Shemuel traveled to Eretz Israel and decided to live there. Upon his arrival he immediately began living in Jerusalem, and he was subsequently appointed as the Rav of the city, a position that he held for more than 70 years. He later established the famous Etz Chaim Talmud Torah, which he would visit every day to discover what was being studied there. Rabbi Shemuel lived in a small apartment, and close to the door was a table where he studied. In fact anyone could come and speak with him without having to make an appointment, and it was in this apartment that he welcomed Sir Moses Montefiore and Baron Rothschild. Rabbi Shemuel enacted several decrees for the community and individuals, and everyone knew that it was forbidden to deviate from them to the slightest degree.

Everything that concerned the community and individual residents of Jerusalem (emissaries, ritual slaughterers, the nomination of rabbis and kollel directors, etc.) was administered by Rabbi Shemuel during all those years, until he reached an advanced age. On Av 29, 5669, at the age of 94, his soul ascended to Heaven. Rabbi Shemuel Salant is buried on the Mount of Olives. May his merit protect us all.