

לעילו נשמת: פייגה בת הרב אהרן ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

לזכות רפואה שלמה: מלכה בת רחל, מיכאל בן שולמית, יעקב משה בן דבורה שירי, ואברהם יהודה בן שרה רבקה.

# Torah Wellsprings

Collected thoughts  
from  
Rabbi Elimelech  
Biderman  
Shlita

Ki Sisa - Parah



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# Torah Wellsprings

## Ki Sisa - Parah

### Teshuvah is Always an Option

This week's parashah teaches us that it is always possible to do teshuvah. Even after sinning with the egel, Hashem lovingly accepts Bnei Yisrael's teshuvah.

As the *Toras Emes* (from Rebbe Leibele Eigar *zt'l*) writes, "This week's *parashah* discusses the great sin of the *egel*, and it looked like they lost their *kedushah* entirely, *chas veshalom*. One thinks there is no cure for them, *chas veshalom*. [However, the Torah reveals] that people can fix

their souls, even after committing great *aveiros* like this one."<sup>1</sup>

The Gemara (*Chagigah* 14:-15) says, "Four people entered the *Pardes* (the celestial orchard): Ben Azay, Ben Zoma, Acher, and Reb Akiva."

Rashi explains that they said Hashem's name, and this brought them into heaven, and they saw heavenly visions.

Only Reb Akiva entered heaven and came out unscathed. "Ben Azay looked [at Hashem] and died... Ben Zoma looked

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1. After the *aveirah* of the *egel*, Hashem said to Moshe (*Shemos* 32:10), ועתה הניחה לי, "Now leave Me." The Gemara (*Brachos* 32.) writes, "If the *pasuk* did not say it, we could not have said it. *Keviyachol*, Moshe was grabbing onto Hashem, as one grabs on to the clothing of his fellow man, and Moshe said, 'I will not let go of You until You forgive them.'"

Hashem replied, מלחתי כדברך, "I forgive them, as you said."

and became insane... Acher cut down trees. Reb Akiva left in peace."

Acher was קוצץ בנטיעות, knocking down the trees of the Pardes. The Gemara explains that this means Acher became an *apikores*.

This is what happened:

Acher saw the *malach* Metatron sitting in heaven. Acher said to himself, "I've learned that *malachim* in heaven can't sit. How can it be that this *malach* is sitting? Could it be, *chas v'shalom*, that this *malach* is also a god?"<sup>2</sup>

This was Acher's moment of *kefirah* and

*apikorsus*. A *bas kol* emanated from heaven and said (Yirmiyahu 3:14, 22), שובו בנים, חוזן מאחר, "Do *teshuvah* wild children...except for Acher." Heaven was telling him that he can never do *teshuvah*.

Acher decided that he may as well do *aveiros*. If he anyway won't go to Olam HaBa, why not enjoy This World? He was called Acher, which means "Someone else" because he became someone else, an entirely different person. Previously, he was a *Tana*, Elisha ben Avuyah, but now he became a sinner.

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2. The *malach* Metatron was granted special permission to sit down and to write the merits of the Jewish nation.

When Acher sinned, he had permission to erase all of Acher's merits.

Metatron was also punished, with sixty fiery lashes. The *malachim* told him, "When you saw Acher why didn't you stand up?" This would have prevented Acher from sinning.

The Maharsha explains that this punishment was to show Acher that Metatron isn't a god, *chalilah*.

Reb Meir learned Torah from Acher, even after he left the path of Judaism. The Gemara explains that while most people can't learn from a sinner like Acher, Reb Meir knew how to separate the good from the bad and was, therefore, able to learn Torah from Acher. Sometimes, people would see Acher riding his horse on Shabbos, with Reb Meir was running alongside him to learn Torah from him.

Reb Meir would often tell Acher to do *teshuvah*, but Acher always replied that there was no hope for him because the *bas kol* said, שובו בנים שובבים חוץ מאחר, that Acher can never do *teshuvah*.

Once, Acher was riding his horse near the Kodesh Kadoshim on Yom Kippur that fell on Shabbos. He heard a *bas kol* announce the same message that he heard in Heaven: שובו בנים שובבים חוץ מאחר, that Acher can never do *teshuvah*. This confirmed to him that he

was hopeless, and he continued his sinful ways (see *Yerushalmi*, quoted in Maharsha, *Chagigah*).

The Maharasha writes that Acher should not have heeded the *bas kol*, because אין לך דבר העומד בפני התשובה, nothing can prevent a person from doing *teshuvah*." Even after hearing in heaven and from the Kodesh Kadoshim that he can't do *teshuvah*, he should have ignored the message and served Hashem regardless. Hashem would have accepted him because *teshuvah* is always an option.

Similarly, the Igra d'Pirka (1) writes in the name of the Chozeh of Lublin that when Acher heard that he can't ever do *teshuvah*, he should have said, "It is good that I won't get Olam HaBa, because now I can serve Hashem *lishmah*, without ulterior motives!" If Acher had said that, all his sins would have been forgiven, and he

would have gotten Olam HaBa, too.

An indication that Acher was able to do *teshuvah* is that Reb Meir would always tell him, חזור בך, "Repent. Do *teshuvah*." The Chozeh explains that Reb Meir knew about the *bas kol*'s discouraging message about Acher's inability to do *teshuvah*, but Reb Meir knew that, nevertheless, *teshuvah* is always an option.

Chazal say, כל מה שאומר לך, בעל הבית עשה חוץ מוצא, "One must do everything the *baal habayis* says, except for when he tells you, צא, to leave the house."

The Shlah quotes from his father that this means one must listen to everything the *Baal HaBayis* of the world tells him. He must obey all of Hashem's dictates, except for when Hashem says צא. When Hashem says צא, "Leave. You can't serve Me anymore," we don't have to listen.

Many people feel they can never do *teshuvah*. They say that they sinned too much and too severely; they think Hashem abandoned them.

Furthermore, the *Zohar* discusses severe *aveiros*, and says that for those *aveiros* it is impossible to do *teshuvah*. When one reads statements like this one, he can become very discouraged. Therefore, it is important to remember that *teshuvah* is always an option. The holy sefarim offer various explanations on this *Zohar* because it cannot be understood in its literal sense. No matter what a person did, he can repent.

The Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 7:6) describes someone who does *teshuvah*. "*Teshuvah*...brings the person close to the *Shechinah*, as it states (*Hosheia* 14:2), שובה ישראל עד ה' אלקך, 'Repent Yisrael up to Hashem' ... אמש היה זה שנאו לפני, במקום משוקץ ומרוחק ומתעוב, yesterday, he was hated by

Hashem. An abomination and distant, והיום הוא אהוב ונחמד, קרוב וידיד, and today he is beloved and close and a friend."

Reb Nachum Yasser *zt'l* once overheard two *yungerleit* discussing this Rambam, and they were astonished that *teshuvah* can accomplish so much and so quickly. They asked, "How can *teshuvah* change a person in a day from being an abomination to being beloved?"

Reb Nachum Yasser had a son who wasn't religious. He hardly ever spoke about him; his distress was so great. But now he said to the *yungerleit*, "If my son came into the beis medresh right now and if he would tell me that he wants to live like a Yid, I would love him immensely. Even if I'm angry and upset with him now, in a single moment, everything could turn around."<sup>3</sup>

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**3.** The nature of oil is that it it first drops low, and then it floats. For example, if you have a cup of water and pour in some oil, the oil will first drop to the bottom, and then it will immediately rise above the water. This hints to a Yid's ability to do *teshuvah*. Even if he falls to very low levels, he can do *teshuvah* and rise up again. Even if he is (*Shemos* 27:20), כִּתִּיתָ, squashed by his many sins, he can לְמֵאוֹר, shine brightly again when he does *teshuvah*.

The Beis Yisrael *zt'l* taught that the mitzvah of *bikurim* is written close to the end of the Torah to imply that even if one transgressed the entire Torah, he could do *teshuvah* and become brand new again. This is represented by the new fruits of *bikurim* that we bring to the Beis HaMikdash.

The Beis Yisrael said that עֵמֶלֶק is similar to the word אִמְתָּל, which means "sometimes." Because we fight against the *yetzer hara*, and sometimes we win, and sometimes the *yetzer hara* wins. The main thing is that we never give up. If we have that attitude, we will triumph in the end.



## The Abolished Temptation for *Avodah Zarah*

When we read about people's attachment to *avodah zarah*, discussed in Nach, and in this week's parashah, in regards to the *egel*, we wonder how intelligent people can be interested in an idol made of silver and gold?

This is because we no longer have a *yetzer hara* for *avodah zarah*. Therefore, it is hard for us to understand the temptations of years ago.

Chazal (*Yoma* 69:) state that in the days of Ezra and Nechemya, the *chachamim* prayed, "Woe! Woe! This is the *yetzer hara* (of *avoda zarah*) that destroyed the Beis HaMikdash, killed all the *tzaddikim*, and sent the Yidden into *galus*. And the *yetzer hara* is still dancing around us! You gave us the *yetzer hara* so that we can earn reward. We don't want the *yetzer hara* nor its reward."

A notelet fell from heaven. It had Hashem's seal and signature on it, אמת. This meant Hashem

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When one has a lucrative business, he won't close it when he suffers an occasional loss. The business stays open because it is so profitable.

The Rebbe of Kotzk *zt'l* explains that this is hinted in the *pasuk* **כי לקח טוב נתתי לכם תורתי אל תעזבו**, the Torah is like a good business. Even if you have some errors, and you sin at times, don't abandon the Torah, just as you wouldn't abandon a lucrative business."

The Kotzker said that the *pasuk* also hints **כי לקח טוב**, that when you take a hold on yourself to become better; you shall know that **נתתי לכם**, I gave you that inspiration. I beseech, **אל תעזבו**, don't abandon your inspiration. Follow up on your feelings of *teshuvah* until you improve your ways.

agreed that this *yetzer hara* isn't good for us.

They fasted three days and three nights, and the *yetzer hara* came out of the Kodesh Kadoshim appearing like a fiery lion. The *navi* said to Bnei Yisrael, "This is the *yetzer hara* for *avodah zarah*..."

They captured the *yetzer hara*, and from then on, we don't have a *yetzer hara* for *avodah zarah* anymore.

This is why when we read about the temptation for *avodah zarah* that prevailed in the early generations, we don't understand why Yidden should have such interest in serving idols.

The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 102:) tells that Rav Ashi said to his students, "Tomorrow we will study about our friends." He was referring to Menasheh (and other kings) who lost their portion in Olam HaBa.

That night, Menasheh came to Rav Ashi in a

dream and said, "You called me your friend, so let's see whether we are true equals and friends in Torah: On what side of the bread does one make a *brachah*?"

Rav Ashi responded that he doesn't know.

Menasheh told him, "If you don't know this simple matter, why do you call me your friend? [I'm far greater in Torah than you are.]"

Rav Ashi replied, "Please tell me the answer, and tomorrow I will teach it to the students in your name."

Menasheh replied that the *brachah* is said on the part of the bread that is baked best.

Rav Ashi asked, "If you are so wise in Torah, why did you worship *avodah zarah*?"

Menasheh replied, "Had you lived in my generation, you would pick up the hems of your coat and run

after me to worship *avodah zarah* together with me."

The next day, Rav Ashi started his class, "Let us begin discussing our teachers."

The early generations had a strong desire for *avodah zarah*, which we *baruch Hashem*, don't have anymore, and therefore, we can't understand them.

### Anger

Nevertheless, although we don't have the *yetzer hara* for *avodah zarah*, some *aveiros* are "like *avodah zarah*" and we must carefully avoid them.

When we read about the *egel* it's a good time to think about those *aveiros* that are "like *avodah zarah*," and seek to cleanse ourselves from them.

One example is anger. The *Zohar* states, כל הכועס כאילו, "Whoever becomes angry, it is as if he worshiped *avodah zarah*."

The Ben Ish Chai told the following parable:

A king and his prime minister would often dress up like regular people and walk about the kingdom to hear what the ordinary folks were saying.

Once, the king said, "Let's go to the hospital."

The prime minister didn't want to go there. He said, "What can we hear in a hospital that is important for your kingdom?"

But the king insisted so the *mishnah lemelech* went along. They came to a person who was in great agony. "What happened to you?" they asked.

"I was bitten by a wild dog."

"Is there no cure?"

"There is a cure. You have to take out the liver of the dog that bit me, while the dog is still alive. The liver can cure the illness." "So why are you so

distressed? You can be healed."

The man explained, "I was so angry at the dog that bit me that I threw a stone at it and killed it. Now, I don't have a cure anymore. That's why I'm so distressed."

When they left the hospital, the *mishneh lamelech* told the king, "I told you this would be a waste of time. We didn't hear anything smart or learn about people's opinions regarding your policies and rule."

The king disagreed. "I think it was a very good idea to come here. I learned a critical lesson. I learned that I must control my anger. If I act impulsively, I might regret it later, like the ill man regrets that he killed the dog that bit him. From now on, I will never execute anyone in the kingdom before waiting a night to think things over."

The Sefer Chassidim relates the following story:

A father told his son, "You honored me in my lifetime. I request that you honor me after I die. And this is what I ask from you: When you have reason to become angry, wait until the next day. Don't become angry immediately."

The son promised that he would do so. This is what he took on himself as *kibud av ve'em* after his father's demise.

The son got married and shortly after that left his wife and traveled to a distant land to earn *parnassah*. When he finally returned, he was about to knock on the door of his home when he heard the voice of a man. Why was there a man in his house, conversing with his wife?

He drew his sword, ready to kill his wife and the intruder. But then he reminded himself that he doesn't act on his anger

before sleeping a night. He returned his sword to its sheath and then heard his wife say to the man, "Your father left many years ago, and didn't know that I was pregnant with you. If he knew that he has a grown son, ready for marriage, he would certainly come home to marry you off."

From outside the door, the husband announced, "My wife, open the door. I've returned!"

He told them, "I bless Hashem for helping me overcome my anger. And I bless my father for teaching me to sleep a night before acting on my anger. Otherwise, I would have killed my wife and my son tonight."

They were extremely happy, and all their neighbors came to their home to celebrate together with them."

Indeed, it is an important counsel to push off anger for a later time. So many

family feuds (and the like) develop when people react immediately when they get angry. And after there's a breach, it is so hard to rectify it. We can save ourselves from so many unnecessary fights and trouble by training ourselves to push off getting angry.

Rashi (*Bereishis* 14:10, 32:4) teaches that מצרימה means למצרים, "to Mitzrayim," and, similarly, חרנה is translated להרן, "to Choron." Instead of placing a ל' at the beginning of the word, the Torah places a ה' at the end.

Rebbe Mendel of Vorkeh zy'a (called the *shtiller Rebbe*, the silent Rebbe, because of his caution with his speech) asks why the Torah prefers to place a *heh* at the end of the word, rather than a *lamed* at the beginning of the word? If there would be fewer letters, we would understand that the Torah prefers to write more concisely. But either way, the words מצרימה and למצרים, contain the same number

of letters. So, what is gained by placing a *heh* at the end of the word?

The Vorker Rebbe replied that the gain is that it comes later. The *heh* comes at the end of the word, which is preferable over a *lamed* that is placed at the beginning of the word. Because whatever can be said later should be said later.

The *heh* has a softer sound than a *lamed*. This hints that when you push off speaking for later, it will be expressed in softer tones. But if you talk immediately, you will speak harshly.

At Achashveirosh's party, Achashveirosh got angry at Vashti. As it states (1:12), ויקצוף המלך מאד, והמתו בערה בו, "the king became very angry, and his wrath burned within him." At Esther's party, Achashveirosh became angry again, this time at Haman. As it says (7:7),

והמלך קם בחמתו, "the king stood up in his wrath..."

Achashveirosh was one to push off anger. When he got angry at Vashti, and later at Haman, he killed them immediately. Had he allowed himself some time to think things over, he would have very likely reacted differently.

The megillah (7:9) states, ויאמר חרבונה... הנה העין אשר עשה המן למרדכי אשר דבר טוב על המלך... "Charvonah said... 'Behold the gallows that Haman prepared for Mordechai who said good for the king...'"

The Vilna Gaon *zt'l* writes that Achashveirosh misunderstood what Charvonah said. He thought that Charvonah said, "Behold the gallows that Haman made for Mordechai, and Haman said that the gallows are even better for the king Achashveirosh." Therefore, Achashveirosh became so angry with Haman.

Due to Achashveirosh's misunderstanding, Achashveirosh ordered, *חללו עליו* to hang Haman on the gallows. This was the result of acting in anger, impulsively, without taking time to think things through clearly.

Rebbe Naftali of Ropshitz *zy'a* had an empty *tabak pushkeh* (snuffbox), which he often held. Sometimes he would open and close its lid. One of his chassidim asked him about the box. He replied, "When I'm about to get angry, I open the lid and place my anger inside. Two hours later, I open the lid again to reassess and to decide

whether the issue warrants anger or not."<sup>4</sup>

### Sadness

As we wrote earlier, we no longer have a yetzer hara for avodah zarah, but some matters are compared to avodah zarah. Another example is atzvus, being sad.

Chazal say that only the men worshipped the *egel*. The women didn't.

How did the women succeed in passing this test?

Rebbe Yissacher Dov of Belz *zy'a* explains that this is because the woman danced at *kriyas Yam Suf*.

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4. There are other approaches that tzaddikim used to postpone reacting to anger. One approach is to fill up your mouth with water so you can't speak. One of the Lelover Rebbe's said that if you are getting angry, put water in your mouth and keep it there. Don't swallow it, and don't spit it out. He said that this is a *segulah* to overcome anger.

Some baalei mussar had an anger-suit. They would put it on when they felt that they had to become angry. By the time they put it on, they generally realized that they don't need to become angry.

As it states (*Shemos* 15:20), ותקח מרים אהרן התוף בידה ותצאנה כל הנשים אחריה בתפים ובמחולות, "Miriam, Aharon's sister, took the drum in her hand, and all the women went out after her with drums and dances." Later, when there was dancing around the *egel*, as it states (32:19), וירא את העגל ומחולות, "Moshe saw the *egel* and the dancing," the women who danced earlier didn't participate. Their joy protected them from worshipping *avodah zarah*.

The men sang *Oz Yashir* but didn't dance. Their joy was less, and therefore, they didn't pass the test of the *egel*.

Similarly, the Levi'im didn't sin with the *egel*. This is because Levi'im serve Hashem through music in the Beis HaMikdash, and where there is music and joy, one doesn't fall into the trap of *avodah zarah*, *chalilah*, because *avodah zarah* is associated with being sad.

The Maor VeShemesh (*Behaloscha*) writes, "A great foundation in *avodas Hashem* is to distance oneself from עצבות ומרה שהורה, from being sad, as much as possible. Because the *Zohar* says that *atzvov* is like *avodah zarah* (שמץ עבודה זרה). The proof that it is so is that when one is sad, he has thoughts of *avodah zarah*. Therefore, one must be very distant from *atzvov*. It leads to all kinds of *aveiros*."

The Tanya (*Igeres HaKodesh* ch.11) writes, "When one is sad, he is demonstrating that his life isn't perfect and that he lacks something good that he needs. But to think so is *kefirah*, heresy, *chas veshalom* [because we believe that Hashem gives us everything we need, and nothing is lacking]. Therefore, the *chachamim* of kabbalah warn against *atzvov* immensely..."

We are still in the month of happiness. משונכם אדר מרבין. The holy *sefarim* teach that בשמחה is *gematriya* שנה,



year. This implies that being joyous during this time brings happiness to the entire year.

### ***Hakaras HaTov***

When Moshe Rabbeinu lived in Yisro's home in Midyan, Hashem told Moshe to return to Mitzrayim to take out the Yidden from slavery.

Moshe Rabbeinu had endless compassion for the Jewish nation, yet he didn't jump at the opportunity this time. The Midrash (*Tanchuma, Shemos 16*) tells us that Moshe said, "Ribono Shel Olam, how can I leave Yisro without first asking his consent? Yisro opened his home for me; he treats me like a son."

The Midrash explains, "When one opens his house for you, you owe him your life... You are obligated to

honor the one who opened his home for you more than you are obligated to honor your father and mother." Despite the urgent need to save the Jewish nation, Moshe said it isn't right for him to leave Midyan without Yisro's consent because Yisro hosted him in his home. Hashem permitted Moshe to ask Yisro's permission, and Yisro consented.

There was another time that the Torah expresses Moshe Rabbeinu's *hakaras hatov* to Yisro. This was when Yisro came to the desert, Moshe Rabbeinu went out to greet him. The Seforno (*Shemos 18:7*) writes that as the honored leader of Bnei Yisrael, it wasn't befitting for Moshe to go out to greet Yisro. But due to his strong *hakaras hatov* he went out to welcome Yisro.<sup>5</sup>

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5. The Seforno elaborates that even when one has a high-ranking position, he shouldn't forget the people who are beneath him, who he owes them his attention and care. The Seforno writes:

The Yidden left Mitzrayim armed. As it states (*Shemos* 20:18), והמושים עלו, בני ישראל מארץ מצרים, "Bnei Yisrael left Mitzrayim with weapons." The Chasam Sofer (*Toras Moshe, Beshalach*, והמושים) asks, if they carried weapons, why did the rules of nature need to be overturned for them, and why did the sea split? They could have used their weapons to battle the Egyptians!

The Chasam Sofer explains that 210 years

earlier, the Egyptians performed a great favor for the Jewish nation. At that time, there was a hunger in the world, and Mitzrayim opened their doors for Yaakov and his offspring.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, the Yidden had to have *hakaras hatov* for the Egyptians. It wouldn't be proper for them to raise weapons on the nation that once helped them.

The Mitzrim afflicted and enslaved the Yidden,

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"[Moshe was the king of Bnei Yisrael.] Nevertheless, he didn't refrain from paying back a favor for the person who did him a favor when he was in need. Similarly, it states (*Esther* 2:20), ואת מאמר, מרדכי אסתר עושה, "Esther did as Mordechai told her..." [Esther was the queen, but she didn't refrain from obeying Mordechai.] Similarly, we find by Yosef with his brothers. [Yosef was the king of Mitzrayim, but he nevertheless remembered to do kindness with his brothers]. An example of the opposite is (*Bereishis* 40:23), ולא זכר שר, המשקים את יוסף, "The *sar hamashkim* didn't remember Yosef." [He felt proud in his position, and he didn't think about helping people who were on a lower social status.]"

6. As Rashi (*Devarim* 23:8) writes, לא תתעב מצרי מכל וכל, אע"פ שורקו זכוריהם ליאור, מה מעם, שהיו לכם אכסניא בשעת הדחק, "Don't be totally disgusted with the Mitzrim, although they threw your first-borns into the Nile. Why? Because they gave you a place to live when you were in a tight place."

and the favor the Mitzrim did for the Yidden was so long ago! Nevertheless, the Torah obligates one to have *hakaras hatov*. It would be wrong to use weapons on Mitzrayim, against a nation that once did them a favor, even as the Mitzrim were pursuing them. How careful we must be to demonstrate proper *hakaras hatov*!

The Or HaChaim (*Bereishis* 20:9) writes, שאין אדם מתחייב רע בעולם כמשלם רעה תחת טובה, "No one deserves punishment like one who repays a favor with evil" We must have *hakaras hatov*, to repay the good that people do for us by doing good for them. Of course, you shouldn't do

evil to someone who did you a favor.

The Or HaChaim is referring to what Avimelech said to Avraham: מה המאתי לך... מעשים אשר לא יעשו עשית עמדי, "In what way did I sin to you...? You punished me in ways that aren't standard..." Avimelech was being punished for taking Sarah, but Avimelech claimed that his punishment was too severe. His afflictions were befitting someone who repays bad to someone who did kindness to him. But Avimelech said that Avraham never did a kindness for him, that he should be punished so severely for taking Sarah.<sup>7</sup>

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7. Reb Dardak was in charge of the distribution and selling of the Steipler *gaon's sefarim* in America. Sometimes, Reb Dardak would write letters to the Steipler and the Steipler would answer him.

Years passed. The Steipler *gaon's sefarim* were being distributed through the stores, like all *sefarim*, and Reb Dardak's services were not needed anymore.

Also, at this time, the Steipler stopped answering letters. He was

We will give a couple of examples of our obligation to have *hakaras hatov* even towards animals.

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weaker and had become world renowned as the *gadol* of Bnei Yisrael, and it was impossible for him to answer the many letters people sent him.

One day, the Steipler received a letter from Reb Dardak. The Steipler decided to make an exception and answer him. He wrote up a letter and brought it to Reb Dardak's father's home (Reb Chaim Shmaryahu Dardak from Bnei Brak) and the Steipler asked him to send it to his son in America.

Reb Chaim Shmaryahu was surprised that the Steipler wrote the letter and made the effort to bring it to his home.

The Steipler explained, "I don't write letters anymore, but this time I made an exception. I didn't want your son to think that I only wrote him letters when I needed his service, and now that I don't need his distribution, I stopped writing to him."

Reb Chaim Shmaryahu assured the Steipler that he will send the letter.

A few days later, it was *erev Shabbos*, the Steipler was once again knocking on Reb Chaim Shmaryahu Dardak's door.

"Did you send the letter yet?" the Steipler asked.

"No."

"Good. I wrote up another letter, and I want you to send this one."

Astounded once again, Reb Chaim Shmaryahu asked, "Is this letter different than the first letter you gave me?"

"No. They are exactly the same. I'll explain: I didn't want you to send the first letter, because I wrote it for the wrong reasons. I wrote the first letter so your son shouldn't think negatively of me. But that isn't the right reason to write a letter. I should write to your son because I have *hakaras hatov* for distributing my *sefer*. Therefore, I wrote up a second letter. The words are the same, but the intention is improved."

Many readers saw the photograph of Reb Elyah Lopian *zt'l* giving a dish of milk to a cat. This is the story behind the picture:

The *bachurim* who learned in yeshivas Kfar Chassidim were bothered by the many rats that nibbled at their food and got into their belongings. They brought a cat to the yeshivah, which promptly solved the rat problem

After the mission was accomplished, the *bachurim* wanted to send the cat away. Reb Elyah Lopian *zt'l* was the *mashgiach* at Kfar Chassidim and told the *bachurim* that they must first show *hakaras hatov* to the cat. The picture of Reb Elyah giving milk to the cat is how he showed the cat *hakaras hatov* for helping the *bachurim*, and then they sent the cat away.

The Yerushalmi (*Terumos* 8:3) tells:

Someone invited a talmid chacham for a meal.

At the meal, the host brought his dog, and had the dog sit down next to the host. The guest asked, "Is there a reason why you are disgracing me?"

The *baal habayis* replied, "*Chas v'shalom!* It is just that I owe this dog a favor. Once, kidnappers came to the city. They intended to catch people and to sell them as slaves. One of the kidnappers wanted to take my wife. This dog bit him, and the kidnapper left us in peace. Therefore, I must honor this dog."

We've seen that we must show *hakaras hatov* to people who do us favors, and even animals. What about *domem*, inanimate objects? Must we have *hakaras hatov* for them too? The answer is yes. The obligation of *hakaras hatov* extends even to *domem*, things that don't have feelings.

We can prove this from the *makos* in Mitzrayim. Moshe Rabbeinu performed

most makos, but the first three *makos* – דם צפרדע בניים – were performed by Aharon HaKohen. Why didn't Moshe do those?

Rashi (*Shemos* 7:19) explains that as an infant, Moshe was cast into the Nile River to save him from the Egyptians who were out to kill all newborns. The Nile saved him, and therefore, Moshe couldn't bring plagues on the Nile (דם צפרדע). It had to be done by his brother Aharon.

Similarly, about מכת בניים Rashi (*Shemos* 8:12) writes, "It wasn't appropriate that Moshe should hit the earth since the earth protected Moshe when he killed the Mitzri, he buried him in the sand. Therefore, Aharon smite the earth and brought forth the בניים.

Now, the Nile and the earth don't have feelings, yet Moshe couldn't bring a

*makah* on them. He had to have *hakaras hatov* even for a *domem* (inanimate).

The Shita Mikubetzes (*Bava Kama* 92:) writes, "A student of the Ri Migash z'l wrote the following in Arabic, and this is the translation:<sup>8</sup>

"The Gemara (*Bava Kama* 92:) says, בירא דשתית מיניה לא תרמי ביה קלא, if you drank water from a well, don't throw in a stone or any other matter. Don't do anything bad to it, because you once benefited from it. The Gemara is using a well as a *mashal* for all matters: If you gained benefit and pleasure from something, it isn't proper that you damage it".

This teaches us that we must have *hakaras hatov* even for inanimate items. A well doesn't have feelings; it doesn't care if someone throws in a stone.

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8. Obviously, the Shita writes the translation in lashon hakadosh, and we translated it once again into English.

But if we benefited from the well, we must not disgrace it.

We return to the quote, from the student of the R'I MiGash:

"Rabbeinu (the R'i MiGash) told a story that happened with his *rebbe*, the Ri'f. Someone once asked the Ri'f to rule on a monetary matter, but the Ri'f emphatically refused. This is the reason:

"There was a time when the Ri'f z'l was ill, and he went to the home of someone who had a bathhouse. The Ri'f bathed there, and it was very beneficial for his health. The bath house owner invited the Ri'f to stay at his home until he is fully cured. The host honored the Ri'f immensely until the Ri'f recovered.

"As time passed by, this person [who hosted the Ri'f] unfortunately lost his money and was suffering from hunger, etc. He was

also deeply in debt. His financial situation became so bad that he had to sell the bathhouse to pay off his debts. The Ri'f said, 'I won't judge anything that has to do with the bathhouse, such as regarding its sale, evaluating its worth, and the like, because I enjoyed this bathhouse. He said this about a bathhouse, which doesn't have any feelings..."

The Ri Migash adds that if the Ri'f was careful not to judge on a matter related to a bathhouse, certainly, how much one must be cautious not to judge a human being who helped you. He writes "It would be wrong to judge [the person who did a favor for you]. Whoever does, has left the path of *mussar* and *derech erez*. Chazal say, לא לידון איניש לא למאן דרחים ליה ולא למאן דסני ליה, 'A person shouldn't judge someone he loves or someone he hates.' There are two reasons why you shouldn't judge someone

whom you love: One is because you might bend the judgment in favor of your friend whom you love. Even if you possess the strength of spirit to judge him correctly, nevertheless, it is wrong to judge your friend, because you will be *משלם רעה תחת טובה*, paying bad to someone who did kindness with you."

The Ri MiGash concludes that our primary *hakaras hatov* should go to Hashem. He writes, "Hashem bestows perfect goodness upon us. *Kal v'chomer* it is proper that we praise Hashem with perfect praises and that we shouldn't do anything that will get Hashem angry, and we shouldn't do anything that Hashem hates."

Because when one trains himself in the attribute of *hakaras hatov* for inanimate things, animals, and certainly for human beings, he will also have *hakaras hatov* to Hashem, for all the

kindness He bestows upon us.

### **Shabbos Parah**

Some *poskim* hold that reading *parashas Parah* is a Torah obligation. The *Avodas Yisrael* writes says it is alluded to in the words (*Bamidbar* 19:1-2). *זאת חקת התורה* , *ואת חקת התורה* , *אשר צוה ה' לאמר* , "this is the rule of the Torah that Hashem commanded to say." This indicates that there is an obligation to say this *parashah*.

The *Avodas Yisrael* writes, *זאת חקת הפסח אשר צוה ה' לאמר* , we can explain that the word *לאמר* follows the opinion that the reading of *parashas Parah* is an obligation from the Torah. The Torah is hinting that even when we don't have a *Beis HaMikdash* and we can't offer an actual *parah adumah*, we must read the *parashah*, and *ונשלמה פרים* , *שפתיהנו* , our reading the *parshah* will be considered as if we brought the *parah adumah*."



The Torah (Bamidbar 19:21) calls the *parah adumah*, חקת עולם, "an eternal law." How is *parah adumah* eternal? The ashes of the *parah adumah* were available in the times of the Amoraim, and they would use it to purify themselves. But what about our generation? How is it possible to keep *parah adumah* in our generation? The Aruch HaShulchan (685:7) answers that the Torah is hinting that when we can't bring a *parah adumah*, we have a mitzvah to read *parashas Parah*.

The Yerushalmi says, "Parashas Parah is מהרתן של ישראל the purity of the Jewish nation."

When we read about the *parah adumah*, we become pure. We don't become pure from טומאת מת, but we become purified from the *tumah* of sin. *Aveiros* create a type of *tumah*, and we become clean from our *aveiros* when we read *parashas Parah*.

The Beis Aharon writes, "One must believe that just as the ashes of the *parah adumah* purify...today, everyone becomes purified when *Parshas Parah* is read – each person according to his level."

The Sfas Emes (*Parshas Parah* end 5641) clarifies, "The purity we are referring to is purity from sin."

Similarly, Rebbe Tzaddok HaCohen zt'l teaches that we become pure from sin when we read this parashah. He proves this from the *haftarah*. The *haftarah* is always based on the weekly Torah reading. This Shabbos the *haftarah* says (*Yechezkel* 36:25), וזרקתי עליכם מים, "I will throw the purifying waters on you and you will be cleansed from all your impurities," and it's referring to purification from sin. This indicates that the Torah portion is also referring to purity from sin.

## Say No to Sin!

In the *yotzros* of *parashas Parah* we say, *מי יתן טהור מממא לא אהר*. This can also be translated, "How does one become pure? How does one stop sinning? The answer is *לא אהר*, by saying "No!" once and for always.

To explain, we share the following:

An alcoholic recognized that his drinking habits were destroying his life, so he made a firm commitment never to drink again. Around ten in the morning, he became thirsty for a drink, but he controlled himself, and he didn't take it. Noontime, he started walking to the bar. His old habits were controlling him. But midway, he reminded himself of his resolve, and he stopped himself. He wouldn't drink, and that was final. He returned home.

He had several other challenging moments that day, but he overcame each

one. Ten at night, he thought to himself, "I had a very good day today. I deserve to celebrate." He went off to the bar and got drunk.

Tomorrow, if he will decide once again to become clean, he will need to say "no" again. His first resolve wasn't strong enough.

But the advice the *yotzros* is offering is to say *לא אהר*, one firm and everlasting "no".

## Step by Step

Above we discussed the approach of *לא אהר*, to say "no" to the *yetzer hara* once and for all. To tell oneself, "I will never return to this sin," and to keep this resolve. But there is also the gradual approach.

The Midresh (Tanchumah - Bahaloscha 10) says: "The Jewish people said to Hakadosh Baruch Hu, 'Ribono shel Olam, You recognize the strong power

of the yetzer hara... [How can we conquer him?]. Hashem replied, 'Send the yetzer hara away, step by step in this world, and I will completely remove the yetzer hara in the future. Today, improve in one area; tomorrow improve a drop more; until you acquire a second nature.'

This Midrash is referring to the gradual approach to teshuvah, which is often the recommended way.

When one sets out on a mission of becoming a better person, he isn't always able to make one firm and final decision to change. Often, one needs to change gradually, step by step, day by day. If he keeps at it, he will succeed.

Each time he conquers the yetzer hara, he gets one step closer to success.

The Beis Avraham of Slonim, zy" a, compared this to someone who drank a cup of wine. It seems that nothing happened. He isn't

drunk, or even dizzy. Later, he drinks a second cup, and then a third...and then he's intoxicated. Now he recognizes that the first cup also contributed to the final result.

Similarly, when one overcomes the yetzer hara once, nothing seems to have changed. He seems to be the same person as before. But he really isn't. Something did change. If he keeps at it, he will see that he has become a new person one step at a time.

The Tanya (27) teaches:

"Whenever one is victorious over his yetzer hara, even for just a short moment...for example, he desires to eat, but he pushes it off for an hour or even for less than an hour, and during this time, he studies Torah... or when one remains quiet, and he doesn't say something that he strongly desires to say... even if it is merely for a brief moment... it sanctifies him... As Chazal say:

"When a person sanctifies himself a little bit below, Heaven sanctifies him a lot from above."

So, two things happen when one improves step by step:

(1) Each time he overcomes the yetzer hara, he is gradually becoming a better person.

(2) Each small step in the right direction is significant because this small deed grants him *siyata dishmaya*. Hashem will sanctify him and help him win over the yetzer hara.

### Humility

The parah adumah hints at the trait of humility, which is a vital component of the process of attaining purity.

An עץ ארו, cedarwood, and an אִזְוִב, hyssop grass, is thrown into the burning *parah adumah*.

Rashi explains, "The cedar tree is the tallest tree, and the hyssop is the

smallest plant. This hints that someone who was haughty and sinned, should make himself small like hyssop...and he will be forgiven."

The ideal of humility is also discussed in the *yotzros* of Shabbos Parah. As we say, לבל יתגאה מתגאה בארו, "One shouldn't be proud like a cedar tree."

The Chasam Sofer (Drashos 33:) teaches: The ashes of the parah adumah represent humility, the water that is sprinkled alludes to tears. When there is humility, regret and tears, one becomes purified from all his sins.

### Holy Pride

Humility is important but thinking that he is unimportant to Hashem and the mitzvos he performs don't have any value is a severe problem. As the Beis Yisrael of Gurzt" I said. "Misguided humility is worse than *gaavah*."

We must know that all our good deeds are precious to Hashem.

This is the reason the parah adumah required ארי, cedarwood, which represents gaavah. Yet, it also needs אזוב, the hyssop grass, which represents humility. This teaches us that there is a time for modesty, but there is a time when you should employ some *gaavah d'kedushah*, to consider yourself special, as this gives you the motivation to invest in Hashem's service. When one figures out when and where to use each attribute (pride and humility) he has attained the purity that *parah adumah* represents.

The Rizhener zt'l explains that if a person focuses on his qualities and good deeds, he can become a baal gaavah. On the other hand, if he focuses on his faults and sins, he can

become sad. So, what should he do? The answer is, he should change his focus according to his present needs. If he needs to feel humble, he should focus on his faults. And if he needs to feel proud, as it states 'גבה לבו בדרכי ה', raise his heart to do Hashem's service, then he should focus on his good deeds, qualities, and abilities.

The Rizhiner said that this lesson is hinted at in the following pasuk (Bereishis 4):

הלא אם תיטב, if you will focus on your good deeds, שאה you can become a baal gaavah. ויאה לא תיטב, but if you focus on your evil deeds, לפתה המאת רובין you might become sad. So, what should a person focus on? The solution is, נע ונד תהיה, to waver back and forth with these two thoughts.<sup>9</sup>

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9. The Noem Elimelech writes, "Hashem yisbarach rejected the tall mountains, and chose Har Sinai, the lowest of them all, to give

## Emunah

Every year, on Parshas Parah, Rebbe Henech HaCohen of Alaxender zy"a would tell the following story that the Chozeh of Lublin zy"a related:

During the Rishonim era, it was common for the Catholic priests to summon the Yidden to a debate, in front of a tribunal, in an attempt to prove the superiority of their religion. Their goal was to win the debate - with their crooked reasoning - and then to legally force the Yidden to accept their faith.

A priest once came into a Jewish village, and with permission from the local government, announced that someone should come forward to debate him. This debate's rule was that the loser is to be thrown into the river where he would drown. A date was set for the debate.

The Yidden were very afraid, and they davened to Hashem for salvation. The date of the debate was quickly approaching. No one wanted to challenge the priest because the loser will be drowned. And everyone knew that the Yid would be determined the "loser" of the debate.

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the Torah.... This tells us to always be humble...This is intended in the passuk when it say מרבר סיני. But...humility can lead to depression, and that is a great impediment to avodas Hashem. Therefore, the Torah warns that one must always be happy, because the Shechinah doesn't reside where there is sadness. This is the meaning of אהל מועד, and *Moed* is happiness, because *Moed* means Yom Tov..."

This Noem Elimelech is related to our discussion. One needs humility, but one also needs happiness. One has to learn how to combine both into his avodas Hashem.

A simple tailor said that he was willing to take on the priest. This tailor was unlearned – which made his chance of success against the scholarly priest even slimmer – but since no one else stepped up to the challenge, the community had no choice other than to accept his offer and to pray for his success.

When the priest saw the ignorant tailor standing before him, he thought the Yidden were mocking him. The priest was certain that he could easily win this debate, so he said to the tailor, "You can ask the first question." (The priest figured that the question would be foolish and arouse the laughter from all the gentile spectators.) The tailor didn't seem to be afraid at all. He fearlessly said, "What does איני יודע mean?"

The priest said, "I don't know."

The tailor raised his hands and shouted, "I won

the debate! I won the debate! Everyone heard. The priest admitted that he doesn't know."

Following the rules of the debate, the priest was promptly lifted and drowned in the nearby river.

The Yidden rejoiced. Their tefilos were answered. They asked the simple hero how he thought of this clever question. The tailor replied, "I saw a Yiddish translation on Rashi. When Rashi writes איני יודע, the translator writes "*ich veis nisht*" (I don't know). So, I figured: if the learned author of this sefer didn't know the meaning of איני יודע, certainly this goy won't know the answer, either."

The Chozeh told this story to demonstrate that a simple, unlearned tailor can win against a learned priest because to have emunah, one doesn't need wisdom. In fact, simplicity is the key factor of emunah.

Rashi writes (Bamidbar 19:2) "The Satan and the nations of the world ask the Yidden, 'What is this mitzvah (of parah adumah)? What reasons does it have? Therefore, the Torah writes חוקה; it is a law. It is My decree, and you don't have permission to question it." We don't understand the mitzvah, but we keep it without understanding. That is emunah peshutah, which is to believe in Hashem, even when you don't understand.

The reward for believing in Hashem is enormous.

Chazal say (Gittin 57) "The descendants of Haman taught Torah in Bnei Brak."

How did Haman earn this merit? The Sheim MiShmuel explains: It was a reward for a single moment of emunah that Haman had.

When Haman was leading Mordechai through the streets of Shushan, he said (Tehilim 30:7-8) ה' ברוצח

העמדת להררי עון הסתרת פניך הייתי נבהל. Haan recognized that his humiliation came from Hashem, and that when he gets honor, it is also from Hashem (see Esther Rabba 10:5). It was a righteous thought, a moment of emunah, albeit it was just for a moment, and therefore he merited having descendants who taught Torah in public.

## Torah

The passuk says (Bamidbar 19:19) וזהו המהר על הממא ביום השלישי וביום השביעי... ומהר, "Someone tahor should sprinkle [the ashes of the parah adumah] on the third and the seventh day...and this will purify him..."

Tzaddikim said that the third and seventh days represent Torah. The third day represents Torah, as the Gemara (Shabbos 88.) says, "Baruch Hashem Who gave us a Torah of three (Torah, *Neviim*, *Kesuvim*) to a nation of three (*kohanim*, *Leviim*, *Yisraelim*) by the third



(Moshe Rabbeinu, who was the third child to his parents) on the third day (of *shloshes yemei hagbalah*) and during the third month (Sivan)." So, the sprinkling on the third day hints at the Torah, which is the primary purifier.

The sprinkling on the seventh day also represents Torah, because Chazal say, "All opinions agree that the Torah was given on Shabbos."

We learn from this that the purity of parah adumah, which in our generations is primary to be pure from sin, comes from studying Torah.<sup>10</sup>

Studying Gemara, particularly, purifies.

Rebbe Shlomo Karliner zy" a said that Gemara comes from the word *gumri* [coals] because the Gemara is like burning coals that burns away all impurities, and it ignites one's heart to Hashem.

Rebbe Shmuel Kaminka zy" a was once speaking with his students about the importance of studying a "blatt Gemara." He said, "With a blatt Gemara, one comes out of the *blotta* (the mud, the yetzer hara)."

One of the students was inspired by his counsel, and he quickly went into the adjacent room to find a Gemara to study. He didn't find a gemara there, but he

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**10.** The Or HaChaim Hakadosh teaches: A non-kosher kitchen utensil (pots, pans, etc.) becomes kosher by purging it in boiling hot water. An even stronger form of cleansing is when they are purged in fire. Torah is the strongest form of purity, since the torah is fire; as it states (*Yirmiyahu* 23:29) הלא כה דברי כאש, "Behold My words are like fire," and it burns away all the tumah.

The *Or HaChaim* (*Ki Sisa*) writes: "Torah protects, forgives, and increases one's merits. Even if one has many sins, when one studies Torah... it cleanses him..."

found a mishnayos. He learned a chapter, and then returned to hear more Torah from Reb Shmuel Kaminka. Rebbe Shmuel commented, "He thinks that he can cleanse himself with a chapter of Mishnayos with the same purity that comes from a daf Gemara."

Mussar and chasidus are essential, as they inspire people to improve, but even that doesn't provide the benefit that Gemara provides.

Tzaddikim said: Ovens can be warmed with coal or with straw. Straw creates a larger fire, but the straw is consumed quickly, and the oven will become cold again. Coals make a smaller fire, but the heat lasts longer. This describes the difference between mussar and Gemara. Mussar inspires the person like a raging fire, but the inspiration will soon dissipate. But when he studies Gemara, the fire can remain for a long time.



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