

Derech Ha-Rif

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

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First Shabbat Meal

Fish have symbolic value within Judaism, and this has significance in relation to Pesach. In Egypt, the Torah notes that Hashem provided the Jews with fish to eat, for fish represent faith and trust in Hashem. During their sojourn in Egypt, the Jews were hesitant to bring children into a world in which they lay vulnerable to Pharaoh's wrath; it was only through their faith in Hashem that they continued to procreate, and this faith is represented by the fish. In a similar vein, we are instructed to eat fish each Shabbat, for this represents surrendering ourselves to Hashem in all facets of our lives, for fish represent such a concept. Moreover, each of the Jewish months has an accompanying sign. The month of Adar's sign is the fish, for Adar was rife with terrible decrees against the Jewish people, and thus the fish, representing unwavering trust in Hashem, is fitting. It teaches us that even when things are tough and don't seem to make sense, one should continue marching with Hashem with absolute faith. If one abides by the Mitzvot with purity, then Hashem will surely lend them the ability to transcend and grow tremendously.

The fish teach us the importance of walking through life with absolute pure faith in Hashem. Indeed, this is the guiding mantra of 'Shuva Yisrael,' namely that if one follows the will of Hashem, they can accomplish anything. The key is to have conviction in what one does, without getting overly caught up in one's thoughts, sound in the knowledge that if it is the will of Hashem, they will succeed.

We follow this philosophy in our own life, such that whenever we believe that something is the will of Hashem, we simply do it, without concern for any naysayers. We fight for anything which we believe to be the will of Hashem, even if it involves significant self-sacrifice, safe in the knowledge that 'the counsel of Hashem will stand (Mishlei 19,21).' In Egypt, Hashem decreed that we should be enslaved and undergo hardship. However, it was forbidden to question Hashem and ask 'why,' rather the correct approach was that of the Jewish women who provided for their brethren by bringing fish and water, representing faith in Hashem. It was a message to continue to serve Hashem and bring children into the world, knowing that Hashem would safeguard them and bring redemption.

This mantra applies equally to each of us, in that it is incumbent upon us all to concretise our goals, and once established, drive for them, sanctifying the journey with all our strength. This means that if we take upon ourselves to complete certain Mitzvot, we should throw ourselves into them with gusto, and thus prevent the Yezter Hara (Evil Inclination) from pouncing. As soon as the Yezter Hara discerns that one feels a fiery energy to grow spiritually, it seeks to cool one off and weaken their resolve.

It seeks to bring one to ask questions of oneself and sink into doubt to preclude growth.

However, when one conducts oneself like a fish, with utmost purity, asking no questions, then they can be assured of Divine assistance.

The month of Nissan is the first month, serving as the source of strength for all the eschewing months, and is thus an apt time to emphasise the importance of faith in Hashem. The faith which one experiences during the rest of the year, bears a direct correlation to the spiritual strides one makes during this month. If today one accepts certain obligations upon oneself concerning faith and trust in Hashem, then one can be assured of success if one views them through the lens of a fish. Namely, one should not think and doubt oneself, but rather stride forward with conviction.

To conclude, all we can do is push ourselves and avoid weakening our fortitude in our service of Hashem. If one cleaves to Hashem with all their might, then it is impossible to be hampered in one's spiritual growth; Hashem will provide the paths to success.



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Soul Of the Rif

Each person must know that even if they sin or make a mistake, or if they fail to succeed in something, and even they stumble throughout their entire life, if they attach themselves to Hashem with strength and believe that He has the ability to make someone or something succeed, then they will have the power to achieve anything. A person must believe that their soul is exceptionally lofty and powerful. Success and failure are not measured at the present moment, rather, life is evaluated after one hundred and twenty years, when what one has achieved and attained is measured. There are people who attain their portion in the World to Come in their younger years and they stumble and fall into old age. There are others who stumble in their youth and suddenly, Hashem raises them to the highest places. Therefore, "Guard my soul for I am devout (Tehillim 86,2)." Every person has Chesed (Kindness) in their soul, they have a soul with the greatest powers. As our holy Rabbis say, sins are like red blood. If one knows how to take them, they can turn into milk, i.e., they can turn into Chessed. Even the red, the evil which is harsh, can be transformed into Chessed, i.e., whiteness, and be a great Bracha.



2nd Shabbat Meal

"And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised (Vayikra 12,2)."

A person who speaks large amounts of Lashon Hara profanes the holy Brit

In this week's portion, we see that the Torah states that if a woman gives birth to a baby boy, "On the eighth day, his foreskin shall be circumcised." The Torah places the laws of Nega'im [forms of leprosy which come as a punishment] after the laws of Brit Mila. Let us ask the question, what lies behind this choice of order? Rather simply speaking solely about Nega'im, why does the Torah first mention Brit Mila?

This can be explained in light of the words of the Kli Yakar. It is known that within the Torah, if one Mitzva is written and then followed by another, the first Mitzva supersedes the second if the two Mitzvot clash. An explicit proof to this notion is found in Parshat Vayakhel, where the Mitzva of Shabbat is detailed before the command of building the Mishkan, in order to demonstrate that Shabbat takes precedence over building the Mishkan.

The same is true in this week's portion. Brit Mila is written prior to Nega'im, the Kli Yakar and other commentaries cite the point that if a person has Tzara'at on the place of the Brit Mila, one performs Brit Mila even though one is usually forbidden to remove a spot of Tzara'at. The Kli Yakar explains that if a person wishes to lower and subjugate their Yetzer Hara, as symbolised by the Tzara'at, he should subjugate the Brit Mila, one who overcomes the Brit Mila, i.e., overcomes his natural urges will help themselves to overpower the might of the Yetzer Hara.

Based on this, our Sages teach that the Brit of the flesh and the Brit of the tongue are one. A person who speaks large volumes of Lashon Hara damages the holy Brit. If one sees a person speaking Lashon Hara in large amount, you will find that he is damaged in regard to the Brit Kodesh. With a little research, it will come out that they have perhaps sinned with immoral behaviour, as the Brit of the flesh and the tongue are one.

"A man person who has a Se'ait, a Sapachat or a Baheret [various appearances of Tzara'at] on the skin of his flesh (Vayikra 13,2)."

The holy Torah is the remedy to dangerous maladies of a person and is the cause for a person's spiritual ascent

In this week's portion as well as Parshat Metzora (next week's portion), there are unique laws which

apply to a person who has Tzara'at on their body or Tzara'at on their wall. The holy Torah says, "A person who has a Se'ait, a Sapachat or a Baheret on the skin of his flesh". Every word in the Torah is precise, let us try to understand why the choice of words here is "Be'or Besaro," which literally means on the skin of his flesh. Why does the Torah emphasise the skin?

It is possible to explain and suggest a key concept. It is known that when the Torah tells of how Hashem created Adam, he was radiant and elevated in Kedusha on the highest level. It is necessary to understand why when Hashem created the world, Adam did not have flesh ('Or', spelled with the letter 'Ayin'), like humans and animals do, he was dressed in light ('Or' spelled with an 'Alef'). Originally (i.e., before sinning), he illuminated like a Menorah. After he sinned and ate from the Tree of Knowledge, he descended from his elevated level. His flesh which had been wrapped in 'Or' (spelled with an 'Alef') transformed and he was wrapped in 'Or' (spelled with an 'Ayin'), as the verse states, "And Hashem made for Adam and his wife garments of skin ('Or', spelled with an 'Ayin') and He dressed them (Bereishit 3,21)."

The Midrash (Bereishit Rabba 20,12) brings that in the Sefer Torah of Rabbi Meir, the words 'Kotnot or' (garments of skin) was written with an 'Alef', i.e., garments of light. The reason for this was because Rabbi Meir Ba'al HaNeis was a holy and elevated person of the highest level. He raised himself through the power of the Torah to the level of Adam at the time of the creation of the world, to be a luminary. In effect, he was 'Or' with an 'Alef' and not with an 'Ayin,' as we became after Adam sinned with the Tree of Knowledge. It is to that level that a person must toil and aim to ascend.

In this week's portion, we see that there is another lower level which a person can descend to, beyond the two levels at which Adam operated. The first level is man at the time of his creation, with light, as Rabbi Meir Ba'al Haneis, who learnt Torah and sanctified himself and purified himself to become. If man descends from his level, he becomes 'Or' with an 'Ayin,' like Adam became after eating from the Tree of Knowledge. A greater level of descent is found in this week's portion, "A person who has a Se'ait, Sapachat or Baheret," i.e., Tzara'at on his body. The Gemara (Arachin 15b) tells us that Tzara'at comes on account of the sin of Lashon Hara (gossip). A person who sits and speaks about how this one did one thing and another person did that, saying

Q & A with the Rif



Dear Rabbi,

I am a Ba'alat Teshuva, my younger daughter is in Australia and my son lives in Israel. Both are single and are not yet observant. I am trying to convince them to keep something over Pesach. Would the Rav be able to give me some advice, a Mitzva or two that I should ask them to be particularly careful about over Pesach so that at the very least, they do not ruin everything?

Answer:

First of all, the prayers of a mother for her child have immense power, they can subjugate the heart of a child to keep Torah and Mitzvot. Her prayers are incredibly powerful and carry immense strength.

The second thing is that the mother should beg them not to eat Chametz (leaven), as the Torah says, "For whoever eats Chametz, that soul will be cut off (Shemot 12,15)." This is something particularly severe, eating Chametz on Pesach is a grave sin. The first thing would be to ask them, with a mother's tears, not to eat Chametz on Pesach.





3rd Shabbat meal

things like "So and so caused me this problem" is punished by receiving Tzara'at. The Gemara proceeds to ask: What is the remedy of a person who speaks Lashon Hara, how can one repair the Lashon Hara that they spoke? If a person is one who sits and studies Torah and speaks Lashon Hara, from that day onwards, he should study more, if he learnt one page per day, he should now learn two. By elevating himself in Torah and learning more, he repairs the sin of Lashon Hara which he committed.

Therefore, we see that the remedy for a person to recover from sicknesses and bad things is the holy Torah. If a person suffers a spiritual descent from the level of 'Or' with an 'Alef' to 'Or' with an 'Ayin,' they will descend further to the level of Tzara'at. The holy Torah raises a person to the highest place, it puts one in a good situation and illuminates one's life.

Based on this, a key concept relevant to the life of every person can be explained. The Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 16b) tells us that three books are open on Rosh Hashanah. One is for complete Resha'im, another is for Tzaddikim, and the third book is for Beinonim (in-between people). Tzaddikim are immediately written for life whilst Resha'im are immediately written for death. However, Beinonim remain suspended during the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, if they merit, they are written in the Book of Life; if they do not, they are written in the Book of Death. Let us ask the question, we see that Tzaddikim die over the course of the year, or suffer greatly, how can it be said that they were written in the Book of Life? Furthermore, we see Beinonim succeeding and other Beinonim die, how is it so that they remain suspended. Lastly, there are many Resha'im who steal, talk Lashon Hara, lie, oppress and cause damage to others. Let us ask, how can the Gemara say that Resha'im are immediately inscribed for death on Rosh Hashanah, yet we find that they live years upon years! How is it possible to say that they are immediately inscribed for death?

It is possible to explain as follows: The creation is comprised of three parts, the Nefesh, Ruach and Neshama. Everyone has a Nefesh, whether Jewish, non-Jewish or animal. Ruach is a higher level. According to Kabbala, Ruach is the strength with which we speak, as it says, "And He breathed into his mouth a living soul. (Bereishit 2,7)." The Seforno explains that man merited to receive more than all of the cattle and wild animals, because Hashem put His mouth into ours, breaking Ruach and Neshama into Adam. In regard to the Neshama, we say "My G-d, the Neshama that You placed in me is pure, You created it and formed it, You breathed it into me," this is the highest height.

Based on this, it is possible to explain that when the Gemara states that Tzaddikim are automatically written in the Book of Life on Rosh Hashana, this means Tzaddikim who have, Ruach, Nefesh and Neshama, they carry a Nefesh (life force) like all of creation do. They also have Ruach (a form of spirit of life) which is of a higher level, and he also has the Neshama which Hashem gave them to guard, and this is the highest level. The Beinonim whose sentences are suspended until Yom Kippur have a Nefesh like all and they have Ruach also. If they refine their deeds, their Neshama returns to them, and if they do not do so, then Hashem confirms what will happen to them on Yom Kippur. For Resha'im, who are written right away for death, they have only the Nefesh. What is the meaning of the Gemara's wording that "they are immediately inscribed for death"?

It is necessary to know of a key concept. There are many people outside who have neither Neshama nor Ruach, they are like a body that

simply moves in the street. A person who commits sins, steals, tells lies, hurts and causes pain to people has a Nefesh, but no Ruach and no Neshama. Such a person is termed 'dead' as the Gemara (Brachot 18a) says, "Wicked people, even in their lifetimes are called dead." Perhaps such a person moves around and causes profit to another person and damages another person, but in fact such a person is dead (even if they seem to perform actions in this world), they lack a Neshama and the unique power of one who observes Torah and Mitzvot. We see that they are people who live years with lives which carry no purpose, they have sad lives with no achievement or joy. All of this is because they do not have Ruach and Neshama. They live lives of falsehood, which revolve around incorrect and bad things; as a result of this, their lives are empty of content.

The Kabbalistic works and our teacher, the holy Ari, teach the following critical concept: A person can gather himself and lead himself to the highest level, during the Reading of the Torah. There are four things to be aware of within this matter: The first is the letters of the holy Torah. The second is the crowns above the letters; each of these first two are seen by the eye. There are two other aspects which we do not see but are present during the reading of the Torah, one is the Ta'amim (cantillation notes) according to which the Torah is read. The second is the vowelizing which is not seen, but exists; these dictate where the reader stops and where he continues.

The Ari (Eitz HaChaim, Sha'ar Tanta, chapter 5) brings that the letters of a Sefer Torah correspond to a person's body. As King David says, "Perform a good sign with me (Tehillim 86,7)." In other words, he asked that Hashem show him his letter within the Torah, as our Sages expounded, the word 'Yisrael' stands for 'Yesh Shishim Otot LaTorah' - there are six hundred thousand letters to the Torah. The crowns in a Sefer Torah correspond to a person's Nefesh, as the Gemara (Menachot 29b) tells of how Rabbi Akiva would expound mounds and mounds of Halachot from each and every crown. If one rubs a crown out from above a letter, the Sefer Torah is invalidated; a person dies because the Nefesh is the crown above the letter in the Torah. The Ta'amim correspond to the Neshama and the vowels match the Ruach. When a person is called up to the Torah and looks at the letters of the Sefer Torah, they should keep in mind that these letters are their body, the crowns are their Nefesh, the vowelizing of where the reader starts and stops are a person's Ruach and the Ta'amim are a person's Neshama. If a person keeps these four things in mind during the reading of the Torah, he can bring his soul to complete Tikkun (repair).

Based on this, all can be explained. A person who speaks Lashon Hara descends from the level of garments of light to garments of flesh, or even further down, to the level of Tzara'at on his skin. Through the holy Torah, a person can ascend and return himself to the highest level. By connecting the letters with the crowns, the vowels and the Ta'amim, a person completes their Nefesh, for the Hashem, the Torah and Yisrael are one. However, for a person who does not learn Torah and does not fulfil it as they should, their Nefesh cannot achieve anything. The Yetzer Hara (Evil Inclination) in this generation tries to bring a person to destroy their connection with the Torah, thereby ruining the Neshama and the Ruach, the source from which a person is carved out. Once this happens, a person loses the essence of their life, as they then lack Nefesh, Ruach and Neshama.

Treasure charms from the Rif



It is a great Segulah (charm) for individuals, especially the youth who are very susceptible to being overcome by the Yetzer Hara (Evil Inclination), to clean the Beit Knesset (Synagogue) and Beit HaMidrash (Study Hall) from Chametz on Pesach Eve. This is a Segulah to humble one's heart and thereby bring one closer to serving Hashem in the optimal manner.

Additionally, our teacher, the Arizal, assures us that anyone who involves themselves in baking Matzot, cleanses and purifies his soul. This assurance is also referenced in the Sefer Be'er Heitev and extended to involvement in all Mitzvot.



The fourth Post Shabbat meal

Stories from the Rif

It is well known that on Seder night, one can reach tremendous spiritual and physical heights. Below is a story involving the Apter Rav, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heshel, who was the teacher of the great Noam Elimelech. The Apter Rav was renowned for his love of every Jewish person which earned him the title 'Oheiv Yisrael' ('Lover of Israel').

There was a certain man who was renting a tavern from his local Poritz. The Poritzs were the heads of their municipalities and were noteworthy for their ruthlessness. Rather than maintain a local jail, Poritzs would generally simply kill any local who failed to meet their demands. In this vein, if one failed to pay rent to the Poritz, they were at a significant risk of death.

The man who had rented the tavern was in an awful situation, for he had fallen behind in his rental payments to the Poritz and now owed a year's worth of rent. He had been informed that if he didn't pay up on the day after Pesach, he would be killed, and his entire family would be at risk too. With tears in his eyes, the man resolved to visit the Apter Rav, to seek a Bracha (blessing) and advice as to how to proceed. He gathered up the few coins he had left to his name and set out on the long journey to the Apter Rav, aiming to arrive in time for Shabbat HaGadol (the Shabbat preceding Pesach).

He reached the Rav's town for Shabbat and entered his Beit Knesset to listen to his Drasha (sermon). The Rav drew on the words cited in the Haggadah: "And we cried out to Hashem, and He heard our voices (Bamidbar 20,16)." He explained that when reciting the Haggadah, one ought to enunciate these words with fervour and conviction, seeking Divine Assistance in all of one's troubles. The man heard the Rav's message, and internalised them, resolving to pour his heart to Hashem during the recital of those words.

On Motza'ei Shabbat, the man sought a private meeting with the Apter Rav, however it was to no avail. The Rav had already begun his preparation for Pesach, which entailed intense study and contemplation in solitude, to enter the festival in absolute purity. As such, the Rav was no longer receiving guests and the man had to return to his town, without a personalised blessing or advice from the Rav.

Upon returning home, the man's wife inquired about his trip. He informed her that he had been unable to speak to the Rav, however, he had merited to hear the Rav's Drasha. He related that the Drasha had informed him of how to conduct the Seder in a manner conducive to merit salvation from Hashem. His wife smiled and trusted in her husband; they completed their preparation for Pesach and were filled with calm when they greeted the festival a few days later. The entire family sat around the table for the Seder, full of joy, with the imminent deadline out of their minds; they were at total peace, immersed in the Seder, with absolute trust in Hashem.

When the family reached the line "And we cried out to Hashem, and He heard our voices (Bamidbar 20,16)," the man broke out in tears. He released all his anguish, and poured out his heart to Hashem, requesting miraculous salvation from the Poritz. He drew on the Apter Rav's words and recited the words with deep concentration, speaking to Hashem from the depths of his heart.

When the man finished reciting the words, he heard frantic knocks on the door. He opened it and was met by a gentile man, covered in blood. The man was holding two barrels, one containing gold and one containing the man's personal precious items. The man explained that he had got into a terrible argument with his wife and in the heat of the moment had killed her with a knife. He said that the police were pursuing him and would likely seize all his assets. He therefore wished the man to safeguard the precious contents of one of the barrels and in return he would let the man keep the gold contained in the other barrel as payment.

The day after Pesach, the Jew paid off his rental debt to the Poritz, and even had enough funds to purchase the tavern outright. Through his new acquisition the man became exceptionally wealthy and lived in prosperity for his remaining days.

It is incredible to think that the man internalising the words of the Apter Rav led to his miraculous salvation. The gentile in the story was in distress and was simply scouring the entire town for a single home with awake inhabitants to safeguard his barrel. The inhabitants of the other homes were asleep, having long finished their Sedarim; only this man remained awake, fully entrenched in his Seder, as per the guidance of the Apter Rav. The man's lengthy recitation of "And we cried out to Hashem, and He heard our voices" brought him riches.

Following the miraculous turn of events, the man journeyed to the Apter Rav to receive a Bracha and inform him of the miracle. The Rav rejoiced with him and re-emphasised the tremendous Segulah behind reciting the relevant verse with deep-rooted emotion.

This story has since become well known, being recalled each year on Shabbat HaGadol by Rabbis through the generations. It highlights to us the sheer power of any moment of sincerely focussed prayer during the Seder night; prayer during the Seder can quite literally transform our entire lives.

It is incumbent upon us all to internalise the saying that "There is no man that does not have his hour Pirkei Avot 4,3)." This saying means that each of us will be presented with unique moments of opportunity, which we can capitalise on and draw upon to become extraordinarily elevated. Our generation is complex, in that on the one hand it is lacking in certain respects, but on the other hand it is rich in opportunity. There has never been a generation which is as apt for spiritual elevation and joy.

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