



NEFESH SHIMSHON

DIVREI TORAH ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA AND HOLIDAYS FROM
THE TEACHINGS OF RABBEINU SHIMSHON DOVID PINCUS ZT"l

THIS PUBLICATION IS DEDICATED TO THE HATZLACHAH AND ZECHUS OF נחמה ויעקב בן רחל נחמה
MAY THEY GROW TO BE TALMIDEI CHACHAMIM AND OVDEI HASHEM.

PEARLS OF WISDOM FROM THE PARSHAH

The Yetzer Hara's Captives

כִּי תִצֵּא לְמִלְחָמָה עַל אִיבֶיךָ וּנְתַנּוּ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְיָדְךָ וְשָׁבִיתָ שְׂבִיּוֹ: (דברים כא, י)

When you go to war against your enemies, and Hashem your G-d will deliver him into your hand, and you will capture his captives. (Devarim 21:10)

The *Baalei Mussar* saw this passage as a metaphorical description of the war against the *Yetzer Hara* and his army.

It often happens that a person wants to make serious improvements in his life, in spiritual matters. He wants to make big changes. For instance, he wants to devote more time to Torah learning, or to *daven* better, or get into a better social circle. He wants more *kedushah* and modesty in his life. Or it could be some other serious changes he wishes to make. However, it takes a lot of effort and sometimes a prolonged battle to succeed.

The first step is to "go to war." Don't give up in advance and say, "I can't do it, I know I won't be able to keep it up." The Torah promises us in this *pasuk* that if we will just "go to war," then "Hashem your G-d will deliver him into your hand." You will have *siyata d'Shmaya* and you will win the war.

The Torah then goes on to say, "And you will capture his captives." You will capture *his* captives, meaning that which he captured himself. Whatever he took from you, you will take it back.

The *Yetzer Hara* has a lot of possessions. There is a lot under his control. But he stole it all from us. For instance, let's say a man needs to support his family. How should he schedule his day? The *Yetzer Hara* says to him: first of all, you need to put in a good eight hours at work every day. That's beyond question.

After we figure in the time spent commuting, and eating meals, not very many hours are left. Then the *Yetzer Hara* lets him read the news, and relax a little bit. After the man spends some time with the family, too, he is lucky to have two hours left out of the day for Torah and *davening*.

The *Yetzer Hara* took his whole day away from him. He needs to fight to get it back. This is an

example of taking back what the *Yetzer Hara* took captive.

If we go to war on the *Yetzer Hara* we are guaranteed victory. But first we must put up a fight.

Another example: good Jews are sitting in *shul* in the evening, learning. Perhaps they are learning as *chavrusa*, perhaps they attend a *shiur*. Here and there, this one is struggling to stay awake, and that one already dozed off. They are not too perturbed about it. They are doing the best they can. They are in *shul*. They are trying to learn.

But at the same time, *lehavdil*, on the other side of town, there is a discotheque. The people over there are also after a day's work, but they are not bored or falling asleep. They are full of energy.

So what happened? The *Yetzer Hara* stole the learners' zest and energy from them. He took it captive. Zest and energy properly belongs to the side of *kedushah*, but it was robbed from us. We need to fight to take it back. It belongs to us!

This is the Torah's message. We can get back what is rightfully ours. All we need to do is put up a fight. ●

The Problem With Pleasure

כִּי יִהְיֶה לְאִישׁ בֶּן סוֹרֵר וּמוֹרָה אֵינָנו שְׁמַע בְּקוֹל אָבִיו וּבְקוֹל אִמּוֹ. (דברים כא, יח)

If a person will have a wayward and rebellious son who doesn't listen to his father and his mother. (*Devarim 21:18*)

The whole issue with the *ben sorer umoreh* is not what he did or what he does. It is what he will do. As Rashi explains, someone who eats meat and drinks wine like that, and ignores his parents' warnings, will eventually run out of money and become a highway robber. Better he should die while he is still a good person, while he is still *zakai*. So explains Rashi.

So we see that the *ben sorer umoreh's* problem is not *aveiros* that he did. It is that he is too attached to physical pleasures, to *taanugim*.

We commonly think that the main challenge we face is to avoid *aveiros*. However, there is more to it than that. The key issue we face in life is how to

relate to physical pleasures and comforts. Do we take pleasure in *Hashem*, or do we seek the pleasure of material comforts?

The modern world offers us a sea of fun and pleasure. We have games, we have computers, we have so many things. They may seem innocuous. What sin is it to play an innocent game or enjoy *kosher* features of a digital device? But in truth, these things a great danger to the Jewish people.

This danger is as serious as that of the *Haskalah* movement a hundred years ago, and the Reform movement two hundred years ago. Both these movements started with "little" things. They printed

לְעִילּוֹי נִשְׁמָת

מוֹהַ"ד מוֹשֶׁה בֶּן אֱלִיעֶזֶר הַמְבוֹרָגָד זצ"ל

וּמוֹהַ"ד בְּרוּךְ זָאב בֶּן נִפְתָּלִי קְרָאוּס זצ"ל

נִדְבַת נְכֻדֵיהֶם ~ עֲטַרְת אֲבִיבֵי בְנֵי וְהַפְאֶרֶת בְּנֵי אֲבוֹתָם

books. At first, they were not books denying and abusing the Jewish faith; they were just fun books to read, full of nonsense. And Jewish children read those books. It later developed to much worse things, as we know. But it all started with a subtle change of direction, with seeking worldly pleasures rather than spiritual ones.

It was such a subtle shift that some *Gedolim* at the time did not even see where it was leading. But the shift was there. It led to such a horrible deterioration of the Jewish people that the only option left was a Holocaust, a total destruction, paving the way for a new beginning.

My father-in-law, Harav Mordechai Mann *zt"l*, recounted that in his town back in Europe, which had a large Jewish population, there were only two *yeshivah bachurim* left. Everyone else went different ways. When he would come home for Pesach vacation from *yeshivah*, he felt uncomfortable just walking down the street. It was an embarrassment

to be a *yeshivah bachur*. This was the end result of the “little” things the *Haskalah* movement started decades earlier.

It is the same today. People are starting to take a look toward the outside world in seek of pleasure, and it is very dangerous. The danger is not just in seemingly innocent children’s movies, and games on the computer. It is also in ordinary worldly pleasures that are completely clean of forbidden content.

The issue is not whether the activity is prohibited or permitted. The issue is which direction it leads you. Where are you seeking your pleasure? We should find all our *geshmak* and pleasure in Torah itself. The Torah should be everything for us. It should be both our occupation and our pleasure. If we need some physical enjoyment, we have *Shabbos* and *Yamim Tovim* for that.

Unfortunately, many people’s lives focus too much on the pursuit of material pleasures and comforts. A Jew should focus on *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* alone. ●

PARSHAH TOPIC



Guard your Heart

Every year, as the month of *Elul* arrives, there are people who wonder why we need all these 40 days from *Rosh Chodesh Elul* to Yom Kippur.

The *avodah* of these days has a special quality, as can be seen from the month that follows these days. We know that the month of *Cheshvan* is called “*Marcheshvan*.” This hints to “*merachashin sifevasei*” – a person’s lips whisper and move. There is an allusion to this in the *Gemara*:

For [the time it takes to walk] four *amos*, the *tefilah* is still arranged in a person’s mouth, and his lips whisper.¹

The month of *Elul* passes by, and then come Rosh

Hashanah, *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* and Yom Kippur, with all their *selichos* and *tefilos*. And then there is *Chag Hasukkos*, *Hoshana Rabbah* and *Simchas Torah*. A person gets so used to reciting prayers and praises during these two months that when the month of *Cheshvan* comes around, his lips are still moving and whispering the prayers and praises to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*.

However, a feeling that a person is unaware of will bring his lips to move and whisper only if the matter truly penetrated to the depths of his heart. Ordinary speech comes from the intellect. The mind thinks and decides what to say. But when the lips move by themselves, this is a sign that in the depths of a person’s subconscious, these thoughts are present. A person might not even be aware of them, but at

¹ *Megilah* 27b.

certain moments they emerge on their own.

This is because of the tremendous impression that the matters left on the depths of the person's soul. (It is known that people who went through traumatic experiences, such as the Holocaust, will sometimes say things in the middle of their sleep that they haven't spoken about for fifteen or twenty years.)

This is actually the purpose of the *avodah* of these days: to acquire Torah, *tefilah* and *yiras Shamayim* so strongly that it reaches the depths of our heart and penetrates our innermost soul. So that even when the *Yamim Nora'im* have gone by, and we are in the month of *Cheshvan*, our lips still move and whisper the words of *Hashem*, and will continue that way for the whole year until next *Elul*.

This is the time to fill up with spiritual riches for the whole coming year.

On Which Path will I be Led?

People work on strengthening their Torah learning and their *tefilah*. They bolster their *mitzvos* and increase their *chesed*. In our generation, too, there are those who stop and take time out during these forty days to make an accounting of what they did and accomplished spiritually in the past year, and to do *teshuvah* for their sins.

But *eimas hadin* is hardly to be found these days. Where is our terror of the coming judgment? We don't feel the fear.

Let's say a person is going to be tried in court, or to undergo medical testing. Even if he can't see anything wrong with himself, he still fears that the judge or the doctor might uncover a problem.

If *Chazal* teach us that we have good reason to be afraid, this means that in truth, we are facing a great danger. The situation is terrifying! We could compare this to a person who is informed that there is a dangerous snake moving stealthily around his house. Though he doesn't see it, he is afraid for his life.

We find an expression of *eimas hadin* in the following well-known teaching:

R. Yochanan ben Zakkai fell ill, and his

disciples came to visit him. When he saw them he began to cry. His disciples asked him, "O lamp of *Yisrael*, right-hand pillar, powerful hammer, why are you crying?"

He answered them, "If I would be led before a human king – who is here today and in the grave tomorrow, and if he is angry with me, it is not an eternal anger, and if he imprisons me, it is not an eternal imprisonment, and if he puts me to death, it is not an eternal death, and I can pacify him with words and bribe him with money – I would still cry.

Now that I am being led before the King over all, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, Who lives on forever and ever, and if He is angry with me, it is an eternal anger, and if He imprisons me, it is an eternal imprisonment, and if He puts me to death, it is an eternal death, and I cannot pacify Him with words or bribe him with money. Furthermore, there are two paths before me, one to *Gan Eden* and the other to *Gehinom*, and I don't know which one I am being led on. Should I not cry?"²

Here the disciples of R. Yochanan ben Zakkai, who were themselves great sages, made a *cheshbon nefesh* for him. They said to him: First of all, you are the "lamp of *Yisrael*." Without you, the whole Jewish people would be in the dark. If there is any light in the world, it comes from you. Furthermore, you are the "right-hand pillar". Without you, the whole Jewish people would be like a building whose pillars were taken away; it would collapse and smash into pieces. Not only that, but you are the "powerful hammer". You are the one who saves *K'lal Yisrael* and keeps them going. This being so, of what are you so afraid?

R. Yochanan ben Zakkai answered them as follows: First of all, I am facing the great King over all, whose anger is eternal. Furthermore, there are two paths before me, one to *Gan Eden* and the other

² *Berachos* 28b.

to *Gebinom*, and I don't know which one they will bring me on.

We see here that even if a person embodies all the light and strength of *K'lal Yisrael*, this is good only until it comes to *yom hadin*. In the hour of judgment, even he can't know if they are taking him to *Gan Eden* or to *Gebinom*.

This requires explanation. First of all, what exactly was R. Yochanan ben Zakkai afraid of, considering his awesome and elevated *madreigah*?

There is a story that can answer this first question. When *Beis HaMamikdash* was about to be destroyed, the Roman ruler asked R. Yochanan ben Zakkai:

“Ask me for something, and I will grant it.” R. Yochanan ben Zakkai answered, “Give me Yavneh and its sages, and the descendants of Rabban Gamliel, and doctors to heal R. Tzadok.”

Rav Yosef, and some say it was R. Akiva, applied the following verse to R. Yochanan ben Zakkai: “He turns back the sages and ruins their knowledge.”³ This is because R. Yochanan ben Zakkai should have asked the king to let them all go this one time.⁴

This implies that had R. Yochanan ben Zakkai put himself out a little more, it seems he could have prevented *Beis Hamikdash* from being destroyed!

Accordingly, we can say that R. Yochanan ben Zakkai feared that when he comes before the Heavenly court, they will tell him: Indeed, you are the “lamp of *Yisrael*, right-hand pillar, powerful hammer.” You have the entire Torah. However, you caused the destruction of *Beis Hamikdash*! In truth, Hashem was the One who “turns back the sages” by causing R. Yochanan ben Zakkai to think that it was not possible to save the situation. Despite this, R. Yochanan ben Zakkai was seized by a mighty terror of judgment.

This answers the first question, but the real question is as follows. Even if we will assume that R. Yochanan ben Zakkai considered himself deserving

of *Gebinom*, what about all his Torah? He is still the “lamp of *Yisrael*, right-hand pillar, powerful hammer.” Will he go to *Gebinom* in spite of all this?!

The following allegory points to an answer. There is a certain man who owns a lot of property. He has houses, fields and vineyards, and is very wealthy. But he accidentally ingests the wrong medication. He, too, is liable to die from such a mishap.

In the same way, a Jew could be a *talmid chacham* and a great *tzaddik*. He could possess great spiritual wealth. And when he gets to heaven, everything will be waiting for him: *Hashem* and His *Shechinah*, all the Torah he learned, the *mitzvos* and *maasim tovim* he accumulated for himself. But the man of honor, the *tzaddik* himself, won't be there, because he “ingested a medication” – he did a deed – that took him out of *olam haba*.

Guarding the Heart is Critical

Shlomo HaMelech taught us this important principle when he said:

מִכָּל מִשְׁמֶר נֹצֵר לְבָבְךָ כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תוֹצֵאוֹת חַיִּים –

More than any guarding, protect your heart, for from it, life results.⁵

A person who has possessions needs to protect them. If he buys a new suit, he needs to be careful not to get it muddied up. If he acquires property, he needs to make sure not to lose it. Because these things really belong to *Hashem*; it's just that *Hashem* entrusted him to them, and he needs to guard them.

A person needs to exercise extra care in guarding his body. As it says:

וְנִשְׁמַרְתֶּם מְאֹד לְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם – You shall

guard your lives very well.⁶

A person needs to eat and sleep properly, and not undervalue his life, because it doesn't belong to him. A person who doesn't take good care of an object entrusted to him is guilty of negligence. However, “more than any guarding, protect your heart.” The thing you are required to guard most stringently of all is your heart.

3 *Yeshayahu* 44:25.

4 *Gittin* 56b.

5 *Mishlei* 4:23.

6 *Devarim* 4:15.

I will offer a rather shocking example of the above, although it is hard to say this: Imagine a grandmother who is a great *tzadekes*. Her *chesed* is renowned and she cares for all the poor people around her. What's more, she finishes *Sefer Tehillim* every day. And her *yiras Shamayim* is wondrous. She prays from the depths of her heart. Her conduct is truly amazing and exemplary. And, of course, her children and grandchildren are blessed and upright; they all busy themselves with Torah and *mitzvos*.

When this grandmother passed away and arrived in the World of Truth, she was of course received there in great honor: she was greeted by dozens of *yesomim* that she supported and people who were rescued by her *pidyon shevuyim*. Also *David HaMelech*, whose *Sefer Tehillim* she finished every day, was waiting for her. But the honorable lady herself was not there.

What happened?

She indeed knew that *Hashem* is great and awesome. However, she mistakenly thought that He has a physical form, or she didn't know that life in this world is just temporary, and there will be *techiyas hameisim*. She simply was not taught these principles. As we know, the Rambam rules that a Jew who lacks belief in one of the Thirteen Principles of *Emunah* has no portion in *Olam Haba*.⁷ And R. Chaim of Brisk is known to have said that even someone who commits this error unwittingly is considered an *apikorus*, someone who denies the Jewish faith.

This grandmother's mistake was unawares. She never thought deeply about the matter, and if she would have been asked, she would have said that *Hashem* must be very great, but she can't describe how in detail. (Actually, the Ra'avad disagrees with the Rambam on this particular point, and writes: "Why did the Rambam call such a person an apostate [for believing that *Hashem* has a physical form]?)

⁷ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Teshuvah* 3:7.

Many people who were greater and better than the Rambam followed this line of thought, due to what they saw in Scripture, and especially according to confusing teachings that they saw in the *Aggadab*.⁸) But after all is said and done, she lacked belief in one of the Principles of *Emunah*, so all the *chesed*, *tzedakah* and *Tehillim* that she accumulated did not help her, as she has no portion in *Olam Haba*.

This is what *Shlomo HaMelech* warns us in his great wisdom: "More than any guarding, protect your heart." Be very careful that even in the depths of your unconscious, the smallest doubt in matters of outlook should not crop up. "For from it, life results." Entertaining such a doubt is debilitating to life itself.

Another example of this point is a shocking story that I know of firsthand. A certain *rosh yeshivah* told me that on *Shabbos* night he sat down to converse with a group of *yeshivah* boys. In the middle he heard one of the boys speaking about the concept of prophecy, saying that prophecy doesn't mean that *Hashem* literally speaks to the prophet. Rather, it is a deep realization that is attained by a person's intellect.

"When I heard this," recounted the *rosh yeshivah*, "I began to cry. It is *kefirah* and *apikorsus*! The Rambam states: 'Among the foundations of religion is to know that G-d speaks to people prophetically ...'⁹"

I happen to know that particular *yeshivah* boy. He was an excellent student, great in Torah and *yiras Shamayim*. After living a long life, he could end up coming to the World of Truth with all the Torah he learned, with all his *mussar* and *yirah*, with all his *chesed* and *zikui harabim*, and still not have a portion in *Olam Haba*, may *Hashem* save us from such a thing. All because he lacks the simple belief that *Hashem* speaks to prophets. "More than any guarding, protect your heart." ●

⁸ *Hasagos HaRa'avad ad loc.*

⁹ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 7:1.