

The Torah Any Times

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Rabbi Shlomo Farhi

Watch Your Step

Allow me to share with you something beautiful from our Jewish tradition. It's one of those teachings that, unless we revisit it frequently, we might forget its importance.

In this week's Parsha, at the very outset, we encounter the word "Ekev." It's an interesting word. It can mean, 'If you will only listen.' But our Sages observe that the double entendre—the other meaning of the word—is also instructive. Rashi famously explains, "It's worth a lot if you listen to the mitzvot that are kalot, those that are simple, treated as unimportant, like those people step on with their heels. If you listen to those mitzvot, then I will give you tremendous beracha (blessing)."

It's crucial to understand. Why is the Torah saying that if you listen to the small mitzvot, the ones people step on, that's when you'll receive beracha in your life? Why only the small mitzvot? And what exactly are small mitzvot? All mitzvot are given by Hashem, so how can there be a mitzvah that's considered small or one that would be stepped on with our heel?

The Shelah HaKadosh writes that many people think a ba'al teshuvah is someone who commits a serious transgression—like a murderer, a thief, a pirate, someone deeply corrupt. That's the person who needs to do teshuvah.

But that's necessarily the entire

picture, explains the Shelah. Teshuvah is for anyone who has committed any sin. Any mitzvah you didn't perform properly, if you turn back to the right path, that's teshuvah.

What's interesting is that while some believe a ba'al teshuvah is someone who grew up irreligious and then became religious, the Shelah dispels that simplistic notion. The worst sins in your pocket aren't the big ones. Often, when you ask someone if they have anything to do teshuvah for, their mind immediately goes to their most serious transgressions—the one time they really failed, really did the wrong thing. But actually, as the Shelah HaKadosh teaches us, the key to teshuvah isn't in the big sins; those are relatively easy to deal with. The real issue is the small things—the small sins that accumulate over time.

He provides a great example, which can be modernized to our day and age. How many times have you gotten that dreaded message on your phone—'Storage full'? What do you do? You delete the biggest video, thinking that will solve the problem. But moments later, your phone tells you again, 'Storage full.' Why? Because it's not about the big video. It's about the countless small pictures that each take up half a megabyte. They're small, but when added up, they're much bigger than that one big file.

In life, it's not the big sins that get you—it's the accumulation of small ones. If you don't realize this, re-

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frame how you think about it, and then it'll begin to click. You might think, 'I'll just do teshuvah for the big things,' but you won't see how much the small things weigh you down.

For instance, in the Aseret HaDibrot (Ten Commandments), one Commandment is not to swear falsely in G-d's name. Yet many people swear about everything—they swear about business deals or they swear they paid a certain amount for something. They're so accustomed to swearing that it becomes a habit. When asked why they swear needlessly, they might say, "Rabbi, I swear I never swear!" They don't even realize what they're doing.

The Gemara (Kiddushin 40a) tells us that when a person commits a sin repeatedly, it becomes like a heter (permissible) for them—it no longer feels like a sin. They might argue that the rabbis didn't mean it that way, or that it's not really a problem. But the reality is, the more you do something, the less you see it as an issue.

In Judaism, awareness is crucial. It's about recognizing the small things—the details of how you live your life. Teshuvah isn't about battling every sin every minute of every day, but about building good habits. Those good habits eventually make the difficult challenges easier, allowing you to focus on other areas of growth.

There's a great saying: "Great people do small things, and small people only try to do great things." True greatness comes from focusing on the small details, from building habits that align your life with Torah values.

When we focus on the small things—the words we use, the way we treat others, the mitzvot we might otherwise overlook—we not only avoid accumulating spiritual clutter, but we also create a foundation for true greatness. Remember,

Judaism is first and foremost about awareness—recognizing and paying attention to the details, to the minutiae of how we live our lives.

Some time ago, someone approached me after class and said, "Rabbi, you shouldn't speak that way." I was surprised and responded, "Really? That's a very common phrase where I'm from, especially in New York City." But then I thought back to my time in England, and realized that certain words are used differently in different places. There are words they use there that others would never use, and vice versa. So, I said something, thinking it was harmless, but this person said, "Rabbi, please don't speak that way. Your words go everywhere, and even if it's common elsewhere, in this setting here, it's not suitable."

He went on to explain that he used to work on a trading floor, where he was surrounded by the foulest language you could imagine. "It was so difficult to guard my own speech and not let that language seep into my everyday talk," he explained. "The result is that I became very sensitive to the way I talk and other people talk, which is why I noticed it when you said that phrase." I appreciated his feedback, and told him, "I'll do my best not to use that word again in a class."

Now, this made me think about how often we say, "Oh, it's fine. Everybody says it." But just because something is common doesn't make it right. Speaking properly and respectfully is something that Jews are obligated to do. The fact that others may say something inappropriate doesn't change that.

David HaMelech said, "Why am I afraid on the day of punishment? The sins of my heels that surround me" (Tehillim 49:6). Dovid Hamelech is reflecting upon the fact that certain sins are impossible to heal—not because we lack willpower, or we're not

strong enough, but because they've become so ingrained, so habitual, that we don't even recognize them as sins anymore.

In the Israeli army, they don't train soldiers to be heroes by having them do grand, daring acts right away. Instead, they make soldiers practice the basics over and over—taking apart and rebuilding their guns dozens of times, running in the desert with heavy loads, and crawling in the sand. The repetitive, small tasks are what build discipline and character, not the flashy, heroic acts.

This same idea applies in Jewish life. In yeshivot, rabbis would sometimes point to young students and say, "This one will grow up to be great," based on the small details of how they lived their lives. The worst thing you can develop isn't necessarily a bad deed—it's a bad habit. Because bad habits sneak into your life, and before you know it, you're doing them without even realizing it.

Judaism is first and foremost about awareness—paying attention to the minutiae of how you live your life. It's not just about the big sins like stealing or killing; the Torah even has something to say about having a smile on your face. Our Sages teach that it's important to greet others with a pleasant expression (Pirkei Avot 1:15) and to be the person to say hello to another person first (Berachot 17a). The Torah cares about the small things because greatness is achieved by focusing on the details.

There's a story about a toothpaste company that wanted to increase sales. After many grand marketing ideas were pitched, the winning suggestion was simple: Make the opening of the toothpaste tube just a fraction of a millimeter wider. That tiny change led to people using more toothpaste without even realizing it, and the company's sales skyrocketed by 20%. The lesson here is that great

people focus on the small things, while small people only try to do great things.

In the same vein, someone who wants to be great doesn't aim only for grand gestures. It's the person who gets the little things right—the one who always gets on base or never misses a catch—who becomes truly valuable.

This is an idea that can never be repeated enough times to ourselves. The process of growth is not about fighting every challenge every minute of every day. It's about building good habits, so those habits carry you through the difficult moments. Once you've established those habits, the tough battles become easier,

and you can focus on other areas of growth.

Scientists say it takes 90 days to change a habit. In Judaism, too, as demonstrated in the laws of Tefillah (prayer), when in doubt, we assume you have kept to your old routine of saying *Mashiv ha'ruach u'morid ha'geshem* and mentioning the rainy season until after 90 tefillot (or 30 days) have passed. The lesson is that with consistent practice, something becomes a part of you. Imagine if we applied this rule to different aspects of our life—gradually eliminating bad habits and replacing them with good ones. Over time, we would find ourselves growing in ways we never thought possible.

There are also triggers in life—small actions you can take that lead to a cascading effect of positive change. For instance, you can set your phone to auto-delete messages after a certain period. If you consciously save the important messages, you can clear up storage without losing what matters. One small action can make a big difference.

Look for those small triggers in your life that can help you grow spiritually, and you'll find yourself exceeding your expectations for personal growth.

And you can be sure. That's the greatest gift you can give yourself.

Mr. Charlie Harary

Indiscernible Change

Great people have this amazing ability to see even the smallest things and change their lives. One of the greatest stories is the story of Rabbi Akiva. He was an unlearned shepherd, walking in the fields one day, when he saw a brook. At the end of the brook, there was water that was dripping down onto a rock. Rabbi Akiva stopped, if you can picture the scene, walked closer, and saw this incredible sight: water dripping, drip, drip, onto a rock. And when he looked down at the rock, he saw that the rock had a hole. Somehow, this water was able to bore a hole in the rock.

He made his calculation: if water, which is soft, can penetrate a rock, which is hard, then Torah, which is like iron, can penetrate

his heart, which is soft (Avos D'Rebbe Nosson 6:2). That moment, that scene, that lesson, led him to start learning and to become one of the greatest Tzaddikim in the history of Klal Yisrael.

Rabbi Noach Weinberg zt"l once spoke about this and observed the following. What was it that made Rabbi Akiva so inspired? Was it just the hole? Actually, it wasn't. It was much deeper. The reason why the hole came to be was because it was a drip. There was no water that came in a torrent on the rock; it wasn't the force and the power of water that created the hole. It was the consistent drip that allowed, one after the other, a slow erosion of the rock. It may have been the millionth drop that made the hole, but the first drop also made a difference—you just couldn't see it. There was no one

drop that made the hole; it was every drop.

Rabbi Akiva realized, "I've got such a long way to go. In my middle age, I don't even know the Aleph-Beis. How am I ever going to become a successful person in Torah? But wait, even if I don't see any results, that first Aleph will actually make a difference. I can see now, through this story, that every single drop, whether my eye can discern it or not, is actually changing my life. And so, every day has meaning and every moment is valuable. So let me get started now, and let it go wherever it goes."

We all want to be great in life. But you know what happens many times? We start down the journey, and do one, two, five, six, ten, twenty days, and we don't see a difference because we're waiting for the dramatic moment. But Rabbi Akiva saw that day, and knew that it's never how change works. Change

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isn't discernible to the eye when you look closely. It's only when you look from afar.

We must believe that every drop of goodness, every drop that we're

doing for Hashem is actually making us a different, greater person, whether we can see the change or not. Because we believe, at the end of the day, that if we're continu-

ously, every day, doing that thing, we'll wake up one morning and see that the change we've made in our lives is beyond our imagination.

Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser

A Good Kind of Fear

In our Parsha, we encounter the famous words, "Mah Hashem Elokecha sho'el me'imach—What does Hashem ask of you?" And the answer is, "Ki im l'yirah et Hashem," meaning "Only to fear Hashem." Here, we come across a profound teaching from the great R' Chanina, who says that everything is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven itself (Berachos 33b).

This raises an intriguing question. How can it be? What is this novel interpretation that R' Chani-na is offering us? Would we assume that Hashem could make us automatically fear Him, that we would all walk around with great Yirat Shamayim (fear of Heaven)? Of course not. If that were the case, there would be no challenge, no nissayon (test), no avodah (service) for us to engage in.

So, what does it mean? The great Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer zt"l explains with a powerful analogy.

Imagine a person standing alone in a very scary place, a place he would never venture into under normal circumstances. However, if someone offered him \$10,000 to cross that land, he might decide to go for it, driven by the need for the money. Is he still afraid? Cer-

tainly. But because of the \$10,000, he pushes through his fear and proceeds, even though his heart is pounding.

However, as Rav Shach explains, when it comes to Yirat Shamayim, there are no such limits. It's not a matter of money or external incentives. Yirat Shamayim is something we must work on throughout our lives. It's an avodah, a lifelong service to Hashem. Each person must cultivate this fear of Heaven, understanding that with every sin, the consequence is already created at the time of the sin. Therefore, we must do teshuvah (repentance) quickly to avert the harsh consequences. We must be extremely careful throughout our lives to stay on the right path, to do the right things, and to be kind to everyone. We must be mindful of our obligations bein adam l'Makom (between a person and Hashem) and bein adam l'chaveiro (between a person and their fellow).

Two great tzadikim, Rav Mendel of Rimanov and Rav Yisrael of Apt (the Apter Rav) once wanted to learn from the great tzaddik, the Chozeh of Lublin. When they arrived in Lublin, they dressed in white garments as a sign of purity and humility. However, some locals were not pleased with their arrival, and they were sus-

pected of being spies, and as such, thrown into prison. The next morning, the two tzaddikim appeared before the judge. When asked why they were there, they explained that they were working on their Yirat Shamayim and had come to learn from the ways of the Chozeh of Lublin.

The judge, seeing them dressed in white, asked why they were dressed that way. In response, they asked the judge, "Why are you dressed in black?" The judge, infuriated, demanded, "Do you understand before whom you are standing?" Rav Mendel of Rimanov calmly replied, "We understand exactly who we are standing before—the Creator of the world—and that is why we are not afraid of anything you are saying."

At that moment, Rav Mendel of Rimanov removed his shtreimel (traditional fur hat), revealing his full countenance, and the judge, seeing the holy aura of the tzaddik, grew pale and quickly dismissed the case, pleading with them to leave.

Yirat Shamayim is a lifelong journey and a fundamental aspect of our relationship with Hashem. But its dividends are worth everything, because they bring Hashem into our life in the most palpable of ways. And not only that, but the rewards of such closeness to Hashem last for an eternity.



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Bring Them Home!

Names of Hostages in Gaza

(Updated: 18 Av)

עידן בן דלית (שתייו)	דורון בת סימונה שרה (שטיינברגר)	אבינתן בן דיצה תרצה (אור)
עמרי בן אסתר ורוניקה (מירן)	דניאלה בת אורלי (גלבוע)	אביתר בן גליה (דוד)
קית' שמואל בן גלדיס חוה (סיגל)	הירש בן פערל חנה (גולדברג)	אגם בת מירב (ברגר)
קרינה בת אירנה (ארייב)	פולין) זיו בן טליה (ברמן)	אוהד בן אסתר (בן עמי)
רום בן תמר נועה (ברסלבסקי)	טל בן ניצה (שוהם קורנגולד)	אוהד בן קרן (יהלומי)
רומי בת מירב (גונן)	יאיר בן רות אידית (הורן)	אור בן גאולה (לוי) אורי בן עינב
שגב בן גלית (כלפון)	יוסף חיים בן מרים (אוחנה)	אפרת (דנינו) איתן בן רות אדית (הורן)
שגיא בן נעמית (חן דקל)	יצחק בן אנטה חנה (אלגרט)	איתן אברהם בן אפרת (מור)
שירי בת מרגיט (ביבס)	יצחק בן דבורה (עידן)	אלון בן עידית (אהל)
שלמה בן מרסל (מנצור)	ירדן בן פנינה (ביבס)	אליה בן סיגלית (כהן)
תמיר בן חירות (נמרודי)	כפיר בן שירי (ביבס)	אליהו בן חנה (שרעבי)
	כרמל בת כנרת (גת)	אלכסנדר בן אוקסנה (לובנוב)
	לירי בת שירה (אלבג)	אלכסנדר סשה בן ילנה לאה
	מקסים בן טלה (הרקין)	(טרופנוב) אלמוג בן נירה
	מתן בן ענת (אנגרסט)	(סרוסי) אלקנה בן רוחמה
	מתן בן ירדנה עינב (צנגאוקר)	(בוחבוט) אמילי תהילה בת
	נמרוד בן ויקי (כהן)	אמנדה פרנסיס (דמארי)
	נעמה בת איילת (לוי)	ארבל בת יעל (יהוד)
	עדן בת שירית (ירושלמי)	אריאל בן סילביה מוניקה (קוניו)
	עודד בן בלהה (ליפשיץ)	אריאל בן שירי (ביבס)
	עומר בן ניבה (ונקרט)	בר אברהם בן ג'וליה (קופרשטיין)
	עומר בן שלי (שם טוב)	גד משה בן שרה (מוזס)
	עומר מקסים בן אורנה אסתר	גיא בן מירב (גלבוע דלאל)
	(נאוטרה) עופר בן כוכבה	גלי בן טליה (ברמן)
	(קלדרון) עידן בן יעל	דוד בן סילביה מוניקה (קוניו)
	(אלכסנדר)	

Bring Them Home!

Names of Hostages in Gaza

(Updated: 18 Av)

Oded ben Bilhah (Lifschitz)	Gad Moshe ben Sarah (Mozes)	Avinatan ben Ditza Tirtza (Ohr)
Omer ben Niva (Venkrat)	Guy ben Meirav (Gilboa Dalal)	Evyatar ben Galya (David)
Omer ben Shelly (Shemtov)	Gali ben Talya (Berman)	Agam bat Meirav (Berger)
Omer Maxim ben Orna Esther (Neutra)	David ben Sylvia Monika (Konyo)	Ohad ben Esther (Ben- Ami)
Ofer ben Cochava (Kalderon)	Doron bat Simona Sarah (Steinbrecher)	Ohad ben Keren (Yahalomi)
Idan ben Yael (Alexander)	Daniella bat Orli (Gilboa)	Ohr ben Geula (Levi)
Idan ben Dalit (Shtivi)	Hirsch ben Perel Chana (Goldberg-Polin)	Ori ben Einav Efrat (Danino)
Omri ben Esther Veronica (Miran)	Ziv ben Talya (Berman)	Eitan ben Ruth Idit (Horen)
Yitzchak ben Devorah (Idan)	Tal ben Nitza (Shoham- Corngold)	Eitan Avraham ben Efrat (Mor)
Kieth Shmuel ben Gladis	Yair ben Ruth Idit (Horen)	Alon ben Idit (Ohel)
Chava (Segal)	Yosef Chaim ben Miriam (Ochana)	Eliya ben Sigalit (Cohen)
Karina bat Irena (Ariav)	ben Miriam (Ochana)	Eliyahu ben Chana (Sharabi)
Rom ben Tamar Noa (Brasalevsky)	Yitzchak ben Aneta Chana (Elgarat)	Alexander ben Oksana (Lubanov)
Romi bat Meirav (Gonen)	Yarden ben Penina (Bibas)	Alexander Sasha ben Yelena Leah (Tropanov)
Segev ben Galit (Chalfon)	Kfir ben Shiri (Bibas)	Almog ben Nira (Sarusi)
Sagi ben Naamit (Chen- Dekel)	Carmel bat Kineret (Gat)	Elkana ben Ruchama (Buchbut)
Shiri bat Margit (Bibas)	Liri bat Shira (Elbag)	Emily Tehilla bat Amanda Francis (Damari)
Shlomo ben Marcelle (Mansour)	Maxim ben Talleh (Herkin)	Arbel bat Yael (Yehud)
Tamir ben Cheirut (Nimrodi)	Matan ben Anat (Angrest)	Ariel ben Sylvia Monika (Konyo)
	Matan ben Yardena Einav (Tzangauker)	Ariel ben Shiri (Bibas)
	Nimrod ben Viki (Cohen)	Bar Avraham ben Julia (Cooperstein)
	Naama bat Ayelet (Levi)	
	Eden bat Shirit (Yerushalmi)	