

# 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

## Mortal Danger

וַתִּשָּׂא כָּל הָעֵדָה וַיִּתְּנוּ אֶת קוֹלָם וַיִּבְכוּ הָעָם בְּלִילָה הַהוּא. וַיִּלְנוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אַהֲרֹן כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. (במדבר יד, א-ב)

**The entire congregation raised their voices loudly and the people cried on that night. All the people of Yisrael complained against Moshe and Aharon. (*Bemidbar* 14:1-2)**

The Torah tells us a really awesome message here about the *Meraglim* and their complaints against *Hashem*. We can all learn a lesson from it to be applied in daily life.

Let's zero in on this important detail:

וַתִּרְגְּנוּ בְּאֶהְלֵיכֶם וַתֹּאמְרוּ בְּשֹׁנֵאת ה' אֲתָנוּ – הוֹצִיאָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם – “You complained perniciously in your tents, saying, *Hashem* took us out of the land of Egypt because He hates us.”<sup>1</sup>

This is really astounding. *Hashem* took us out of *Mitzrayim* with open miracles. He split the Sea for us, He fed us *Man*, He supplied all our needs in the *Midbar* in a most wondrous way.

And why did He do all this?

For just one reason. Because He hates us. That's what they said! This is why He carried us on eagles' wings, to bring us to a land flowing with milk and honey, whose fabulous fruits were right there before their very eyes. What was all of this for? “To place us in the hand of the Amorites to destroy us.” That's what they said. It's hard to get it. How could they even cook up such a crazy explanation?

Indeed, the reaction of the people to the *Meraglim's* report sounds so ridiculous, but what about us? What do we do every day? A person lives in *Hashem's* world, he has health, he has *parnassah*, he has a family, he has thousands of good things in life. And when something happens, let's see what he says.

It might be something little, like he is running to the bank to take care of some business before closing

<sup>1</sup> *Devarim* 1:27.

hours, and just as he rushes up, huffing and puffing, the door locks.

It might be something more serious, such as suffering a loss, whether it be in *gashmiyus* or in *ruchmiyus*. Or maybe he or a family member falls ill.

What conclusion jumps up in his mind? It looks like *Hashem* doesn't love me. That's what he thinks.

That's what the *parshah* is about. And it teaches us not just how silly it is to think that way, but also how dangerous it can be.

They all cried that night. *Chazal* say "that night" was the night of Tishah b'Av.

*Hakadosh Baruch Hu* said to them: You cried a needless cry; I will set for you a crying for generations on this night.<sup>2</sup>

This is when it was decreed that *Beis Hamikdash* will eventually be destroyed and the Jewish people will go into exile among the nations of the world.

The *Midrash* compares this to a king who brought a person in to be judged, and the person was so distraught that he bitterly blurted out the harsh punishment he thought the king would give him. The king said to him: What you said is what I decree upon you. What you said is what will happen to you.<sup>3</sup>

What's the point of the *Midrash*?

If you think the king is so cruel and mean that you imagine he will do such and such to you, then that's what you will get.

We are the same way. Every morning, when we recite *Ahavah Rabbah*, we bless *Hashem* for His great love of us. Then, in *Modim*, we thank Him for our lives that are in His hands, and for the miracles He does for us every day, and for His constant acts

of kindness. But afterward, during the course of the day, when something happens, it is common to forget all this, and starting thinking, "*Hashem* must be angry with me."

Don't fall into this way of thinking. It's a false narrative. Don't be like the distraught man in the above-mentioned *Midrash*.

And the biggest mistake of all: usually, what we are complaining about so bitterly is in fact very good for us.

That's how it was with the *Meraglim*. They complained that *הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֶתֶּה אָרֶץ הַזֵּה הִיא אֹכֶלֶת יוֹשְׁבֵיהָ הִיא* – "The land we passed through is a land that devours its inhabitants."<sup>4</sup> *Chazal* explain why they said this: everywhere they went, they saw funerals.

So was this good or bad?

They thought it was bad. People are dying all the time over here. But in fact, it was good, because *Hashem* caused a lot of funerals to take place just as they were spying out the land, so the locals will be busy mourning for their dear departed loved ones, and won't notice that there are twelve spies walking around.

It's like this with us, too. How many times did something happen that you thought was bad, and it turned out in the end to be very good? There are so many wonderful stories about cases like this. We need to remember this during difficult moments, to know that *Hashem* loves us dearly and always. The biggest danger is forgetting that *Hashem* loves us.

If a person remembers *Hashem's* love for him even in the difficult moments, that love will always accompany him, and all his troubles will transform into blessings and good news. ●

2 *Taanis* 29a.

3 *Midrash Tanchuma Shelach* 12.

4 *Bereishis* 13:32.



# The Best Buy

וְעָשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצִית. (במדבר טו, לח)

**They shall make *tzitzis* for themselves. (*Bemidbar 15:38*)**

We don't really know how to decide which *mitzvos* are more "important." We must do them all. *Chazal* said:

Be as careful about a light *mitzvah* as about a severe *mitzvah*, because you don't know what reward the *mitzvos* bear.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, there are certain *mitzvos* that we know to be especially important, and the Torah exhorts us especially to keep them.

One of these is *tzitzis*, mentioned at the end of this week's *parshah*, about which *Chazal* say that it is equal to all the *mitzvos* put together.<sup>2</sup> There are a lot of other teachings of *Chazal* that emphasize how important this *mitzvah* is, and what a great reward we will receive for keeping it.

If you are smart, you will take *mitzvos*:

חָכָם לֵב יִקַּח מִצְוֹת – The wise of heart will take *mitzvos*.<sup>3</sup>

And this saying applies especially to the *mitzvah* of *tzitzis*.

How so?

A person should approach *mitzvos* as would a smart businessman. When you are in business, you want to buy cheap and sell expensive. That's how you make money. So a good businessman has an eye out for this kind of merchandise.

Accordingly, *tzitzis* is a really good buy. Some *mitzvos* entail a considerable financial layout. What do a good pair of *tefillin* cost?

But not *tzitzis*.

It is so easy! It just costs a few dollars, and once you put the *tzitzis* on, you earn a great *mitzvah* every moment you wear them, even if you aren't thinking about it. It's like making a one-time investment of a few dollars in a business that doesn't take time, effort or further thought, and it registers profits not just once a year but every single moment of the day. It will add up to millions.

Who wouldn't invest in such a business? Either someone who is totally stupid, or someone who doesn't believe, and the second is worse than the first.

The *Yetzer Hara* knows all this, so he tries hard to keep people from doing the *mitzvah*. For those not yet used to wearing *tzitzis*, he puts the idea into their head that it is hard and uncomfortable, especially during the summer. This is silly. People wear shirts and undershirts anyways. Adding a light *tallis katan* made from thin cotton makes hardly any difference at all. It is easy to get used to, and it is worth millions!

For those who wear *tzitzis* regularly, the *Yetzer Hara* has a different trick. He lets them get so used to it that they don't pay attention to their *tzitzis* anymore, and sooner or later, some of the strings tear or break, and then the person is wearing a four-cornered garment without valid *tzitzis*. So instead of a *mitzvah* every moment, it is an *aveirah* every moment.

*Tzitzis* is a very precious *mitzvah* and we need to pay proper attention to it. "He who is careful to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *tzitzis* will merit greeting the *Shechinah*."<sup>4</sup> ●

1 *Pirkei Avos* 2:1.

2 *Nedarim* 25b.

3 *Mishlei* 1:8.

4 *Menachos* 43b.

וַיִּצְיֵאוּ דְבַת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּרוּ אֹתָהּ וְגו' הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֹתָהּ אָרֶץ אֲכָלָת  
 יוֹשְׁבֵיהָ הוּא. (במדבר יג, לב)

**They defamed the land that they spied out... “The land that we passed through to spy it out is a land that devours its inhabitants.” (*Bemidbar* 13:32)**

**“Devours its inhabitants” – [They said:] Every place we passed through, we found them burying the dead. However, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* did it for their good, so the Canaanites would be occupied with mourning and not pay attention to the Spies. (*Rashi*)**

### The King of Lashon Hara

This story of how the *Meraglim* defamed *Eretz Yisrael* teaches us an important principle about *lashon hara*.

Everything the Spies saw in the Land was done by *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* for their sake, for their own good. *Hashem* busied the Canaanites with burying people so they won't notice the *Meraglim* walking around. How did the *Meraglim* interpret this? For the bad. They said it “is a land that devours its inhabitants.” In other words, it is a bad country where lots of people die. They did the same with the fabulous fruit of *Eretz Yisrael*; they put a negative spin on it. They said *פירותיה משונים*, “Its fruit is abnormal,” as *Rashi* explains.

This is what *lashon hara* does. It focuses on the bad and ignores the good. We find this idea expressed elsewhere as well. For instance, *Chazal* say:

No one knew how to speak *lashon hara* like Haman did.<sup>1</sup>

Haman was the king of *lashon hara*. *Chazal* explain what he said about the Jewish people.

*מפוזר* – “Scattered.” The Jews are scattered among the nations of the world. *מפורד* – “Separated.” Lest you think there is some benefit from them, I am

telling you that they are like a *פרידה*, a mule, which does not reproduce. *עם* – “And their laws are different from those of all peoples.” They don't eat our food and they don't intermarry. *עושים* – “And they do not keep the king's laws.” The whole year long they say, “Today it's *Shabbos* [so we don't work]; today it's *Pesach* [so we don't work].” *ולמלך אין שווה להניחם* – “And it is not worthwhile for the king to maintain them.” When they eat and drink, they show disrespect to the kingdom. If a fly would fall into the cup [of wine] of a Jew, he would throw out the fly and drink the cup. But if your highness, the king, would touch the cup [of wine] of a Jew, he would spill on the floor and not drink it.

Haman spoke disparagingly about the *mitzvos* that the Jewish people do, and *Chazal* describe what he said as *lashon hara*.

But technically, everything he said was true. *Lashon hara* is, after all, when one says the truth, [because speaking falsehood is usually called *motzi sheim ra*, slander]. Haman said *עם אחד* – “There is one people.” This is true. He said that the Jews are scattered and separated among the nations. True. He said that their laws are different from those of other peoples. Again true. He said they don't keep the king's laws. Very true: when a Jew is asked to do something on *Shabbos* or *Yom Tov*, he simply won't do it.

<sup>1</sup> *Megilah* 13b.

And when Haman said, “It is not worthwhile for the king to maintain them,” this was Haman’s conclusion. It was not the actual *lashon hara* on which his conclusion was based.

The thing that is hard to understand is why Haman’s comments are defined as *lashon hara* at all. What was disparaging in what he said? Ostensibly, he showered praises on the Jews. It is good to be “one people.” Similarly, we readily admit that we are different from other peoples. We are not ashamed of that in the least.

If so, where do we find an element of *lashon hara* in what Haman said? What brought *Chazal* to crown him as the king of *lashon hara*?

Perhaps it was Haman’s claim that every time a Jew is asked to do something, he has an excuse, and says it is *Shabbos* today or it is *Pesach* today? This is all true, and we are proud of it, too, that we have such wonderful holidays and that we feel we are בני חורין, free men. Where is the *lashon hara* in it?

Yet, *Chazal* clearly say that no one knew how to speak *lashon hara* as effectively as Haman did. The explanation is as follows.

## Focus is Everything

Everyone in the world has good points and not-so-good points. The question is what we focus on.

*Sefer Chovos Halevavos* describes the trait of humility, and explains that it entails seeing the other person as better than oneself:

If the other person is wiser than I am, I would say, “He fears G-d more than I do, thanks to his greater wisdom.” And if he has less wisdom than I do, I will say that his reckoning on the day of judgment will be lighter than mine, because I transgress knowingly, while he transgresses unknowingly.

If he is older than me, I say that he has more merits than I do, because he came to

the world before me. And if he is younger than me, I say that his sins are less than mine.

If he is equal to me in age and wisdom, I say, “Perhaps his heart is more devoted to G-d than mine is, because I know the sins I have already committed, and I don’t know his.”

In this way, I always honor the other person and show deference to him.<sup>2</sup>

R. Yisrael Salanter asked how is it possible to live that way, with such thoughts? Is a person really expected to think that everyone is better than himself?

He answered based on the idea that a certain thing, a certain point that you see in the other person, makes an impression on you, and you naturally focus on that point.

Let’s say you see someone do a misdeed. And this someone is greater in Torah learning than you are. So you naturally conclude that he commits misdeeds deliberately, whereas if you commit a misdeed, you consider it unintentional. Why did you come to such a conclusion? Because he is a big *talmid chacham* and it is inappropriate for him to act in such a way. But you are not so learned, so it’s not so terrible if you do these things. Thus you naturally conclude that you are better than him.

Now let’s switch the scenario. You meet someone who is less learned than you are. You naturally conclude that you are better than him, because you are a much greater *talmid chacham*.

What happened? Why did your outlook change to just the opposite?

The answer is when you are a greater *talmid chacham*, that is the point that makes an impression on you, so you naturally focus on it. You push the other factor into the background. You don’t think about how his sins are unintentional and yours are deliberate.

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<sup>2</sup> *Chovos Halevavos* 6:10.

The following allegory illustrates this point beautifully. Ten people grab hold of an elephant, and each one says something different about the object he is holding on to. One grabs hold of a leg and says, “It is a stick of wood.” Another grabs hold of a tooth and said, “It is a sword.”

Who is right? They are all right. It’s just a question of what you look at.

This is how *lashon hara* works, [and, by contrast, this is how the trait of humility works]. Every person has good points and not-so-good points. The question is what you concentrate on, what you give more weight to.

## David Hamelech’s Lame and Blind Enemies

There is a wonderful example of this in *Tanach*.

וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כָּל מַכֵּה יְבִסִי וְגוֹי  
– וְאֵת הַפְּסִחִים וְאֵת הָעוֹרִים שְׁנָאֵי נֶפֶשׁ דָּוִד  
David said on that day, “Whoever strikes a  
Jebusite... and the lame and the blind hated  
by David’s soul.”<sup>3</sup>

The Commentators explain that in that period, the Philistines did not fear the Jewish people. Why? Because *Avraham Avinu* swore to Avimelech their predecessor that for four generations, Avraham’s descendants will not harm the Philistines. And there was an old man still alive who belonged to those four generations. As long as this man lived, the Philistines knew the Jewish people cannot harm them, so they allowed themselves to make fun of the Jewish people and of their holy forefathers.

To this end they made two statues, one of a lame man, to belittle *Yaakov Avinu*, who limped after his encounter with Eisav’s ruling angel. The second statue was of a blind man, to belittle Yitzchak, whose eyes dimmed in his old age. About these statues it was said, “The lame and the blind hated by David’s soul.”

I don’t know why *David Hamelech* hated them, but I will tell you why I hate them.

I, too, learned *Chumash*, and even so, until I came to this verse in *Sefer Shmuel*, I never knew that Yaakov was lame and that Yitzchak was blind. I saw many blind people in the course of my life, and I also was aware of the teaching of *Chazal* that when Yitzchak was bound on the altar, at the *Akeidah*, the angels cried and their tears fell into his eyes, and as a result, he became blind in his old age. I knew all this. But I never realized that *Yitzchak Avinu* could be described as a “blind man.” I simply never pictured him this way.

Similarly, I knew that Yaakov wrestled with the angel and came out limping on his thigh. But when I saw a lame person in the street, I never associated this with *Yaakov Avinu’s* image.

Only when I saw this *pasuk*, that the *Plishtim* made fun of Yitzchak and Yaakov, Yitzchak because he was blind and Yaakov because he was lame – then I realized that this was indeed their nature, as seen from the perspective of the Philistines.

Now I ask you: weren’t the *Plishtim* right? Yitzchak surely was blind, and Yaakov surely limped.

However, only those “hated by David’s soul” would characterize Yitzchak and Yaakov that way, because it all depends on what you look at. You can look at *Yitzchak Avinu* or at *Yaakov Avinu* and say, “Astounding! He is one of the four legs holding up the *Merkavah*, the Heavenly Chariot!” Or you could look at Yaakov and say, “Oh, it’s just a limping man,” and at Yitzchak and say, “It’s just a blind man.” And no one can deny it is true.

This is *lashon hara*.

## A Very Tidy Bridegroom

I will tell you a story that happened to me.

I once was acquainted with a certain *chasan* and *kallah*. The *chasan* was one of the cleanest and tidiest people I knew. I never saw a stain on his clothing. He was also remarkably refined of nature.

The day before the wedding, the *kallah* came to

3 I *Shmuel* 5:8.

me, crying. She doesn't know what to do, she just found out that the *chasan* is not what she thought...

What happened?

It turned out that the brother of the *kallah*, who was far from the Torah world, didn't want his sister to marry a *ben Torah*. So he came to his sister and told her, "Do you want to know what kind of person your *chasan* is? Come and I will show you how he eats!"

Do you get the story?

Every person, if you catch him in the middle of a physical activity such as eating, is not going to look very refined and uplifted. Almost anyone, if you stand next to his kitchen window and watch him eat supper, will appear a bit unsavory.

This brother was not lying. He simply pointed to the person's weak point and emphasized it, a point that most people have, if not all people. This typifies *lashon hara*.

Thus *Chazal* said Haman was the king of *lashon hara*. They meant that no one knew as well as he how to take the most beautiful thing there is and show its negative side. Speaking good means to see the good side. To see that the other person is wiser than me, or more refined of nature than me. *Lashon hara* means to grab hold of the weak point and say, "Look how disgusting!"

Let us learn to focus on the good in things we see and in people we encounter.

## Amazingly Good

On a deeper level, people commonly think that כל דעביד רחמנא לטב עביד, "Whatever the Merciful One does is for the good," means that even when *Hashem* punishes, in the end it will be for the good. It is worthwhile for a person to accept this punishment for whatever reason, for instance, that it will enable him to go to *Olam Haba*.

Let's talk about this. After all, there is such a thing as Divine punishment. There is such a thing as *Din*.

The deeper understanding is that everything *Hashem* created in His world, including judgment and *din*, is amazingly for the good. Not that it brings something good in its wake, not that we can find some positive aspect in it, but that it really is good. This is something wondrous. There are two things here that contradict each other, but they both are true. It is bad and good at the same time.

This is why, in this world, we say *Baruch Dayan Ha'emes* on bad news. We don't say *Hatov v'ehaMeitiv*, because it is an act of *din*. It is punishment. It is something bad; it is darkness. But at the same time, in a wondrous way, it is good!

As long as we can't grasp this, we say *Baruch Dayan Ha'emes*. Because only in the future will it be revealed to us how *Baruch Dayan Ha'emes* itself is *Hatov v'ehaMeitiv*. It's not that we were mistaken. We are right; something bad happened. It's that the bad thing is, at the same time, something good. But we can't grasp this here in this world.

When Moshe asked *Hashem* what Name to tell the Jewish people, *Hashem* said, "Do you wish to know My Name?" I have a lot of different modes of action. But I will tell you something that is the internal aspect, the root of everything: אהייה אשר אהייה. "I will be what I will be."

In other words, the truth will be revealed in the future, and then you will understand how everything *Hashem* did is good. And *Rashi* explains how, in a certain sense, it is true even now. "I will be' with them in this trouble." All the troubles that *Hashem* brings upon a person are indeed troubles, but wondrously, with all the troubles, *Hashem* is here with him.

This is *emunah*. ●