



**“Remember what Amalek did to you on the derech!”**

## **Amalek Fought to Block the Path of Teshuvah of Chodesh Elul which Yaakov Avinu Took Strategically from His Grandfather Eisav**

The upcoming, auspicious Shabbas kodesh is the first Shabbas in the month of teshuvah—chodesh Elul. It is fitting that we establish a connection between the teshuvah of Elul and the mitzvah of “mechias Amalek”—eradicating Amalek.” This mitzvah appears at the end of parshas Ki Seitzei, which we read annually in chodesh Elul (Devarim 25, 17): **“זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים, אשר קרך בדרך ויזנב בך כל הנחשלים אחריו ואתה עיף ויגע ולא ירא. Remember what Amalek did to you on the “derech,” while you were departing from Egypt, how he happened upon you on the “derech,” and he attacked at your rear, all the weaklings that straggled behind you — while you were tired and exhausted; and he did not fear G-d. Why does the Torah employ the term “derech” twice here?**

Additionally, we wish to clarify the depiction: **“All the weaklings that straggled behind you.”** According to Rashi, this refers to **“those lacking strength on account of their sins, whom the cloud cast out (denied protection).”** The Midrash Tanchuma (10) identifies them as: **Shevet Dan, who were cast out by the cloud; they all worshipped avodah-zarah, as it states: “You were tired and exhausted; and he did not fear G-d”—tired because of thirst, exhausted from the journey, and not G-d-fearing.** Now, if they were so sinful and idolatrous that the cloud refused to cover them and protect them, why did Amalek bother to pursue them?

### **A Fabulous Insight from the Illustrious Arizal Concentrate during Elul on the Passuk: “הנותן בים דרך”**

We will begin to shed some light on the relationship between the month of Elul and the war with Amalek

based on a wonderful insight from our mentor, the Arizal (Sha’ar Ruach HaKodesh 16), which is cited in much of the Chassidic literature. During the month of Elul, it is advantageous to focus on the deeper meaning of the passuk (Yeshayah 43, 16): **“הנותן בים דרך”—He Who provided a path (“derech”) through the sea.** This depiction alludes to the incredible light associated with the process of teshuvah, which is called **“derech”—a way or path.** For, HKB”H illuminates for Yisrael the **“path of teshuvah”** during the month of Elul.

With the Almighty’s help, we will explain the concept of **“הנותן בים דרך”** that is crucial and instructive regarding how a Jew should behave during this month of teshuvah. We find that teshuvah is referred to as a **path—“derech”—**in the formula instituted for the Vidui before Tachanun: **“אל ארך אפים אתה ובעל הרחמים ונקראת, וְדֶרֶךְ תְּשׁוּבָה הוּרִיתָ”—You are a G-d Who is slow to anger, You are called the Master of Mercy, and You have shown (established) the “derech” of teshuvah.** The source for this is the following passuk (Tehillim 25, 8): **“טוב וישר ה' על כן יורה חטאים בדרך”—good and upright is Hashem; therefore, He guides sinners on the ‘derech.’”** Rashi comments: **“Hashem is good and upright”—He does not reject sinners; if they wish to repent, He will accept them and guide them on the “derech” of teshuvah.**

This interpretation of the passuk: **“He guides sinners on the ‘derech’”—**that it refers to the **“path of teshuvah”** is based on a passage in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Makkos 2, 6), where this passuk is expounded as a dispute between **“chochmah,” “nevuah,”** and HKB”H concerning the appropriate punishment for a sinner. Here is the passage:

“שאלו לחכמה חוטא מהו עונשו, אמרו להם חטאים תרדף רעה, שאלו לנבואה חוטא מהו עונשו, אמרה להן הנפש החוטאת היא תמות... שאלו לקודשא בריך הוא חוטא מהו עונשו, אמר להן יעשה תשובה ויתכפר לו, היינו דכתיב על כן יורה חטאים בדרך, יורה לחטאים דרך לעשות תשובה.”

They asked “Chochmah” (Wisdom): “What should the punishment of a sinner be?” She answered them (Mishlei 13, 21): “Evil pursues sinners.” They asked “Nevuah” (Prophecy), “What should the punishment for a sinner be?” She answered them (Yechezkel 18, 4): “The soul that sins shall die.” . . . They asked HKB”H, “What is the punishment for a sinner?” He answered that he should perform teshuvah, and it will atone for him, as it is written (Tehillim 25, 8): “Good and upright is Hashem; therefore, He guides sinners on the path”—for He shows the sinners the path of performing teshuvah.

From all the above, we have learned that “**derech**” alludes to the “**path of teshuvah**,” which HKB”H established for Yisrael, as per the passuk: “**ידרך תשובה**.” Therefore, our mentor, the Arizal, advises us to focus in the month of Elul on the passuk: “**הנותן בים דרך**.” This depiction implies that during the month of Elul, HKB”H illuminates for us the brilliant light associated with the “**derech**” of teshuvah, so that we will make amends for all of our flaws and transgressions prior to the judgment of Rosh HaShanah.

### In Elul HKB”H Illuminates the Path of Teshuvah to Traverse the Stormy Turbulent Sea of Olam HaZeh

The Yismach Moshe (Shoftim 2) explains the simple meaning of the Arizal’s teaching. We should focus on the depiction of HKB”H as “**הנותן בים דרך**” during the month of Elul, because Olam HaZeh is analogous to a stormy, turbulent sea in which sinners drown. Hence, HKB”H, in His infinite mercy and kindness, throws us a lifeline in the month of Elul. He **shows** us the “**derech through the sea**,” i.e., the path of teshuvah.

Let us embellish this vital teaching. The Shela hakadosh (Maseches Yoma) presents a fundamental principle regarding the service of Hashem in the name of the Sefer Chareidim (Chapter 67, 100):

“העולם הזה ים סוער, צריך לרמות האדם בדעתו כאילו הוא שט, ירים ראשו למעלה ליצור, ויזהר פן יכנסו בפיו המים הזידונים, וישמור מן הגלים הבאים לטרדו, ואם לאו דמו בראשו.”

Olam HaZeh is a stormy sea. A person must imagine that he is floating; he should raise his head upwards towards his Maker; he should beware lest the treacherous waters enter his mouth; and he should protect himself from the waves that threaten him. Otherwise, he is responsible for his own demise.

We can understand his sacred meaning based on the words of David HaMelech, Yisrael’s sweet psalmist (Tehillim 124, 3): “**לולי ה' שהיה לנו בקום עלינו אדם, אזי חיים בלעונו**” בחרות אפם בנו, אזי המים שטפונו נחלה עבר על נפשנו, אזי עבר על נפשנו. Had Hashem not been with us when men rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us alive, when their anger flared up against us. Then the waters would have inundated us; the current would have surged across our soul. Then they would have surged across our soul—the treacherous waters. This teaches us that all the ordeals we experience in Olam HaZeh are akin to “**treacherous waters**” threatening to drown us. To survive, we must raise our heads heavenwards toward our Creator and pray.

It appears that the source of the remarks of the Sefer Chareidim is the commentary of Rabeinu Bachaye (Introduction to parshas Masei): “**כי לכך נקרא הטבע בשם הזה, כי יטבע האדם ביון מצולתו וירד לבאר שחת אם לא יזהר בו, כמי** For this reason, nature is referred to by this name (“hateva”); because a person will drown in the mire of his abyss and will descend to the depths of despair if he is not wary of it—like a person who falls into the depths of the sea and does not know how to swim and drowns. In other words, the day-to-day operation of Olam HaZeh is called “**hateva**”—mother nature. The term “**הטבע**” is related to the root “**טבע**”, meaning to drown. This teaches us that if a person is not careful, chas v’shalom, he is liable to drown in the natural “hateva” of Olam HaZeh.

This sheds additional light on the teaching of the Arizal. By focusing on the vital message of the depiction “**הנותן בים דרך**”—that HKB”H illuminates for us the “**derech**” of teshuvah during the month of Elul, so that sinners will not drown in the treacherous sea of Olam HaZeh—we are able to raise our heads out of the stormy sea and cry out loudly to our Creator: **אבינו מלכנו חטאנו לפניך... אבינו מלכנו**

**"our Father, our King, we have sinned before You . . . our Father, our King, bring us back to You through perfect teshuvah."**

### The "Derech" of Teshuvah versus the "Derech" of Tumah

Now, we are all familiar with the statement of the wisest of all men (Koheles 7, 14): **"זה לעומת זה עשה האלקים"**—G-d created the world with corresponding equal and opposite forces (good and bad). As such, just as there is a **"derech"** of teshuvah bringing a person back to kedushah and closer to HKB"H; correspondingly, there is a **"derech"** of the klipah chosen by reshaim, which distances them from HKB"H and from performing teshuvah. The Arizal explains this in Likutei Torah. In relation to the passuk under discussion—**"הנותן בים"**—he asserts that there is a **"derech,"** a path, associated with the klipah, the forces of evil. This is the **"derech"** mentioned in the passuk (Mishlei 30, 19): **"דרך נחש עלי צור"**—**the way of a snake upon a rock**. We can suggest that this is a reference to the **"nachash hakadmoni,"** the serpent that persuaded Adam and Chava to betray the sovereignty of Hashem by partaking of the Eitz HaDa'as.

So, let us examine these two paths—the **"derech"** of kedushah versus the **"derech"** of the klipah. Clearly, when a person stumbles and commits an aveirah, chas v'shalom, he has two options. He can choose the **"derech"** of teshuvah by repenting wholeheartedly for his sins. This, in fact, will bring him even closer to HKB"H than he was prior to the sin. This is evident from the statement of Rabbi Avahu (Berachos 34b): **"מקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין צדיקים גמורים אינם עומדין"**—**in the place where "ba'alei teshuvah" stand, consummate tzaddikim cannot stand**. On the other hand, he can choose the path that the klipah offers him. For, when a person sins, the sin generates a malach of destruction. This is taught in the Mishnah (Avos 4, 11): **"העושה מצוה אחת: קונה לו פרקליט אחד, והעובר עבירה אחת קונה לו קטיגור אחד"**—**a person who performs one mitzvah acquires for himself one advocate (a malach who defends him); while a person who commits one aveirah acquires for himself one accuser (a prosecuting malach)**. The Ohr HaChaim hakadosh (Shemos 30, 12) explains that an **"accuser"** is a malach of destruction.

This malach of destruction generated by one's aveiros leads a person down the path of reshaim. Not only does it convince him that teshuvah is senseless and a waste of time, but, even worse, it entices him to continue and increase his evil, sinful ways. In the words of the Mishnah (ibid. 2): **"עבירה גוררת עבירה"**—**one aveirah leads to another aveirah**. Furthermore, if this malach sees that a person is contemplating teshuvah, it causes him to despair, to believe that his sins are so egregious and numerous that it is too late and futile to perform teshuvah—that he is beyond tikun. With that state of mind, he will continue his evil ways, chas v'shalom.

### "Hashem knows the way of the righteous, and the way of the lawless will perish"

Now, we learn from the Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishis 41) that David HaMelech was a gilgul of Adam HaRishon, and Adam HaRishon gave him seventy years of his life. This explains why David HaMelech began Sefer Tehillim (1, 1) by saying: **"אשרי האיש אשר לא הלך בעצת רשעים ובדרך חטאים לא עמד ובמושב לצים לא ישב"**. **Praised be the man who refrained from following the counsel of the wicked, and stood not in the path of the sinful, and sat not in the session of scorners**. In the Midrash Shochar Tov (ibid.), they interpret this as a reference to Adam HaRishon: **אמר אדם הראשון, אשרני אם לא עמדתי בדרךיו של נחש, ואשרי אם לא ישבתי במושביו של ליצנות"**. **Adam HaRishon said, "Fortunate am I if I have not followed the ways of the serpent, and fortunate am I if I have not sat in the company of scoffers."**

As we know, Adam HaRishon was tricked and caused to sin by the **"nachash hakadmoni"**—the primeval serpent. It led down the **"derech"** of reshaim, in keeping with the passuk: **"דרך נחש עלי צור"**. To make amends, David HaMelech paved the **"derech"** of teshuvah for all Jews. As they expounded in the Gemara (A.Z. 4b): **"מאי דכתיב: נאום דוד בן ישי ונאום הגבר הוקם על, נאום דוד בן ישי שהקים עולה של תשובה"**. **What is the meaning of that which is written (Shmuel II 23, 1): "The words of David the son of Yishai, the words of the man who was established on high." It means: The words of David the son of Yishai, who established the yoke (mechanism, path) of teshuvah**. For this reason, he concludes the first psalm (Tehillim 1, 6): **"כי יודע ה' דרך צדיקים ודרך רשעים תאבד"**—



**for Hashem knows the “derech” of the tzaddikim and the “derech” of the reshaim shall perish—**referring to the two paths available to a sinner.

We can begin to understand why David HaMelech prayed about these two paths repeatedly in Sefer Tehillim. On the one hand, he prayed that he would succeed in following the path of teshuvah leading to kedushah, as per the passuk (ibid. 119, 27): **”דרך’ פקודיך—let me understand the “derech” (way) of Your precepts that I may discuss Your wonders.** In a similar vein, he prays (ibid. 33): **”הורני—teach me, Hashem, the “derech” (way) of Your statutes (chukim).** He beseeched Hashem to teach him the path of teshuvah, which is categorized as a “chok.” He concludes this passuk: **”ואצרנה עקב”—**which can be interpreted homiletically as alluding to the month of Elul, the “eikev” (heel), the end of the year, the time designated for teshuvah. Further on, he adds (ibid. 30): **”I have chosen the “derech” of emunah.** Additionally (ibid. 32): **”I will run in the “derech” of Your mitzvos.**

On the other hand, David HaMelech prayed to be saved from the “derech” of the nachash, the embodiment of the yetzer hara. He prays (ibid. 29): **”remove from me the “derech” of falsehood, and graciously endow me with Your Torah.** Along these lines, he cautions us sternly (ibid. 36, 5): **”—he stations himself on a “derech” of no good; he does not disdain evil.** He also says (ibid. 107, 4): **”—they wandered in the midbar, in the desolation of the “derech”; they did not find an inhabited city.** Additionally (ibid. 40): **”—He pours contempt upon the affluent, and He made them wander in the wasteland where there is no “derech.”** Thus, we see that David HaMelech refers to these two paths repeatedly in Sefer Tehillim.

### **Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai Lamented before His Passing the He Was Presented with Two Paths One Leading to Gan Eden and One Leading to Gehinnom**

Since we are currently in the month of Elul—in which HKB”H illuminates the brilliant light of the “derech”

of teshuvah in the world, in keeping with the depiction **“He Who provides a ‘derech’ through the sea”**—it behooves us to explore the words of the great Tanna, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai. Prior to passing away to the life of Olam HaBa, with great humility, he conveyed to his disciples—who were Tannaim and esteemed Torah scholars—his intense fear of the Judgment Day. He expressed his concern that throughout his life he was confronted by two paths, and he wondered if he had chosen correctly the “derech” of teshuvah.

First, let us identify his disciples. We have learned in the Mishnah (Avos 2, 10): **”חמשה תלמידים היו לו לרבן יוחנן: רבי אליעזר בן הורקנוס, רבי יהושע בן חנניא, ורבי יוסי הכהן, רבי שמעון בן נתנאל, ורבי אלעזר בן ערך, הוא היה מונה שבחם, רבי אליעזר בן הורקנוס בור סוד שאינו מאבד טיפה, רבי יהושע בן חנניא אשרי יולדתו, רבי יוסי הכהן חסיד, רבי שמעון בן נתנאל ירא חטא, ורבי אלעזר בן ערך כמעין המתגבר.”**

**Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai had five disciples. They were: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkanos, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chanania, Rabbi Yossi HaKohen, Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach. He used to enumerate their praises: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkanos is like a cemented cistern that loses not a drop; Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chanania, praiseworthy is she who bore him; Rabbi Yossi HaKohen is a scrupulously pious person; Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel fears sin; and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach is like a spring flowing stronger and stronger.**

These disciples illuminated the world with their Torah. From their greatness, we can only begin to imagine the greatness and holiness of their mentor Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai. Yet, he did not refrain from pouring out his pure heart to them. He became very emotional and confessed to them his apprehension concerning Rosh HaShanah, the day on which HKB”H sits like a king atop His throne of judgment to judge His subjects, who pass before Him like a flock of sheep. All the more so that simple Jews like us should be overcome with apprehension and be motivated to perform teshuvah. Here is the passage in the Gemara (Berachos 28b):

**”כשחלה רבי יוחנן בן זכאי נכנסו תלמידיו לבקרו, כיון שראה אותם התחיל לבכות, אמרו לו תלמידיו, גר ישראל עמוד הימיני פטיש החזק מפני מה אתה בוכה, אמר להם, אילו לפני מלך בשר ודם היו מוליכין אותי, שהיום כאן ומחר בקבר, שאם כועס עלי אין כעסו כעס עולם, ואם אוסרני אין איסורו איסור עולם,**

ואם ממיתני אין מיתתו מיתת עולם, ואני יכול לפייסו בדברים ולשחדו בממון, אף על פי כן הייתי בוכה.

ועכשיו שמוליכים אותי לפני מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא, שהוא חי וקיים לעולם ולעולמי עולמים, שאם כועס עלי כעסו עולם, ואם אוסרני איסורו איסור עולם, ואם ממיתני מיתתו מיתת עולם, ואיני יכול לפייסו בדברים, ולא לשחדו בממון, ולא עוד אלא שיש לפני שני דרכים, אחת של גן עדן ואחת של גיהנום, ואני יודע באיזו מוליכים אותי ולא אבכה".

When Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai fell ill, his students went to visit him. When he saw them, he began to cry. His students said to him, "Lamp of Israel, the right pillar, the mighty hammer, why are you crying?" With a life as complete and meritorious as yours, what is upsetting you? He answered them, "I cry in fear of heavenly judgment. If they were taking me before a king of flesh and blood, who is here today and in the grave tomorrow, if he is angry with me, his anger is not eternal. If he incarcerates me, his incarceration is not an eternal incarceration; if he kills me, his killing is not an eternal death. Moreover, I can appease him with words and bribe him with money. Even so, I would cry when standing before him."

Now that they are taking me before the King of Kings, HKB"H, Who lives and endures eternally, if He is angry with me, His anger is eternal; if He incarcerates me, His incarceration is an eternal incarceration, and if He kills me, His killing is for eternity. I cannot appease Him with words or bribe Him with money. Moreover, I have two paths before me—one of the Garden of Eden and one of Gehinnom, and I do not know on which they are taking me. Should I not cry?"

### The Kipah of Amalek: Precluding the Performance of Teshuvah in Elul

With this introduction, we can now consider the amazing relationship between the reading of the mitzvah of "mechias Amalek" and the month of Elul. In the sefer Keren Yehoshua (Elul 8), Rabbi Yehoshua Shapira explains the reason that the mitzvah of "mechias Amalek" is always read in the month of Elul. The Torah says of Amalek: "אשר קרך בדרך". The term

"קרך" can mean "who happened upon you" or "who cooled you down (off)." Their klipah makes a Jew less prone to perform teshuvah and less likely to be inspired by the influence of HKB"H in the month of Elul depicted as: "הנותן בים דרך".

In this vein, he interprets the passuk as follows: "Recall what Amalek did to you on the 'derech'"—referring to the "derech" of teshuvah that HKB"H illuminates during Elul; "as you were departing from Mitzrayim"—alluding to the difficult, heart-wrenching period of Bein HaMetzarim, the three weeks in the months of Tamuz and Av; "on the 'derech'"—to arouse us to embark on the path of teshuvah in this special month. For, in the month of Elul, Amalek appears to cool down the embers of teshuvah ignited in a Jew's heart by HKB"H.

Let us now focus on the continuation of the passuk: "And he attacked at your rear, all the weaklings that straggled behind you." According to the Midrash, these were the members of shevet Dan, who were rejected by the protective cloud, because they worshipped avodah-zarah. We asked above: Since they were sinners and idolators, why did Amalek attack them? However, since the klipah of Amalek opposes the "derech" of teshuvah, this makes perfect sense. For, they were the perfect targets for Amalek, whose aim was to prevent them from embracing the path of teshuvah.

We are taught in the Midrash Tanchuma (Ki Seitzei 9) that Amalek would cut off their milahs and toss them up in the air. We can explain this bizarre phenomenon based on a teaching of the Rambam in his sefer Moreh Nevuchim (Part 3, Chapter 49). He explains that the purpose of the mitzvah of milah is to weaken the power of the yetzer. Hence, teshuvah is similar to the mitzvah of milah. As the passuk states (Devarim 30, 6): "ומל ה' אלקיך את לבבך ואת לבב זרעך לאהבה את ה' אלקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך"—and Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, to love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul. Therefore, Amalek, whose sole aim and desire is to prevent Yisrael from embarking on the "derech" of teshuvah, excised their milahs and tossed them upwards into the sky.

## The Derech of Teshuvah Made Available by Yaakov

Let us embellish this thought. Of all the seventy nations of the world who hate Yisrael, why is it specifically Amalek who opposes the performance of teshuvah in the month of Elul? Why are they the ones who show up in the month of Elul to cool down the desire to perform teshuvah--"אשר קרר בדרך"—ignited by HKB"H?

We will now introduce a teaching from the Bnei Yissaschar (Tamuz-Av 1, 6). He cites the Megaleh Amukos on Vaeschanan (107) who brings down the Zohar hakadosh (Yisro 88b) that teaches that Yaakov and Eisav divided up the months of the year between them. As his portion, Yaakov Avinu took the first three months—**Nissan, Iyar, and Sivan**—for the realm of kedushah. The exodus from Mitzrayim took place in **Nissan**; then they prepared themselves to receive the Torah during the days of the Sefirah in the month of **Iyar**; in **Sivan**, they received the Torah at Har Sinai.

Correspondingly, Eisav chose the following three months as his portion—**Tamuz, Av, and Elul**. He was elated that he had control of the month of Elul, thinking that he could prevent Yisrael from performing teshuvah prior to the Days of Judgment. Yaakov Avinu, however, employed various tactics, waging a spiritual war against Eisav to gain possession of the month of Elul to enable Yisrael to utilize this month to perform

effective, sincere teshuvah. This left Eisav only the months of Tamuz and Av, during which the two Batei Mikdash were destroyed.

Perhaps this explains why of all the nations, it was specifically Amalek, the grandson of Eisav, אשר "קרר בדרך"—who strenuously opposed the "**derech**" of teshuvah illuminated during the month of Elul. He wished to avenge his grandfather by taking back control of the month of Elul, which had been confiscated from him. Hence, we are cautioned: "**Remember what Amalek did to you while you were departing from Egypt, how he happened upon you on the way, and he attacked at your rear, all the weaklings that straggled behind you.**" These are words of chizuk from HKB"H, encouraging us to fortify our resolve not to allow Amalek to influence sinners to refrain from performing wholehearted teshuvah in the month of Elul.

Notwithstanding, we are the Children of Yisrael, the descendants of Yaakov Avinu, who believe in his kedushah and are entrenched in it. We believe that he was justified in taking the month of Elul away from Eisav, and this was condoned and sanctioned by HKB"H. Therefore, HKB"H—"Who provides a '**derech**' through the sea"—illuminated the phenomenal "**derech**" of teshuvah in this month. In the merit of this teshuvah, the following will come true (Yoma 86b): "גדולה תשובה שמקרבת את הגאולה". **It will hasten the arrival of the geulah**—swiftly, in our times! Amen.



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