

The Path To Follow

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A Person is Allowed to Follow the Path that He Wishes to Pursue

It is written, "Hashem said to Moshe, 'Ascend to Me to the mountain and remain there, and I will give you the stone tablets and the Torah and the *mitzvah* that I have written to teach them.' Moshe stood up with Joshua, his servant, and Moshe ascended to the mountain of G-d. He said to the elders, 'Wait for us here until we return to you. Behold, Aaron and Hur are with you. Whoever has a grievance should approach them.' Moshe ascended the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of Hashem rested upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. He called to Moshe on the seventh day from the midst of the cloud. The appearance of the glory of Hashem was like a consuming fire on the mountain-top before the eyes of the Children of Israel. Moshe arrived in the midst of the cloud and ascended the mountain, and Moshe was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights" (*Shemot* 24:12-18).

I would like to explain, with G-d's help, why this passage states three times that Moshe ascended the mountain, since this fact is mentioned at the outset. We must also understand why the cloud is mentioned three times in this passage, and why the Torah repeats it.

Who Will Ascend the Mountain of Hashem?

Our Sages have taught, "Another verse says, 'Moshe went into the midst of the cloud' [*Shemot* 24:18]. This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, took hold of Moshe and brought him into the cloud. The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: The term *betoch* [into the midst] appears here and also appears elsewhere: 'The Children of Israel went into the midst of the sea' [*Shemot* 14:22]. Just as there it implies a path – as it is written: 'The waters were a wall for them' – likewise here too there was a path" (*Yoma* 4b). This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, helped Moshe by opening a path for him. Furthermore, since he wanted to ascend the mountain of Hashem, He not only helped him, but also led him by this path, as the Sages have said: "One is allowed to follow the path that he wishes to pursue" (*Makkot* 10b) – whether he realizes it or not.

Here the Torah teaches us that it is impossible for a person to spiritually grow and conquer his evil inclination unless the Torah is with him. One who spiritually grows is said to "ascend the mountain," as it is written: "Who shall ascend the mountain of Hashem" (*Tehillim* 24:3). No one can ascend the mountain of Hashem unless he possesses Torah, and although his evil inclination spreads out a cloud and darkness before him, preventing him from ascending, nevertheless since he possesses Torah, the Holy One, blessed be He, opens a path for him in the

midst of the cloud. He also helps him to speak, as the Sages have said: "If one comes to purify himself, he is given help" (*Shabbat* 104a). However if a person does not study Torah, then even if he observes *mitzvot* and performs good deeds, this will not help him to conquer his evil inclination, since its only antidote is Torah (*Kiddushin* 30b). If a person fails to study Torah, he will not know how to distinguish between a *mitzvah* and a sin, and he will fall into the hands of the evil inclination. Above all, he will not grow spiritually throughout his life.

I Will Deliver You from the Evil Inclination

Furthermore, as soon as a person wants to "ascend the mountain," the evil inclination hastens to oppose him, transforming itself into a mountain, as the Sages have said: "[The evil inclination] will appear like a mountain" (*Sukkah* 52a). It also robs a person of all his virtues, to the point that the entire world seems like a cloud to him, for he can no longer sense Hashem's Presence. What does the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He summons him from the cloud itself: "Ascend to Me – this cloud is nothing but a notion of the evil inclination, and I will open a path for you by which you may enter through the cloud. I will also support you and remove you from the grasp of the evil inclination, for the Torah is its antidote. Since you study Torah, you have the right to ascend the mountain. If you are afraid of the cloud that covers the mountain, by your life, I am found within this cloud, and since you ascend the mountain, I will save you from the grasp of the evil inclination."

If this cloud is a test of wealth, Hashem will lead a person's heart to distance himself from wealth so he can ascend the mountain. It is in this regard that the verse states, "Moshe arrived in the midst of the cloud and ascended the mountain" (*Shemot* 24:18). This teaches us that since he was inside the cloud, he conquered the evil inclination and immediately ascended the mountain.

If anyone thinks that only a person who possesses a complete grasp of Torah can reach this level, he should realize that any person can ascend the mountain of Hashem, even if he does not possess a complete grasp of Torah, for the Holy One, blessed be He, will open a path for him. The proof comes from Moshe Rabbeinu, for he only ascended the mountain to learn Torah from the mouth of G-d, as we read: "Moshe was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights" (*Shemot* 24:18). This means that only one who studies Torah may ascend. That is why it is repeated at the end of the passage: We are told that Moshe ascended the mountain before we read that he stayed there for forty days and forty nights, thereby teaching us that only a person who studies Torah may ascend the mountain.

The Maharal writes that “Nobody accepts Hashem’s decree as much as one who studies Torah, for the Torah is a decree of Hashem. Man must study it and put all his efforts into it” (*Derech Chaim* 3:2). This is a way of life for all who truly serve Hashem, and who have taken upon themselves the decree of the King to sit in His palace to study His words.

A disciple of Rabbi Shalom Schwadron *Zatzal* recounted the following story:

During the time that I was learning at the Tiferet Tzvi yeshiva, my father died. I became an orphan at the age of 15, and my mother became a widow. She was poor, penniless, and left to carry the heavy burden of having to marry off her grown children, who had become engaged in the final month of my father’s life. As darkness fell upon our home, our sadness was immense and our sorrow overwhelming. We had been left orphaned, without a father, without someone to guide us, and without anyone to lean on.

As normally happens in such cases, all eyes turned to me. “You are 15 years old and in good health. You can go out and work to put food on the table,” I was told. That was how I was encouraged to present myself every night to one of the print shops in Jerusalem, where I was to work during the latter part of the day, from 5 to 9 pm, causing me to lose two hours of learning at the yeshiva. I explained my situation to the Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Mikhal Shalpowarsky *Zatzal*, telling him that I had no other choice. It was easy to understand my decision, and he allowed me to be absent during that time. That was how I started working in a print shop.

This is not the place to describe how a young man who was infused with Torah, the fear of Heaven, and Chassidut felt among print shop workers – men who had never stepped into a Beit HaMidrash – or how he felt in their company, engaged in their conversations, and what he learned from their conduct. I worked there during the entire winter, and my friends at the yeshiva often asked me where I disappeared to each day, or what ink was doing around my fingernails. I did not respond to their questioning, for I was ashamed to reveal the situation in which I found myself.

Is That the Goal?

One day during the month of Adar, the *Mashgiach* Rabbi Shalom Schwadron gestured with his finger for me to approach. He asked me to accompany him on his way home, after doing *hashgacha* work and praying *Mincha*. We walked together all along Avinoam Yalin Road, Yechezkel Road, and Strauss Road, reaching the junction at HaNeviim Road. We arrived at the wall by the Bikur Cholim Hospital, continuing our conversation as we stood there.

Rabbi Shalom revealed the secrets of his family and told me about his childhood. Fatherless by the age of seven, he described how he suffered from poverty, from having to live in an orphanage, and about his misery growing up. He talked about how he had found himself beset by misfortune wherever he went or tried to fit in. When he told me the story of his life, the smile on his face vanished, replaced by a look of pain. His story brought him back to those difficult years, as suffering appeared on his face. He relived days long past, years when he was forced to fight against all the temptations of the street by himself. He described the ups and downs of his life, the battles he fought, and his failures and

defeats. He spoke about his struggles to rebuff the evil inclination with all his might, all while continuing to learn Torah.

When he finished his story, he added: “I could have improved my financial situation ten times over if I had left the Beit HaMidrash, if I had left the world of Torah to join the circle of workers. Yet how could I have grown spiritually?” He was silent for a long time, but then continued: “I would have grown up as a worker, a laborer, and perhaps like someone who belong to the families of the earth. Yet is that the goal? Is that the ideal? Is that what we must yearn for?” He ended by saying, “Thank G-d, I stuck with Torah, making me what I am today.”

I looked at him with respect. I raised my eyes towards this Torah giant, this *gaon* in the fear of Heaven who had cleared a path to the summit by dint of his work and effort. At the same time, I also felt compelled to search my soul and reflect upon my own situation.

At that point, Rabbi Shalom did something that startled me. He had been silent for a long time, but now he turned to me, looked me straight in the eye, and said: “Do you really want to grow up to be a laborer? Know, my dear boy, that many people have experienced the trial of fatherlessness, and thank G-d they have succeeded in becoming greater than other boys from good families who experienced good fortune. I suggest that you set out a new path for yourself.”

Rabbi Shalom asked me for neither my reaction nor my thoughts. He extended a friendly hand to me – the hand of a “veteran” – and said goodbye. He then continued walking down the road that led to the Sha’arei Chesed district, where he lived.

I returned home loaded with thoughts and doubts about my decision to work. I had already started to like the print shop, the professional work that was being done there, and the creative atmosphere that reigned within. However Rabbi Shalom’s description of his difficult life as an orphan, as well as his piercing gaze, stuck in my mind and said to me: Young man, this is not your place!

A few months passed, and I distanced myself from the professional future into which I had been thrown. I returned to learning Torah for the entire day.

Today, as I look back and think of the people by whose merit I remained in the world of Torah with unshakable devotion, I place Rabbi Shalom at the top of the list, and it is to him that I owe my Torah.

I Remained Uneducated

The *gaon* and *tzaddik* Rabbi Meir Chadash *Zatzal* once spoke about a yeshiva student whose family was exerting tremendous pressure on him to leave the yeshiva and earn a living. They begged him without respite, until he finally gave in by agreeing to leave the yeshiva.

A few years later, Rabbi Meir went to Tiberias with his wife, when all of a sudden a large truck pulled up next to them. Out came a sturdy-looking man who approached them, a man whom Rabbi Meir recognized as the boy who had left the yeshiva at the beginning of his journey.

With tremendous emotion, the man said to him: “Rabbi, at the time I couldn’t endure the pressure that my family was putting on me, which is why I abandoned the Beit HaMidrash. Today I’m not shoveling gold, nor are my friends eating rocks. But the difference between us is that they became *talmidei chachamim*, while I remained uneducated.”

Giving Tzeddakah Discreetly

It is written, "If you lend money to My people, to the poor person who is with you" (*Shemot* 22:24).

Rabbi Yaakov, the author of *Iyun Yaakov*, would often say: "If you lend money to My people" – meaning that if you want to lend money to others, then the loan should be before 'My people' – before two witnesses, as the *Shulchan Aruch* specifies. On the other hand, 'the poor person who is with you' – when you want to give *tzeddakah* to a poor person, then it should be done in secret and discreetly – with you alone."

The Judges

It is written, "You shall not curse the judges" (*Shemot* 22:27).

In the Midrash our Sages say, "It once happened that a man had a lawsuit and came before a judge who pronounced the verdict in his favor. He then went about saying: 'There is no judge like this one in the whole world.' Over the course of time, he had another case and came before the same judge, who this time ruled against him, so he went about saying: 'There is no greater idiot of a judge than this one.' People said to him: 'Yesterday he was genius, and today he is an idiot?' On this account Scripture exhorts you, 'You shall not curse the judges'" (*Shemot Rabba* 31:8).

With Great Joy

It is written, "You shall not cook a kid in its mother's milk" (*Shemot* 23:19).

The author of *Yesod VeShoresh HaAvodah* states that he was careful to make distinctive marks to differentiate milk vessels from meat vessels. We normally make marks on milk vessels.

"When I make a mark, I say with great joy: 'My Creator, blessed be Your Name, I am making a mark on this vessel to protect myself and my family from the prohibition against cooking meat and milk together, for You have commanded me in Your holy Torah not to boil a kid in the milk of its mother.'

"I make these marks with tremendous joy, exactly as for the *mitzvah* of putting on *tefillin* and the like. Act in the same way as well, my dear children."

The Face of Idolaters

It is written, "I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you" (*Shemot* 23:27).

Just before this, we read: "I shall fill the number of your days" (v.26).

Rabbi Moshe Kramer *Zatzal* (the grandfather of the Vilna Gaon) explained this in the following way:

In the Gemara we find that one who gazes upon the face of an idolater shortens his days. Conversely, one who is careful not to gaze upon the face of an idolater is spared from this fate (*Megillah* 28a).

When we go out to war, it would seem that the combatants are forced to look at the face of idolaters, and therefore their lives are shortened.

This is why Hashem promised that our enemies will turn their backs to us, preventing us from seeing their faces. Scripture says nearby, "I shall fill the number of your days," for there will be no need to look

at the face of our enemies, nor for our lives to be shortened.

The Mark of Generosity

It is written, "If a man borrows from his neighbor" (*Shemot* 22:13).

The author of *Peleh Yoetz* writes that the *mitzvah* of lending is a great mark of generosity. One who lends will have wealth in his home, and his righteousness will endure forever. Even if he loses a little, he will gain more because he does not lose the reward that Hashem gives him for his generosity. He will also receive blessings from the borrower.

Every man must caution his wife to act generously and to purchase more utensils than she needs for the home, in order to lend them to others and not be in a position to refuse such requests. Hashem will pay them back sevenfold.

This is part of the *mitzvah* of being generous and helping others with one's strength, wisdom, and wealth, to help whoever asks for it. We must not refuse to do what we can, and we should do so generously, be it little or much, in accordance with our means. All this brings satisfaction to our Creator, and we will receive a good reward for it.

In the Light of the Parsha

Every Jew is a Servant of Hashem

It is written, "When you buy a Hebrew slave.... His master shall bore through his ear with the awl, and he shall serve him forever" (*Shemot* 21:2,6).

Rashi cites Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai as saying, "Why was the ear singled out from all the other limbs of the body? The Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'This ear, which heard My voice on Mount Sinai when I proclaimed, "The Children of Israel are My servants" – and yet went out and acquired a master for himself – let it be pierced!' " (*Kiddushin* 22b).

We must point out that a "Hebrew slave" is a "slave" who is "Hebrew." Yet since he was not a slave at the time he was bought, but rather a free man, why does the verse not say: "When you buy a Hebrew to work"? The expression, "When you buy a Hebrew slave" is only accurate if he buys him from someone who already owns him as a slave!

We must say that in reality, every Jew is Hashem's slave. Hence it is proper to say that every Jew is a "Hebrew slave." We must also say that this man, when he followed his evil inclination to steal, allowed the evil inclination to rule over him. He therefore acquired a master for himself in the form of the evil inclination, which is why the Torah calls him a "Hebrew slave," for he was already a slave to the evil inclination before being sold as a slave.

We may likewise explain this verse allegorically, according to what is written in our holy *seforim*, namely that a person's spiritual state is always changing, for he is either ascending or descending. He must therefore always pay attention to constantly ascending, for otherwise he will inevitably descend.

Now this man descended lower and lower. At first he served the evil inclination, then he was sold as a slave, and then he said: "I love my master, my wife, and my children – I shall not go free." All this is contrary to what he heard on Mount Sinai, as Rashi points out.

Concerning the Parsha

Doctors Have Received Permission to Heal

The basis and origin of the permission given to man to be healed by a doctor – without fearing that since the Holy One, blessed be He, has decreed that he should get sick and suffer, it is forbidden to annul this decree from the King and avoid suffering by taking medications prescribed by a doctor – is found in this week's *parsha*: "If he gets up and walks out with his staff, then the one who struck him is absolved. Only for his lost time shall he pay, and he shall cause him to be thoroughly healed" (*Shemot* 21:19). Here the Gemara explains: "Permission was granted to the doctor to heal" (*Bava Kama* 85a).

The Midrash recounts the following story:

Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva were walking along the streets of Jerusalem with another man. A sick person encountered them and said, "Rabbis! Tell me how I may be healed." They replied, "Do such-and-such until you are healed."

The man who was with them said, "Who sent him this illness?"

They replied, "The Holy One, blessed be He."

He said to them, "You, the Sages, are getting involved in something that does not concern you. The One Who struck him is the One Who must heal him. Why are you transgressing His will?"

They asked him, "What is your trade?"

"I work the earth, and this is my sickle," he replied.

They asked, "Who created the earth? Who created the vine?"

"The Holy One, blessed be He," he answered.

They said, "You are getting involved in something that does not concern you. He is the One Who created it, and you are the one eating its fruits?"

He replied, "Do you not see the sickle in my hand? If I don't do the necessary work, the earth will not produce anything!"

They said to him, "Fool! In regards to your work, have you not heard what is written: 'As for man, his days are like grass. He flourishes like a flower of the field' [*Tehillim* 103:15]? Just as a tree will not grow if it is not fertilized and the necessary work is not done – and if it grows, but does not have enough water to drink, it will die – likewise the body of man is like a tree, the fertilizer is a remedy, and the farmer is a doctor."

He Who Hastens is to be Praised

The Tur, in his remarks on medicine, gives general and *halachic* outlines for patients and doctors (*Yoreh Deah* 236). He first cites the *Tanna D'vei Yishmael* on the Gemara's explanation that "permission was granted to the doctor to heal." He states, "The doctor should not say, 'How does this suffering concern me? I might make a mistake and kill him unintentionally!' He should be very, very careful, as required in cases of life and death. However he must not say, 'The Holy One, blessed be He, had wounded, and should I heal?'"

We therefore learn that doctors have received permission to heal. It is a *mitzvah*, part of the *mitzvah* of doing everything to save a life, and one who hastens to do so is to be praised. If he does nothing, he has spilled blood.

The Tur adds, "No man should occupy himself with medicine unless he is well-trained and at present there is no one better suited for the job. Whoever knows nothing about this field should not practice it. If there is someone more knowledgeable than him, he should not practice it at all, especially in regards to the other laws and injunctions of the Torah."

Doctors in the Private Field

Along the same lines, the Chazon Ish writes that one must visit the best doctors (*Letters of the Chazon Ish* 1:140). Rabbi Aharon Roter (*Sha'arei Aharon*) is cited as stating that the Chazon Ish once said that people think that ordinary doctors know something and that skilled doctors know much. However he did not share this view. To him, ordinary doctors know nothing and skilled doctors know a little.

He criticized the usual practice of people going to doctors who work in a *Kupat Cholim* [national health insurance system], which is not a good idea for two reasons: The first is that highly specialized doctors do not practice in such systems. The Chazon Ish recounts that someone once complained about some pain he was having, and he went to a *Kupat Cholim*. He was told, "What do ordinary doctors know?" He was then sent to a specialist in Tel Aviv. Furthermore, the very form of medicine practiced in a *Kupat Cholim* comprises a certain element of the idea that "a doctor who heals for free is worthless." There is no doubt that in serious cases, a person must go see a doctor in the private field.

The Ramban states, "Had they not accustomed themselves to medication, people would become sick according to the degree of punishment corresponding to their sin, and they would be healed by the will of G-d. Yet since they accustomed themselves to medication, G-d left them to natural happenings. This is also the intent of the Rabbis' interpretation, 'He shall cause him to be thoroughly healed' – from here permission was granted to the doctor to heal.' They did not say that 'permission was granted to the sick to be healed,' but instead state that since a person who becomes sick comes to be healed...a doctor should not refrain from healing him on account that he die under his hand, since he is qualified in this profession, or because he says that G-d alone heals all flesh, since people have accustomed themselves [to this]. Thus when men fight and one hits the other with a stone or his fist, the one who hit must pay for the healing, for the Torah does not base its laws upon miracles.... Yet when a man's ways please Hashem, he does not have to deal with doctors" (Ramban on *Vayikra* 26:11).

Guard Your Tongue!

Whether Man or Woman

In regards to the prohibition against speaking *Lashon Harah*, it makes no difference if the speaker is a man or a woman. Even if the person being spoken about pays no attention to these words because he cares deeply for the speaker, or is close to him – or if the speaker is a relative and does not really wish to disparage him, but is only speaking out of a love for truth, believing that the person in question is not acting correctly – it is still *Lashon Harah*.