



Parashat Re'eh



English version

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## THE ART OF USING AI

Summer break, marrying off our first child of ten in Israel, and Parashat Re'eh, is a great recipe for writer's block. When creative juices are not flowing, I sometimes ask Chat Gpt for help. But being that I plan on working on adding some humor and smiles to the upcoming year, to serve Hashem better, and looking to be more relevant to what people are going through and current events, I wondered if the robot can save the day, and this article.

Why is Parashat Re'eh so hard for me? Parashat Re'eh starts off talking about blessings and curse, and that the choice is up to you. And then it moves to some other interesting topics like getting rid of idols and idol worship from the Land of Israel, serving G-d with sacrifices only in the Temple, eating meat from a proper shchitah, but not eating blood. Staying away from false prophets, waging war against idol worshipping cities. Which animals can be eaten, the laws of Maaser, Shmitta money laws, and laws of Jewish slaves. The parasha ends with the three Pilgrim holidays, Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot.

So how do we make false prophets self helpy, and connected to current events, with some humor, Chat gpt?

In Parashat Re'eh, we're warned about the false prophet who might try to lead people astray, promising all sorts of wonders, but ultimately steering them in the wrong direction. Nowadays, you might say we've traded in the false prophets for social media influencers and conspiracy theorists who claim to have the "truth" about everything from miracle diets to secret government plots. Imagine if the ancient Israelites had to deal

with a false prophet who had a TikTok channel. He'd be there, making viral videos about the newest "miracle" diet straight from Mount Sinai—only to have people realize later they've been eating nothing but sand for a week! Or maybe he'd be claiming to have the ultimate inside scoop on the best way to cross the Red Sea—no need for Moses, just use these 5 easy steps! You'd end up with a bunch of Israelites splashing around, waiting for the "likes" to roll in while they slowly realize they're not getting anywhere. The message of the Parashah still holds true: don't get swept away by the hype and the latest trend, especially when it comes from someone promising things that sound too good to be true. Whether it's a false prophet or the latest "expert" on the internet.

Um, I am not sure that this is my style, ChatGPT. You have anything on eating blood and making that self helpy, and humorous?

The prohibition of eating blood in Parashat Re'eh is pretty straightforward—blood is off the menu! Now, if we were to spin that into some self-help humor, especially as we're approaching Elul, it might look something like this:

Imagine if the Torah's prohibition on eating blood was a self-help metaphor for cutting out all the "toxic" stuff from your life. Just like blood isn't exactly the best choice for dinner, you might say that holding on to grudges, negativity, and drama is the emotional equivalent of chomping down on a big, bloody steak—totally off-limits if you're trying to purify yourself in Elul!

So, picture this: you're trying to make some positive changes this Elul. You've got your self-improvement plan all set, but every time you sit

down to meditate or journal, you can't stop thinking about that time your co-worker took your parking spot two years ago. It's like you're trying to "eat clean" emotionally, but you keep sneaking in a little "blood" of resentment on the side. Or, let's say you're working on being more positive, but every time you turn on the news or scroll through social media, you get sucked into a vortex of negativity. It's like trying to stick to a healthy diet, but then drinking a smoothie made entirely of raw steak juice—yuck! Just like you wouldn't want that in your physical diet, it's not doing your soul any favors either. The lesson? Just as the Torah tells us to steer clear of eating blood, maybe it's time to cut out the emotional "blood" that's clogging up your spiritual arteries. This Elul, skip the negativity, grudges, and toxic vibes—because, let's face it, nobody ever found peace of mind by sinking their teeth into a problem they should've let go a long time ago. And hey, if you ever feel tempted, just remember: life's too short to be snacking on anything but the good stuff!

Chat Gpt! I don't think that that is going to work. You have anything on Elul, free choice, idol worship, and technology? It seems that people love those Vayemaen videos!

Elul is our chance to hit the reset button and make sure we're heading in the right direction. In Parashat Re'eh, the Torah reminds us to choose wisely. And in Elul, it's like we're in the final round of Who Wants to Be a Mensch?—so, no pressure, but your choices could lead to a million-dollar blessing... or a lifetime supply of curses. Let's aim for the grand prize, shall we?

Rejection of Modern-Day Idols: Materialism and Consumer Culture: If ancient Israelites had to deal with golden calves, we're dealing with shiny new smartphones that have us glued to our screens like a squirrel to an acorn. It's like the modern "idol" you carry in your pocket, constantly demanding sacrifices in the form of your attention span. Back in the day, people looked to the stars for guidance. Now, we look to algorithms. "O Mighty YouTube Algorithm, lead me to the next video that I didn't even know I needed!" And can you picture Moses

coming down the mountain, seeing everyone staring at their phones, people bowing down and chanting, "Just one more scroll!" and Moses being like, "Seriously? I was gone for 40 days and this is what you're doing? Bowing down to your smartphone? This is what you're worshipping now? You upgraded to iPhone worship?!? Behold, the iPhone 20 Pro Max! It hath the power to deliver us from boredom and lead us into the promised land of endless scrolling" You think some more Shein purchases will bring you happiness? It's like the Torah is telling us: "Hey, maybe put down the credit card and step away from the online shopping cart for a minute. Those shoes won't fill the hole in your soul.

Technology and Social Media: Social media is great—until you find yourself in a 2-hour deep dive into your third cousin's vacation photos from 2015. Parashat Re'eh is like the Torah's version of a pop-up ad: "Warning: You're about to idolize something that really doesn't matter." Elul is your chance to click "unsubscribe" from the endless scroll and "subscribe" to real-life connections. Who knows? You might even rediscover the lost art of eye contact! Elul suggests maybe taking a break from posting and liking to, I don't know, actually live your life. Who knows, you might rediscover the lost art of talking to people face-to-face—without the help of emojis!

Parashat Re'eh is like G-d saying, "Don't just tweet about justice—live it!" Elul, then, is your chance to do some soul searching: Are you a social justice warrior, or just someone who retweets a lot? It's time to stop being a keyboard activist and start being a real-life mensch. After all, the world could always use a few more superheroes who don't need capes—just a good sense of right and wrong (and maybe a decent challah recipe). And during Elul, it's time to check in on your neighbor, donate a little extra to charity, and maybe even share your secret challah recipe. Because nothing says "I care" like carbs and kindness.



Parashat Re'eh and Elul remind us that we've got choices to make, idols to ditch, and justice to pursue. And if you can't laugh at yourself during Elul, just remember: God probably is, and He's got a great sense of humor.

Chat Gpt, I never thought that mussar from a robot can be so tough. Try to stick to self help please. How about this, Chat Gpt. If we look at the choices of extraordinary productivity that we have in life, there are mostly five. Act on the important, don't react to the urgent. Go for the extraordinary, don't settle for the ordinary. Schedule the big rocks, don't sort the gravel. Rule your technology, don't let your technology rule you. Fuel your fire, don't burn out. Let's talk about choosing the choice of ruling your technology and not letting it rule you.

Imagine if Moses had to deal with technology on top of everything else. The two questions the Jews could not stop asking on their travels in the desert were: Can we get directions on Google Maps for this? And, Uh, is there Wi-Fi in the desert?" And Moses responds, "If I had Wi-Fi, those commandments would have been sent via iCloud": "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's Wi-Fi password!" "Remember the Sabbath and keep it free from notifications!" Honor thy father and thy mother... and explain to them how to use Zoom for the tenth time this week.

In the old days, people made offerings of animals or grain. Today, we sacrifice something far more precious: our attention span, our time and sanity. "O Instagram, take this hour of my life in exchange for a fleeting moment of validation!" We're willing to offer up our sanity to the gods of social media, hoping they'll bless us with likes, shares, and the

elusive blue checkmark. Imagine if the ancient idols demanded selfies instead of sheep. Oh god! Please accept this perfectly filtered selfie, in exchange for lots of likes!

Once upon a time, people prayed for rain. Nowadays, we pray for strong Wi-Fi. Picture this: an entire household gathered around the router, hands raised in desperate plea: "O mighty Wi-Fi, grant us your endless bandwidth and speed. Bless us with low latency and no buffering, so we may stream and game without interruption!" And when the Wi-Fi goes down, it's like the heavens have closed up shop. Forget golden calves—there's no greater despair than the "No Internet" dinosaur on your browser.

Back then, people went to oracles for wisdom. Now, we call tech support. "O wise customer service representative, please bestow upon me the knowledge to restore my lost files!" In the ancient world, knowledge was power. Today, that power is held by whoever can remember their password. "I say unto you, blessed are those who remembereth their login credentials, for they shall inherit access to their email!" But woe to those who forget, for they shall wander in the wilderness of password recovery. And heaven help the one who tries to change it, for the system will decree, "Thou shalt not use a password you have used before!" We pray that Moses shows up and smashes all our Tablets, literally.

Chat Gpt, I think that you are a great learning partner. I hope that we can work together one day. But for the mean time, I think I need to work with someone else. (Or at least, if I use you in my dvar torah articles, I won't tell anyone.)

## FOR THE LOVE OF THE LAND

R' Shlomo Wolbe wrote a fascinating Sefer called *המצוות השקולות*, The seven Mitzvoth that have Equal Weight. Fulfilling each one of these seven Mitzvoth is equal to fulfilling the entire Torah, all of the 613. 1. Denying Avodah Zarah, 2. Wearing Tzitzit. 3. Shabbat. 4. Torah learning. 5. Brit Milah.

6. Tzedaka. 7. Living in Eretz Yisrael. These seven Mitzvoth are important to remember, because they are the heavyweight ones.

We know that living in Eretz Yisrael has equal value to keeping all 613 from a passuk in our



Parasha. Moshe relays G-d's message to His People. *כִּי אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן לְבֹא לְרִשְׁתׁ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ. וְאַשְׁרֵי־יִקְנֶה אֶל־הֵיכָם נִתְּנָה לָכֶם וַיִּרְשׁתֶּם אֹתָהּ וַיִּשְׁבַּתֶּם־בָּהּ. וְאַשְׁרֵי־יִקְנֶה אֶת־הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי וְאַתֶּם לִפְנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם.* *And you shall keep all of these statutes and laws that I am placing in front of you today.* From the flow of these pesukim, our Rabbis derive that living in Eretz Yisrael is equal to keeping all of the 613. (Sifri Devarim 29, Yalkut Shimoni Devarim 885) The flow of the pesukim implies that by inheriting the land, and by dwelling in the land, you will be keeping all the Mitzvoth of the Torah.

R Wolbe writes that each and every one that is mentioned as the seven have something pivotal about them and correspond to the seven קדושות, the seven areas of holiness. The Mitzvah of Denying Avodah Zarah is the Mitzvah corresponding to your value system. Tzitzit corresponds to your memory, as the strings are meant to remind you of the 613. Shabbat corresponds to the holiness of time. Torah learning corresponds the holiness of knowledge. Milah corresponds to the holiness of desires. Tzedakah corresponds to the power of giving. And Eretz Yisrael, to the holiness of a place.

Now, there are many opinions about the mitzvah of living in Eretz Yisrael and what it means to us. For some reason, the Rambam does not mention it as one of the 613, although he wrote, *A person shall always live in Eretz Yisrael, even in a city that is all gentiles, and this is better than living out of E Yisrael, even in a city that is all Jews. Because anyone who leaves E Yisrael to go to out of E Yisrael – it is as if he is serving idols.* (Shoftim, Melachim 5, 10) The Rambam seems to learn that the Mitzvah of living in E Yisrael is something that is incumbent on each and every Jew, not a mitzvah to the collective Jewish People.

The Ramban disagrees with the Rambam. He believes that living in Israel is a Mitzvah from the Torah that should be included in the 613, and it is

learnt from the passuk *וְהִרְשַׁתֶּם אֶת הָאָרֶץ וַיִּשְׁבַּתֶּם בָּהּ.* *And you (plural) shall inherit the land, and you (plural form) shall dwell in it.* (Bamidbar 33; 53) The Ramban is bothered by the question why the Rambam does not mention this as a Mitzvah of the 613. And the Ramban believes that this Mitzvah is not addressed to the individual, but to Klal Yisrael, for the directive of this Mitzvah is written with the word “you”, in the plural.

There are various situations in which a person is not required to live in E Yisrael. I am not going to discuss this subject from either the halachic point of view or the consideration of hashkafa. I am just going to point out something that meant a lot to me, and a life lesson from this Mitzvah.

R Avigdor Miller pointed to something in the blessing we make immediately before Shema each morning that seems out of place. In the blessing, we ask for success in Torah learning and thank G-d for choosing us as His Nation to give us His Torah. And then, we ask Hashem to bring us back to His Land. What is the connection between coming back to The Land and the rest of the blessing, which is talking about Torah learning?

The answer R A Miller gave was very enlightening. We want Mashiach, we want Eretz Yisrael “*not to be able to eat pomegranates and dates and figs in Eretz Yisroel. We are asking for Moshiach in order to be able to sit and learn Torah successfully in Eretz Yisroel. And to learn Torah doesn't only mean to sit in front of the Gemara. It means to absorb all of the great Torah attitudes and ideals. And we want the best environment possible to grow great in. A plant has to have two things to grow. It has to have roots or a seed, and it also has to have the right environment surrounding it. Plants won't grow just in any climate. In certain climates, like in warm parts of the world, these plants will grow more successfully. Today, even if the seed is planted, we are lacking the environment. All around us is an avir of tumah. And therefore, it is very difficult today for a seed, a child, to grow successfully. However, when a person is Ashrei Yoshvei Veisecha – if he sits in the house of Hashem;*



*whenever he has spare time, he remains long in the house of Hashem, so it's like sitting in Eretz Yisroel. Rabbi Yochanan was once told that in Bavel, there were some zekeinim who lived long. So he asked a kasha: How could they live in Bavel if it says in the Torah לָמַעַן יִרְבוּ יַמֵּיכֶם עַל הָאָדָמָה – if you'll serve Hashem, you'll live long al ha'adamah, you'll live long on the land in Eretz Yisroel. But in Bavel, how could they live long? So, they told him: No, the people there come early to the beis haknesses and they remain late in the beis haknesses. "Oh" he said, "Hainu d'ahani lei, that's what helped them." (Berachot 8a) The air of the beis haknesses is like Eretz Yisroel. So, if you are in a makom Torah, it's an atmosphere where you'll grow more successfully."*

There is a rule I learnt about people and how they think. People do not think how they want to think. Their thinking is dependent on five S's. State of Mind. Structure. Social context. Story of life. Scenario. The place where you are, the scenario in which you are, are pivotal to who you are and how you think. To how you serve G-d. To how you learn Torah, and what its words mean to you.

## ELUL – TIME FOR A CHANGE

I apologize, but I can't make my point without first troubling you. Fold your arms. Now, open them. Now, fold them again. Now, notice which arm you "naturally" put on top of the other. Is it right on top of left or left on top of right? Now, switch. Fold your arms the opposite way from the way that you are used to. Feels strange? Welcome to change. Welcome to Elul.

The parasha in which G-d gives us choice coincides with the Shabbat before Rosh Hodesh Elul. Why? Because Elul is a time for change, and change begins with choice. Once, a long time ago, without too much thought, you decided which arm to put on top of the other, whenever you fold your arms. Ever since, you have continued to fold your arms like that, and now, it is "strange to change". It's awkward.

And this is why living in Eretz Yisrael can be so important. Because E Yisrael can be a place where religious Jews feel comfortable to live a life as religious Jews. And this is a heavy-weight Mitzvah, because where you are, your scenario, are so pivotal to what type of Jew you are, of how you believe. That is what E Y was all about. It was a place where it was easiest to serve G-d, without any distractions from the gentiles.

The Rambam writes that the greatest Rabbis would kiss the stones of E Yisrael and roll in its dirt at the border. (Melachim 5;11) As the passuk says, *The Land that YHVH your G-d looks after always: the Eyes of YHVH your G-d are on it, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year.* (Devarim 11;12) Our Sages teach us, that someone who sins in E Yisrael – it is as if he is sinning in the Palace of The King. And someone who does a Mitzvah here, it is as if he did the Mitzvah in front of the Eyes of the King, in G-d's Palace! (Sefer HaCharedim 59)

Sefardim say Selihot for forty days, because that's how long Moshe spent up in Heaven to get the second set of tablets, after the sin of the Golden Calf. We were granted the second set of tablets on Yom Kippur, as we received atonement. During those forty days, what did the Jewish Nation do in the desert, without a Torah to study? They probably did Teshuva. Repentance.

The hardest part of repentance is changing self-perception. In order to repent, to change, there are steps that you can't skip. First, you need awareness of the present situation. Second, you need to choose and define what you want different in your life. You need to choose how you want your behavior and identity to "look". Then, you need motivation. Motivation depends on three factors: knowing what to do differently, believing in change, and believing that you can do it. For forty



days, the Nation in the desert needed to believe that after falling from such lofty angelic levels to idol worship, they could still change. It takes forty days to totally convince yourself that things can be done differently. Even though change may feel awkward at first, it can be achieved in forty days. If you fold your arms the new way forty times, in a week from now, you will probably, naturally, go back to your old way of folding your arms. But, if you changed the order for forty days, you have probably changed it for life. Elul is 40 days. Only after 40 days from conception can an embryo, in the womb, be considered a living entity. If life in the womb ends before forty days, we do not relate to it as

“death”. It takes 40 days to create a human. And, it takes 40 days to recreate a human. Choice, alone, is not realistically going to make the change, until you follow up on the choice for 40 days.

The reason why most people do not change is because they don't understand that it takes forty days. And, when they fail to change, they think that they do not have choice. So, G-d reminds us, just in time, in Parashat Re'eh, that choice is ours, but it takes forty days. Purim is a time for happiness, Hanukah is a time to thank G-d for miracles, Tisha B'Av is a time to mourn. But Elul is a time to choose. Elul stands for opportunity.

## THE ART OF FIGHTING THE YETZER HARA

The four parashiot of Elul have in them endless tools for change and Teshuva. Reeh – See that you have choice, more choices than you think. Shoftim-observe how much self-control you have and how honest and true to yourself you have been. Ki Tetze – Now, go out to war against your Yetzer Hara, your evil inclination; recognize its ways. And then, Ki Tavo- let the past fall behind, וקללותיה, תכלה שנה וקללותיה, and start a new year, with new blessing.

The difference between a Tzaddik and a Rasha, says the Alter from Kelm, is what you imagine and how you imagine. The way to fight the Yetzer Hara is to use its own weapons against him. The strongest weapon of the Yetzer Hara is false imaginations and fears. Temptations of pleasure and pride are only able to capture us, once we use imagination to magnify the temptation, making it more attractive and powerful than it actually is. Fear of missing out, fear of change, fear of failure, fear of poverty, fear of retirement ... it is not that these things aren't real issues, it is that the Yetzer Hara magnifies and blows them out of proportion.

So, we fight the Yetzer Hara with imagining, but imagining the truth. How powerful a Rosh Hashana can be, how great the reward and punishment of the next world can be, how great I can be, if I just imagine, do my due diligence and trust in G-d. The first step of being a Torah Jew, the first law in

Shulchan Aruch, is to imagine, wherever you are, whoever you are with or not with, שויתי לה' נגדי, תמיד, I place and imagine G-d in front of me, present with me, “alive” with me. No matter where I am in the world, I am in the world, I am וקים הי וקים הי.

But the Yetzer Hara counter attacks with imagination: *You can't do this repentance thing! How many times have you tried to improve yourself, and you failed! You're broken down and tired of this self-improvement merry-go-round! How many times have you tried to rise up, like the waves, and you just came crashing down! You may be a failure, but you are not foolish enough to try improving again, for the thousandth time! You know you can't change!* He makes you ignore and forget your strengths. And when that doesn't work, when you actually get into the repentance zone, he makes you forget your weakness and imagine that you can do more than you actually can: *You can change, if you really want to. It won't be hard. You can change at the last minute.* He makes you bite off too much, more than you can swallow, so that you have spiritual indigestion. He makes you overestimate what you can do in one year and underestimate what you can do in seven years.

Another tool of the Yetzer Hara is to start with something so small and seemingly insignificant, that before you realize it, it becomes something



you can't stop. This is the lesson of the Ben Sorer U'moreh, which begins with a young boy going after worldly pleasures and continues with a person who will turn into an unstoppable beast. Parashat Ki Tetze introduces to us the war tactics of the Evil Inclination, how one thing leads to the next : marrying an Eshet Yefat Toar will lead to having a rebellious child.

To counter that, G-d doesn't ask us to change, but to change direction. No matter how far you have gone off the beaten path, the point when you realized that you are in the wrong direction is closer to the destination than the point that you started to go off in the wrong direction. All G-d asks from us is, פתחו לי פתח כחודו של מחט ואני אפתח, Open up even a tiny opening for Me, an opening so small like the sharp point of a needle, and I will open up for you an entrance like a hall. This is the lesson of the shape of the Shofar, that on one side, it is narrow, and on the other side, it is wide. Because all G-d wants from us, is to take the first step. Elul is called אלול because it stands for אני לדודי ודודי לי, I am to My beloved, and My beloved is to me. The month is not called Dalul, after the other passuk of Shir Hashirim, דודי לי ואני לו, My beloved is to me, and I am to Him, because G-d waits for us, to make the small change, to take the first step towards the relationship. וְשׁוּבוּ אֵלַי וְאֶשׁוּבָה אֲלֵיכֶם

The best way to get ready for Rosh Hashana is to imagine how many things were decided upon, last Rosh Hashana. It's been a crazy year. Last Rosh Hashana was "heavy stakes", on a personal and a global level. A year of collapse in so many ways. Meron. Givat Zeev. Surfside. Everything we relied on: doctors, hospitals, justice, our votes in America and Israel, police enforcement – everything just seems to be collapsing. The trust in leaders, the trust in the economy, the trust in "the system", whatever the system might have been. People are anxiety-ridden about how to be ready for the next

"collapse", as we shift from second vaccine, to the third vaccine, to the unknown...

The Rambam tells us that no matter how saintly we are, every Rosh Hashana we need to blow shofar, to wake up and realize that we are spiritually sleeping. We forgot G-d, even if we trusted in Him. We forgot the truth, as we busied ourselves with unimportant things. Chasing after money we don't need, running after respect and honor that is, anyway, short lived, eating tempting food that is not even good for us, and wasting endless time which is life itself, justifying it by calling it "entertainment". (see Rambam Teshuva 3) This is the message of the Shofar, to simpletons and Chief Rabbis alike. The Shofar blowing is the trumpet blow as we crown G-d as King, at the beginning of the new year. By waking up from spiritual slumber, by searching for the truth, focused on self-improvement, as we crown G-d as the world begins anew each Rosh Hashana, just as G-d was King on the first day of creation.

Elul is time for war. Elul stands for אהת למעלה ושבעה למטה One above, and seven below, the strange way the Kohen Gadol would count and track the sprinkling of blood on Yom Kippur. The Yetzer Hara comes from seven places, with its seven names. (See Succah 52b) He uses any possible way to trick you, to go against you ... but there is always the One Above. *Every day the Yetzer Hara tries to kill you, spiritually, and if G-d won't help you, you won't be able to withstand him* (Kiddushin 30b). But it also means that if we just stick to the truth, if we learn Torah, all the lies of the Yetzer Hara will fall by the wayside. The only way to Teshuva is through Torah learning. Onkelos says, if you learn My Torah, I will forgive your sins. If you do not, I will not forgive your sins. The Torah is the only vaccine against the Yetzer Hara, בראתי יצר הרע בראתי לו תורה. תבלין. If you learn Torah, you will not be given over into the hands of the Yetzer Hara. (Kiddushin 30b)

## TZEDAKAH: HOW SMALL CHANGE CAN MAKE A BIG CHANGE



During my early days in Israel, a roommate and I were approached by a poor man as we were strolling down Meah Shearim Street in Jerusalem. The man stuck out a cup, which contained a few coins, and said, “*Shabbos Koidesh*.” He meant that he was collecting funds to purchase Shabbat food for himself and his family. I handed the fellow a shekel as my friend searched his pockets. All he could come up with, though, was a ten-agurot coin which he promptly dropped into the cup. But before we could move on, the man said, “Wait a minute!” and placed 50 agurot in the hand of my friend. “It looks like you need the money more than me, he explained.” Without further ado, he turned and walked away, leaving us in a mild state of shock.

Before offering a Torah perspective on responding to an outstretched arm and open palm (or cup), permit me to share several additional encounters with poor beggars in Israel. I will never forget a gentleman in his late sixties who would circulate in the study hall of the Mir Yeshiva in a black baseball cap with the word *SHVIGGER* (mother-in-law) embossed in large gold letters. Then there was the fellow who came around the yeshivah with a sign over his chest proclaiming in English – a language which he apparently did not understand – that he is “deaf, dead, and dumb.” I myself could only testify to his being deaf and dumb. A third fellow tells you jokes, and a fourth first tries to convince you to take a 250-shekel massage (as he shows you his degree), and then asks if you can at least spare a shekel to help him pay his psychologist.

At one point, I started to ignore these people because of the nuisance they frequently caused. Each encounter involved having to stop learning to search for a coin. But I began feeling uneasy about this approach, especially regarding those people who came around every week. After all, they were really only asking for half a shekel. Furthermore, I kept thinking of the classical image of one Jew putting a coin into the *pushke* at the end of the outstretched arm of a fellow Jew. Even worse, I knew that there is a Torah prohibition concerning

not giving anything at all: (דברים: כ"ב:א-ג).

An insight in this week's parashah helped me rectify my actions and, ultimately, my perspective. The Torah tells us: *Give to him, and let not your heart turn evil...*— נתן נתן לו ולא ירע לבבך בתתך לו (דברים טו - י'). The *Kli Chemdah* points to the doubling of the verb *Give* in the verse (נתן נתן), and explains it to mean that if one has trouble giving, he should give a little to the first one who asks, and another small amount to the next poor person... Eventually, he will be able to change his habit and give more generously. Indeed, this approach can help us become more generous and compassionate in other life areas as well.

Besides the benefit of “small change” ultimately leading to big change, there are other significant benefits hidden in the mitzvah of *tzedakah*. For one thing, the poor man gives the giver a change in perspective. The Torah tells us that there will always be poor people in the world. Why? Rabbeinu Bachye answers that a world with only rich people in it would fall apart economically: If an individual needed something from someone else, no-one would ever feel a need to sell, and the result would be that money would lose its value. Therefore, there must always be poor people. (*Chovat HaLevavot, Shaar HaBechinah, Ch.5*).

On the surface, this is a bit perplexing. Rabbeinu Bachye seems to be saying that the poor must suffer their entire life to facilitate a healthy economy for the rich. Indeed we find a similarly perplexing statement in the Talmud concerning poverty: Rabbi Akiva said that although G-d loves the poor, He allows them to suffer from poverty so that the rich should be saved from Hell when giving charity. (*Bava Batra 10a*) How can G-d allow the poor to live a life of suffering just to save the rich from suffering in the next world? Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler *zt"l* explains that we do not appreciate just how great the merit of benefiting another human being actually is – and the poor person receives this merit!



It is told that when a poor man would knock on the door of Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer *zt''l*, he would jump up and run to get some money so that the poor man would not need to waste an unnecessary second. His students offered to do the mitzvah for the *Gadol HaDor*, or at least open the door and let the poor person in. Rabbi Isser Zalman declined, however, explaining that he owes a tremendous debt to the poor. In light of the fact that the existence of poor people is a Heavenly decree, he commented: “If not for this person being poor, then I might have to take his place. He is doing me a favor by filling that position in my stead.” (See *Devarim* 15:11.)

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When we meet a poor person, we sometimes hear a voice inside us saying: “Why doesn’t he go to work and make money?!” or, “Surely, there are better causes than this...” Before listening to this voice, we would do much better to learn the laws of *Tzedakah* in detail and learn (or re-learn) all that *Chazal* have written about this mitzvah. It saves us from death, evil decrees, poverty, and *Gehinom*; and it brings us salvation, makes us better people, and unites us. And, as the prophet Yeshaya declared, Jerusalem will be rebuilt through charity (יְשַׁעֵיָא, בְּצַדָקָה).

Besides, it often only costs a shekel!

### JUST ONE MORE PRAYER

A central theme of our daily prayers is the Final Redemption. Eight Berachot, three times a day, revolve around this subject. Reeh Nah, Teka B’shofar, Hashiva Shoftenu, Laminim Valamalshinim, Al Hatzadikim, Tishkon Betoach, Et Tzemach and Retzeh. We implore G-d for mercy on Jerusalem each time we have a sandwich or doughnut, in the grace after the meal, and we even stress our agony over the loss of Jerusalem in Birkat Hamazon on Shabbat, despite the tranquility that Shabbat requires. Ignoring Jerusalem, the Temple, or the Mashiach is ignoring a central part of the prayers and a major theme of Judaism.

When Mashiach comes, and the Temple will be rebuilt, not everyone will be allowed inside. Only those whose thoughts were centered around Jerusalem, those who mourned, get an entrance pass. The first thing upon approaching the Heavenly Court each Jew is asked, *Did you anticipate the Final Redemption?* If not, you cannot get into Paradise. Why are our prayers and anticipation of the rebuilding of the Temple so central in Judaism?

The answer is that each prayer, of each person, is another step closer to the way things are meant to be. A King without a castle, a King without a throne, is a King with a kingdom that is incomplete. As dedicated and loyal servants to G-d, this should be unsettling. The job of the Jew in this

world is to build that kingdom of G-d. How? Just by sincerely asking G-d to allow the Final Redemption to happen. Each time we say Amen Yehei Shemei Rabba, *May the Great Name of G-d be blessed forever and ever*, we are pledging allegiance to that Kingdom. And each time we say those words by Kaddish in synagogue, G-d cries and wails, “Woe is to Me, that I allowed the gentiles to destroy the Temple, and exiled My Nation from the Land.”

We do not have the Temple, we do not have Mashiach – for one of two reasons. Either because we don’t really want the Final Redemption, or because we do not believe that our prayers can make it happen. Noah was held responsible for the Flood,(the” flood of Noah”) because he did not pray to G-d to annul the decree. Why did he not pray? Because he did not believe that his prayers would have any effect. And, our Rabbis teach us, that every generation in which the Temple was **not** rebuilt is considered a generation in which the Temple was destroyed. We are held responsible.

If we pray for the Mashiah, with the belief that our prayers can bring him faster, and because we really want the Final Redemption, it will happen! Any minute. Especially during these three weeks, let us at least try to have more concentration when we pray for Jerusalem.



## REMEMBERING OUR MORTALITY:

### AN EFFECTIVE “SELF HELP” TECHNIQUE

One of my rabbis recently flew to the United States to visit a student. While in town, the rabbi was asked to give a Torah class at the office of the student's father – a very hard-working, rich man who spends untold hours behind a big desk in a fancy office. Towards the end of the class, this busy man took out a bucket from under his big mahogany desk and put it on the table. He asked the rabbi to take a look inside. The bucket was full of dirt! The man turned to the rabbi and explained that whenever he feels good about making a great business deal, he picks up this bucket and says to himself: One day I will be buried with this bucket of dirt covering my body. It can happen any day, and when it does, I will leave all the cash behind.

After relating this story, my rabbi looked at me and commented: “I was shocked! I would never imagine a man in his position doing such a thing. Most people are afraid of death, and try to avoid the subject. This man actually felt happy reminding himself that one day it will all be over” because a reminder of death can actually give one the right mindset for life. The Ben Ish Chai finds this same concept hinted at in our *parashah*: ( רֵאָה אֲנִי מוֹתָן ) – “See that I put before you today...” In other words, perceive and focus on the *today* that I am giving you. In order to deal with life from a proper perspective, we must stop and ask ourselves: “How would I conduct myself if today were to be my very last day.” This can give us the strength to deal with hardships and overcome them. This can also help us to not waste time on mundane things that are ultimately of very little importance.

The Ben Ish Chai's insight is particularly relevant to those of us who are living a life of plenty. The *yetzer ha'ra* (Evil Inclination) tries to take advantage of this, and entices us to feel very proud of ourselves – to the point of haughtiness. The *yetzer ha'ra* knows that haughtiness can easily lead to the abandonment of G-d and His

commandments. The best way to overcome this is by imagining that there is no more than “today” – that tomorrow is non-existent. By tomorrow, our soul might have left all our worldly possessions behind. As the Midrash puts it, when a baby arrives in this world, his fists are clenched. When he leaves the world, however, his palms are open (קהלת רבה ה,ב). What this means, symbolically, is that we all come into the world trying to grab whatever we can get our hands on; but when we die, we leave with nothing.

The same insight of the Ben Ish Chai can also help us in times of financial hardships. In fact, it dovetails with the teaching of our Sages in the Talmud: “Do not fret over tomorrow's worries because you do not know what tomorrow will bring. Maybe you will not even have a *tomorrow*; and by fretting over it, you may be fretting over a world that is not yours” –

(סנהדרין ק: ) אל תצר צרת מחר כי לא תדע מה ילד יום שמא למחר איננו ונמצא מצטער על עולם שאינו שלו

Why is it, by the way, that we are inclined to forget that death is inevitable, and that it can happen to any one of us at any moment?

The Chofetz Chaim explains that – at least emotionally – most people tend to feel that there is a *society* of people who die. It is made up of the elderly, the sick, and the unlucky. They belong to this select group who die, of which I am not a member. So while I may be aware of death, it doesn't apply to me. This mistaken perspective on death spawns a mistaken perspective on life. To counter this, the businessman described above came up with a unique method to internalize death emotionally, on a daily basis, and put life's worries and challenges in the right perspective.

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Learning from the Dead



Another way for us to keep our priorities straight is to consider the meaning of a well-known halachah pertaining to the Jewish cemetery. A man is forbidden to walk in the cemetery with his *tzitzit* strings outside his pants. This is because – on some level – the people buried there perceive that someone near them is fulfilling a mitzvah that they cannot. This is considered a slight. The Sages

call it לועג לרש – *mocking the dead*. Note that although a few inexpensive *tzitzit* strings “bother” the dead, they are not in the least bit bothered if a visitor pulls right up to the grave in the latest Infiniti SUV, wearing a Canali suit, a Cartier watch, and talking on his Blackberry. Just thinking of this *halachah* can help us put things in proper perspective!

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