

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

# TORAH LESSONS for the HOME

{ SPECIAL EDITION ADAR 5780 }

## MESSAGES FROM CORONA

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### LIKE NEVER BEFORE

We are dealing with an unprecedented situation, the kinds of which were never experienced before. Yes, we have had times when we were singled out and forced to remain in close quarters, apart from the rest of the population. But never has everyone else in most of the world also been subject to this decree.

The Jewish calendar is replete with all sorts of customs that would look interesting to an outsider. We have times that we don't eat, times that we don't talk, and times when we don't sleep. But never are we told that we can't leave our homes or interact with others. On both happy occasions and sad, we are always together. Whether it's Simchas Torah or a wedding, Tisha B'Av or *nichum aveilim lo aleinu*, Yidden are always coming together, several times a day.

Being told to separate from the rest of society goes against the very fiber of our beings. It's not just that we are used to the social aspect of meeting each other, but when we get together, we are also able to offer each other support and encouragement for whatever we're going

through. As the *possuk* says "*Ish es rei'eihu yaazoru ul'achiv yomar chazak*". The absence of that, and the fact that we don't know when all of this will end is also highly unsettling for most of us.

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### OVERCOME DOUBTS

Chazal teach us the importance of having Daas Torah. *Asei Lecha Rav Vehistalek Min Hasafek*, Have for yourself a Rav and you will have no doubts. *Ein Simcha K'hataras Hasfeikos* – there is nothing as joyous as resolving doubt. At a time like this, it becomes clear to us why that is so. People are so confused; they don't know what to think. When there is such an overload of conflicting information coming from all directions, it can be overwhelming. Who should one listen to? Which report should he believe?


While it's always nice to listen to *shiurim* and glean inspiration from many different sources, it is so important to have one Rav that you consider your own, whom you talk to when you have any concerns or when you seek counsel. When you have a Rav that

you always turn to for guidance, it can be a great source of comfort to be able to turn to him now, during this upheaval, for his insight and advice. This is something that should always be the case, not only in extraordinary situations, but is especially important in situations such as this. The *rabbanim* might all be saying something different, but when you have your own Rav, you automatically know whose guidance to follow. Even just in our own heads, there are a million little voices vying for our attention (maybe that's why they say two Jews – three opinions?). A Rav can help us sort through the chaos and find our own truth inside of us.

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### WHO IS IT?

When a child experiences difficulty, he runs away from his troubles into his caring Totty's arms where he knows he'll be accepted with love. But when that same child runs after a ball into the street, that same caring Totty must harshly reprimand him to teach the child about safety. A virus, not unlike many other things, does not have its own power. Coronavirus



is just another manifestation of Hashem's power. One day Hashem expresses Himself with sunshine, one day with rain, and one day with a virus. It's not some type of "bad-guy" entity that we can or should run away from. And although we don't understand why He is sending us this test, we turn to Him to try to understand what it is that He wants to teach us.

There's a song from the Bardichever Ruv Zy" a about Hashem, and one of the stanzas goes: "If it's good, it is You. And if it is C"V the opposite, it is still You. And if it's You, it is good." The lesson is that no matter what is happening around us, it is all from Hashem. And if it's from Hashem, then it is definitely good, even if we can't necessarily see it. Sefarim tell us, that even if something appears not to be so good, when we remember and tell ourselves that it is – because if it's from Hashem, then it's good – then it makes the good become obvious, and even before that happens it serves as a great source of comfort.

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## A CUSTOM MESSAGE

Another important thing to keep in mind is that whenever Hashem does something, it is His way of communicating with us, so to speak. He is trying to send us a message. Sometimes, though, we pick up the wrong message. We tend to ignore any mention of things that would challenge us to become better, and rather only choose to hear the things that will make us feel better about ourselves. Like the Rav who spoke on Shabbos *Shuva* to his very *frum* congregants about *Shemiras Shabbos*, and the other Rav who spoke to his modern congregants about being accepting

of each other. In a perfect world, this would be just the opposite, but people don't like to hear messages that insinuate that they're falling short in any way.

We are also under the misconception that Hashem can only send one message. And if there is only one message, we'd rather assume that it's the one that demands of *others* to change, while we pat ourselves on the back for being just perfect. Hashem is, *k'vayachol*, multi-talented. *Hatzur tamim pa'aloi*. He is wholesome and complete, and has the ability to mean several things at once, while taking into account every aspect. Tzaddikim teach us that when a human king does something that affects many people, it doesn't necessarily mean that he knew in advance who will be affected – or that he even cared about who got affected. He might just have intended to punish one person, for example, and if others were injured in the process, then so be it. Hashem, on the other hand, has every little piece of the puzzle planned out in advance. That means that every single person that is affected by something that happens is being sent a message. That's why we have to find the message that pertains directly to us, something that we can take to heart on a personal level.

When September 11 happened, I remember one Gadol BeYisroel who said that in his opinion this didn't happen because anyone was doing anything bad, but just as a way to make a dent in the American arrogance that was represented by the Twin Towers. However, his intention wasn't to absolve Yidden from seeing this as a wake-up call to *Teshuva* or *Tikun Hamaasim*. Quite the contrary. Everything Hashem does is for us, Yidden. It

was a message to the American arrogance that resided inside of us, *Hagoiy Asher Bekirbicha*, or our reliance on it. The attitude that we were invincible, in control, that we could do anything. What's certain is that even if it is the gentiles that are hit, we have to find how the message can apply to us as well. the same can be said about how the virus is so prevalent in China and Italy, the world's suppliers, which is a lesson to us to not be so reliant on anyone but Hashem.

So no matter what one hears or sees, there's something relevant to them. If your Rabbi spoke about not talking in *shul*, and you never do, then don't think, "Oh, great. So, this doesn't mean me." No! There is very likely something else that you need to correct, maybe you need to improve your attitude in recognizing that the soul is the House of Hashem. There is no doubt that this means you in some way as well.

Instead of going into a full-fledged panic, and trying to run away from this monster of a virus, turn inward and try to determine what Hashem might want from you. It might be *tefillah b'tzibur*, or *b'kavana*, or saying 100 *brachos* a day. It might be saying the *ketores*, or strengthening your *Emunah* and *bitachon*. Whatever you think might be your point of weakness, address it and improve it, and show Hashem that you heeded the message. Hopefully that will be the right way to utilize this opportunity.

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## SUGGESTIVE FOOD FOR THOUGHT

There are two obvious lessons I feel that we can take away from what is happening. One, *bein*



*adam lamakom*, is the *hisgalus hashechinah*, the revelation of G-d's existence. What we are experiencing is unbelievable. We learn about Hashem telling Titus, back in the Roman era, that He will conquer him with His smallest creation. Indeed, a little fly entered his brain through his nose and wreaked the kind of havoc that ultimately led to his death. All his power and his might could not withstand the terror and pain of this tiny little creature. Here, it's not just one king, and not even just one kingdom. The entire world has been conquered by something even smaller than a fly – something that's not visible to the naked eye at all! This display of Hashem's power is breathtaking.

We are part of a generation that feels more in control than ever before. With the right amount of money or power, or with the proper application of technology, there is very little we can't do. Even the weather, which we'll never be able to control, we are able to predict pretty accurately. Right now, we were thrust into a situation where not only we don't have even the slightest measure of control over it, but nobody even has the capability to predict what will happen next. This type of uncertainty is making most of us very uneasy. We are not used to not knowing where we will go or where we will be in a couple of days or weeks from now.

Our grandparents a couple of generations back were used to this kind of existence. They never knew what the next day would bring. They didn't know if their livelihood was safe, if their life was secure, so they had to have *Emunah* and *bitachon* and trust that all will be well. We are very far from their level of belief. So even after we crawl out of this on the other side, *be'ezras Hashem*,

let us not forget this lesson. Let us remind ourselves, our children and grandchildren that there once was a time, in a very modern era, when everyone was powerless to control or predict what was going to happen even a day later.

The other takeaway, *bein adam l'chaveiro*, is – we don't know if what Hashem is doing is a punishment or a lesson – but perhaps by being told that we can't get together, we are made aware that we weren't together enough. Nowadays it is so easy to just live in isolation. Everyone sits alone on his device, and gets entertained, makes money, spends money, everything from the comfort of his own isolation. But can we really do without others? That may be one lesson.

And sometimes we do come together often enough, but internally, in our opinions of each other, we are divided. Things get very difficult when we're so far apart from each other. We are realizing that we need each other more than we thought. It's possible that this is what this situation is coming to teach us. Because even if we are not together physically, we are all thinking about each other and hoping for the best for all of us.

## WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

Chazal tell us that when we pray for our friend who is in trouble, we are answered first. The words *המתפלל בעד חבירו והוא צריך לאותו דבר* might allude to when one *davens* for someone else, because he *needs* that person to be helped. Not just because it's nice to have someone else in mind, but he actually cares for that person. That's why his *tefillah* is heard. When someone *davens* for someone else just

because it's a nice thing to do, but he's not really invested in the outcome, it doesn't carry the same potency.


Here with the coronavirus, when we are praying for others not to be infected, we really *need* that *tefillah* to be heard. We don't want people to be infected, because “we” don't want to be infected. It's an interesting way that Hashem made us all fervently pray for each other. Perhaps this virus came to teach us a lesson that when one of our friends is stricken with an illness or hard times, it is also our own *tzarah*.

Hashem is forcing us to have more *Emunah* and *bitachon*, he is forcing us to stop relying on others for security, and he is forcing us *daven* for each other with our whole heart. He is pushing us in a very definite direction and we need to hear the message. We need to show Hashem that we will keep doing this even when we are not in a situation where we *must* do it.

## RECONCILING CONTRADICTIONS

People tend to do one of two things when faced with a difficult situation. It might be based on their personality, their source of information, or other factors. Some people are calm and optimistic, and (automatically) less cautious, while others are anxious and nervous, and overdo it on the precautions. This is something that happens when a person relies only on his own thoughts and feelings.

Logically, you can't do both at the same time. If you're calm, you're likely not going to take proper precautions, and if you're anxiously taking precautions, you're probably not very calm. When you do things



the Torah way, however, you can actually do both. The Torah often demands things of us that seem to be a contradiction. For example, we have the ability to be really humble but still believe that our actions have a global impact, because that is what the Torah tells us. Similarly, the Torah demands that we rely on Hashem and believe that He has a precise plan. We have to remember that “*who shall live and who shall die*” was already decreed on Rosh Hashana, and everything that He does is good, and that should calm us all down.

At the same time, however, we are instructed to be ultra-careful to guard our bodies from harm and not be negligent. So we need to be calm and confident that Hashem is taking care of us, while at the same time taking every precaution we can to guard our health. Truthfully, this is the only way to retain our sanity amidst this craziness. Nobody can say that because they’re doing this, that, or the other, it will or won’t affect them. Hashem has a plan, and none of us have any control over the outcome. But still, He wants us to try to protect ourselves as much as humanly possible.

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### AN ATTITUDE OF UNITY

Sometimes people get a little selfish and talk about how they were spared of something, and they forget that many others were hit really hard by it, some of whom might become offended by their callous commentary. I remember that, as a child, after a hurricane one of my friends was saying that “B”H, even though there was a bad hurricane, our class trip

wasn’t cancelled.” An older fellow overheard his comment and chided him, “This is not how a Yid looks at things. The fact that your class got to go on their trip is very trivial, considering the amount of people who lost their livelihoods and whose lives were at stake during this disaster.” So even if this did not particularly affect your family or your plans, don’t forget that we are all in this together.

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### EASIER SAID THAN DONE

Sometimes, we don’t feel like we’re really on “that” level of *Emunah* and *bitachon*. Yes, we pontificate about staying calm and trusting that all will be well, but truly, deep down, we are very nervous. And that’s okay. We are taught that when it comes to *Emunah* and *bitachon*, we should talk the talk and walk the walk, so to speak, even if we don’t really feel it in our core. Eventually, it will seep into our psyche and become our reality. *He'emanti ki adaber, I gain emunah through speaking about it.* Although *bitachon* is much easier said than done, it has to be said, and hopefully that will help us do it. Don’t just give up and say that this is too high of a level for you. Keep trying, keep believing, and one day you will get there.

Many people know intuitively what they should be doing, but when it comes to carrying it out, it is quite difficult. That still isn’t a reason not to do it. The benefit will be yours. The *Chovos Halevavos* refers to the serenity that ensues from such thought patterns as the “believer’s peace of the soul”.

This week, Parshas Vayakhel Pekudei, is really just a review of everything Hashem had told us to do. But sometimes, from when we’re told what to do until we actually do it it’s a whole new *Parasha*... We need to review things multiple times until it becomes a part of us. By repeating to ourselves that this is from Hashem and Hashem is good, we will actually be able to see the *Chasdei Hashem*.

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### PESACH PREP

It’s also important not to scare our children. On the contrary, we should keep telling them that Hashem is in control. We also need to show them that we believe it. Nobody has ever been helped by panic. Remember that it’s a difficult time for them too. You might feel like they are in your way because they’re home all day, but the lack of routine and the absence of their normal schedules are unsettling for them too. Make sure you prioritize them over all non-important things. In a year like this, it’s especially important to remember that Pesach cleaning is not spring cleaning and taking care of your child supersedes scrubbing out the top shelf of the corner cabinet.

It’s also vital to take care of yourself and take some time for yourself so that you have the mental and physical capacity to take care of those who need you most.

Hopefully, with all our good deeds, we will have a beautiful preparation to the Yom Tov and let’s hope we will greet Moshiach really soon *B'meheira B'yamaeinu Amein*.

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