



# 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

## Real Freedom

וַיָּשׁוּבוּ וַיַּחֲנוּ לִפְנֵי פִי הַחִירוֹת. (שמות יד, ב)

**They went back and encamped in front of Pi Hachiros. (*Shemos* 14:2)**

**Pi Hachiros – [It is so named] because they received freedom (*cheirus*) from there. (*Mechilta*)**

The Jewish people went out of Egypt, from slavery to freedom. However, their freedom is associated with a certain location where they encamped, a place called Pi Hachiros.

What does this place have to do with freedom? Why did they go free there?

The main downfall of the Jewish people in Egypt was their involvement with *avodah zarah*. As *Chazal* say, the angels declared, “Both these [the Egyptians] and those [the Israelites] are idol worshippers.”<sup>1</sup>

But when the Jewish people came to Pi Hachiros, which is in front of the idol Baal Tzefon, they saw with their own eyes that *avodah zarah* has no power. This set them free.

What event took place there that brought them to this realization?

*Hashem* told them to go back and encamp in front of Pi Hachiros, which is in front of Baal Tzefon, and *Hashem* told them to do this because Baal Tzefon was the idol that guarded the entrance to Egypt. When *Hashem* destroyed the idols of Egypt, He left Baal Tzefon standing, so the Egyptians would mistakenly think that *avodah zarah* has power.

When the Egyptians saw that the Jews turned around and went back, and encamped in front of Pi Hachiros, which is in front of Baal Tzefon, Pharaoh said, “Baal Tzefon agreed to my decree to destroy the Jews in water.” He began to sacrifice animals, incense and wine libations to

<sup>1</sup> See *Mechilta*, *Beshalach* on verse 14:28.

*avodah zarah*.<sup>2</sup>

Pharaoh's belief in *avodah zarah* led him to the fatal mistake of chasing after the escaping Jews, and ended in him drowning in the Sea. Then, everyone could clearly see that *avodah zarah* has no power.

But why did Baal Tzefon need to be spared, and then be shown powerless? If Baal Tzefon had been destroyed along with all the other idols of Egypt, why would that not have uprooted all belief in *avodah zarah* from the hearts of the Jewish people?

Let's understand why people believed in *avodah zarah* in the first place.

Zonin said to R. Akiva, "We both know that *avodah zarah* has no power. But we see people who go [to the temple of idol worship] lame, and they come back healed. What is the reason for this?"

R. Akiva answered him, "I will answer you by way of allegory. There was a trustworthy man in a certain town, and all the townspeople would deposit valuables in his safekeeping, without any witnesses. Then a person came along and made his deposits in front of witnesses. One time he forgot, and deposited without witnesses. The trustworthy man's wife said to him, 'Let's deny he made that deposit.' He answered her, 'Just because this fool acted improperly, should we lose our trustworthiness?!'

"This is how it is with suffering. When suffering is sent to someone, it is first placed under oath that it will not leave that person

until such and such a day, and such and such an hour, and through such and such, and by such and such a medicine. When the time came for suffering to go away, the person went to the house of idol worship. Suffering said, 'It is proper for me not to go away from this man.' Then it says, 'Just because this fool acts improperly, should I transgress my oath?!'

"This is as it is written, חוליים רעים ונאמנים – 'Harsh and faithful illnesses.'<sup>3</sup> R. Yochanan explained, 'They are "harsh" in fulfillment of their mission, and "faithful" to their oath.'<sup>4</sup>

This *Gemara* then goes on to say that there was a certain idolatrous temple where they would sacrifice a person after having been instructed to do so by a "prophetic" dream, and this would bring the rain, thus saving them from drought. Why did this seemingly miraculous event take place? It was all in order to lead people who were already idol worshippers to think that *avodah zarah* really has power, so they will receive their well-deserved punishment. So explains the *Gemara*.

I heard from R. Yosef Liss, in the name of the Brisker Rov, that this is the whole strength of the *Sitra Achara*. It really has no power to do anything at all. The only thing it can do is create the false impression that it did everything. The man whose time to be healed has come, happens to find himself at that moment in a temple of idol worship. When the time for rain has arrived, the idol worshippers happen to sacrifice a man. There is no cause-and-

2 *Tanchuma, Beshalach* 8.

3 *Devarim* 28:59.

4 *Avodah Zarah* 55a.



effect relationship between the acts of *avodah zarah* and the healing or the rainfall. It's just a very convincing coincidence.

Now let's get back to the Jewish people in Egypt. As they left Egypt, they were not yet convinced that *avodah zarah* has no power. They could see that in a battle between *avodah zarah* and *Hashem*, the clear winner is *Hashem*. This proved to them that *Hashem* has more power, but maybe *avodah zarah* has a certain amount of power, too?

They had not yet freed themselves of attachment to *avodah zarah*, as long as they thought that way.

Now something new and different happened. After they left Egypt, they entered the domain of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. Now they saw not just the fall of the idols but also utter falsehood of the idols.

How did they see this?

*Hashem* commanded them to turn around and go back the way they came, to encamp in front of Pi Hachiros. This meant they were presently traveling towards Egypt, not away from it. Pharaoh thus thought they were trapped in by the Wilderness. They didn't know where to go and how to get out. He assumed that it was the power of *avodah zarah* that caught the Jews and brought them back, when

really it was *Hashem* Who told them to retrace their footsteps.

This is exactly how *avodah zarah* works, as we explained. It takes credit for things that *Hashem* does, making it look like the *avodah zarah* did it.

But now things were different. The Jewish people until this point had been in Pharaoh's domain, and they saw only *avodah zarah's* side. Now they entered the domain of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, and saw both sides. They saw the falsehood of *avodah zarah* from up close. They knew that *Hashem* told them to encamp here. Yet, *avodah zarah* was claiming, "I caught them, I brought them back here!" And Pharaoh was yelling out, "Look, the *avodah zarah* is in full force, it trapped the Jews in the Wilderness!"

The Jewish people saw all this. And for the first time they witnessed how *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* grants *avodah zarah* the power to deceive, to claim *Hashem's* deeds as its own deeds, when it in truth it has no power at all.

Now the Jewish people saw the utter falsity and bankruptcy of *avodah zarah*. They repudiated *avodah zarah* completely, and thereby attained true freedom. ●

## When the Parnassah is Hard

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִסְעוּ. (שמות יד, טו)

**Speak to the people of Yisrael and tell them to go forward. (*Shemos* 14:2)**

*Chazal* equated the difficulty of earning a living with *Krias Yam Suf*:

A person's *parnassah* is as hard as Splitting the Sea.<sup>1</sup>

And they compared the struggle of making a

livelihood with the struggle for life itself.

People work hard to get money. In Hebrew, money is called דמים, derived from the word דם, "blood." Blood is what life depends upon. And Rashi says that stealing from a poor person is like taking his life,<sup>2</sup> as it says, את נפש בעליו יקח, "He

1 *Pesachim* 118a.

2 *Rashi* on II *Shmuel* 12:5.

takes the soul of its owner.”<sup>3</sup>

When a person is fighting for his *parnassah*, and he feels threatened from all sides, he is like the Jewish people when they saw the Sea on one side, and the chariots of the Egyptian army on the other side. When a person is experiencing this kind of pressure, he should do as *Hashem* instructed our forefathers to do as they stood at the banks of Yam Suf. דבר את בני ישראל ויסעו – “Speak to the people of Yisrael and tell them to go forward!”

This is what we should do also regarding *parnassah*. A person should jump into the water, even though we are helpless in the water.

What does it mean to “jump into the water”?

Being up to one’s neck in water is the feeling that

we can’t do anything on our own, and only *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* can help us, and we are totally dependent on His assistance. This is actually *mesirus nefesh*.

When we cry out, “*Hashem*, help us, we are going to drown,” when we say to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, “Only You can help us,” this is the stage when the Heavenly treasure houses of endless *chesed* open up.

הֲרֵאִינִי אֶת מְרֹאֲךָ הַשְּׁמִיעֵנִי אֶת קוֹלְךָ –  
Show Me your appearance, let Me hear  
your voice.<sup>4</sup>

This verse speaks of *Krias Yam Suf*. As Rashi explains on the spot, *Hashem* says to us, “Show Me who you turn to in a time of trouble.” ●

3 *Mishlei* 1:19.

4 *Shir Hashirim* 2:14.

## PARSHA TOPIC

# The Power of Asher Yatzar

כָּל הַמַּחֲלָה אֲשֶׁר שִׁמַּתִּי בְּמִצְרַיִם לֹא אֲשִׁים עֲלֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי ה' רֹפֵאֶךָ: (שמות טו, כו)

**All the sicknesses that I placed on Egypt, I will not place on you, because I, *Hashem*, am your Healer. (*Shemos* 15:1)**

### Preventative Medicine

Many people think this *pasuk* contradicts itself. First it says that we will not become sick. Then it says that *Hashem* is our Healer. If we aren’t sick, why do we need healing?

The answer is a good healer, a good doctor, instructs people in healthy living habits so they won’t fall ill and need to be healed.

Usually, people go to the doctor when they are already sick, and then the doctor typically prescribes

medicine rather than teaching the patient what he can do to avoid illness in the first place.

However, there are people nowadays who are not so happy with antibiotic treatment. They prefer natural healing over conventional medicine. This has brought many people back to various methods that strengthen one’s health and prevent sickness. They remind us that the only way to stay healthy is to eat right. If a person eats without discrimination, and ruins his health, a doctor might not be able to help him.

When it comes to physical health, we all understand that we need to watch what we eat because we could damage our health in ways that can't be remedied by just taking a pill or a shot. We need to live a healthy lifestyle in the first place, so we won't end up in the doctor's office.

The same is true with spiritual means for health. Most of us know people who need our prayers. We *daven* for them and wish them a *refu'ah sheleimah*. The question is what can be done about it? How can we diminish the number of sick people?

Some suggest that we should designate a *Yom Tefilah*, a day devoted to prayer. This is a wonderful idea, but it somewhat resembles going for a serious operation. It is a means to be reserved for cases of emergency. We can't live routine life that way, just like we can't take antibiotics all the time. We should rather search for a spiritual lifestyle that will keep us in good health so we won't need days of *tefilah* and so forth.

## The Segulah of Mitzvos

Everyone understands that a *mitzvah* brings health, happiness and satisfaction, and an *aveirah* brings tragedy, sickness and pain. However, each *mitzvah* has a special quality, a special *segulah*, that helps in a certain area.

For instance, *mezuzah* has the quality of protecting the home from thieves. *Chazal* say that *Hashem* stands at our doorway to protect us, so to speak. The Divine Name *Shadda-i* written on the *mezuzah* parchment stands for **שומר דלתות ישראל**, "He guards the doors of Yisrael." Thus, someone who is smart will check his *mezuzos* from time to time, rather than investing in locks and bolts.

So it is with other *mitzvos*. They have special qualities that help in specific areas. Whatever the situation, we should search for the part of Torah and *mitzvos* that is especially pertinent to it.

In this spirit, we need to think about what we can do in our regular daily lives that will protect

our health. What spiritual "vitamin," what aspect of Torah and *mitzvos*, does *Hashem* offer us to keep us healthy?

We indeed have the blessing of *Refà'einu* in the *Amidah* prayer. However, this is a prayer for people who are already sick. It is more comparable to antibiotics. We are looking for a spiritual form of preventative medicine.

In my opinion, the special blessing for preventing illness is *Asher yatzar*. It ends with the words **רופא כל בשר ומפליא לעשות** – "He is the Healer of all flesh and works wonders." It doesn't say that *Hashem* "heals the sick," but rather that He is the Healer of all people. It begins **ברוך אתה ה' – You, Hashem, are a בריכה**, a "pool," a fountain of healing power. This blessing does not mention sickness. On the contrary, it praises *Hashem* for protecting our health: **אם יפתח אחד מהם או יסתם אחד מהם**.

It seems to me that people do try to recite the *Refà'einu* blessing in the *Amidah* with *kavanah*, but the blessing of *Asher yatzar* is not always recited the way it should be, and sometimes people don't even say it at all. The proof is how many sick people there are. If we would recite this blessing properly, there would not be so many illnesses.

## The Healing Relationship

*Chazal* say about the blessing of *Refà'einu*:

Why was healing placed as the eighth blessing in the *Amidah*? Said R. Acha: Because *milah* is set to be performed on the eighth day, and *milah* needs healing. Therefore, the blessing of healing was placed eighth.<sup>1</sup>

We see that the blessing of *Refà'einu* is associated with *milah*, but why? There are plenty of other illnesses and injuries that need healing. There are plenty of diseases much worse than the illness caused by *Milah*.

<sup>1</sup> *Megilah* 17b.

The point that *Chazal* are making is that *Hashem's* healing is a *bris*, a covenant, a relationship with Him.

If we would ask someone how he sees, he would likely answer, "With my eyes." Asked how he hears, he would say, "With my ears." How does he walk? "With my legs."

I will tell you a story about how I discovered that we don't walk with our legs.

Once I was in a traffic accident and my legs were injured. I was sitting in the wrecked car until someone came and said to me, "Get out of the car!" I responded, "I can't." He showed me: "Look, you can get out like this." I thought to myself: Right, if your legs are healthy, that's how you get out.

We don't walk with legs, we don't see with eyes and we don't hear with ears. Walking, seeing and hearing (and other bodily actions) do not come naturally, just because that's how the world works. They all are a personal gift from *Hashem*. Because we are so used to them, we don't notice this, and only when the eyes stop seeing and then *Hashem* gives eyesight back, then a person starts to understand that we don't see with our eyes. We need *Hashem* to empower our eyesight.

There is one time when we are together with *Hashem* in a way reminiscent of being in *Beis Hamikdash*. This is when we are sick. *Chazal* say:

The *Shechinah* is above the pillow of a sick person.<sup>2</sup>

Normally, only the *tzibbur* may recite prayers that are in Aramaic. An individual needs to pray

<sup>2</sup> *Shabbos* 12b.

in Hebrew. The *tzibbur* is different because the *Shechinah* is there. However, a sick person may *daven* in Aramaic because the *Shechinah* is with him.<sup>3</sup> When a person is sick, he is in a covenantal relationship, a *bris*, with *Hashem*.

The fact that the blessing of *Refa'einu* was fixed as the eighth blessing of the *Amidah* implies that healing is a miracle. This is because the number eight is associated with matters that are above nature. Every time a person is healed, it is a miracle.

The question is whether a person needs to be sick in order to attain this wondrous closeness to *Hashem*?

The answer is, of course, no. We can attain the same closeness by praying to *Hashem* before sickness comes.

We learn this from Rachel and Leah. They both were barren. Rachel cried and received dear children, and Leah cried and received dear children. Leah merited the same miracle that happened to Rachel, but with a big difference: Leah cried for years before she got married, and had children right after marriage. (We wouldn't even know that Leah was barren if not for the Torah revealing this to us, as mentioned in Rashi.) Rachel didn't cry before marriage, and afterward she needed to cry for years until she had children. This illustrates *Chazal's* teaching:

A person should always beg *Hashem* for mercy before he falls sick, because if he falls sick, he is asked to present merits in order to be healed.<sup>4</sup> ●

<sup>3</sup> See *Ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* 32a