

The Path To Follow

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Rabbi David Pinto Shlita

Permanent Holiness

It is written, "Speak to the entire assembly of the Children of Israel and say to them: 'You shall be holy, for holy am I' " (*Vayikra* 19:2). Here the Sages immediately note: "It is written, 'You shall be holy.' Does this mean that you can be like Me [G-d]? Hence we read, 'for holy am I, Hashem your G-d' – My holiness is greater than yours" (*Vayikra Rabba* 24:9). This is surprising, for can anyone possibly think that the holiness of Israel would equal G-d's? Furthermore, this *parsha*, according to *Torat Kohanim*, was said before the entire community. Why was it said before everyone? It is because most of the Torah's major principles depend on it. We find several other *parshiot* that contain many laws, and yet they were not said before the entire community. Therefore what is the difference between this week's *parsha* and all the others, such that it was said before the entire community?

I would like to explain this week's *parsha* with Mussar. Let us begin by noting what we find in the statements of the Sages in various places, namely that the holiness of Israel is greater than that of the angels. The Sages say, "The Children of Israel are dearer to the Holy One, blessed be He, than the ministering angels, for Israel sings praises to Hashem every hour, whereas the ministering angels sing praises but once a day. Others say once a week, while others say once a month. Others say once a year, while others say once in seven years. Others say once in fifty years, while others say once in eternity. And whereas Israel mentions G-d's Name after two words, as it is said: 'Hear, O Israel, Hashem' [*Devarim* 6:4], the ministering angels only mention G-d's Name after three words, as it is written: 'Holy, holy, holy, is Hashem of hosts' [Isaiah 6:3]. Moreover, the ministering angels do not start singing praises in Heaven until the Children of Israel have sung on earth" (*Chullin* 91b). The Sages have also said, "Each day ministering angels are created from the fiery stream, sing praises, and cease to be" (*Chagigah* 14a). From here we learn of Israel's holiness: When the ministering angels sing Hashem's praises, they immediately disappear. As for the Children of Israel, they pray to their Father in Heaven three times a day, but do not disappear. Furthermore, they sanctify themselves through prayer and cleave to Him, and thus everything they need is given to them through prayer.

May My Body Be Healthy to Serve Him

A man only attains holiness by killing himself in the tent of the Torah, as the Sages have said: "One should never abstain from the Beit HaMidrash or from Torah, even in the hour of death, for it is said: 'This is the Torah, when a man dies in a tent' [*Bamidbar* 19:14]. Even in the hour of death, one should be engaged in [learning] Torah. Resh Lakish said: Words of Torah only endure with one who kills himself for it, as it is said: 'This is the Torah, when a man dies in a tent' " (*Shabbat* 83b). In regards to Rabbeinu HaKodesh, it is said that at the time of his death, he lifted up his ten fingers and said, "Sovereign of the universe, it is revealed and known before You that I have labored in the study of Torah with my ten fingers, and that I did not enjoy [worldly] benefits even with my little finger. May it be Your will that

there be peace in my resting place" (*Ketubot* 104a). He conducted himself with tremendous holiness, and throughout his life he never placed his hands below his belt. Since he distanced himself from the pleasures of this world, he attained holiness.

How can a person reach the point of killing himself in Torah study, since in the end he was created in this world with a physical body, and therefore he must eat, drink, and sleep in order to live? When he sanctifies himself in what is permitted, and only eats, drinks, and sleeps to regain his strength in order to serve Hashem – not for the pleasures of his body – Scripture regards it as if he has killed himself for Torah, since he cannot do more than this. Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk recommends, "Before washing the hands to eat, we should say Rabbeinu Yona's prayer for one who repents, and after eating the *motzi* we should say: "I do not eat for the pleasure of my body, but only so my body can be strong and in good health to serve Him. May no sin, evil thought, or physical pleasure come and delay the '*yichud*' by the holy sparks of this food and drink."

A Life of Holiness from Childhood

When a person sanctifies himself in what is permitted, only stretching out his hand for what his body needs to live, and when he distances himself from the pleasures of this world, Scripture considers him to have not profited from this world. It considers him to have killed himself for Torah and *mitzvot*, and he thereby attains a level greater than that of the angels. Because this person has sanctified himself to such a degree, he may succumb to pride and think: "I have sanctified myself more than enough, and I don't need to sanctify myself any further, since in any case the evil inclination does not control me." In that case, the Torah tells him: "Know that My holiness is greater than yours, and even if you killed yourself for Torah today, you have no right to rest. You must work each day until your final day, since the evil inclination can enter you and bring you down from the level you now occupy." The Sages have said, "Do not be sure of yourself until the day you die" (*Pirkei Avot* 2:4). This means that until a person's dying day, he must conduct himself with great sanctity, never wavering in his service of Hashem. Otherwise the evil inclination may return and make him sin.

This passage was said before the entire community of Israel, and everyone heard it – men, women, and children – in order to teach children that they must not run after the pleasures of this world as children do, and their parents must accustom them to living in holiness and purity from childhood. As we read concerning Yehoshua ben Chanania, his mother brought him as a baby to the Beit HaMidrash in order for words of Torah to enter his ears. Of his mother the Sages said: "Happy is she who gave birth to him." It is the duty of every Jew to educate his sons in Torah and *mitzvot*, as King Solomon said: "Train a child according to his way, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (*Mishlei* 22:6).

The Psalm of the Menorah

In *Tehillim* we read, “For the conductor, on stringed instruments; a psalm, a song. May G-d favor us and bless us. May He shine His face upon us” (*Tehillim* 67:1-2). Not including the first verse, this psalm consists of 49 words in Hebrew.

Our holy books say that these words evoke the counting of the Omer. The same applies to the middle verse: “Let the nations be glad and sing for joy” (v.5), which has 49 letters and also represents the counting of the Omer. This is the source of the custom cited by the Acharonim (*Magen Avraham*, *Eliya Rabba*, and others) of reading this psalm every day after the counting of the Omer.

In the book *Sha’ar HaKavanot*, Rabbi Chaim Vital *Zatzal* describes what he saw with his teacher the Arizal:

“I also saw that my teacher of blessed memory, after the counting of the Omer, would always read Psalm 67 entirely from the start, paying great attention during each of the 49 days to one of the 49 words in the psalm.”

On the other hand, we must point out that the Vilna Gaon and the disciples who followed his customs did not recite Psalm 67 after the counting of the Omer. As soon as the counting was over, they ended by reciting the blessing: “The Merciful One will return the Temple service to us, etc.,” and then they recited *Alenu*. This custom is also mentioned in the book *Ma’aseh Rav*, which states that in the Vilna Gaon’s Beit HaMidrash, “No verse is recited before or after the counting of the Omer.”

This custom is also mentioned in the book *Akedat Yitzchak* (*Emor*, *Sha’ar 67*) by the *gaon* Rabbi Yitzchak Arema *Zatzal*. In his introduction, Rabbi David Abudaram mentions this custom, though he says that people normally recite this psalm during *Shacharit*, after reading the psalm of the day.

We Will Not Sleep in Prison

The *gaon* Rabbi Chaim Palagi *Zatzal* makes an important remark in one of his responsa (*Lev Chaim*, part V), namely that in the verse, “Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,” there are 47 letters – not 49! In the margin, editors have indicated that he did not take into account the words of Rabbi Chaim Vital in *Sha’ar HaKavanot*, who cites the Arizal, namely that the terms *tishpot* and *mishor* are written fully vocalized (*i.e.*, with a *vav*), which brings the verse to exactly 49 letters.

Some people have the custom of stressing the word that corresponds to the night on which they are counting the Omer. Hence they recite that particular word loudly. This ancient practice is mentioned in the customs of Eretz Israel, as described by Rabbi Avraham Galanta of Sefat:

“Every night during the counting of the Omer, people emphasize one word in the psalm *Elokim Yechanenu* and one letter from the verse *yismechu ve’iranenu*. When people arrive at the word that corresponds to that night, they raise their voices to demonstrate that it corresponds to that night.”

Rabbi Avraham testifies that they had a tradition according to which “one who does this with concentration will not spend a night in prison, even if he incurs death.”

A Psalm Composed Through *Ruach HaKodesh*

The author of the book *Yirat E-I*, Rabbi Eliezer of Worms *Zatzal*, mentions the importance of the *segula* to write Psalm 67 in the form of a seven-branched Menorah, like the one that stood in the Temple.

He states, “King David composed this psalm through *Ruach HaKodesh*, and it contains great and marvelous secrets and allusions. It is written in the form of a Menorah: There are three verses on the right, the verse *yismechu ve’iranenu* in the middle, and three verses on the left.”

Kabbalists say that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed this psalm to David through *Ruach HaKodesh*, written in a particular way in the form of a Menorah. He also showed it to Moshe during the vision in which He showed him the Menorah.

From here, Rabbi David Abudaram also points out that this psalm has become known as the “Psalm of the Menorah,” since it contains seven verses that correspond to the seven branches of the Menorah. It also has 49 letters, which corresponds to the bowls, bulbs, and flowers on the seven branches of the Menorah, which together number 49. Furthermore, the first verse contains four words, corresponding to its tongs and incense-pans, of which there were two pairs.

Rabbi Chaim Bechner’s book *Menorat Zahav Tahor* (based upon, according to one tradition, a manuscript of the Maharshal) cites numerous *segulot* connected to the reading of this psalm in the form of a Menorah: “The Sages have said that no evil decree will come upon one who recites this psalm in the form of a Menorah every day at sunrise. He will be as valuable to the Creator as if he had kindled the lamps in the Temple, and he is promised the World to Come.”

In his writings, the Chida describes numerous *segulot* connected to reciting the “Psalm of the Menorah,” whose reward is great. If someone reads it in the form of the Menorah written on parchment before finishing the *Amidah*, it is a *segula* for protection while on a journey. He also states that King David, when he went off to war, concentrated on the secret of the Menorah. He was therefore victorious over his enemies, who fell before him.

The design of the Menorah must stand upright before a person, like an image of the Menorah that stood upright in the Temple, says Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad in *Yosef Hai* (*Parsha Vayigash*), meaning that the design should not be laid out flat before a person. If he does not have an image in the form of the Menorah before him, it is enough to imagine it, *i.e.*, to picture Psalm 67 in the form of the Menorah.

The book *HaRokeach* states that it is a great *segula* to draw the Psalm of the Menorah within the synagogue’s *Aron Kodesh*, for it protects the community from evil decrees. Furthermore, the Zohar states that drawing a Menorah in the *Aron Kodesh*, and reading it each day that the *Sefer Torah* is taken out, is a *segula* for protecting the city from all harm.

Drawing Lots for Azazel

Concerning the drawing of lots for the goat that was sent to Azazel, the Sages have said that it was a type of bribe for the Satan.

This is difficult to understand, for the Sages have said that the term *haSatan* ("the Satan") has a numerical value of 364. Since there are 365 days in the year, this teaches us that the Satan has no power over us on Yom Kippur. That said, why do we need to bribe it on the very day that it is powerless?

The book *Siftei Cohen* explains that this is what normally happens in the world: When a government official is removed from office, he is presented with a gift, and he is grateful to the person who gives it to him. He thinks, "Although I am no longer in government, he has shown consideration for me." In this way, he feels a greater sense of friendship to the one who brought him this gift.

I Cannot Dwell

It is written, "Which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleanness" (*Vayikra* 16:16).

From here the Baal Shem Tov learns that pride is infinitely worse than all other sins in the Torah. With regards to the sins of the Children of Israel, the Torah states: "Which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleanness." In other words, even when they are deeply immersed in the impurity of their sins, the *Shechinah* still dwells among them. As for a person with pride, however, we read: "One with haughty eyes and an expansive heart, him I cannot bear" (*Tehillim* 101:5). The Sages explain this to mean: "With him I cannot dwell" (*Sotah* 5a).

An Angel of G-d

It is written, "No man shall be in the Tent of Meeting when he enters" (*Vayikra* 16:17).

Rabbi Abahu said, "Is the *Kohen Gadol* not a man?"

In response, Rabbi Shimon said: "When *Ruach HaKodesh* rested upon Pinchas, his face lit up like a torch. Hence it is written, 'For the lips of the *kohen* should safeguard knowledge...for he is the angel of the L-RD of hosts' [Malachi 2:7]" (*Vayikra Rabba* 21:12).

Removing the Spoon

It is written, "Aaron shall come to the Tent of Meeting, and he shall take off the linen garments that he put on when he went into the holy place" (*Vayikra* 16:23).

Rashi explains why he must come to the Tent of Meeting: "In order to take out the spoon and incense-pan with which he had offered incense in the Holy of Holies."

It is said that as the *tzaddik* Rabbi Israel Yerachmiel Dantziger *Zatzal* (the author of *Yismach Israel*) was seated around his holy table with his chassidim, he mentioned that one of his chassidim had left without helping to clear the table and clean up.

When the *tzaddik* met him, he said: "Even removing the spoon and incense-pan from the Sanctuary was an important

religious act, and it was performed by someone as honorable as yourself."

On Jacob's Account

It is written, "You shall not take a wife in addition to her sister" (*Vayikra* 18:18).

Since the first woman that a man marries is called his "wife" and the second is called "her sister," why does Scripture reverse things by stating: "You shall not take a wife in addition to her sister"? Why does it not say, "You shall not take the sister of your wife"?

The book *Chanukat HaTorah* explains, in accordance with the Midrash, that during the festival of the *tzaddikim* in the future, Jacob will refuse to recite *Birkat Hamazon*. The reason for his refusal will be: "On my account it is written, 'You shall not take a wife in addition to her sister.'" Since this was a commandment addressed to the entire Jewish people, why did Jacob say that it was written on his account?

The answer is that when Jacob worked with Laban, it was solely for the purpose of marrying Rachel. Although he eventually married Leah, Rachel was his primary wife, and Leah was the sister of his wife. Hence Jacob said, "On my account it is written." Although he married Rachel second, after her sister Leah, Rachel was still called "the wife of Jacob." Normally, the first woman he marries is called his wife, and the second is "her sister."

In the Path of the Fathers

Pray for the Welfare of the Government – But Discreetly

The Mishnah states, "Rabbi Chanina, the deputy High Priest, said: Pray for the welfare of the government" (*Pirkei Avoth* 3:2). We may say that Rabbi Chanina meant that we must pray for the welfare of the government discreetly, without the authorities knowing that we are praying for them. Nobody should think that we are really seeking our own good by praying for the authorities! In fact the Sages have already warned us by saying, "Do not make yourself known to the ruling power" (*Pirkei Avoth* 1:10). We must not think that because we do certain things for the sake of the authorities, good will result. We must pray for Hashem to influence the government in our favor, and it is up to Him to act.

An allusion to this may be found in the verse, "Like streams of water is the heart of the king in the hand of Hashem" (*Mishlei* 21:1). The Sages have said, "The Holy One, blessed be He, has retained three keys in His own hands, not entrusting them to any envoy" (*Taanith* 2a). Scripture adds that the heart of the king is also in the hands of the Holy One, blessed be He, and that man cannot do anything but to pray for the welfare of the government. Hashem will act, inclining the hearts of leaders to do good, just as He does in regards to the three keys that have not been entrusted to any envoy.

Throughout his life, my father prayed for the welfare of the kingdom of Morocco. He never made himself known to the king, even though the king would have been grateful to him if he had. My father did not want to do this, for he put into practice the teaching of the Sages: "Do not make yourself known to the ruling power."

Your Eyes Shall Behold Your Teacher

Rabbi Yitzchak Hai Taieb

In his book *Ma'agal Tov*, the Chida states that during his travels he met close to 300 *talmidei chachamim* in Tunis, 14-year-old youngsters with extraordinary minds. Among them was Yitzchak Hai Taieb, who was very young at the time, barely 13 years old, but was already known as an outstanding *talmid chacham*, a cistern that did not lose a drop of what he learned. His father died when he was very young, after which he lived in extreme poverty as an orphan. He found comfort in the pages of the Gemara, which he studied with great diligence until late into the night.

He stood out because of his simple ways and extraordinary modesty, for it was humility that guided his steps. His sanctity and the merit of his pure heart brought him to great spiritual levels. He could even perform miracles, for "the *tzaddik* decrees and the Holy One, blessed be He, executes."

The following stories recount what people said about him:

There as a great drought in Tunis one year. The community gathered to recite *tehillim* and *selichot*, but their prayers went unanswered. At that point a public fast was decreed. After *Shacharit*, Rabbi Yitzchak Taieb (who was unaware of the decree) asked his wife to prepare him some coffee. The Rebbetzin replied, "Didn't you hear that the rabbis decreed a public fast today because of the drought?" Rabbi Yitzchak replied, "Make me a cup of coffee, and the rain will fall." As it turned out, once she had made him some coffee, he went into the courtyard and raised his eyes to the heavens. He then implored Hashem like a son imploring his father: "Sovereign of the universe, Your children await mercy from Heaven! Do not deprive them of water!"

He had not yet said the word "water" when a strong rain began to fall, a violent downpour that penetrated the earth. Rabbi Yitzchak then returned to his studies.

His wife rushed to the room where he studied and said to him, "Such rain can destroy the world!" Rabbi Yitzchak went back into the courtyard, stretched out his hands to the heavens, and said: "Sovereign of the universe, this is not what I asked for. I implore You, send us beneficial rain, a rain of blessing and goodness."

Even before he could finish saying "of blessing and goodness," the intensity of the storm diminished, and a rain of blessing began to fall, water that quenched the earth. Rabbi Yitzchak then sat down and drank the coffee that his wife had made for him.

A Victim of Fire

Rabbi Yitzchak Hai wrote many works, most of which were victims of fire. His book *Chelev Chitim* survived.

How did his manuscripts get burned?

He lived in an apartment that he rented along with his mother. He would spend many hours in the sea of the Talmud and the secrets of Kabbalah. One day, his Arab landlord asked him to pay the rent, but since he was poor, he did not have enough money to pay. His landlord therefore had him summoned to a *din Torah* before the *gaon* Rabbi Messod Alfasi. In the meantime, his mother wanted to clean up the apartment, and so she gathered all his papers that were strewn on the floor and burned them. She thought that her son certainly did not need them.

When he returned home and realized that his commentaries had been burned, he suffered greatly and his heart broke. In his agony, he began to drink at times in order to forget. This did not please his closest relative, the *gaon* Rabbi Yitzchak Taieb (the author of *Arach HaShulchan*), the Chief Rabbi of Tunis at the time. He gave clear and unequivocal instructions to all the alcohol merchants not to sell any of their products to Rabbi Yitzchak Hai. Eventually Rabbi Yitzchak Hai learned what his uncle had done, and he responded in the following way:

It was Shabbat HaGadol, when all the members of the community assembled in the great synagogue of Tunis. The Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Yitzchak Hai, was present and began his discourse with the usual phrase: "With the permission of my teachers." At that point, however, he did not say another word, for he had forgotten what he wanted to say. In fact the entire contents of his discourse, which he had prepared for many hours beforehand, had escaped his memory.

A few minutes passed, but they seemed like an eternity. These were the minutes in which he tried to remember what his sermon was about, but it was not to be. He simply could not remember a thing, not a single word. It was absolutely extraordinary.

"Is Rabbi Yitzchak Hai here?" the Chief Rabbi asked.

"Yes, our teacher, I am here," he replied.

"I implore you, with the power of your great wisdom, help me," the Rav said to him. He realized that it was the power of his sanctity that was preventing him from giving his discourse on Shabbat HaGadol before the people.

"Save me below and I will save you above" was his reply. The public heard this strange exchange, but did not understand its meaning.

At that point Rabbi Yitzchak Taieb summoned the alcohol merchants, who were in synagogue on that day, and asked them to sell Rabbi Yitzchak Hai whatever he wanted. Once this order had been given, Rabbi Yitzchak Hai said to him: "Open your mouth, and your words will shine." The Chief Rabbi began to speak, giving his full discourse on Shabbat HaGadol, a speech that lasted a good three hours. It left a great impression upon the entire Jewish community, which recognized the greatness and value of the *talmidei chachamim*.

Rabbi Hai Taieb Did Not Die

Rabbi Yitzchak Hai Taieb is also called "Rabbi Yitzchak Hai did not die." The reason is due to an amazing incident: When the Rav died on Iyar 17, 5596, the person responsible for preparing his tombstone, a simple and uneducated Jew, wanted to engrave his name and the date of his passing. Yet in his innocence, he did not know how to write the customary inscription on the gravestone of the great *tzaddik*, and instead wrote: "Rabbi Hai Taieb died on..." That night, the Rav came to him in a dream and wanted to strangle him: "Do you not know what our Sages have said, that 'even in their death, the *tzaddikim* are called alive'? You must get up in the morning and add the word 'not' between the words! I am warning you!"

The man was frightened by this dream, and as soon as the sun rose, he added the word "not" on the gravestone of the *tzaddik*. This is how he received the famous name, "Rabbi Yitshak Hai Taieb did not die." About 50 years ago, the authorities moved the remains of the *tzaddik* and placed a new gravestone above his resting place. May his memory protect us all.

Guard Your Tongue!

Forbidden Praise

If we want to speak with someone about another individual, and we believe that he is not on good terms with him and will end up disparaging him, it is forbidden to speak about that individual to him.

Excessive praise is forbidden even if the listener does not dislike the individual. This is because it is common to end off such statements with criticisms such as "except for his negative character trait of [such and such]," or because the listener will say: "Why are you praising him when he has such a character flaw?"

The above applies when not speaking in public. In public, however, it is forbidden to praise a person at all, for among a group of many people it is common to find those who distort facts or act with jealousy. Thus mentioning a person's good points will lead to disparaging remarks.