

Derech Ha-Rif

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

For the Torah portion of Yitro | Volume 61 | 24 Shevat



First Shabbat Meal

"And Yitro, the father-in-law of Moshe, took sacrifices for Hashem; Aharon and all the elders of Israel came to share a meal of bread before Hashem."

One must express gratitude to everyone who grants them goodness.

The Talmud in Taanit 7a equates the falling of rain to Techiat Hametim, the Resurrection of the Dead; the goodness that comes when it rains is equivalent to the dead coming back to life. Rain is essential to all life and as such we pray for the yearly allotment of rain Hashem grants with the prayer of rain recited on Shemini Atzeret, the last day of Sukkot.

In the Ashkenazi rite of prayer, there is an interesting clause which calls for deeper insight. "In the merit of the one who focused his will and rolled the boulder off the mouth of the well (Yaakov Avinu), in his merit do not withhold water (rainfall)." When Yaakov arrived in Haran, the city where his mother's family dwelt and where he was to find his future wife, he came across a well whose opening had been covered by the local shepherds with a great boulder. Soon after his cousin and soon to be wife, Rachel, arrived with her flock of sheep. With heavenly intuition, Yaakov saw that she would be his wife and thus, with one effortless move, removed the stone from the opening of the well.

Summarising Yaakov and Rachel's first meeting, seeing that Rachel would be his wife, Yaakov did the natural thing to help her out. What then was so outstanding in his action that we beseech Hashem to not refrain from granting rain in his merit? After all, Yaakov was helping out a cousin, someone who was to be his wife, and whose family was shortly going to provide for his basic necessities (as Yaakov had arrived penniless, after being robbed by Elifaz, Esav's son, on the way). What was so great that we pray for the immense goodness of rain to arrive in the merit of his action?

This teaches us a great lesson in the practice of gratitude. No matter how relatively insignificant an action may seem, gratitude must be expressed to the doer of that kindness.

We find this great attachment to expressing gratitude with King Shaul when he was on the verge of attacking Amalek. He sent out a message that all the descendants of Yitro should leave from amidst Amalek, lest they be felled along with them.

Yitro and his descendants were owed thanks for the meal which Moshe, Aharon, and all the Elders benefited from. Even many generations later, King Shaul was careful to recognize the appreciation of the Jewish nation to Yitro and his descendants.

How careful must we be in recognizing and expressing gratitude for every goodness that is done to us, no matter how small it may seem



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Soul Of the Rif

One should always have one's feet on the ground and conduct oneself in a serious manner. A person should constantly consider the correct way to conduct themselves and not be concerned that others will laugh and scoff at them. A person may be tempted to engage in negative activities, but instead, one should know to place themselves in the right place and in the most serious place.

When a person does this, they open the path of truth for themselves. However, if one solely follows their instinctive desires then they will slowly lose themselves, with their sense of self and goodness slowly vanishing.



2nd Shabbat Meal

"Now I know that Hashem is greater than all of the gods, on account of the matter in which He dealt deliberately with them (Shemot 18:11)."

A person suffers according to the sins which they have performed

In this week's portion, we read of how Yitro declared, "Now I know that Hashem is greater than all of the gods, on account of the matter in which He dealt deliberately with them." Rashi comments that the Egyptians wished to destroy the Jews through water, by throwing their sons into the river, and they were punished accordingly by being drowned in the Red Sea.

In light of this, Yitro's statement can be explained as containing a key concept. Many times, a person suffers and undergoes problems in life. A person must know that when they experience a travail, or challenge, if they wish to solve it, they need to search and ascertain the type of problem they face. By doing so, they will determine which sin they have done. Every distress which a person undergoes has a reason behind it, each sin is similar to the punishment which a person receives. The Egyptians threw the Jewish children into the water and were punished by being drowned in water. When undergoing punishment or distress, one should investigate and find something within their deeds which is similar to their trouble. Upon finding something similar to the sin that one has done, you can resolve the thing which you did wrong and the trouble will cease.

In regard to every problem which a person has, if one assesses it deeply, and seeks out something negative and similar to it which they have done, if they then engage in Teshuva, Hashem will solve the problem that they face. Our holy Rabbis say, "To You Hashem is kindness, for You repay each person according to his deeds (Tehillim 62:13)." Hashem did a kindness with us by repaying each person with a punishment which is similar to the sin that they have done. Therefore, a person must know a key concept, namely, that if they ever face trouble, they should evaluate their deeds, and search for something similar to the problem that they face. For example, if a person attacks other people, they may be attacked; if one steals, they may be robbed; if a person causes grievement to others, they too may be aggrieved. If a person explores their deeds and returns in Teshuva in regard to that which they did, Hashem will forgive them and their problem will stop. This is a major concept in life, "For you pay each person according to their deeds," for the punishments people receive are similar to the sins they performed.

And he said to Moshe, "I am Yitro, your father in law, coming to you (Shemot 18:6)."

A person must know not to use the power of Torah and Mitzvot for their unimportant needs.

In this week's portion, we read of how Yitro came in the direction of Bnei Yisrael. He sent a message to Moshe, saying: "I, Yitro, your father in law, am coming to you." Let us ask the question, why did Yitro send such a message? We all know that Yitro was Moshe's father in law, and Moshe knew exactly who his father in law was. What does Yitro come to teach us through this?

A tremendous concept can be explained. Sometimes, a person may wish to receive a reduction in price for something, and in order to receive it, they request a reduction on account of the Torah and good deeds that they have done. The Chovot Halevavot (Sha'ar Yichud Hama'aseh chapter 5) writes that there was one devout person who wished to acquire an object and entered a shop. The shopkeeper saw him and said, "You are a great Tzaddik. Since you are a great rabbi, I will give you the item for free." The Tzaddik left the store and declared, "I do not wish to buy. I came to buy it with money, I did not come to acquire it by means of the Torah, Mitzvot and honour that I have."

For a person who is a true Tzaddik, it is forbidden to acquire something using the Torah and/or good deeds that they have as currency. Yitro was a great and prominent man, and he knew that if he were to come to Bnei Yisrael and make his status known, everyone would honour him. He therefore said, "I am your father-in-law, Yitro," meaning to say, I come with the honour of being your father in law, honour me for this. In other words, do not honour me on account of my wish to come near to the Jewish people, do not mix the Mitzvot and good deeds which I have done into the equation, I do not wish to take any benefit from the Torah. This is a key concept which a person must be aware of. Many times, a person tries to get a reduction from another, or they try to do something and they use the power of their Torah or good deeds as a reason to reduce the price, but this is not the correct way. Never pay for something with the Torah or Mitzvot that you have done. Use something else, either merchandise or money, and preserve the Torah and sanctity for another time and another place. Be careful not to lose the high levels of the Torah and Mitzvot for empty things.

Q & A with the Rif



Question:

Dear Rabbi, ten years ago, we renovated our house, and since then, we have undergone a difficult spiritual downturn in terms of our children, and in general, we have problems all the time. Not a long time ago, we discovered that our neighbour, who is a religious person, deals with impure things. We wanted to ask the Rabbi's opinion of what we should do. Perhaps the neighbour's actions are impacting our household?

Answer:

It is necessary to understand what impure things are. In general terms, this question is not connected. Several times in the past, the question has been asked by people who wanted to build and improve a house in which a couple who divorced had lived, or a couple who died had lived. The advice we gave was to go ahead, make the improvements, do a Chanukat Habayit (inauguration of a house) and there is no problem. If you worked on renovating the house once and it did not work, then do so again. If that does not work, then relocate, as a person can change their fortune by changing their locale. In regard to the suggestion of a bad neighbour, we do not believe in such things. If it is not good for you, they will go to another place.





3rd Shabbat meal

"And Yitro, the father in law of Moshe heard all that Hashem had done for Moshe and Israel, his people, for Hashem had taken Israel out of Egypt (Shemot 18:1)."

The level of one who learns Torah and teaches it to others.

"A person is born to toil (Iyov 5:7)." Our holy Rabbis expounded that the letters of the word 'La'amol' - 'to toil,' which are 'Lamed,' 'Ayin,' 'Mem' and 'Lamed,' spell out the phrase Lilmod Al Menat Lelamed - to learn in order to teach. There is great power in the Torah which a person learns and teaches to others. The Mishna (Avot 2:8) teaches that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai would say: "If you have learnt great quantities of Torah, do not claim credit for yourself, for you were created for this purpose." Our holy Rabbis expounded that the main purpose of a person's creation is so that they can teach the Torah that they have learnt to others.

The Talmud in Sotah (49b) elucidates the following verse: "Her mouth opens with wisdom and a Torah of kindness is on her lips (Mishlei 31:26)." The Talmud asks, is there a Torah which is of kindness and a Torah which is not of kindness? The Talmud answers that Torah which is learnt for its own sake is termed Torah of kindness and Torah which is not learnt for its own sake is a Torah which is not one of kindness. Some say that Torah learnt in order to teach others is considered a Torah of kindness, whilst Torah learnt without intention to teach it to others is not a Torah of kindness.

A person should know the great level of causing merit to others and the greatness of the continuative effect of that which he learns and shares with others. In the book of Bamidbar (10:29-32), we find the following verses: "And Moshe said to Chovav, the son of Re'u'el, the father-in-law of Moshe, "We are travelling to the place about which Hashem said 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will deal with you in a good way, for Hashem spoke well about Yisrael." And Yitro said to him, "I will not go, rather, I will go to my land and my birthplace." And Moshe said, "Please do not abandon us, for you know our encampments in the desert and you have been for us as eyes [i.e., a source of guidance]. And it will be that when you go with us, the good which Hashem will do for us, will be good for you as well."

It is difficult to understand why Moshe pressured Yitro so much and asked that he go with them to the Land of Israel. What is the significance within this episode for the people of that time and what lesson does it carry for future generations? It is necessary for us to understand the reason behind this request of Moshe that Yitro continue onwards with the Jewish people to the Land of Israel.

It is possible to explain based on the words of the Chatam Sofer (Chelek 1, p. 17). He raises a difficulty on the words of the prophet (Yeshaya 2:1-2) which read as follows: "The matter which Yeshaya, son of Amotz, envisioned about Yehuda and Yerushalayim. And it will be in the end of days: The mountain of the Temple of Hashem will be firmly established as the head of the mountains, and it will be exalted above the hills and all the nations will stream to it. Many people will go and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of Hashem, to the Temple of the G-d of Yaakov, and He will teach us His ways, and we will walk in His paths. For from Zion the Torah will come forth and the word of Hashem from Yerushalayim."

Based on these words, our teacher explains that Moshe thought that he would merit to enter Eretz Yisrael, and if he were to do so, there would be a complete repair. He believed that death would vanish forever and Techiyat Hameitim (the resurrection of the dead) would take place.

Then, all of the converts will be the students who will be taught the Torah of Hashem. For at the time of the complete redemption, the entire world will be filled with awareness of Hashem. Therefore, Moshe persisted in asking Yitro to enter the Land of Israel with them, in order that he would be the head of the converts and the students who would receive the Torah from the Jewish people. Moshe thought the complete repair which he believed would happen when he would enter into the Land would entail converts learning the word of Hashem [i.e., the Torah] from the Jewish people.

Based on these holy words, our holy Rabbis explain the wording of the Bracha (blessing) of the Torah. We say 'Notein HaTorah' - the One Who gives the Torah, i.e., in the present tense. The question is asked, why is the Bracha phrased in the present tense and not the past tense? The answer is that the Torah is eternal, and we are obliged to learn and teach it at every moment, and therefore, the wording used is 'Notein HaTorah' - the One Who gives the Torah.

It is incumbent upon us to strengthen ourselves in applying the following key concept which relates to understanding the Torah and attaching oneself to it. Every Jew has a source from which the root of his soul suckles and draws out the Torah. Each person must attach himself to his teacher, and therefore, for generations, people have been strict in fulfilling the dictum, "Make a teacher for yourself (Avot 1:6)." Crowds would gather around the Gedolim (great men) of the Jewish people, they would stand straight before them, thirstily drinking their words. Each generation had its leaders and those who sought them out. The generation of students would take strength from their teachers, the rabbis. When a Jew fulfils the instruction of our Sages and designates a teacher for himself, he must remove himself from doubt and sanctify this aspect of making a teacher for oneself in regard to his Torah, his conduct and his practices. The plot of the Yetzer Hara (Evil Inclination) is to come with new ideas, entering like small foxes which damage vineyards, in order to mislead and ruin the path of each generation learning from its teachers and each person assigning a teacher to himself.

Therefore, we need to be particular and live focused lives in which light rests without distraction, and then the fulfilment of the Torah will continuously move forward. Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua, and so too, from one generation to the next. G-d's faithfulness has been great, it will go on until the coming of the Mashiach, and whoever breaks a fence will be bitten by a snake.

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של הדוד

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Treasure charms from the Rif



There is a verse in the Torah concerning the sacrifices, which reads: "A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar, it shall not be extinguished (Vayikra 6:6)." Although on the surface this verse seems to refer to the sacrifices, on a meta-level, it alludes towards having constant purity of thought, mirroring the constant flame on the altar. Therefore, it is a segulah (charm) to recite this verse, and in so doing, ward off any derogatory thoughts.



The fourth Post Shabbat meal

Stories from the Rif

Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak of Peshischa was a tremendously holy person, to the extent that he is affectionately known as the Yid HaKadosh ('Holy Jew'). Below is a story concerning the Yid HaKadosh.

There was a wealthy man who lived in Peshischa who would often travel abroad for business. One day he travelled to Paris, a central metropolis of the time, in order to locate wares to purchase. While in a Parisian market, he spied a beautiful bundle of fabric, which surpassed anything he had ever seen. He approached the seller, and despite the astronomical asking price, decided that he couldn't forgo the opportunity to purchase the stunning cloth.

He purchased the fabric and brought it back to his small town of Peshischa. Upon arriving, he showed the fabric to the top tailor in town and instructed the tailor to use it to make an exceptional suit. The tailor excitedly obliged and assured the wealthy man that he would make him an exceptional suit.

The tailor worked delicately on the beautiful fabric and drew on his experience to thread together a masterpiece of a suit. He ensured that each curve perfectly accentuated the wealthy man's physique, and that the fabric's beauty glowed from the suit. After finishing the masterpiece, the tailor summoned the wealthy man. The man arrived and eagerly tried on the suit, yet upon putting it on, his eyes drooped, and his countenance became sombre. He turned to the tailor and said that the suit was horrible; in fury he began to curse the tailor. He claimed that the tailor had butchered the beautiful fabric and produced a hideous suit.

The wealthy man left the tailor's shop in disgust and began spewing horrible accusations about the tailor throughout the town. He stood in the town square and yelled that the tailor had taken his beautiful fabric and transformed it into a tattered mess! In the meantime, the tailor was distraught and couldn't believe what had happened. He knew that he was the premier tailor in town; he could tell someone's measurements by just looking at them and could create gems from even the simplest cloth. How could it be that the wealthy man was so dissatisfied with the suit, which he, the tailor, had worked so hard on?! Moreover, the wealthy man had destroyed his sterling reputation which he had spent so many years building!

In his angst, the tailor decided to visit the Yid HaKadosh and seek his counsel. He entered the Rabbi's home and broke down in tears. He explained that he had lovingly made the suit, yet the wealthy man had castigated his work before the entire town. Moreover, the wealthy man was now claiming the huge value of the fabric from him, which he simply didn't have! He bemoaned that he was the best tailor in town and simply couldn't understand how the wealthy man could be so dissatisfied with his work?!

The Yid HaKadosh listened patiently and issued his advice. He instructed the tailor to undo each of the stitches and remove each of the threads. He explained that when the tailor had made the suit the first time, he had been preoccupied with how great a tailor he was. This arrogance had seeped through into the garment and given it its ugly look. He therefore instructed him to undo each of the stitches and rethread the suit with simplicity and humility. The tailor did as instructed, and upon completing the suit a second time, he summoned the wealthy man to retry on the suit.

The wealthy man entered his shop sour-faced, still furious over the former state of the suit. The tailor led him to the back of the store and showed him the newly sowed suit. Upon seeing it, the

wealthy man's face glowed; he was totally enamoured by the suit's beauty. He tried it on and couldn't help but dance with joy and admiration for the tailor's handiwork. The wealthy man declared that the tailor was in fact the most talented tailor in town, as demonstrated by the gorgeous suit.

This story illustrates the profoundly negative effect of arrogance. If one engages in an activity with arrogance, then the arrogance funnels through to sully the entire endeavour. However, if one conducts oneself with humility, then all of one's endeavours will be enriched by one's pure humility.

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