

Derech Ha-Rif

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

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First Shabbat Meal

"And Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon instructing them to communicate to the Jewish People and to Pharaoh, to take the Jewish People out of Egypt (Shemot 6:13)."

Ancestral merit lives on even after the righteous people have passed on

The Parasha begins with Hashem's instruction to Moshe and Aharon to begin the exodus process for the Jewish nation, however the narrative is abruptly interrupted, with a genealogical detailing of Moshe and Aharon. The motive of this genealogical revelation at this point in the narrative is not immediately evident and the Torah's decision to conclude with Moshe and Aharon's families, rather than continue onwards with the other tribes is even more perplexing.

Furthermore, another question which may provide insight into the above dilemma is as follows: When Aharon threw Moshe's miraculous staff onto the ground and it transformed into a snake, the staff was first transformed back into a staff before swallowing the snakes of the Egyptian sorcerers. They managed to magically repeat Aharon's feat of transforming a staff into a snake, but before they had a chance to do anything more, Aharon's staff swallowed their live snakes. What was Hashem wishing to communicate through this double miracle of a staff turning into a snake before reverting and then swallowing snakes as a lifeless staff?

The message that these miracles were intended to communicate is very powerful. The staff represents righteous ancestors and the merit of their good deeds, Zechut Avot. When Moshe and Aharon arrived before Pharaoh with their message that he must free the Jewish nation, Pharaoh refused. The following question must be asked: In what merit did they deserve to be freed, surely they were very similar to the Egyptians in their culture and lives? As the Midrash points out, "both the Egyptians and the Jews were serving idols."

Moshe responded with the staff, transforming it into something alive and returning it to its inanimate state. The staff represented righteous forefathers and the ephemeral power of their righteous deeds. The snake also symbolizes Sages, as the Mishna in Pirkei Avot says: "The bite of the Sages is like the breath of a scorpion (Avot 2:10);" the scorpion is like the snake. The staff, which is inanimate like the bodies of righteous people who have passed away, is the one to swallow the live snakes.

This also explains the Torah's going on a tangent of describing the genealogical origins of Moshe and Aharon.

It was to emphasize that they had all the ancestral merit to back them up, supporting both them and their Jewish brothers.

A practical conclusion of these teachings is that when one has the opportunity to obtain a blessing from a Rav or pray for what they need at the tomb of a saint, they should opt for the latter, as the power of ancestral merit is immense and surpasses all else.



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Soul Of the Rif

There are people who dominate others through imposing guilt upon them. This is a violent form of dominance, it is incorrect and not good. This form of conduct is one which can be found in a person's conduct at home, with one's family, in life as a whole, and it stems from faulty foundations. It is necessary to build life and the realities within life from an angle of positivity, goodness, love, brotherhood, seeking to see the good in others. One must see Hashem as the source of kindness in the world, rather than the source of seeing guilt in place of goodness on a daily basis, with an outlook which contains thoughts along the lines of, "Here, You did wrong." One needs to seek to find the good in things. Of course, if a person did something improper, one needs to put them in their place, but in a gentle manner. This is the idea expressed in the verse: "A soft word will break strong anger (Mishlei 25:15)", in that a "soft word" means a word shared in a gentle manner.



2nd Shabbat Meal

"I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as E-I Sha-ddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name Ado-nai (Shemot 6:3)."

A person who has faith and trust in tough moments and during times of failure will merit a great ascent and good times.

In this week's portion, we find that Hashem tells Moshe "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name Ado-nai." Hashem responds to Moshe in a harsh manner after he questioned why Hashem wanted to send him on a mission to the Jewish people. Let us ask, what is the meaning of "E-I Sha-ddai" - why did Hashem specifically use this Name?

Perhaps this can be answered based on the Gemara (Chullin 60b). The Gemara there tells of how the moon asked Hashem, "Since I said something fitting before You, that two kings cannot use the same crown [i.e., the moon and the sun cannot both have dominion), You reduced me?!" Hashem responded to the moon that the Tzaddikim will be named on account of it, such as Yaakov the Katan (small), Shmuel Hakatan, and David Hakatan. Based on this, we can explain that the word Sha-ddai is an abbreviation of David, Shmuel and Yaakov.

Even at the points when Yaakov was in pain and great anguish, and when David was pursued and suffered great distress, they remained strong and knew that better times awaited them in which they would ascend. The Amora (Talmudic Sage) Shmuel was one of the greatest Amora'im, yet he did not even merit to be called Rav Shmuel. With great strength, they accepted the Middat Hadin (attribute of judgment) of the ascent and descent with great joy and in the best manner.

This is the explanation of "with my name 'E-I Sha-ddai' I was not known to them," for this name teaches a lesson from Shmuel, David and Yaakov, who were great Tzaddikim, holy ones of the Supreme One, who underwent difficult periods, and despite pain and difficulty, they remained with great faith and trust in Hashem.

Likewise, every Jew must learn a great concept: Many times in life a person passes through difficult stages and periods, in which they undergo descents and fall into tough times which do not make sense. A person must learn from the moon, and from the Tzaddikim, Shmuel, David and Yaakov. This is one of the aspects of greatness of man: Even during challenging times, a person can remain with strong faith and trust. This is how a person must conduct themselves, and when a person walks in such a way, times of tremendous growth will come, in

which they will have great joy and Divine Help.

"And I will place a distinction between My people and Your people (Shemot 8:19)."

The four cups on seder night and the four ways of interpreting the Torah, repair the mental damage caused by the evil inclination.

In this week's portion, we read of how Hashem said, "And I will place a Pedut - distinction [lit. redemption]." Rabbi Yaakov Abuchatzzeira (the author of Pituchei Chotam) said that the letters 'Pei' and 'Tet' in the word 'Pedut' have the same Gematria (numerical value) as 'Lilit,' a force whose name should not be said aloud. Rabbi Yaakov said that the Four Cups which the Jewish people drink on Seder night, which correspond to the four exiles which Bnei Yisrael have undergone and been redeemed from provide a merit which distance us from the power of 'Lilit' by placing the letter 'Dalet' between the letter 'Pei' and the letter 'Tav.' In the merit of the letter 'Dalet' (in the word 'Pedut'), Am Yisrael are redeemed from the power of 'Lilit.' The following idea can be explained concerning the letter 'Dalet' and the four cups which are drunk at the Seder. The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 10:8) says that the mind is divided into four parts, two in the two kidneys, one in the mouth and one in the heart. The Midrash says that when a person drinks wine, he damages one of these four places; the first cup reaches the first kidney, the second cup reaches the second kidney, the third to the heart and the fourth in the mouth. This is the meaning of the statement that Adam drank wine, according to the view that he ate grapes, and through this, he brought evil into the world. When a person drinks wine on account of desire, a secret comes out (Eiruvin 65a). The Gematria of 'yayin' - wine, is seventy, which is the same as 'sod' - secret.

Therefore, a person must be aware of when they are drinking wine without thought, as this causes the power of the secret of the Divine Assistance to leave them. This was the sin of Adam. The power of these four cups which enter between the letters 'Pei' and 'Tav' are to fix a person's mind, through the four methods of expounding the Torah, which are PaRDeS - Pshat (the basic meaning), Drush (expounding), Remez (hint) and Sod (secrets). By internalizing these four methods, a person fixes the damage caused by 'Lilit,' which is caused by the Sitra Achra, who destroys and ruins all of its good portion, and this is the 'Pedut' - redemption, through which the Jewish people were saved and redeemed from every bad thing.

Q & A with the Rif



Question:

Dear Rabbi, it is said that the later Geulah (redemption) will be like the first one. In which case, is it really the case that only twenty percent of the Jewish people will be redeemed as happened in Egypt?

Answer:

The Jewish people need to have attachment to Hashem. "And your people are entirely righteous, forever, they are to inherit the Land (Yeshaya 60:21)." They merit great salvation and a sweetening of the judgment. The nation will merit to cling to Hashem, and whoever returns in Teshuva and clings to Him will merit to have a complete redemption.

In the days of the plague of darkness in Egypt, which were the time to return in Teshuva, people did not do so. If they had done so, they would all have been redeemed. However, since they did not perform Teshuva, "And in fives Bnei Yisrael ascended from the land of Egypt (Shemot 13:18)" - only one in five ascended. If only they had performed Teshuva, every single Jew would have been redeemed.

The same is true now - if everyone returns in Teshuva, everyone will be included in the future redemption.





3rd Shabbat meal

"And the frog ascended and covered all of Egypt (Shemot 8:2)."
Each person has the foundation of dedicating their soul as the frogs contributed this to the world.

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 67b) tells of how Rabbi Elazar would expound on the plague of frogs, teaching that there was one frog which spawned and filled all of Egypt. Rabbi Akiva taught that there was one frog in Egypt, they would hit it, and every time that it was struck, more frogs came out of it, forming the plague of frogs. Rabbi Elazar came to Rabbi Akiva and said, "Akiva, what do you have to do with words of Aggada (the textual rather than halachic parts of Torah), leave Aggada, and learn Nega'im (the laws of leprosy spots) and Ohalot (the laws of how contamination from the dead is conveyed in tents and buildings). What you say is not what happened, in fact the plague came about through one frog which made a great noise, and as a result, many other frogs came to it." [i.e., it was not that one frog spawned many as you said].

A difficulty must be asked, the Torah was given to all of us, and each person can express their view within the Torah, each person can argue and state their view. Rabbi Akiva wished to state his view that there was one frog, and because of the beating which they gave it, many other frogs came out. Why did Rabbi Elazar silence him and tell him to move from Aggada to matters of Halacha such as Ohalot and Nega'im?

Our Rabbis teach (Berachot 61b) that when the Romans took out Rabbi Akiva to murder him, it was the time of reciting the Shema. They were flaying his flesh with iron combs and Rabbi Akiva endured tremendous and unimaginable pain. His students asked him, "Is this how we shall see you dying?" He responded to them, "Throughout my entire life, I was disturbed in regard to the following verse 'And you shall love Hashem with all of your soul,' which means that one must love Hashem even if one has to give up one's life over it. I would say, when will the time come that I can fulfill this? Now that such a chance has come to my hand, will I not fulfill it?" His soul departed after this. The commentaries ask about the meaning of this phrase, "Throughout my life I was disturbed in regard to this verse, when would I have the opportunity to fulfill it?"

The explanation is like this: Hashem created man on the sixth day and not earlier. After completing all of creation, He said to the wild animals, the birds and more, "Let us build the best thing in the world, and each creation will make their own contribution." The lion gave of its strength, the eagle gave of its talent, each specimen gave something good of its own to the creation that was soon to be formed. What was the result? Adam, the first man was created, with all of the powers of creation within him. Therefore, the Mishna (Avot 5:20) states: "Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift like a deer and strong like a lion." A person can emulate all of these aspects. For example, a person can be bold as a leopard, because the leopard contributed its boldness to man, likewise a person can be light as an eagle, because all of the talents of animals are buried within a person.

When the animals made their contributions, the frog gave man two forms of strength: 1) The ability to sing and express Hallel to Hashem, and 2) The ability to give over one's soul.

In light of this contribution of the frog, the discussion of the Rabbis can be understood from a new angle. Rabbi Akiva was suggesting that the frog did not have this dedication, for it was not originally created with the ability of Mesirat Nefesh (giving up one's life for a cause), rather there was one frog from which the plague began. The others were born in a miraculous manner, and it was these others which gave up their lives, but they were not natural frogs. Based on the logic of Rabbi Akiva, it would emerge that people do not possess Mesirat Nefesh, for in his view, the frogs which gave up their lives (by entering Egyptian ovens) were formed by a miracle, and therefore, the original frogs (which Hashem created when creating the world) did not give humanity the ability to give up one's life for a cause.

Rabbi Elazar told him to stop dealing with Aggada, as we had in fact received the ability to give up our lives from the frogs, who had this characteristic as part of their nature. Therefore, you [Rabbi Akiva] should go and learn Ohalot and Nega'im. It was therefore difficult for Rabbi Akiva throughout his life to give it up, he was waiting for the moment to say "Shema Yisrael" with dedication of his soul. Rabbi Elazar told him to study another section of Torah because he was denying the human ability of giving up one's soul. The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim 150) teaches that when King David finished writing the book of Tehillim, his mind moved (i.e., he became distracted). The Midrash says that a frog came to him and said, "David, why has your mind shifted? I say thousands of praises to Hashem every moment." Upon hearing this, David immediately became silent. We asked the question, how could one frog possibly rebuke King David and why was he silent? The answer is as we have said, the power of praising Hashem is sourced in frogs, who contributed this ability to the world. David was silent because he received this power from frogs.

The Tachash was an animal which existed only for the sake of the Mishkan. The question is asked, why was it not created at the time when the world was created? The Gemara tells us that the skin of the Tachash was very beautiful. If it had been present when the world was created, it would have contributed immense beauty to man, which would have been misused for sinful purposes. Hashem therefore created it only for the Mishkan and not at the earlier point when the world was created.

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Treasure charms from the Rif



We have a tradition from our Rabbis, that anyone who completes the recitation of each week's Torah portion with Rashi's commentary, can be assured that, when they reach the World to Come, they will at the very least be welcomed into the Beit Midrash (study hall) of Rashi.

In this light, my holy grandfather, even when ill, was particular to never miss completing each weekly Torah portion with Rashi's commentary.



The fourth Post Shabbat meal

Stories from the Rif

Rabbi Yisrael Abuhatzeira, known as the Baba Sali, was a leading Moroccan Rabbi.

It is known that during his life he was promised by Eliyahu HaNavi (the prophet) that we would merit to see the coming of the Mashiach. However, a short while before Rav Yisrael passed, he summoned a small group of Tzaddikim and informed them that the promise had been canceled and he needed to return his soul to Hashem before the Mashiach would come. He continued, that in return for the promise having been canceled, a negative decree in the world had been canceled and with that he retrieved some alcohol and made a L'Chaim with the Tzaddikim.

Rabbi Yisrael has incredibly powerful merits, which we have personally been privy to experience during trying times. Some years ago, our organization 'Shuva Yisrael,' and in particular, our flagship Yeshiva in Ashdod, went through challenging times, which threatened the continued existence of our organization. A few nights before Rav Yisrael's Yom Hillula (death anniversary), we dreamt of Rav Yisrael. In the dream, Rav Yisrael was standing on the roof of the Yeshiva's building. We asked what he was doing there, to which he responded that he was serving as a shield against all the negative forces opposing the Yeshiva. A few days later, on the day of his Hillula, the troubles suddenly stopped, and Shuva Yisrael formally obtained ownership of the Yeshiva location in Ashdod, which remains the premier site of Shuva Yisrael to this day. This incident assured us that the powerful merit of the Baba Sali remains tangible even today.

Rabbi Yisrael Abuhatzeira was a soul with whom all the Jewish people are associated; accordingly, he fervently sought good for all the Jewish people. In this vein, his father, Rabbi Masud Abuhatzeira, warned him from when he was young to refrain from cursing anyone, and to be especially particular with his speech. This was the reason why he was called 'the one who bestows blessings,' in that Rabbi Yisrael Abuhatzeira was someone who bestowed blessings on others. When Rabbi Yisrael arrived on the shores of Eretz Yisrael, a great Tzaddik, called Rav Alfandari, heard that Rav Yisrael had arrived. Rav Alfandari was ecstatic upon hearing of Rav Yisrael's arrival, and contrary to his common practice, he went to meet with Rav Yisrael. When Rav Alfandari entered Rav Yisrael's room, he was taken by Rav Yisrael's countenance, and despite being far older than Rav Yisrael, he bowed his head before Rav Yisrael. The elderly Rav Alfandari understood that Rav Yisrael was the pillar of prayer in the generation and therefore requested a blessing from him.

For context, Rav Alfandari was a towering sage and Tzaddik. One story told about him is that on one occasion, he traveled to Italy to collect funds for the Jews living in Eretz Yisrael. It happened to be that there had been an earthquake in Italy just prior to Rav Alfandari's arrival. When Rav Alfandari arrived, the local Jews were engaged in a fierce debate as to which scientific phenomenon had caused the earthquake. Rav Alfandari was alarmed by the debate and promptly announced that the earthquake had been brought about by Hashem alone; any scientific phenomenon had simply been part of Hashem's Divine will. As if to prove his point, he then beseeched Hashem to cause another earthquake, and sure enough Rome was hit with a further earthquake at that moment. The above story sheds light on Rav Alfandari's greatness and can help us appreciate the magnitude of his statement that Rabbi Yisrael was the pillar of prayer in his generation.

It is incumbent upon us to understand that although Rav Yisrael is no longer with us physically, his prayer still accompanies us, such that if we mention his name and seek that he pray to Hashem on our behalf, surely, he will open the gates of Hashem's mercy upon us.

We heard the following story about the Baba Sali from someone who is still alive who witnessed it with his own eyes. This person is a scholar of note, Ba'al Yirat Shamayim (one who fears Heaven), who is not prone to making up stories. He recounted that three-years prior to the Baba Sali's passing, his attendants wheeled him outside to make the special monthly prayer on the new moon. The Baba Sali was excited to make the prayer, understanding the great depths which lay behind the blessing. When they exited the building and looked skywards, they were dismayed to discover that the moon was concealed by thick clouds, and thus they would be unable to recite the blessing. The witness relates that upon seeing this, the Baba Sali raised his walking stick toward the sky and waved it to the left and then to right, at which point the clouds split and the sun became visible. The people were delighted and proceeded to recite the blessing with great gusto and devotion.

After the recitation, the men turned to the Baba Sali and queried as to how he had performed the miracle. They proclaimed that surely, he must be a wizard! The Baba Sali dismissed their assertion and proceeded to explain why he had merited to say the moon prayer. He explained that when he had been a young child, of fifteen or sixteen years old, there had been a civil war in Morocco. He related that vicious thugs had run rampant in his village and bullets had been flying in all directions. One day, it had been the time to recite the blessing on the moon and despite the dangers of going outdoors, he had risked his life amongst the bullets to go out and recite the blessing. The aged Baba Sali turned to the people and said that seeing as he had been particular to observe this practice his entire life, even under trying circumstances, Hashem had ensured that he had been able to continue doing so at the end of his life.

The Baba Sali was joyful throughout his entire life. He underwent many challenges in life but always viewed life through the lens of optimism. His life can perhaps be summed up by the incident below.

The Baba Sali lived during the 1967 six-day war. This was a time during which Eretz Yisrael was perched on the precipice of destruction. Yet during the entire time, the Baba Sali sat and learnt with his students. Even when reports of Jewish casualties reached them, the Baba Sali would cry bitter tears and then rejoice. He personified care for others, and couldn't restrain himself from weeping, yet he was simultaneously enraptured by unwavering faith in Hashem, which compelled him to delight with boundless joy.

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