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THE POWER OF INFLUENCE

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, “Then Moshe and the Children of Israel sang this song to Hashem, and they said: ‘I will sing to Hashem, for He has triumphed gloriously. Horse and its rider, He threw into the sea’ ” (Shemot 15:1).

At the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, the waters that drowned the Egyptians also drowned their horses, as we read in the Shira: “Horse and its rider, He threw into the sea.” This means that the horsemen were not the only ones punished, for the horses upon which they rode were also punished. This is surprising, for why did the horses meet such a violent death when it was the Egyptians who had pursued the Children of Israel? The Ba’alei HaMussar usually respond by saying that these sinners were aided by their horses, and that G-d sends evil through evildoers, which is why these animals were condemned to die by drowning in the Sea of Reeds. This teaching contains an important principle, namely that if we ourselves have not transgressed a Torah commandment, but have simply supported a sinner, his transgression is imputed to us and we will have to render an accounting for it. Thus if horses, which have no desire to do evil, were severely punished by drowning alongside their riders, how much more will we – who possess both heart and mind – be punished if we participate in a transgression! Furthermore, even the nations of the world strictly judge criminal accomplices: Even if someone is not the instigator of a crime, the fact that he drives the instigator to the crime scene or provides him with refuge after the fact renders him guilty and punishable.

This explanation remains difficult to understand, however, for did the horses willfully agree to help their riders pursue the Children of Israel? Clearly not. It was the Egyptians who saddled them in their haste to pursue those who were escaping. Even Pharaoh refused to climb into his royal chariot, preferring instead to pursue them on horseback! The fact that these animals were eventually punished raises a question: Must the vehicle driven by a criminal give an accounting for its participation in the actions of its driver, despite being incapable of understanding where it is being led or discerning the intentions of its driver? Likewise, the Egyptian horses were guided by their riders without knowing where they were being led. That being the case, why were they judged like their riders, suffering a terrible death? In reality, all this stems from just how susceptible people are to the power of influence. In fact we

know that G-d was not content with transmitting the principles of the Torah to Moshe on earth. He asked him to ascend to Heaven in order to receive the Torah, even at risk to his own life. Why so? Because G-d wanted Moshe to transmit the Torah to the Children of Israel in all its power and intensity. In order for that to happen, Moshe had to ascend to Heaven and sense that unique spiritual environment and see the Patriarchs meditating upon its concepts, for only then could he teach it with the necessary intensity and enthusiasm. If Moshe had remained on earth to receive the Torah, he would have not sensed the intense atmosphere of the supernal worlds, meaning that the Torah would have been given in a less than perfect way. By our very nature, we are easily influenced and inclined to emulate the behavior of those around us. Hence the Torah commands us to keep away from bad neighbors (Pirkei Avoth 1:7), and to dwell among people who are righteous and charitable. In fact by seeing our neighbors on the right path, we will be tempted to do the same, and therefore they will exert a positive influence on us. Conversely, someone who decides to live among evildoers will be influenced in a similar way, as the Rambam states (Hilchot De’ot 6). That being the case, we may say that when the Egyptians saddled their horses in order to commit a sin, riding upon these horses to pursue the Children of Israel, they exerted a harmful influence on them, and they became accomplices in that sin. The power of influence is such that it can modify the very nature of animals, which act on instinct, and give them satisfaction to participate in doing evil. Likewise we know that animals were also wiped out along with the generation of the flood. In fact the animals of that generation had been negatively influenced by men, with adultery being so common during the time that even the behavior of animals was changed, for they acted contrary to their own natures. Thus the horses of the Egyptians were punished by drowning in the Sea of Reeds in order to make us realize the power of influence, be it for better or for worse. Even these animals, which lacked free will, were infused with the zeal of the Egyptians and hastened to pursue the Children of Israel. That being the case for horses, how much more does it apply to human beings, who act according to their own desires and thoughts. We must all infuse this concept in our minds, realizing and remembering it at all times. How powerful is the power of our entourage to influence us! We must therefore constantly associate with G-d fearing people who mediate upon His Name, so they may influence us solely in the right way.

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Rabbi David Hanania
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CHEVRAT PINTO
**207 West 78th Street
New York - NY 10024
Tel: 1 212 721 0230
www.hevratpinto.org
hevratpinto@aol.com**
**Editor-in-Chief:
Hanania Soussan**

Two Etrogim

Obtaining etrogim in the plains of Russia and the streets of Ukraine was not a simple task, especially quality etrogim. Hence the chassidim, who showed fervent devotion to their Rebbe and yearned to provide him with a beautiful etrog, would think about this for months before the festival.

Dealing with this problem in particular were merchants, who would travel around the world for business. Everywhere they went, they looked for a beautiful, first-rate etrog that they could present to their Rebbe. When a chassid would have the merit of presenting one to his Rebbe, their joy knew no bounds. The Rebbe was happy to embellish the mitzvah, and he appreciated the affection of his chassid. As for the latter, he rejoiced in the happiness of his Rebbe.

One year a fabric merchant by the name of Reb Elimelech, a chassid of Rabbi Mordechai the Chernobyl Rebbe, went on a business trip that was to last a few months. He took to the road right after Pesach, hoping to return to Chernobyl for the festivals of Tishri.

Some time before his return, at the beginning of Elul, a beautiful, quality etrog came into his hands. He thanked Hashem for having given him the merit of providing his Rebbe with spiritual satisfaction, and he paid a high price to purchase it. After carefully enwrapping it in linen cloth and hiding it among his belongings, he got back to working.

About a month before his return, he was offered another etrog. It was yellow, had a spectacular shape, and was devoid of any flaws. "I've already purchased a beautiful etrog for the Rebbe," thought Reb Elimelech. "And like every year, I also recited the blessing on it. What do I need with an extra etrog?"

Suddenly a thought came to him: "On my way back, I'll be passing through Rozhin," he remembered. "A great tzaddik lives there, a man renowned around the world, and he's blessed me more than once. I'll buy the etrog and offer it to him on my way back to Chernobyl." He therefore decided to purchase the second etrog.

A few days later Reb Elimelech began his journey home. During one of his stops, he met a group of friends, some Chernobyl chassidim.

In the course of their conversation, he told his friends about his business success, as well as how he had managed to purchase an excellent etrog for their Rebbe.

The chassidim asked to see the etrog, upon which their Rebbe would be making a blessing. Reb Elimelech took both etrogim out of his bag and recounted the story behind them.

With both etrogim now side by side, it was clear that the second etrog was superior to the first. "Give the first etrog to the tzaddik of Rozhin and keep the second one, the finer one, for our Rebbe," they spontaneously advised him. Reb Elimelech liked the idea and agreed to follow it.

Arriving in Rozhin, he went to ask for a blessing from the tzaddik, making sure to mention that he had brought a beautiful etrog for the tzaddik as a gift.

Reb Elimelech then presented the first etrog to the tzaddik, who looked at it, smiled, and said: "Yes, it has a fine appearance."

The tzaddik of Rozhin then took it in his hands and examined it from every angle. At that point a look of astonishment appeared on his face: "Is this really my etrog?" he asked in surprise. "Is this the etrog that you bought for me?" he repeated. Reb Elimelech felt sick to his stomach, realizing that the tzaddik, who possessed pure eyes, had noticed that this etrog really wasn't the one he had purchased for him. Ashamed of admitting the truth, however, Reb Elimelech mumbled something about a mistake being made, all while taking out the second etrog and presenting it to the tzaddik.

In an instant, the tzaddik's look of astonishment turned to one of satisfaction. "A very beautiful etrog, glorious in full!" he said. He then showered Reb Elimelech with blessings.

Following their meeting, Reb Elimelech continued on his way to Chernobyl. Encountering no unusual delays, he made his way to the Rebbe and, without saying a word, presented him with the first etrog. The Rebbe looked at it, and then at Reb Elimelech, and then back at the etrog, his face illustrating his puzzlement.

"Tell me, who has already touched my etrog?" he asked.

Reb Elimelech began to tremble when confronted by what appeared to be a spirit of prophesy, though he wasn't certain of it.

"Please tell me how you came into possession of this etrog, and what's happened since that time," the Rebbe added. It was then apparent that the Rebbe could see things that were hidden. Reb Elimelech turned red with embarrassment when he told the Rebbe what had happened.

At that point the Rebbe said, "Know, Reb Elimelech, that every year on Tu B'Shevat, it is decreed in Heaven which etrog each person will have on the following Sukkot. The tzaddik of Rozhin knew exactly which etrog was his, and when he saw the one you brought him, he feared that his judgment had changed. He then examined his deeds, but could find no reason for a change. That's why he didn't want to accept the etrog that you purchased for me, an etrog that had not been meant for him. And since the tzaddik held my etrog in his holy hands, it is no longer the same. That's what I sensed."

Guard Your Tongue

They Consider it Permitted

Our Sages declare, "Three sins carry a punishment in this world and the loss of the World to Come: Idolatry, forbidden relations, and murder. And the sin of Lashon Harah is equal to them all" [Arachin 15b]. Our Sages base their teaching on a text found in the Writings, a teaching on which the Rishonim comment: "This consists of people who are constantly committing this transgression, not attempting to distance themselves from it, for they eventually consider it permitted.

– Chafetz Chaim

Complete Faith

It is written, “They believed in Hashem and in Moshe His servant” (Shemot 14:31).

Every Jew who has children at the age of marriage, and who worries about the expenses related to a wedding, senses the power of genuine faith in G-d. The gaon and tzaddik Rabbi Yechezkel of Shinova Zatzal, the author of Divrei Yechezkel, had a daughter who had become engaged, but he didn't have enough money for the wedding. The tzaddik's wife complained that the wedding day was soon approaching, and that they still didn't have enough money to pay for it. The tzaddik replied that he didn't have any money, and that he couldn't assume the costs of the wedding. One day Rabbi Yechezkel's brother, Rabbi David of Kashanov, paid him a visit. The Rebbetzin implored Rabbi David to ask his brother to obtain the money they needed for the wedding. She added that since their daughter's engagement, Rabbi Yechezkel had been studying even more Torah, not spending an instant on trying to deal with the approaching wedding. Rabbi David explained the Rebbetzin's concerns to his brother, who responded: “What can I do? I have faith that G-d will certainly send us help.” However his brother responded, “All the same, you have to make some effort, but instead you've started learning more Torah! You're not even making as much of an effort as you used to!”

Rabbi Yechezkel's response is recorded in the book Amira Yaffa: “Know that people often make a major mistake, when faced with a small financial problem, by making a small effort and placing their confidence in G-d. Yet when faced with a major financial problem, they think they must double their efforts and drop their faith in G-d.

“In reality, the approach should be the opposite: If the financial need is small and we are capable of responding to it in a natural way, then we are allowed to take care of it on our own, as it is written: ‘Hashem your G-d has blessed you in all the works of your hand’ [Devarim 2:7]. However if we are facing a complex situation that entails numerous expenses – expenses that we are incapable of paying in a natural way – the only thing we can do is place our burden on G-d and have faith in Him alone. He will find a solution, as it is written: ‘Commit your way to Hashem; rely on Him and He will act’ [Tehillim 37:5], for we cannot solve such a situation on our own.

“That's why,” he concluded, “when the Rebbetzin told me about the expenses for my daughter's wedding, I realized that I had no chance of obtaining such funds in a natural manner. As a result, I was exempt from making any effort. I therefore placed all my trust in G-d, which is why I have extra free time to devote to the study of the holy Torah.”

Indeed, You're Right!

In regards to this subject, the following story is told by the gaon Rabbi Raphael David Auerbach in the book Ma'asseh Ish:

Two families recently connected by the engagement of their children went to see the Chazon Ish in order to obtain his blessing and advice on how to divide the couple's wedding and housing expenses.

The Rav turned to one father and said: “You're responsible for the housing expenses.” He then turned to the other father and declared: “You're responsible for the wedding expenses, as well as for the furniture in their home.” After having recovered from the shock of the Chazon Ish's announcement, the first father said: “But Rabbi, I have no way of obtaining such funds!”

The Rav replied, “Do you really think that you're the one who's going to be doing the giving? It's Hashem Who gives money, and you're but the emissary chosen to accomplish the task. That being the case, why are you bothered to be the one designated with the housing expenses? If you refuse this responsibility, however, and prefer a smaller one, I can reverse your roles.”

Then, to the astonishment of the second father, the Chazon Ish turned to him and said: “From now on, you're responsible for the housing expenses, and the other family is responsible for the wedding as well as furniture expenses.”

A very intelligent man, the second father replied: “If you're designating me as the emissary for everything that concerns the housing expenses, why not make me responsible for everything?” The Rav replied, “Indeed, you're right! I'm therefore making you responsible for everything – for the housing, wedding, and furniture expenses!”

The first father, who listened to this entire exchange without saying a word, felt uncomfortable and embarrassed. He said, “Rabbi, I accept to be the emissary for the wedding and furniture expenses.” However the Rav replied, “You're too late. This man has already merited the responsibility of everything.” And that's exactly what happened: The family that took responsibility for all the expenses were successful in all their endeavors, and they obtained the necessary funds for every expense in a supernatural way.

In the Light of the Parsha

The Secret Behind Moshe's War with Amalek

It is written, “Joshua did as Moshe said to him, to do battle with Amalek; and Moshe, Aaron, and Hur ascended to the top of the hill” (Shemot 17:10).

We may ask why, in the war with Amalek, it was precisely Moshe, Aaron, and Hur who were chosen to climb to the top of the hill and conquer Amalek. We may explain this by saying that the initials of these three tzaddikim, chosen to represent the Children of Israel in their war with Amalek, are mem, aleph, and het, which together have a numerical value of 49. Why did Amalek choose to fight against the Children of Israel in the desert, without waiting for them to enter the land of Israel? It was because in the days that separated the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah, the Children of Israel worked to elevate and purify themselves. During this time they emerged from the 49 gates of impurity, into which they had fallen in Egypt, and reached the 49 gates of purity. What Amalek wanted at that very moment, before the Torah was given, was to render the Jewish people impure, to send them back to the 49 gates of impurity in order to completely vanquish them.

This explains how Amalek was to be fought: Moshe had to raise his hands to Heaven, during which time Israel was winning. Yet when he lowered his hands, it corresponded to the 49 gates of impurity, during which time Amalek was winning.

Hur, who joined Moshe and Aaron, was a great tzaddik. In fact we get an idea of his holiness with the following logical argument: It is written, “Betzael the son of Uri, the son of Hur” (Shemot 31:2), yet Betzael was a young man when the Sanctuary was built (see Sanhedrin 69b), and he built it by assembling the letters and Divine Names in the order that the world had been created (Berachot 55a). Now if such was the greatness of Betzael, how much greater was his grandfather Hur!

Leaving Egypt Permanently

It is written, “Pharaoh will say of the Children of Israel, ‘They are imprisoned in the land’ ” (Shemot 14:3).

Who among the Children of Israel was Pharaoh referring to when he said that they would be “imprisoned in the land”?

Targum Yonatan states, “Pharaoh told Dathan and Aviram that they were imprisoned in Egypt.” We need to ask why Dathan and Aviram were not killed during the three days of darkness, as all the others transgressors of Israel were.

The book Edut BiYehosef cites Rabbi Yukil of Bagdad in stating that the transgressors who did not want to leave Egypt died. However Dathan and Aviram did not die because they were unaware that the Children of Israel were going to leave Egypt permanently. Rather, they thought that they would only be leaving for three days. As the Alsheich says on the verse, “Please speak in the ears of the people” (Shemot 11:2), this was said in secret so that Dathan and Aviram would not learn that they were leaving for good.

Hence Dathan and Aviram were not punished, nor did they die, during the three days of darkness. This is because they did not learn that the Children of Israel were going to leave Egypt permanently.

Not to Hashem

It is written, “Speak to the Children of Israel and let them turn back and encamp before Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Ba’al Tzephon” (Shemot 14:2).

The Ba’alei HaTosafot ask the following question: How could it be written that they encamped before Ba’al Tzephon, which is the name of an Egyptian idol, since the Sages say that a person is forbidden to tell others to meet him by the name of such-and-such an idol (Sanhedrin 63b)? They respond by saying that this prohibition applies to men, not to the Holy One, blessed be He, Who judges the entire world even on Shabbat and Yom Kippur, which is forbidden to men.

Hashem Will Fight for You

It is written, “Hashem will fight for you and you shall remain silent” (Shemot 14:14).

The term yilachem (“will fight”) evokes the word lechem (“bread”). This alludes to the fact that if we remain silent – refraining from speaking words that are forbidden, indecent, or futile – then Hashem will fight for us, meaning that He will provide us with bread, with food and everything else we need. Furthermore, as the Sages say in the Gemara, “Whoever speaks obscenely, even if a sentence of 70 years of happiness had been decreed for him, it is reversed for evil” (Shabbat 33a). The opposite is also true: Nothing will be lacking for a person who preserves his mouth by refraining from forbidden words. The book Yoshia Tzion also explains, regarding the teaching of the Sages about “those who are insulted but do not insult others” (Yoma 23a), that “Hashem will fight for you” can also be read as “Hashem will forgive you” (yimchol – same letters as yilachem). He will forgive all your sins because of the fact that “you remain silent” – you are insulted but you do not insult in return.

What Ezekiel Never Saw

“This is my G-d, and I will adorn Him” (Shemot 15:2).

The commentators express great surprise at the words of the Sages in the Mechilta: “What a maidservant saw by the sea, the prophet Ezekiel never saw, as it is written: ‘This is my G-d, and I will adorn Him.’ ” How can this be used to prove that the maidservants saw such a thing?

The book Peninim Yekarim gives a wonderful explanation for this statement by citing Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin on the Sages’ statement (Bikkurim 1:4) that a convert brings bikkurim (first fruit), but does not recite the ac-

companying text, for he cannot say “... which Hashem swore to our fathers to give to us” (Devarim 26:3). It follows that a slave or a maidservant is also exempt from reading the text that accompanies the bringing of bikkurim.

Our Sages had trouble understanding the change of language in the verse, “This is my G-d, and I will adorn Him; the G-d of my father, and I will exalt Him.” Why does it begin with the expression “my G-d,” and end with the expression “the G-d of my father”? For this reason, the Sages explained that the beginning of the verse was said by the maidservants (who could not say “the G-d of my father”), while the end of the verse was said by all the Children of Israel. Since the beginning of the verse indicates that it was the maidservants who uttered it, pointing to G-d as they said, “This is my G-d,” the Sages explained: “What a maidservant saw by the sea, the prophet Ezekiel never saw.”

And They Said

It is written, “Then Moshe and the Children of Israel sang, and they said...” (Shemot 15:1).

The Mishnah states that whoever sings this song every day with concentration will merit to sing it in the future, for it contains the past and future worlds. It also contains everything that concerns faith, as well as the era of Mashiach, and all praises that are said above and below depend on it. “Sang” – for all the generations, so they never forget. In fact whoever sings this song in this world will merit to sing it in the World to Come, using it to glorify Hashem in the era of Mashiach, when all the Jewish people will rejoice in the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written: “And they said.” “And they said” – in exile. “And they said” – when the Children of Israel will be delivered. “And they said” – in the World to Come.

– Zohar, Beshalach 54a

Men of Faith

Stories of the Tzaddikim from the Pinto Family

Falling Prey to the Flames

Rabbi Hadan Pinto would usually prepare shmura matza as Pesach approached, two days prior to its start. The Rav was personally involved in making them, not relying on anyone else to do it. Furthermore, he brought his own kitchen utensils to the bakery to knead the dough, for the kashrut of the matzot was of the utmost importance to him.

As he normally would, on that year Rabbi Hadan agreed with the owner of the bakery, Mr. Ben Ohata, that he would come and prepare his matzot two days before the festival. When the day came, Rabbi Hadan arrived with all his utensils, as well as with flour, water, a rolling pin, and everything else he needed. When he arrived, however, he saw that the stove was already being used by another person to bake his own matzot.

The Rav was very upset, for he had an agreement with the baker, who didn’t keep his word. He was even more upset by that fact that it required a great deal of time to prepare matzah for his whole family, which was large, as well as for the poor, who were especially important to him – and the next day was already the eve of Pesach! The Rav approached the baker and spoke to him about the situation, but the baker replied: “A lot of work is going on today. Perhaps you can return another day to do your baking.”

Upon hearing this, Rav Hadan left the bakery. He hadn’t gone very far when a huge fire erupted in the bakery. The stove, cooking tools, and matzot had all fallen prey to the flames!

Confronted by the reality of the flames, Mr. Ben Ohata ran to the Rav and begged him for forgiveness. He promised that he would keep his word from now on, at which point the flames immediately died out, leaving no trace of a fire. Even the matzot that were already in the fire weren’t burned (Sefer Shenot Haim).

One day Rabbi David Hanania Pinto said, “Each time that we pass by that bakery, we remember the miracle that took place there.”