

The Path To Follow

Va'ethanan

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The Main Thing is to Fear G-d, Not Punishment

It is written, "I am Hashem your G-d, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery" (Devarim 5:6).

Why did Hashem now tell the people, "I am Hashem your G-d"? To what can this be compared? It is like a king who liberates some prisoners and brings them to his royal palace, giving them to eat and drink. On the following day he comes to them and says, "I am the king." Did they not know that he was the king who liberated them? In that case, why did G-d say: "I am Hashem your G-d, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery"?

Not only that, but in Parsha Shemot we read: "He said to the people, 'Be ready after a three-day period; do not draw near a woman.' On the third day, when it was morning, there was thunder and lightening and a heavy cloud on the mountain, and the sound of the shofar was very powerful, and the entire people in the camp shuddered. Moshe brought the people forth from the camp towards G-d, and they stood at the bottom of the mountain. All of Mount Sinai was smoking because Hashem had descended upon it in the fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the entire mountain shuddered exceedingly" (Shemot 19:15-18). Hence the Children of Israel already knew that G-d had descended upon the mountain, and they feared Him. Therefore why did He need to tell them, "I am Hashem"?

What is the Fear of Heaven?

The philosophers (mentioned in Toldot Yaakov Yosef, Eikev 2) ask why a king of flesh and blood does not need to command his servants to fear him, since they fear him without being ordered to. However the Holy One, blessed be He – the King of kings – orders us to fear Him.

The explanation is that here, Hashem wanted to teach the Children of Israel what the fear of G-d means. The author of Reshith Chochma explained it well in stating: The nature of fear must be explained, followed by the ways in which a person can manifest this fear in his heart. Fear, which the Torah on several occasions has commanded us – as it is written: "Now, O Israel, what does Hashem your G-d ask of you? Only to fear Hashem your G-d" (Devarim 10:12) and "Hashem your G-d shall you fear" (ibid. 6:13) – consists of man recognizing that the world has a single Creator Who created all that exists, and Who directs His creations according to His will. If He were not to sustain them, they could not exist, as it is written: "You give them all life" (Nehemiah 9:6). If we could possibly imagine Him not spreading His abundance upon all the worlds for even an instant, everything would disappear and become as if it never were. This is because all things need Him, whereas He needs nothing. We must fear Him and take upon ourselves the yoke of Torah and the yoke of mitzvot, like a servant who knows that he has a master whom he must serve, as it is written: "Know the G-d of your father and serve Him" (I Chronicles 28:9).

In the Zohar, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says: "This [Bereshith 1:1] contains the first precept of all, namely the fear of Hashem, as it is writ-

ten: 'The fear of Hashem is the beginning of wisdom' [Tehillim 111:10] as well as, 'The fear of Hashem is the beginning of knowledge' [Mishlei 1:7]. ... The genuine type [of fear] is that which makes a man fear his Master because He is a powerful ruler, the rock and foundation of all the worlds, before Whom all existing things are as nothing, as it is said: 'All the inhabitants of the earth are as nothing' [Daniel 4:32]" (Zohar 1:11b). It says that "the fear of Hashem" – not "the fear of punishment" – is the beginning of wisdom, for that is the main thing. The fear of punishment is only secondary, not essential in any way. Hence when the Children of Israel were frightened, G-d said to them: "I am Hashem your G-d" – be careful that your fear is not of great thunder and punishment, but of Me, for I am great and powerful. I have brought you out of the land of Egypt, and I have done for you what no one else could.

In fact the Sages say, "Previously, no slave could escape from Egypt, which was sealed tight. Yet now, G-d brought out 600,000 men from Egypt" (Mechilta Yitro, Amalek 1).

No Other Fear in the Heart

This is why G-d ordered us to fear Him, whereas a king of flesh and blood does not need to do so, for the fear that he arouses is not the same as the fear of G-d. People only fear and respect a mortal king because of the possibility of punishment. Such is not the case with the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. The fear of punishment is not so important with G-d, the main thing being to fear Him to such an extent that no other fear can exist in the heart. The Sages have said, "A certain disciple was once following Rabbi Yishmael, the son of Rabbi Yossi, in the market place of Zion. The latter noticed that he looked afraid, and he said to him: 'You are a sinner, for it is written: "Sinners in Zion are afraid" [Isaiah 33:14]. He replied: 'But it is written: "Happy is the man who always fears" [Mishlei 28:14]. He replied, 'That verse refers to words of Torah' " (Berachot 60a).

King David said, "Even if I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me" (Tehillim 23:4). Hence G-d told the Children of Israel: "What does Hashem your G-d ask of you? Only to fear Hashem your G-d" – I ask that you remove fear from your heart and that you fear Me alone. This is not a fear of punishment, but a fear of Hashem. You must only fear Hashem your G-d without worrying about anything else in the world.

This is why the Sages say, "Is the fear of Heaven such a small thing? ... Yes, for Moshe it was a small thing!" (Berachot 33b). The commentators object to this, nothing that the Holy One, blessed be He, spoke to the Children of Israel, not just to Moshe. Therefore why say "only to fear," which implies that it was a small thing? The answer is that since Moshe removed all fear from his heart and left only the fear of G-d, for him it was a small thing. If the Children of Israel had done the same, this fear would also have been a small thing for them. Hence Moshe told them, "What does Hashem your G-d ask of you? Only to fear Hashem your G-d, to go in all His ways, and to love Him and serve Him with all your heart and all your soul."

From Easy to Difficult

It is written, “This good mountain and the Lebanon” (Devarim 3:25).

In general we first ask for something easy, followed by something more difficult. Thus in prayer we first ask Hashem to “forgive us for all our unintentional sins,” followed by “forgive us for all our intentional sins,” and finally “completely forgive us for all our rebellious sins.”

The book Marpeh Lashon underlines that this is why Moshe first asked to see “the good land that is on the other side of the Jordan” followed by, “this good mountain” and finally, “the Lebanon,” which designates the Temple. He did not change this order, but requested easy things first and more difficult things later.

Adding is Subtracting

It is written, “You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor shall you subtract from it” (Devarim 4:2).

A well-known question asks: We understand why we must not add anything, but why must the Torah tell us not to take anything away? It is clear that we cannot take anything away from any of Hashem’s mitzvot!

As usual, the Maggid of Dubno explained this with a parable:

A man arranged with a close friend to set up a shidduch for his son. The man committed himself to paying for his son’s clothes, and to fashion three suits for him. The future father-in-law said, “I know that you don’t have the means to fashion two suits for your son. Therefore if you undertake to make a third, which is beyond your means, you will be forced to make all three with material of inferior quality. This means that your three suits will be less valuable than two suits made of fine quality material.”

The moral of the story is that the Holy One, blessed be He, has sternly enjoined us not to do more than what the Torah has obligated us. This means that we must not add to the mitzvot that our Creator has commanded us. In fact He understands our insignificance and has given us mitzvot according to our abilities.

Hence someone who adds to the things which we must do is necessarily detracting from the quality of our deeds and the time that we spend on them, for man has no ability to add. It would already be good were he not to take away! If he wants to add to a certain area, he will certainly take away from another, which is why the Torah warns: “You shall not add...nor shall you subtract.”

Completing the Count

It is written, “Ve’atem [And you] who cleave to Hashem your G-d, you are all alive today” (Devarim 4:4).

The gaon Rabbi Nathan Shapira Zatzal explains this verse in the following way:

There are 245 words in the reading of the Shema, and to reach 248 – the number of limbs in the human body – the Shaliach Tzibur ends the final section of the Shema with the words: “Hashem your G-d is truth.” The term emet (“truth”) completes the count of 248 words, and as such there is life in all of man’s limbs.

Thus when we connect the term ve’atem (“and you”) – which contains the letters of emet – to “Hashem your G-d,” we have “you are all alive today.” That is, all a person’s limbs will receive abundant life from the Heavens.

No More Incarnations

It is written, “For I will die in this land. I am not crossing the Jordan” (Devarim 4:22).

Since Moshe Rabbeinu was about to die, it is clear that he would not be crossing the Jordan! Therefore what is the meaning of, “For I will die in this land. I am not crossing the Jordan”?

In his book Michtav LeChizkiyahu, Rabbi Chizkiyahu Peretz Zatzal follows

what the Arizal said in explaining why Aaron was not allowed to pray to enter Eretz Israel, as Moshe had done, by the fact that Aaron knew through Ruach HaKodesh that he would be reincarnated as Ezra the scribe. Since he knew that he would enter Eretz Israel by reincarnation, Aaron did not pray for it.

However Moshe knew that he would not be reincarnated, as the kabbalists have explained on the verse, “G-d does all these things with man two or three times” (Job 33:29). [In other words, a man may be reincarnated no more than three times.] Now Moshe has already been reincarnated three times. In fact the name “Moshe” is formed by the initials of Moshe, Shet, Hevel, meaning that he would no longer be reincarnated because this was his third incarnation.

This is hinted at in the doublet, “For I will die in this land. I am not crossing the Jordan.” If one were to say that Moshe would return in another incarnation and enter Eretz Israel, the verse states: “I am not crossing the Jordan.” That is, Moshe would not be reincarnated after his death.

Because of Hashem’s Command

It is written, “Honor your father and your mother, as Hashem your G-d commanded you” (Devarim 5:16).

The mitzvah of honoring one’s father and mother, writes the author of Aruch HaShulchan, is a logical commandment that has spread among all the nations. Even those who deny the Torah respect this commandment, for it is logical and natural. However the Children of Israel have been ordered to fulfill every logical mitzvah, not because their reasoning obligates them, but because Hashem has commanded them.

Hence here, in the second instance of the Ten Commandments, we have: “Honor your father and your mother, as Hashem your G-d commanded you.” In other words, do not honor them because your mind obligates you, but because “Hashem your G-d commanded you.” You must honor them because it is Hashem’s order, not because you feel intellectually obligated to.

In the Light of the Parsha

How Every Person Can Cleave to the Shechinah

It is written, “And you who cleave to Hashem your G-d, you are all alive today” (Devarim 4:4).

In the Sifrei we find a teaching on the words, “Cleave to Him” (Devarim 11:22): “How is it possible for man to ascend to Heaven and cleave to fire, given that it is said: ‘Hashem your G-d is a consuming fire’ [Devarim 4:24] and ‘His throne was of fiery flames’ [Daniel 7:9]? Rather, cleave to the Sages and to their disciples” (Sifrei Devarim, Eikev 49).

Elsewhere it is taught, “You shall follow Hashem your G-d” (Devarim 13:5). Can a man possibly follow the Shechinah, since it is said: “Hashem your G-d is a devouring fire”? However this means that we must emulate Hashem’s deeds: Just as He clothes the naked, we must also clothe the naked. Just as He visits the sick, we must also visit the sick. Just as He consoles mourners, we must also console mourners. Just as He buries the dead, we must also bury the dead.

Let us think about this: The soul of every Jew is actually a divine spark, for it is written: “Hashem’s portion is His people” (Devarim 32:9). Thus each Jew is, in spite of himself, connected to the Shechinah. That said, why have the Sages asked how it is possible to cleave to the Shechinah? Man’s soul is attached to it from birth!

The answer is that although man’s soul is a divine spark, only one who studies Torah and fulfills mitzvot is aware of it. Hence it written, “Ve’atem [And you] who cleave to Hashem” (Devarim 4:4) – the term atem (you) is formed by the same letters as emet (truth). As the Sages say, “Truth is Torah, for it is said: ‘Buy the truth, but do not sell it’ [Mishlei 23:23]” (Berachot 5b). When a person cleaves to the Sages and emulates his Creator’s deeds, he merits to cleave to the Shechinah.

During the time of the Arizal, there lived in Sefat an extremely pious and great Torah scholar by the name of Rabbi Avraham HaLevi Beruchim. For numerous years, Rabbi Avraham would usually get up every night as midnight approached and walk along the streets of the city. He would knock at the door of people's homes to awaken talmidei chachamim and kabbalists, of which there were many in Sefat, to come and serve the Creator.

About an hour later, they would crowd into the local synagogue for Tikkun Chatzot, weeping over the bitterness of the exile. After reciting the Tikkun, everyone began learning both the revealed Torah and Kabbalah with great diligence. During the night, voices of study would escape from the synagogue and spread around Sefat. As dawn approached, these people would go and immerse themselves in a mikveh, then proceed to pray Shacharit with concentration and zeal.

Rabbi Avraham was a fascinating and unique character, living in poverty and isolation throughout his life. He worked with tremendous enthusiasm to strengthen everything that touched upon the religious life of Sefat, as well as devoting a great deal of his time to prayer and Torah study. Yet he devoted most of his life and actions to a single cause: The exile of the Shechinah. In fact each time that he mentioned the exile, heart-wrenching pain took hold of him. He admonished the public, awakening a desire for the Temple that once stood. Rabbi Avraham dedicated himself so much to the exile of the Shechinah and its deliverance, the Arizal himself said that his soul was a reincarnation of the prophet Jeremiah.

One day Rabbi Avraham fell ill, and his condition steadily deteriorated until he reached the gates of death. The best doctors from the surrounding area were summoned to his bedside, but they lost hope in a recovery. Deep down, his relatives were also resigned to the situation, and it seemed that Rabbi Avraham himself was preparing for death.

Word of his illness spread, until finally it reached the Arizal, who rushed to see him. He said to him, "Know, Rabbi Avraham, that your days have reached their end, and that you have little time left. However you still have a chance to annul the evil decree against you and be healed. Go up to Jerusalem to pray by the ruins of the Temple at the Kotel. If you go there and beseech G-d from the bottom of your heart, you will merit seeing the holy Shechinah. In that case, you are promised numerous more years of life."

When Rabbi Avraham heard this, he decided to go to Jerusalem whatever the cost. At the time, however, making such a journey was far from easy. People traveled by donkey, making their way along unmarked paths over the course of several days. The cost of such a journey also exceeded his means. Despite all this, Rabbi Avraham committed himself to making this trip, and in a few days his condition improved to such an extent that he could leave his bed and stand.

When he felt strong enough to take to the road, he began to sell his furniture to finance this arduous journey, for he was extremely poor and had no liquid assets.

When everything was set for the journey, Rabbi Avraham shut himself in his home for three days and three nights in order to fast and pray for the trip. Only afterwards did he set out for Jerusalem. The road from Sefat to Jerusalem was long and perilous, and on several occasions Rabbi Avraham felt that his body would not be able to stand up to the rigors of the road. His great faith is what sustained him until he reached his destination.

When he arrived in the holy city, he did not look for shelter, but headed directly to the Kotel. It was nighttime, and Rabbi Avraham began to pour out his supplications before G-d, weeping in a loud voice and with heart-wrenching cries, until his strength was gone.

In his great fatigue and weakness, Rabbi Avraham suddenly noticed a figure dressed in black, rising like a cloud from the Kotel to the heavens. Rabbi Avraham understood that this was none other than the holy Shechinah, immersed in exile and enveloped in black. It was rolling in the dust on account of its children, who were drenched in misery and captivity.

A sharp pain pierced his heart as his entire body began to tremble. He prostrated himself to the ground, bitterly weeping as he said: "O Zion, more precious than gold, woe to me for having seen you like this!" He then fainted from grief, and in a dream he saw the figure dressed in black approaching him. It placed its hand upon his face, wiped away his tears, and said to him: "Take comfort, my son Avraham, for there is still hope. The children will return to their borders, for I will return and have mercy on them, and I will gather them together."

When he regained consciousness, Rabbi Avraham began to repeat what he had seen and heard. A few days later, he journeyed back to Sefat, arriving there comforted and happy. When the Arizal saw him, he could immediately see on his face that he had indeed prayed from the depths of his heart and merited a vision of the Shechinah.

The Arizal said to him, "Fortunate are you for having merited such an extraordinary revelation within the great darkness of this bitter exile. All this happened because of the fact that you shared in the pain of the Shechinah throughout your life, and because you awoke Jews every night in order for them to weep over the exile. A long life is now promised to you."

Rabbi Avraham Beruchim lived in the holy city of Sefat for another 22 years, continuing to serve Hashem in his own unique way.

Guard Your Tongue!

We Must Admonish Them

If we believe that admonishing people will not serve any purpose, although it will also not do any harm, then in such a case we have no right to remain silent, lest others think that we are in agreement with them. We are therefore obligated to answer and admonish them by defending the tzaddik whom they are disparaging.

– Chafetz Chaim

He Will Forget His Learning

From what the Gemara says, we learn just how great is the loss of one who studies without reviewing: “Every Torah scholar who eats excessively everywhere eventually destroys his home, widows his wife, orphans his young, forgets his learning, and becomes involved in many disputes. His words are unheeded, and he desecrates the Name of Heaven, the name of his teacher, and the name of his father. He brings an evil name upon himself, his children, and his children’s children until the end of time” (Pesachim 49a).

A certain student (Rabbi Nathan David Rabinowitz) from the Ponevezh yeshiva in Bnei Brak studied the entire tractate of Gittin in every detail while in yeshiva. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, he went to see the gaon Rabbi Ovadia Yosef Shlita to ask that he test him on Gittin.

After the Rav finished testing him, he wanted to know how he spent his time. When it turned out that he studied tractate Zevachim at night with a friend, the Rav was not pleased. “When a person studies a tractate,” he said, “his mind must be completely immersed in it. He must spend all his time reviewing it in order to fully understand it.”

The Rav then pointed out that in his youth, when he studied in the Porat Yosef yeshiva, he studied tractate Gittin and reviewed it 60 times during one zeman!

As He Slept

Rabbi Yehudah Zev Segal Zatzal was able to accomplish what he most desired, quenching his thirst for Torah at the Manchester yeshiva, which was headed by his father the gaon Rabbi Moshe Yitzchak Segal Zatzal. He studied with tremendous diligence, giving himself no respite either day or night. Even when he went to sleep, his friends would have to close the book that remained open in his hands. As he slept, he could be heard murmuring, “The purchase of a courtyard... it’s a discussion between Abaye and Raba.”

His next step was the Mir yeshiva in Poland, where his diligence in learning reached new heights, for there he studied 18 hours a day! Every Thursday he would remain awake all night, though not at the expense of the yeshiva’s Friday morning study session. On the night of Shabbat, he would usually get up at 3:00 am and study until Shacharit. Later on, he said that he was so immersed in Torah that he felt no fatigue due to a lack of sleep.

(It is interesting to note that numerous years later, when Rabbi Yehudah Zev and his wife were in Eretz Israel, they went to visit the Rosh Yeshiva of Mir, the gaon Rabbi Eliezer Yehudah Finkel Zatzal, whom they had not seen since the year 5694. Rav Finkel asked Rebbetzin Segal, “Does your husband still study 18 hours without interruption?”)

Among those who studied with Rabbi Yehudah Zev at that time were some of the greatest scholars, including the gaon Rabbi Naftali Beinish Wasserman (the son of Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman) and the gaon Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz. Sixty years later, Rabbi Yehudah Zev could recite the Torah insights that he heard from Rabbi Chaim exactly as he had heard them.

You Too Would be Dancing

The gaon Rabbi Aryeh Leib HaCohen Zatzal took it upon himself to go into exile, traveling among the Jewish communities of Europe.

It was after the publication of his book Sha’agat Aryeh that his name became famous throughout the land. His exile lasted several years, during which time his wife the tzaddeket joined him in his arduous travels to help him study as much as his heart desired. In this way, the hazards and fatigue of constantly being on the move would not disrupt his diligent Torah learning. Everywhere they went, the Sha’agat Aryeh immersed himself in learning at the local Beit HaMidrash, as the Rebbetzin would go knocking on people’s doors. With the few cents that she was given, she would prepare a meager meal to nourish her husband.

The Sha’agat Aryeh would travel from town to town and from village to village, accepting the hardship of exile with love as he tried to hide his true identity. During these journeys, he also made his way to Germany, and in the meantime word spread from person to person that a great Torah figure was traveling among the Jewish communities of Europe. Word of this also reached the gaon Rabbi Nathan Adler Zatzal, who for a long time had wanted to meet the Sha’agat Aryeh, despite feeling bad about the suffering that he endured in exile.

Hence Rabbi Nathan Adler told the director of the hekdesch in Frankfurt that if were to see, among the Jews passing through town, a certain individual who had such-and-such an appearance, and who was accompanied by his wife, that he should let him know immediately, for he would be generously rewarded for it. The director of the hekdesch took careful note of this, and so each day he awaited the Sha’agat Aryeh. However his arrival was delayed, and it was only a few weeks later that his feet brought him to the gates of Frankfurt. It was late at night when they arrived, and most of the residents in town were already sleeping. At the local hekdesch, people almost didn’t open the door for them.

When they entered, the Rebbetzin hurried to cook a few potatoes for her husband. He took out a candle and an old copy of the Rambam’s Mishneh Torah, and went to sit down to learn with great concentration. The melody of his learning disturbed the other guests, who quickly put out his candle. The Sha’agat Aryeh then took his Rambam and went outside, where he studied in the moonlight until the early morning. Happiness and joy surrounded him as he studied, and in his exultation for Torah learning, he got up and began singing and dancing in its honor. His wife the tzaddeket, who was well-aware of what has happening in his heart, also shared in his joy.

Word of this celebration reached the ears of the director of the hekdesch, who was surprised by it. He asked them, “Why are you celebrating?” The Sha’agat Aryeh replied, “If you had found beautiful explanations on what the Ramban wrote, you too would be dancing with us!”

At that point, the director quickly realized who this guest was, and he hurried to tell Rabbi Nathan Adler that the Sha’agat Aryeh had certainly arrived. He described to him what had happened during the night, including the dancing in the early morning. Upon hearing this, Rabbi Nathan hurried to go welcome this great Torah figure. When they began speaking words of Torah, Rabbi Nathan immediately realized that his roar was that of a lion (hence the name “Sha’agat Aryeh”), and that the breastplate was engraved upon his heart.