

Derech Ha-rif

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

For the Torah portion of re'eh | Volume 38 | 2 Eloh



First Shabbat Meal

"Judges and officers you shall appoint in all your gates (Deuteronomy 16:18)."

A person must place judges and officers in all of his entranceways.

Our holy teachers note how the week of Parshat Shoftim always falls out during the month of Elul. There are seven openings through which things can enter a person's body: Two eyes, two ears, two nostrils and the mouth. Through the eyes, a person sees, the eyes are the two entrances through which things enter someone, as what they see enters them. That which a person sees is not neutral. The holy Ari said that not only is wine touched by a gentile rendered Yayin Nesech and forbidden to drink, but even wine which a gentile looked at becomes Yayin Nesech, for based on Kabala, after being seen by a gentile, such wine takes on the denigrative status of Yayin Nesech.

People often assume that seeing something has no effect on them whatsoever, and based on this assumption, they think that whether a person saw something vividly or not makes no difference, but this is not so, in fact, sight has great power. The eyes are the entrance to a person's soul. If a person looks at holy things, those things enter via the gateway of the eyes into their soul. Indeed this applies if a person looks at a Sefer Torah, or at a Tzaddik, as is supported by the verse, "And your eyes shall behold your teacher (Isaiah 30:2)."

The ears are two of the other entrances. If a person hears Torah, they bring sanctity into themselves by way of their ears. If a person hears Lashon Hara (wicked speech), the poison and impurity of these words enters them. The opening of the mouth is the place by which kosher food and food from a Seudat Mitzva enters; by eating these foods, a person can sanctify themselves. However, eating impure foods contaminates a person. By speaking Lashon Hara, a person contaminates themselves, whilst in contrast, by speaking words of Torah, they sanctify themselves. With their nostrils, a person can smell holy things and thereby elevate themselves. The nostrils also represent anger, as the verse says "Smoke went up into His nostrils (Psalms 18:9)", for anger departs via the nose.

Thus, there are seven gates through which a person can bring good or bad into their body. This is the meaning of that which is said in the prayers of Yom Kippur, that the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) would sprinkle the blood once above and seven times below. The one sprinkling upwards is in the direction of the Yetzer Hatov (Good Inclination) and the seven below are to the seven gates (of the body). If a person's seven gates are holy, they ascend as high as possible; if however, sanctity is not found in them, a person descends to the lowest possible level.

This is the Torah's intended meaning when it says, "Judges and officers you shall place for yourself in all your gates (Deuteronomy 16:18)." A person needs to place judges and officers in these seven gates, to guard their eyes, their ears, their nostrils and their nose. If a person places judges and guards in these places, they will experience divine assistance. However, if a person opens the door but does place judges and guards, all forms of evil can enter into them.

If a person closes all and does not give the Yetzer Hara (Evil Inclination) a way in, they dominate over it and over everything. However, the moment they leave somewhere open, this can cause unparalleled damage.

When something is complete it has power, however, when a person is defective, they are powerless and lose their strength. As long as an apple is whole, it can remain as it is for many days and not rot. The moment that part of it is damaged, it begins to rot quickly. When a person is complete, there is good within them, when they are not, they begin to rot quickly. Therefore, a person must place their judges and officers in their gateways, in order that there should be no fault, no matter how small, within a person.



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Soul Of the Rif

The line which we say during the prayers of the High Holy Days - "To you my G-d, is my wish" - is in reference to the fact that all of our wishes are not something separate to ourselves. In our prayers, we say that we are drawing near to You, Hashem. We undergo abstinence and reach out to Him of our own accord. Today, most of life revolves around a person's desires, things which are not their basic needs, and this is the most dangerous thing, and a person must be aware of it. How can a person purify their soul?

The more a person learns Torah and the more they are connected to Torah, the purer they become. This means not only reading it, but learning it and reviewing it; it means immersing oneself in the depths of Torah, thus connecting one's soul with it and living a pure life of Torah. Learning Torah, will enable one to discern between the two aforementioned forces, namely the Yetzer Tov and Yetzer Hara, and know which things are truly part of a person's life and existence and which things are merely from the Yetzer Hara and seek to lead them astray.



2nd Shabbat Meal

Chasing after honor brings destruction to a person and to the entire world.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 102a) tells of how Jeroboam ben Nevat was a tremendous Talmid Chacham (Torah scholar), to the extent that all the other sages were like grass of the field in his presence. At the time when the nation split into two, the tribe of Judah had Rehoboam as their king, and the rest of the nation had Jeroboam. Jeroboam was anointed as king by Ahijah the Shilonite, who was an exceptionally holy man. The Talmud (ibid. 101b) cites Rav Nachman who teaches that it was the arrogance of Jeroboam that removed him from the world. Three times a year, during the festivals, the Jewish people would ascend to the Temple. There is a law that only kings from the tribe of Judah can sit in the Temple courtyard, everyone else must stand. Jeroboam would arrive on the festivals and see Rehoboam, the king of Judah, sitting, whilst he, Jeroboam, would have to stand. Jeroboam thought that people would say that Rehoboam is the king, and he is the servant, on account of which they would honor Rehoboam more than him. He further speculated that were he to place a throne alongside Rehoboam, everyone would say that he is transgressing the Halacha, and rebelling against the king, and would therefore execute him.

The holy Torah tells us: The king sought counsel and made two golden calves, and he said to them "It is too much for you to ascend to Jerusalem. These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt (Kings 1, 12:28)!" Jeroboam took two golden calves and placed them as deities, one in Beit El and the second in Dan, and instructed the people to bow to them.

Relative to Jeroboam, the entire people were small in Torah, but because he thought that Rehoboam would sit while he would stand and they would honor Rehoboam rather than him, Jeroboam lost his portion in the World to Come. Jeroboam had received everything, he had been anointed as king by Ahijah the Shilonite, and indeed the Talmud tells us that there was no deficiency in the Torah of Jeroboam. However, despite all of this, because of the honor which he sought, he committed one of the most severe sins, causing him to lose his portion in the World to Come and bring destruction to the nation.

How many people have ruined their world, and brought destruction to the world because of the thought 'He will sit and I will stand?!' A person needs to sanctify and purify themselves, as well as work on their character traits, because they can bring tremendous destruction to the world, simply on account of a thought along the lines of "he will sit, and I will stand?!" Similarly, in matters of money, a person can say "why does this person have and not me?" or "why does this person get and not I?" People cause incomparable damage to themselves through such outlooks.

During the month of Elul, a person needs to be careful to perform the strongest Teshuva (repentance) for matters which relate to honor, which externally appear like insignificant matters, for they can lead to ruin not only of oneself, but to the entire world.



Q & A with the Rif



Question:

Rabbi, we want to ask about our young son. He worries greatly about his younger brothers, and is constantly afraid of every minute thing and feels tremendous pressure. Is this something expected or does it require some sort of treatment?

Answer:

You need to calm him. A person needs to worry in a healthy manner. When a person has worries which are beyond healthy, regular levels, this is a sign that something is not right. When a child acts in an unusual manner, if they want clothing of an unusual color, wash their hands in a strange way, or do things in an unusual manner, there is something unusual about the child. When checking what is different, this must be done with wisdom and understanding.

If a child is careful and afraid, and is behaving in an overprotective manner, try to gently understand what is going on in the depths of their soul and find out if there is something which is disturbing them. Hashem should help that there be good news and great success.



3rd Shabbat meal

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We now begin a new week and a new month, the month of mercy and Selichot (prayers for forgiveness); this is an elevated time of tremendous connection to Hashem. Let us commence this auspicious time by understanding a striking concept. The holy Torah tells us in this week's portion, "Judges and officers you shall appoint in all your gates (Deuteronomy 16:18)." Our holy rabbis ask: This commandment is upon the nation of Israel as a whole to appoint judges and officers. Every word in the Torah is precise, in which case, it should have said "Place for yourselves" in the plural form?! What is the meaning of "you shall place for yourself" in the singular form?

The answer is that a person must know that if they judge others in a favorable manner, Hashem will judge them in the same manner. If a person judges others assuming them to be guilty, Hashem will judge them accordingly. A person is judged by Hashem in accordance with how they judge the world. If someone judges the world positively, Hashem will do the same for them, and bestow goodness and life upon them, leading them along a comfortable path in life. However, if a person judges others in the direction of liability and only thinks badly of them, Hashem will also judge them harshly, and life will be as difficult as can be for such a person. A person must work on themselves every day and every moment; everything they see must be judged favorably, and if they do so, their life will also be judged in such a manner. The more a person is harsh and thinks badly of their surroundings, the more they ensure that their life will be tough and the world around them will deal with them in a worse manner. As much as a person understands others and thinks about them in a positive light, the more Hashem will judge them favorably. In these days of mercy and Selichot before the Day of Judgment, one must exert themselves with all their might to think about the good in others, and stop living in the world of falsehood in which they currently reside. This world of falsehood is one in which people deal nicely with everyone and look at everyone positively, giving the impression they are friends with all and deal kindly with everyone, but internally, they think badly of others. Let us start to think positively about things and understand the other person. A person only sees that which is close to themselves, where things are easy for them to understand. When someone does something to them or attacks them in any way, they automatically assume that the other person is wicked and improper. The offended party often thinks "how much do I do for them, and how much distress do they cause me?" A person then judges everyone leaning towards guilt. A person must try to see the perspective of the other party, perhaps they made a mistake in their actions, or in their thoughts. They must judge others favorably and not assume they are guilty. When a person judges others assuming them to be at fault, they rope themselves in with their judgments, nothing goes well, as they turn their own surroundings into forces of judgment which are the most harsh. When a person judges others favorably, and tries to understand others in a favorable light, Hashem does the same when dealing with them and judges them favorably. The Talmud (Shabbat 127b) tells the story of a worker from the Northern Galil region who relocated to the south of Israel to work for a wealthy agriculturalist there. The worker decided not to collect any of his wage but have it retained by the employer for when he would decide to conclude his employment. He kept his entire due wage by his employer, who was a trustworthy sage. Three years passed and on the eve of Yom Kippur, the employee presented himself to his employer to collect his entire due sum, as he had decided that it was time to return to his family. The employer, in all sincerity, responded that he wouldn't be able to pay the wage at the moment as he had absolutely no liquidity available. The employee asked for an equivalent in fruit crop, but the employer again replied in the negative. He then asked if he could be paid in real estate, animals or any kind of movables, to which the employer responded that

he had nothing available whatsoever. Downcast but without expressing any complaint, the employee left northwards for his family. After Sukkot, the employer arrived at the employee's home, accompanied by three donkeys loaded with food, drink and presents. He paid the entire due sum and rejoiced with his employee, expressing his appreciation for his understanding. The employer informed his former employee that he was curious as to what was going on in his mind when he had heard that he (the employer) was bereft of assets. The employee explained that never at any point did he feel cheated or did he suspect the owner of lying. The very opposite, in fact. For each situation the owner responded in the negative, he imagined a positive reason why the owner couldn't fulfill his requests. "When I said I didn't have any money," began the employer, "what did you think of me?" The employee explained that he figured his employer had invested all of his capital into a unique business opportunity and therefore couldn't cover his debt. For each of his requests, the employee revealed how he favorably judged his employer and held no grudges against him at all. The employer was very touched and revealed that the very situations the employee imagined actually took place and had prevented him from paying up his due. He then blessed the employee wholeheartedly that because he had judged favorably, Hashem would in turn judge him favorably. The commentators on the Talmud teach that the employee was none other than Rabbi Akiva before he became a Talmid Chacham (Torah scholar). Indeed, the Talmud (Pesachim 49b) stated that Rabbi Akiva said: "Prior to becoming a Talmid Chacham, I would say: 'Who will give me a Talmid Chacham, so that I can bite him like a donkey.'" This informs us that initially Rabbi Akiva was closetted by preconceived negative judgments of others, which were there to seek to trap his lofty soul from reaching its full potential. However, from the moment that he took a step back and judged the employer favorably, with a wholesome and pure heart, he merited to become Rabbi Akiva. All of the difficulties which had previously spurned him were left by the wayside, and instead he was looked upon with tremendous favor in Heaven. From that moment onwards, he merited to be elevated and become Rabbi Akiva the great light of the people of Israel. Each person has meaningful moments during their life, in which they will be given the opportunity to conquer their Yetzer Hara and judge others favorably. Through these experiences, one will be able to rid themselves of the negative judgments they would have received and instead reach unparalleled lofty heights. One of the unique attributes of the month of Elul is that of judgment. Each day, Hashem delicately evaluates one's activities and specifically looks towards the way in which one judges other people. Hashem will assess whether one is able to view others in a positive light and attribute other people's seeming shortcomings to mistaken perception and the like, or whether the person's perception of others is shrouded in negativity. Hashem will look to see if the person views the world through tainted lenses in which he perceives others as simply being out to get him, with a scarred view of the world. This is why the Torah states: "Judges and officers you shall appoint in all your gates (Deuteronomy 16:18)" - to say that one ought to be a holy and clean judge, judging others with reasoned empathy and love. Indeed, when thinking about how to prepare for the month of mercy and Selichot, the first thing one should do is seek to judge others favorably.

Indeed, judging others favorably during the month of Elul, with positivity and love, extends to one's friends, one's parents, one's spouse, and the entire world. And in tandem with us judging others favorably, surely Hashem will reciprocate, such that we enter the month of Elul with favorable blessing. However, one should note, that this outlook is not solely reserved for Elul, to be applied for only one month and then discarded, rather it is a constant. Seeking to judge others favorably is an outlook which we can improve every moment, seeking to internalize this positive lens of love and view ourselves as people who judge others for the better. If we work on this, then surely Hashem will judge us favorably too.

Treasure charms from the Rif



People ask all the time for a Segula for success and Heavenly Assistance. In particular they ask for a Segula for financial success and security. The answer as to how to attain Heavenly Assistance can in fact be found in the hands of every person. A person ought to know that if they want to be blessed with Heavenly Assistance in financial endeavors, they should attach the Name of Hashem to everything. This can be achieved by saying phrases containing G-d's name, such as "With G-d's help" and "if G-d wills it," which quite literally bring Hashem's name into all their endeavors. The moment a person imbues their endeavors with reference to Hashem, this enables them to have great success and Heavenly Assistance, and the Almighty will be found in everything they do. However, if a person does things without connecting them to the Name of Hashem, Hashem is not with them, in which case, they will be led by the path of nature and the constellations, sometimes they will succeed and other times they will not. The moment a person connects Hashem's Name to something, then "The blessing of Hashem enriches and does not add sadness (Proverbs 10:22)" - a person can be assured that they will have Divine blessing to succeed.



The fourth Post Shabbat meal

Storys from the Rif

Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda Teitelbaum, the Yetev Lev

The following story is told about one of the great Tzaddikim, the Yetev Lev, who was a grandson of the Yismach Moshe. The Yismach Moshe was a tremendously holy man and his grandson was also a great Tzaddik.

It is said that the son of the Yetev Lev was deathly ill with a terrible sickness. The Yetev Lev sent him to all the expert doctors who sought to cure him. However, none were able to locate a cure and alleviate his pain. At this point, the Yetev Lev called several of his students and told them to go to the grave of the Noam Elimelech, a great Tzaddik. Given that his son was on the cusp of death with no cure in sight, the Yetev Lev retrieved some money, gave it to his assistants and told them take it with them to the grave of the Noam Elimelech and make the following declaration:

"If there is any Neshama (soul) in the world without someone to say Kaddish on its behalf, or if there is any Neshama in a low place with no one to raise it up, this money should be given as charity for the sake of elevating that soul. This is on condition that that same soul will ascend before Hashem and request that my son be healthy. If the condition is fulfilled, then the money will be given as charity L'iluy Neshama (for the ascent of the soul), and if not, it will not be given for its sake." The Yetev Lev understood that there are literally millions of Neshamot which have no one to say Kaddish on their behalf, and as such, they suffer tremendously. They suffer because there is no one to advocate on their behalf, and as such, when presented with the opportunity for Kaddish, Tzedaka, or Mitzvot to be done on their behalf - they jump at it. It was with this understanding that the Yetev Lev instructed his attendants to do the above.

Upon returning to the Yetev Lev's home, the attendants were astonished to see his son standing erect, fully healthy and completely transformed. They asked the boy what had happened, and he informed them that he had dreamt of an individual praying before Hashem on his behalf. He described the man's features and it perfectly mirrored those of the Noam Elimelech. The Noam Elimelech had grasped onto the Yetev Lev's Tzedakah and stormed the Heaven's on behalf of the Yetev Lev's son, saving his life.

There is so much we can learn from this incident. There are unfortunately endless Neshamot which depart this world leaving no descendants to recite Kaddish, or perform Mitzvot on their behalf. Therefore, how fitting it would be to designate a certain sum for Tzedakah and proclaim: "Whichever Neshama grasps this money first, should approach Hashem and seek mercy, and in return the money should be L'iluy Nishmata."

And indeed this is a tremendous Segula. When one undergoes hardship, one can designate a certain sum of money L'iluy Nishmat a certain person who perhaps has no one else to do so. That soul will then proceed before Hashem and serve as an advocate on their behalf and seek to resolve the hardship.

Thus we see that although there are unfortunately people who feel distant from Hashem, our actions can raise them up and inject their souls with newfound vitality and joy.

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