

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

Don't Get Dirtied

לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך (יב, א)

You shall go away from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house (12:1)

Rabbeinu Bechaye explains that לך לך, normally translated as “Go away,” is referring to “filth”, לכלוך. In other words, “Go away” so that you will not be dirtied by the evil ways of the people in your homeland and your father's household.

This raises a question: why should Avraham be negatively influenced by his native surroundings? On the contrary, Avraham's outstanding trait, his great strength, was that he stood up for his beliefs without support from any friend, parent or teacher. His very name, *Avraham HaIvri*, expresses that he stood on one side, and the whole world on the other side.¹ He spoke up against the idolatrous ways of his father's household. He spread *emunah* in *Hashem* throughout the world, despite the hostile atmosphere in which

he lived. Why should he become “dirtied” by his surroundings?

The question is the answer. Dirt by nature sticks to the person who comes in contact with it, whether he likes it or not, even if he detests dirt. It's in the air. It blows on him and sticks to him. That's how we get influenced by our surroundings. As much as a person tells himself that he is utterly different from these people and their evil ways, it rubs off on him nevertheless.

It is written:

הולך את חכמים יחכם ורעה כסילים ירוע
– He who goes to the sages will become wise, and he who befriends fools will become foolish.²

¹ *Bereishis Rabbah* 42:8.

² *Mishlei* 13:20.

The *Midrash*³ explains it with an allegory. It is like someone who goes into a perfume store and picks up the good scent. When he leaves, all his clothes are perfumed, even if he didn't buy anything there. And it works the other way as well. If someone is around bad people, it's like going into a tannery. His clothing picks up an evil smell no matter how hard he tries to stay away from the tanners and the putrid skins they are working.

So writes the Rambam:

Man was created in such a way that his views follow those of his friends and associates, and he behaves as customary in his locale. Therefore, a person needs to connect himself to *tzaddikim*, so he will learn from their ways, and distance himself from evil people who walk in darkness, so he will not learn from their ways. This is what *Shlomo HaMelech* said: "He who goes to the sages will become wise, and he who befriends fools will become foolish."⁴

Note that the Rambam said, "Man was **created** in such a way." It's part of our essential nature. It's not something we can change or overcome.

3 *Midrash Mishlei* ch. 13.

4 *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos De'os* 6:1.

Sooner or later, the laws of nature will prevail. Being around bad people is like being around those who have a contagious disease and saying to yourself that you won't catch it from them. This is not something you can control; you just have to stay away.

So it is regarding people who do not follow *Hashem's* Torah, who spend their time on empty chatter, on the vanities of this world, or worse. We have no choice but avoid associating with them.

Perhaps this is why the Torah placed this important message, "Go away," so you will not become dirtied, in the story of *Avraham Avinu*. There never was a person who stood steadfastly against the influence of his surroundings like Avraham Avinu did. And even he needs to go away.

אָחַד הָיָה אַבְרָהָם וַיִּירֶשׁ אֶת הָאָרֶץ –
Avraham was a singular individual, and
he will inherit the land.⁵

Avraham was an unique individual and knew how to stand his ground like no one else, but *Hashem* still told him to go away from the filth of his land and his father's home.

We surely need to do so. We should strive to always be in a clean and pure environment, surrounded by *chachamim* and *tzaddikim*. ●

5 *Yechezkel* 33:24.



אֵל תִּירָא אַבְרָם אֲנֹכִי מִגֵּן לְךָ שְׂכָרְךָ הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד (טו, א)

Do not fear, Avram, I am protecting you. Your reward is very great. (15:1)

After this miracle was done for him, that he killed the kings, he was worried. He said, “Perhaps I received my reward for all my righteous deeds?” For this reason, *Hashem* said to him, “Do not fear, Avram, I am protecting you” from punishment, so you will not be punished for all those souls that you killed. And regarding your worry that you received your reward: “Your reward is very great.” (*Rashi*)

Hashem told Avram that He is “protecting” him – מגן. The *Arizal*, in *Sha’ar HaPesukim*, explains an additional meaning of the word מגן: it is similar to the Aramaic word מגונא, which means “free,” “without payment.” *Hashem* promised Avram that it will be “for free,” it will not be deducted from his merits. Nothing Avram received took away from the merits he had accumulated.

This calls for explanation. Why was Avraham granted this special privilege that nothing will be deducted from his merits, and everything he received in the world was “for free”?

First let’s talk about the whole idea of deducting reward for *mitzvos*.

It is known that the *Ba’alei HaMussar*, and especially R. Yisrael Salanter, spoke out about the danger of a person inadvertently eating up the reward for his *mitzvos*, through pleasures he takes in this world. R. Yisrael Salanter is said to have remarked that this world is like a very expensive hotel. He said, “With one serving of *tzimmes*, a person can eat up his whole *Olam Haba*.”

R. Yitzchak Blaser¹ quoted numerous statements from *Chazal* expressing their concern over this happening, and if *Chazal* were concerned about it, surely we should be.

R. Yitzchak Blaser² offers various ways to make sure our *mitzvos* won’t get eaten up, and we won’t come emptyhanded to *Olam Haba*. I will quote a few ideas along these lines from the *Ba’alei HaMussar*. Each of these ideas can be used to explain why nothing was deducted from Avraham’s merits.

1. It is said in the name of R. Yisrael Salanter that this world is indeed a very expensive hotel, and someone who checks in and eats even a small meal will pay a very high price. However, by way of allegory, let’s say a person travels as a company rep. He is on a business trip. While traveling, the company lets him stay at an expensive hotel, all expenses paid.

So it is with us. If we are not in this world for our own sake, to enjoy life, but rather for the sake of *Hashem* and His Torah, then the bill for everything we enjoy in this world is on *Hashem*. Nothing will be deducted from our merits. So it is stated in the name of R. Yisrael Salanter.

This explains what *Hashem* said to *Avraham Avinu*. Since everything Avraham did in this world was to make *Hashem* to be King over His world, he was on a “business trip,” so to speak, and all expenses were covered by Heaven.

2. The *Gemara* states³ that if a person desecrates *Hashem’s* Name, *teshuvah* and Yom Kippur and

1 *Kochvei Ohr* ch. 2.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Yoma* 86a.

suffering can delay the punishment, but only death can wipe the sin away. We see that *chillul Hashem* is a sin that nothing in this world can atone for. R. Yitzchak Blaser⁴ commented that since *Hashem's* trait of kindness is greater than His trait of judgment, it follows that no pleasure in the world can wipe away the reward for sanctifying *Hashem's* Name. The reward for this *mitzvah* will remain for *Olam Haba*.

This explains wonderfully and simply why nothing was deducted from *Avraham Avinu's* merits. Avraham's whole life was one saga of *Kiddush Hashem* in the world. Avraham made *Hashem* into King over the whole world. In fact, *Tosafos* write⁵ that when we say "*Elokei Avraham*" in the beginning of the *Amidah*, this is tantamount to reciting *Elokeinu Melech Ha'olam*, which is the requisite formula for all blessings.

3. R. Chaim Shmuelevitz of Mir was puzzled by R. Yisrael's assertion that with one serving of *tzimmes*, a person could eat up his whole *Olam Haba*. His question was regarding the value of the *mitzvos* we do. What determines their worth? How do we know that my *mitzvah* is worth one serving of *tzimmes*? Maybe all the *tzimmes* and all the other pleasures of the world don't even add up to the value of a single *mitzvah*?

R. Chaim Shmuelevitz answered that a person determines for himself the worth of his *mitzvos*. For instance, if he interrupts his learning for fifteen minutes in order to go looking for a good cold drink, he thereby shows that as far as he is concerned, fifteen minutes of Torah learning is worth a cold cup of soda. On the other hand, if he decides not to interrupt his learning for all the wealth in the world, he shows that Torah learning is worth more than anything in the world. And so it is throughout life. A person determines himself how much his *mitzvos* are worth.

It is written:

וּמַצְדִּיקֵי הָרַבִּים כְּכֹכְבִּים לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד –
Those who make the public more

meritorious are like stars forever.⁶

R. Chaim Shmuelevitz explained this *pasuk* according to the above-mentioned idea. A person can determine the worth of his own *mitzvos*, but he doesn't set the worth of other people's *mitzvos*. When he is rewarded because he brought other people to do *mitzvos*, he doesn't determine their worth, so their worth remains immeasurable. The reward for these *mitzvos* will stay with him forever, just as stars are forever.

This explains why nothing was deducted from *Avraham Avinu's* merits. Avraham toiled valiantly to make the public more meritorious, more than anyone else ever did, so his merits are forever.

4. I once heard a wise person comment on R. Yisrael's comparison of this world to an expensive hotel. He said: if the hotel owner would invite his friend to come in and eat, and urge him to accept the offer, and insist on it, and would then go and serve him the best in the house, does it make any sense that he would present his friend with a bill at the end of the meal?!

So it is with us. Let's say a person decides that as far as he is concerned, he doesn't want to eat, but *Hashem* insists on it, and forces him to eat, so to speak, due to the *mitzvah* of taking care of one's health, as it is written, וְנִשְׁמַרְתֶּם מְאֹד לְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם – "You shall guard your souls very well."⁷ If that is why he eats, *Hashem* surely will not deduct it from his merits.

This is easier than R. Yisrael's way, because R. Yisrael said a person should make his whole life to be for the sake of *Hashem*, and this is not so easy. But if a person just thinks to himself every time he sits down to eat that he is doing so because of the *mitzvah* to keep his body going, this is not as hard.

However, here too, we must not forget that a person's actions demonstrate what he is thinking. If he sits down to a meal and finds that something is missing, and he is bothered by this, and even gets

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Berachos* 40b.

⁶ *Daniel* 12:3.

⁷ *Devarim* 4:15.

upset with his wife over it, this contradicts the whole idea that he is eating because he is so commanded. If he would truly eat only because he must, then when *Hashem* doesn't offer him food, he is not obliged to eat. If he gets upset about something missing, this shows that he is in fact eating because he wants to.

This explains the *pasuk* very well. *Avraham Avinu* was afraid his miraculous salvation from the four kings and their armies will be deducted from his merits. *Hashem* answered him, so to speak: Did you go to war to satisfy your own needs?! You went to save Lot. He went to war as a *mitzvah*, and when *Hashem* miraculously saved him, it wasn't deducted from his merits.

5. A further answer is based on the following teaching of *Chazal*:

R. Levi contrasted two verses. It is written, לְהָאָרֶץ וּמְלוֹאָהּ – “The earth and that which fills it is *Hashem's*,”⁸ and it is written, הַשָּׁמַיִם שְׁמַיִם לַיהוָה וְהָאָרֶץ נְתַן לְבָנָי אָדָם – “The heavens are heavens of *Hashem*, and the earth He gave to people.”⁹

It is not a contradiction. The first verse is before reciting a *berachah*, and the second verse is after reciting a *berachah*.¹⁰

After a person recites a *berachah* over food, it becomes his food, and he is not charged for eating that which is his. It is not deducted from his merits if he acquired the food before he ate it, by reciting a *berachah*.

In truth, everything that flows from *Hashem* is *chesed*. But there is a basic rule that everything that comes from *Hashem* must ultimately return to Him.

8 *Tehillim* 24:1.

9 *Ibid* 115:16.

10 *Berachos* 35a.

There is no exception to this rule. Because if something remains distanced from *Hashem*, if it doesn't return to Him, then it is in a state of destruction. Being far from *Hashem* is the source of all evil, as it says:

הִנֵּה רַחֲקִיךָ יֵאָבְדוּ – Behold, those distanced from You will perish.¹¹

Thus, everything must ultimately return to Him. There are several possible ways to return to *Hashem*, but mainly it is by one of these two: either by *hoda'ah*, admitting and praising, or by *yisurim*, suffering. To understand *hoda'ah*, let's say Reuven deposits an object to Shimon's safekeeping. As long as Shimon admits that it belongs to Reuven, it is still under Reuven's control, even though it is on Shimon's premises. So it is with us and *Hashem*. When a person praises *Hashem* and admits that everything is from Him, this returns it to Him, because even though it is on our premises, so to speak, it is under *Hashem's* control, since we readily admit where it came from and Who owns it.

However, if a person does not admit to *Hashem's* ownership, it will return to *Hashem* a different way, and this is the role of suffering. If we don't return gifts such as *parnassah* and health to *Hashem* by praising Him for them and recognizing where they came from, the *parnassah* simply goes back to Him, and poverty takes its place. Health goes back to *Hashem*, and illness takes its place, *chas v'shalom*.

When a person receives good things from Above, and thanks *Hashem* for it by reciting *berachos* before and after eating, and he does it in a spirit of joy and thankfulness, this returns the goodness to its Heavenly source, so there is no reason for it to be deducted from his merits. He already returned what he received to *Hashem*. In this way, his full reward will remain for *Olam Haba*. ●

11 *Tehillim* 73:27.