

Derech Ha-rif

Excerpts from the Torah discourse delivered by The great Rabbi Yoshiyahu Yosef Pinto Shlita

For the Torah portion of ekev | Volume 37 | 17 av



First Shabbat Meal

"And it shall be when you follow these laws..."

Hashem tests us through difficult situations and challenges

The Torah portion begins with an uncommon syntax and choice of words: "And it shall be when (Eikev- literally, due to) you follow these laws..." there seems to be quite an excess of words. What is the lesson that we are being guided to?

In truth, the Torah is teaching us a fundamental lesson of Torah practice and life perspective. The word Eikev, which seems out of place, can also mean heel. The meaning of the verse, with the metaphorical usage of heel can be read as, "when you follow these laws-at a time when you feel low like a heel..." there are periods in life when we are joyous and feel uplifted and elevated and perform Mitzvot in such a mindset. But that is not always the case. There are times when things aren't going so smoothly or we aren't feeling our very best, but we still are particular in practising the Mitzvot with as much will and desire as we can muster. It is during such times that the Mitzvot we perform have very special value, and it is these Mitzvot that the Torah is referring to in the first verse.

When we study Yossef HaTzadik's life in Egypt, it is only when Yossef overcomes the temptation coming from his mistress that he gains the unique status and title of Tzadik, saint. What is particular about that specific time, as opposed to the many temptations that surrounded him- perhaps ever greater ones- when he rose to the position of Viceroy of Egypt, is that Yossef was at the very lowest point in his life then. The test of temptation with his mistress came to him at a time when he had just been sold as a slave; coming from a house of nobility to being a slave in the most base country of civilization was particularly difficult. Yossef HaTzadik teaches us that it is during the low points in one's life that the challenges and difficulties has greatest meaning to Hashem. Hashem chooses to challenge us when we don't have all our tools of defense.

Overcoming a challenge or temptation when everything is running smoothly in one's life isn't the greatest feat. When things aren't running so well, when one is low and perhaps broken and they then overcome the challenges that Hashem presents them, then and there they can be called great.

The Talmud in Yoma 35b tells us that "Hillel the Elder will in the future prove to all poor people (that they could have studied Torah)." Hillel was the Nasi, the leader of his generation, a great sage and pious personality

but it wasn't these characteristics which defined Hillel. The Talmud describes Hillel's financial condition; he would work for a menial sum per day, half of which would provide for his sustenance and the other would pay for his Torah studies. One day, Hillel hadn't found work, and therefore could not afford to pay the fee to enter the Beth Hamidrash where he would study. With his desire to study burning strong within him, he climbed onto the roof of the Beth Midrash so that he could partake in the Torah lectures down below by peering through the skylight. So immersed was he in his learning that he didn't pay attention to the snow that was falling and slowly covering him. It kept on going until he was entirely covered, and not realizing the development of events, Hillel froze under the snow and fainted. Morning came and Shemaya and Avtalyon, the Torah teachers, noticed that the Beth Midrash's skylight was being blocked by some form; it was then when they discovered Hillel in the position he had placed himself.

It is this particular incident which defines Hillel's greatness and which the Talmud uses to teach a lesson to all poor people who are incessantly toiling for their livelihood. Like Yossef HaTzadik, Hillel rose to greatness by shining in very low moment in his life. "In our low moments, He (Hashem) remembers us (Tehillim 136:23)." Hashem notes the low moments of a person's life and how they overcame them and rose to greatness. These are the moments that define a person in Hashem's Eyes. We must keep this in mind when challenges arise; these are the moments we are being tested.

It is likewise stated in the verse introducing Avraham's test of offering his only son as a sacrifice, "And Elokim (Hashem, manifesting rigor) tested Avraham (Bereshit 22:1)." Avraham was tested at a time when Hashem displayed rigor and judgement towards him, to see if he would pass the challenge.

When we pass the challenges Hashem presents us with during our low or difficult points in life, not only does Hashem reward us, but we develop for ourselves skills to overcome more difficult situations in life.



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Soul Of the Rif

A person needs to know that they must do hishtadlut (taking practical steps to achieve something) even if they do not immediately see the gains and the salvation that they imagined they would have as result of their efforts.

In many areas in life, one needs to start, and slowly, over time, one sees success. Over the course of time, one can see the Heavenly assistance; however, if a person starts something and expects to see success right away, this will not be, as life does not work this way. Sometimes, Hashem moves quickly and shows a person great favor, whilst on other occasions, He wants a person to exert effort and toil, and attain his goals only through effort. Therefore, if you do not see the success that you wanted and you feel that you deserve it, do not despair. Keep going and in the end, you will get there.



2nd Shabbat Meal

"And Hashem will remove from you every sickness and all of the evil maladies of Egypt which you knew, He will not place on you, but on all of your enemies."

A person must pray that evil things should not happen in the world, because if evil descends to the world, it will inevitably take hold of something. In this week's Torah portion, the Torah tells us, "And Hashem will remove from you every sickness and all of the evil maladies of Egypt which you knew, He will not place on you, but on all of your enemies." Hashem guarantees that all sickness and forms of evil which happened in Egypt will not happen to us, but to our enemies. The obvious question must be asked: Surely, it would be enough to say that Hashem will save us and these things will not happen to us. Why do we need the vengeance which will take place against our enemies?

Perhaps we can provide an answer based on the following concept. Our teacher, Rav Shalom Sharabi (Rashash) instituted a prayer which is said on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, in which the following verse is said twelve times, equivalent to the twelve months of the year. "Your word Hashem stands forever in Heaven" (Tehillim 119:89). This is an important prayer of the Rashash in which we ask of Hashem that evil not descend into the world. It is stated in the name of the Rashash that we pray that the evil should remain in Heaven, because if it comes to the Earth, it will have to take hold of something. For example, if G-d forbid, it was decreed that a certain sickness should descend, it would have to come, and if it did not take hold of a bad person, it would affect a good person. Therefore, we must avoid cursing, and even cursing our enemies, because at the moment a person pronounces a curse, they bring evil down into the world. If the evil thing does not impact one's enemy, it can even impact one's friend. In the event that the bad does not adhere to someone or something, it will travel around the world until it does. Therefore, we pray that Hashem should keep anything evil in Heaven and not allow it to descend, neither for bad people nor for good people. Preferably, it should stay up there, for once it has come down, it can escape from an evil person and harm a good person. Our rabbis teach that repentance, prayer and charity remove the evil of the decree. It can be asked, why did they not say "annul the evil of the decree"? The answer is that there is no reality in which we can annul it altogether, but it can be moved from one place to another. Therefore, a person needs to be careful, because if evil descends, it must take hold of something. The Mishna (Avot 3:5) records a statement of Rabbi

Nechunya ben Hakaneh, who says that whoever accepts upon himself the yoke of Torah, the yoke of the government and worldly matters is removed from him. If there is a yoke of worldly matters, it can only be removed from a person and go to someone else. If a problem exists, it has to land on someone specific, it cannot remain without a solution. It is of course better if the evil does not come down into the world at all, as it can cause great damage if it does enter the world. Likewise, we see that Hashem told Avraham, "Do not send forth your hand against the lad and do not do anything to him." Avraham immediately searched for something that he could bring in place of Yitzchak, as it says "Avraham raised his eyes and saw a ram caught in the thicket by its horns, he went and took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son." Once again, one can ask why Avraham made such an effort to bring the ram in place of his son; by this time, Hashem had already told him that he did not need to offer his son, and it seemed that all was over. Why then did he look to find something to offer in place of his son? Avraham knew that the judgment was that Yitzchak be slaughtered, so he had to offer something instead or a disaster could result. The holy mystical writings teach about an ancient custom that if a member of a family was sick, they would go and sell the sickness to a gentile, because if evil descends to the world, it would have to take hold of someone, so they would do this to transfer the sickness from their relative. The Gemara (Berachot 62b) tells of how the attribute of judgment was against Rabbi Eliezer, and there was a snake in the bathroom waiting to strike him as he entered. The Gemara recounts that a gentile pushed him and took his place and the snake killed him instead of Rabbi Eliezer. If evil is decreed, it must take effect, therefore a person must always try through every method to ensure that it does not enter the world, for if it does, someone will definitely be affected by it. This is the meaning of the statement of King David (Tehillim 30:2), in which he said: "I will praise you Hashem because you have raised me up and not caused my enemies to rejoice." King David thanked and praised Hashem for making him poor and giving him sustenance, for poverty and pain can take the place of death. Therefore, the Torah says "And Hashem will remove from you every sickness and all of the evil maladies of Egypt which you knew, He will not place on you, but on all of your enemies." Since it is the case that if evil enters the world, it must take hold of someone, the Torah specifies that Hashem will place it on our enemies.

Q & A with the Rif



Question:

Dear Rav, we got married in the knowledge that we would merit to a house of Torah. However, we have now seen that the husband has become more relaxed in regard to his avodat Hashem (service of G-d) and learns almost no Torah. This causes me pain, because I do not have the merit of having such a house. What are we supposed to do in order that we have a house of Torah?

Answer:

A husband and wife are partners, if a wife strengthens herself and builds her closeness to Hashem without arguments, through this, she can raise her husband. In the same way as a person donates money and declares "I donate entirely L'shem Shamayim [for the sake of Heaven]," even though the recipient does not act with such noble intention, the giver receives reward for acting with pure intent in any case, and in the end, the recipient will also act L'shem Shamayim.

The wife should strengthen herself in her connection to Hashem; as she acts L'shem Shamayim, her husband will end up doing the same, and he will learn Torah and do other things properly also.





3rd Shabbat meal

"And now, Yisrael, what does Hashem your G-d ask of you? Only that you fear Him, and go in all of His ways." The one hundred blessings which a person makes on a daily basis save him from accusation and strengthen his body.

The Gemara (Menachot 43b) says that every Jew must make one hundred blessings per day. This is learnt from the Parsha (weekly Torah portion). It says:

"And now, Yisrael, what does Hashem your G-d ask of you? Only that you fear Him, and go in all of His ways."

Rashi there comments:

The Gemara teaches not to read the word as "mah" [what], but me'ah [one hundred]. If we count all of the letters in the pasuk, there is a total of ninety-nine, if we add the letter Alef to the word "mah" it comes to a total of one hundred.

The Midrash (Tanchuma, Korach 12) tells of how there was a plague in the time of King David, and one hundred people would die from it every day. He instituted that people should make one hundred blessings a day to remove the accusation from upon the nation, and subsequently, no one died in the plague.

There is a connection between reciting one hundred blessings per day and the Gemara (Sanhedrin 38b) which says that when Adam was originally created, Hashem made his height from the Earth to the Heavens, so that man on a conceptual level would link the earthly matters with the spiritual world, making them as one. Likewise, Yaakov saw in his dream, there was a ladder standing on the Earth, whose head reached the sky (Bereishit 28:12).

However, after Adam sinned, and ate from the Tree of Knowledge, the Gemara and the Zohar (Bereishit 53b) teach that Hashem placed His hands on Adam's head and reduced him from a height of one hundred cubits, which are equivalent to the one hundred blessings recited every day. When a person makes one hundred blessings, each blessing fixes, sanctifies and raises part of a person's body, in equivalence to the one hundred cubits of Adam, the first man.

In light of this, a person should try to achieve this every day, and in particular on Shabbat, as the Amida prayer on Shabbat has only seven blessings rather than eighteen. One should therefore be particular to count every blessing he makes on food, drink and sweet-smelling fragrances in order to reach a total of one hundred blessings.

The concept of one hundred blessings can also be explained as being equivalent to the one hundred cubits of the height of the Temple, which the Mishna (Middot 4:6) teaches was one hundred cubits tall.

When a person makes one hundred blessings per day, he purifies and sanctifies himself, and the same is stated in the prophet (Shmuel 2, 23:1), which refers to David as "the man who upheld al" which has a numerical value of one hundred, hinting to the one hundred blessings he instituted. Therefore, a person should be careful to count one hundred blessings, ensuring that he reaches this total every day, as they remove accusations from a person. When they are not made, people die, and the one hundred blessings protect a person's physical strengths.

"And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and in your gates."

A Mezuzah has great power to guard and protect a person from all forms of evil. We are about to enter the month of Elul, a time of mercy during which time we pray for forgiveness. During this month, the custom of dedicated Jews is to check their Tefillin and Mezuzot.

We see how Mezuzah is a significant Mitzva; it guards a person. The early authorities debate if a person can put the Mezuzah up with intention that Hashem will guard them from all evil, or whether they should simply do the Mitzva for its own sake, and within the Mitzva, there is a charm that they will be saved from any evil.

The Yerushalmi (Pe'ah 1:1) tells the following story: Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi (known as Rebbi) received a gift of an exceptionally precious pearl from King Artavan; in return, Rebbi sent him an expensive Mezuzah. The king received the Mezuzah and was angry and offended, as he had sent a valuable gift and Rebbi had only sent him a Mezuzah. Rebbi told him that the Mezuzah is not like other gifts which need to be guarded, the power of a Mezuzah is that it can guard over a person. The king then concealed the Mezuzah in a hidden place.

The princess became sick and after several months, she entered a dire situation. The king then remembered that Rebbi had sent him a Mezuzah; he hung it in the entrance of his daughter's room. A few days later, she arose from her bed and recovered from her terrible sickness. The king rejoiced greatly and thanked Rebbi who had sent him the Mezuzah. A Mezuzah has the power to guard and save a person from difficulties and suffering, therefore, we write Sha-dai on Mezuzot, as this stands for SHomer Daltot Yisrael - the One Who guards the doors of Yisrael, as this is the Divine Name with which He guards a person's doorways from damage and any form of evil.

Our holy teacher, the Ari said that when an evil angel comes to cause damage, when he draws close to a person's house and sees the Mezuzah, he becomes afraid and does not cross the entrance of the house. Therefore, we should be particular that the Mezuzot of our houses be kosher, there are many which are not, this can cause a person to lack Heavenly protection and blessing. We should not simply pass through doorways but act as the Ari instructs. The Ari brings that every time a person passes a Mezuzah, he should think about the name "Shad-dai" which stands for Shomer Daltot Yisrael - He guards the doors of Israel, and humble himself before Hashem in his heart, only then should he pass through the door. Hashem will shower blessing and great light upon him in the merit of keeping the Mitzva of Mezuzah.



Treasure charms from the Rif



The time when the lights of Shabbat are dimming is an auspicious time for prayers to be answered.

They tell over that the Saba Kadisha (Holy Elder), Rabbi Meir Abuhatzzeira, used to say:

"The time on the Holy Shabbat when the Shabbat candles are dimming and the embers are rising, is the greatest time of appeasement, during which prayers will be accepted." Indeed, it is related that Rabbi Meir would wait for hours for the candles to be fully extinguished, all the while praying with his eyes closed. It is said that during this time, people would see tears falling from his eyes, and he would pray for all his requests as the candle light faded and the embers rose to Heaven. This is the loftiest moment of Shabbat, a time of mercy, when Hashem accepts prayers.



Rabbi Amram Ben Diwan

Rabbi Amram Ben Diwan passed away on the 9th of Av and buried on the 15th of Av. The 15th of Av was the day set as his Hilulah - the Hilulah of the great angel of G-d, as it was the conclusion of the week of Shiva following his passing.

Rabbi Amram Ben Diwan was a great Rabbi in Hebron, by Ma'arat HaMachpela (The Cave of the Patriachs) - he was of exalted holiness. Rabbi Amram had a son called Rabbi Chaim, who went to Morocco to collect money. Morocco was a city in which many Jews lived for 2,000 years and these Jews were involved in commerce. Therefore, just like today many go from Eretz Yisrael to collect money in America, so too in those days, many would go to Morocco to collect money for Eretz Yisrael. Those who went to Morocco to collect included hundreds of Tzadikim, such as Rabbi David Ben Baruch, Rabbi Amram Ben Diwan, Rabbi Pinchas HaKohen and Rabbi Daniel HaShomer.

The Jewish people have lived in Morocco for over 2,000 years. In fact, it is even said that the grave of King Solomon's son is situated in Morocco - what a revered place! Morocco is a place where the Jews enjoyed tranquillity, goodness and sustenance - a wonderful and calm place for the Jewish people.

The Chida (Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai), was a disciple of Rabbi Chaim Ben Atar. Rabbi Chaim Ben Atar was from Morocco and was a Kadosh Elyon. It is because of Rabbi Chaim's teachings, as related to the Chida and subsequently spread by him that we have the tradition to place notes into the Western Wall when visiting it.

The Chida journeyed from Eretz Yisrael to Morocco on numerous occasions with Rabbi Amram Ben Diwan in order to collect funds to support those living in Eretz Yisrael. The problem was that they did not have enough money to even pay the ship fare. Therefore, these holy Tzadikim would board the ships as workers responsible for shovelling coal on the ship's journey, in return for travelling free of charge.

The Chida related that on one occasion he travelled on a ship with Rabbi Amram during a time of war between different countries. Travelling entailed significant risk, as ships were being bombed. Yet despite the danger, Rabbi Amram travelled to Morocco, risking his life, in order to collect funds for the Jews living in Hebron.

The Chida related that on a second occasion, Rabbi Amram travelled to Morocco while fleeing from Eretz Yisrael. The backstory was as follows:

One day, Rabbi Amram descended into the Ma'arat Hamachpela and the local ruler became enraged when he heard this. He questioned why Rabbi Amram had gone down, as this was unnecessary! The ruler suspected that there was gold hidden down there which Rabbi Amram had gone to retrieve. He was also convinced that Rabbi Amram had gone there to perform sorcery and other negative practices. Therefore, the ruler issued an edict, imposing the death sentence on Rabbi Amram.

When Rabbi Amram heard this, he feared for his life, and therefore fled with his son, Chaim, to Morocco. While in Morocco, he journeyed around and performed miracles. He was a true Kadosh Elyon and Tzadik.

[As an aside, it is known that there is a debate amongst the Rishonim (early commentators) as to the manner in which the Forefathers and Foremothers were buried. Some maintain that husbands and wives (for example, Abraham and Sara) were buried side by side, whilst others maintain that the men and women were buried separately].

One can see that Rabbi Amram's grave consists of a pile of stones. Why is this so?

This pile of stones is there because they built a grave for him many times, but each time, upon waking in the morning, they found that the grave was broken. They repeated this many times, however it was always broken by the next morning, there was just a pile of rubble. Therefore, after restoring it dozens of times unsuccessfully, they realised that Rabbi Amram simply wanted there to be a pile of stones commemorating him, rather than a grave. Therefore, they left it as a pile of stones.

Many have experienced miracles at the grave of Rabbi Amram. In fact, we can testify that we had a personal miraculous experience at the grave. During trying times, when we were undergoing a pressing challenge, we accepted a Kabbalah (an undertaking) upon ourselves and saw a supernatural miracle at the grave of Rabbi Amram Ben Diwan. This is a place where those who want to work on themselves can regain purity and cleanse themselves.

His tomb is exceptionally holy. Rabbi Amram Ben Diwan died by sanctifying G-d. He was persecuted, fled to Morocco. He then turned to Hashem and said that my son is sick because of me, because I fled (because he was persecuted by the government), therefore I will die as an atonement for my son and he shall live. Regarding Rabbi Amram Ben Diwan, people saw awesome miracles beyond nature.

Rabbi Amram Ben Diwan is certainly sitting in the Heavenly Court. Indeed, it is written in the holy sefarim that Hashem has a Heavenly Court, on which He sits, and He brings the holy souls of Tzadikim to join Him in judgment. These Tzadikim are good, merciful and constantly seeking to see the best in the Jewish people and judge them with love. Furthermore, it is precisely those Tzadikim whose graves the Jewish people constantly visit, that sit on the Heavenly Court and seek to find favour within all the Jewish people. That is why Hashem implanted within us the urge to visit these great Tzadikim.

We can be certain that Rabbi Amram Ben Diwan sits on the Heavenly Court. And as such, each time one visits his grave, he is aroused to find favour within the Jewish people. Rabbi Amram Ben Diwan is a powerful force, whose influence is great and whose legacy inspires us.



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