



Mattot Masei



English version

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The Art of Passing Through Straits

My whole life, I had one financial rule: never let my bank account go into minus. Never. This week, for the first time, my Israeli account slipped into overdraft — and stayed there. It's been eating at me. So I did some research, and what I found made me laugh: most Israelis live in overdraft. People dip in, climb out, and everyone keeps moving forward.

But it got me thinking about something deeper than a bank balance. Right now, the Jewish calendar places us inside the Bein HaMetzarim — the twenty-one days "between the straits," from the 17th of Tammuz until Tisha B'Av. These days carry a secret about every difficulty you will ever face. With everyone talking about the Strait of Hormuz, we can appreciate a strait on a new level: a place so narrow it seems insignificant — yet what it leads to can make it the most significant thing in the world.

The Rabbis teach that these twenty-one days of mourning run parallel to another twenty-one days: from Rosh Hashanah through Hoshana Rabbah — the holiest, most luminous days of the year. The tears we shed now, the honest reckoning with how far we've drifted from G-d, our Av, our Father, is what fuels the closeness of the High Holidays, when we refer to Him as Avinu Malkenu. Think about that. The blackest days on the calendar are the mirror image of the whitest ones.

Why? Because that's how light works. White script can only be read against a black background. No coincidence that the 17th of Tammuz is the day the first Tablets were shattered — and Yom Kippur is

the day we received the second ones. A hidden current of growth flows from the breaking to the receiving. The shattering wasn't the end of the story; it was the beginning. Only because the first Tablets were broken did we forget our learning — the very catalyst for the Mishna, the Talmud, and all the Oral Torah to be written. And those broken Tablets were placed in the Ark right beside the complete ones, because what is broken is not less precious than what is whole.

Here's what most of us get wrong. When life breaks — a divorce, a bankruptcy, an illness, a child who takes a path that shatters you — we feel like something has gone off script. Like G-d wrote a beautiful story for us and we somehow fell out of it. But open the very first page of the Torah. Before the Jewish people existed, before anyone could make a mistake, and Exile was already born! The script first reads: "And darkness was upon the face of the deep" — and only then, "Let there be light." **וְהָאֲרֶץ הָיְתָה תְהוֹ וְהוּ וְהָשָׁ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם**. Exile first. The Sages say the four exiles — **תְהוֹ** Egypt, **בְהוּ** Babylon, **חַשׁ** Persia, and **עַל פְּנֵי תְהוֹם** Edom, the one we're in now — are all hinted at in those opening words of creation. Exile isn't a punishment inserted into the story. Exile is the story's structure. First the black background, then the white fire.

So, when we feel G-d has favorites and we're not one of them — that He's against us or punishing us — we've misread the whole book. G-d loves us exactly as we are, and He wants to hear from us, especially from inside the strait. The hard thing in



front of you may be the very thing carrying you toward the best thing.

Look at every great figure in our history and you'll see the same pattern. Yosef had to be thrown into the pit to end up in the palace. No pit, no palace! It's the mechanics of his story. Moshe Rabbeinu had to flee as a fugitive to Midian; without the running, there is no burning bush and no redeemer of Bnei Yisrael. David HaMelech didn't compose Tehillim comfortably on his throne — he wrote it hunted by his father in law King Shaul, betrayed by his family, and broken by his rebellious son, and three thousand years later we still pray with his words in our own dark moments. Esther, the most modest of them all, had to be married off to a drunken king who ran beauty contests, to be positioned for salvation. And the Jewish people themselves had to pass through Mitzrayim — literally, "the narrow places" — to become a nation. Think of a birth canal. The straits are not where life ends; the straits are where life gets born. A nation, like a baby, enters the world through the narrowest passage of all.

This is why Avraham Avinu, at the Brit Bein HaBetarim, the Covenant Between the Parts, heard that his children would endure four hundred years of exile — and didn't pray to cancel it. The same Avraham who argued with G-d to save Sodom! He would plead for strangers, but not against his own children's exile? Because he understood: Egypt was the furnace that would forge them into a people.

The Talmud (Berachot 60b) tells of Rabbi Akiva traveling with a donkey, a rooster alarm clock, and a lamp to learn. No one in the city would give him lodging. "All that the Merciful One does is for good," he said, and slept in the field. That night the wind blew out his lamp, a cat ate his rooster, and a lion took his donkey. Again: "All that the Merciful One does is for good." By morning he learned troops had raided the city and captured everyone. Had his lamp been burning, had the rooster crowed, had the donkey brayed — they would have found him. Every "loss" was a rescue in disguise — not Divine punishment, not payback.

Rabbi Akiva learned this from his teacher, Nachum Ish Gam Zu — the man who answered everything with gam zu l'tovah, "this too is for the good." The

Sages once sent him to Rome with a chest of jewels for the Emperor. At an inn, the innkeeper emptied the chest and refilled it with dirt. When the Emperor opened it, he was so insulted, and he wanted Nachum executed. "This too is for the good," Nachum said. And it was: Eliyahu HaNavi appeared as one of the Emperor's advisers and suggested this might be the miraculous dust of Avraham, which turned to swords and arrows when thrown at enemies. Rome tested it in battle, conquered a province it could never defeat, and sent Nachum home laden with treasure (Ta'anit 21a).

This is what David meant: "One who trusts in Hashem — chesed yesovevenu — kindness surrounds him" (Tehillim 32:10). Kindness is happening behind your back, on all sides, in places you can't see. The stolen jewels were the kindness. The locked city gate was the kindness. You only find out later.

Modern research confirms this. A study tracking nearly 29,000 American adults found that high stress raised the risk of premature death by 43 percent — but only among people who believed their stress was harming them. Those under heavy stress who didn't view it as destructive showed no increased risk. Simply shifting people to a "stress is enhancing" mindset improved their health and performance. People who see setbacks as the raw material of growth respond to failure differently, persisting where others quit. In other words: the interpretation is the outcome.

We have to ask: if G-d can do anything and grant us success so easily, why must we go from pit to palace? Why not straight to the palace, without the pit stop?

Here is something beautiful, hidden in Parshat Masei. The Targum Yonatan ben Uziel teaches that on the night of the first Pesach, G-d carried Israel "on eagles' wings" — miraculously, on the Clouds of Glory — from Egypt to Jerusalem to offer the Pesach sacrifice, and then back to Egypt. Rav Shlomo Kluger asks: if You've already flown them to the Land, why send them back to walk forty-two grueling journeys through a wilderness of "snakes, serpents, and scorpions"?

He answers: the miraculous flight imprinted the path. Just as the Gemara (Niddah 30b) teaches that an angel learns the entire Torah with a baby in the womb and then makes him forget it — so that when he learns it later, it is already engraved in his heart — so too, Bnei Yisrael flew the route once so they could survive walking it. The destination was already written inside them. They had what to believe in, what to hope for, what to aspire to. They just had to live their way there. This is the meaning of the verse: וַיִּכְתֹּב מֹשֶׁה אֶת-מוֹצְאֵיהֶם לְמַסְעֵיהֶם — Moshe recorded "their goings-out according to their journeys." First the going out, the taste of the destination; only then the journeys. G-d showed them the end so they would understand: if the road is hard, it is because He wants them to build themselves through the struggle. After all, we don't

stand up when a pregnant woman enters the room, even though she may be carrying a Talmid Chacham taught by an angel. That Talmid Chacham hasn't yet struggled to become one. Greatness that isn't earned through struggle isn't yet greatness.

So when you find yourself in your strait, know this: the palace is already imprinted in your pit. When the account goes into minus, when the diagnosis comes, when the child wanders — don't break. You're not off script. You're standing on the black background against which your white fire is about to be written.

The straits aren't crushing you.

They're birthing you.

THE ART OF LIVING IN ISRAEL

My 19 year old daughter came to Deal last summer, to spend time with her grandparents. She saw how in America, there is Torah, Chinuch, Tzniut, Tefillah, endless classes that are packed from wall to wall, and delicious Kosher food. She was even more blown away by visiting Lakewood. She tells my wife, Ma! It is so beautiful here. What are we doing in Yerushalayim? Kids here are happy and calm. People live well. What are we doing, with our family of 10 kids in Jerusalem, living in a 110-meter apartment, in Bayit Vegan, Jerusalem? Religion is the in thing, here. The cool thing. This daughter, is very spiritual, only looking to grow, and this is what she told my wife.

My wife asks me, with tears, “Yossi, what are we doing here? Am I stupid? I am killing myself! Are all your siblings smart and we are the dumb ones?” She knows that there is an answer, she just wanted to make sure, I know the answer, because too many times, I complain about it.

I constantly ask, my parents, my Rabbis, my siblings, if I should come back to America, and they all tell me, STAY IN ISRAEL!!! But why???

The Talmud tells us that someone who lives in Galut, out of Israel, it is like he does not have a G-d. (Ketubot 110b): “Whoever lives in the Land of Israel is like someone who has a G-d, and whoever

lives outside the Land is like someone who has no G-d. As it is written: ‘To give you the land of Canaan, to be your G-d.’ (Vayikra 25:38) What? If one doesn't live in the Land, he does not have a G-d?

And it gets worse. The Talmud brings proof from the words of King David, that anyone who lives outside the Land of Israel it is as if he worships idolatry. Why is living outside Eretz Yisrael seen as so severe—even if someone keeps all the mitzvot?

This is something that always bothered me.

Here is the answer that I love, because it is based on understanding the nuances of the Hebrew language. The passage does not condemn someone who is forced to live abroad. Rather, the sharp criticism is aimed at those who choose to dwell permanently outside Israel, without any yearning or effort to return.

The Gemara uses the word “dar” not “gar”. כל הדר בארץ ישראל - דומה כמי שיש לו אלוה, וכל הדר בחוצה לארץ בארץ ישראל - דומה כמי שאין לו אלוה - Someone who has settled with a sense of permanence abroad. Only he, is one who is similar to not having a G-d. Only he is similar, to serving idols.

Why? Because he has become spiritually disconnected from the Divine plan for Am Yisrael to live in their homeland. Someone who lives in galut, in exile, temporarily, with the yearning to return, is not included in this criticism.

This differentiation, between dar and gar, is exactly the intended meaning in Yaakov's words "עם לָבָן" (Bereshit 32:5). He had been living temporarily "גֵרְתִּי וְאֶחָר עַד עֲתָה" (Bereshit 32:5). He had been living temporarily "גֵרְתִּי" = like a ger, a stranger or temporary dweller, with Lavan. His stay was never meant to be permanent. "ואחר עד עתה" means: I delayed my return until now, but my intention was always to come back. He was telling Esav. "Don't think I settled in Haran! I was merely a temporary guest there, and now I'm finally coming back home."

This is in line with the Gemara in Ketubot (75a) that states: "Whether one is born in Eretz Yisrael or merely longs to see it—both are precious." The Hafla'ah explains why. If someone longs to return—even if physically in exile—they are spiritually counted as part of the Land. As R' Yehuda Halevi famously penned, לְבִי בְּמִצְרָיִם וְאֲנִי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם. My heart is in the East, and I am in the far west. This is so different than what many Americans answered, about living in Israel. "I love Israel to tour, to visit, but not to live." The opposite is true. To live in America, is just for a visit, even if it is a long visit. America is not good to live. America is good to tour.

Why is it so wrong to dwell permanently out of Israel?

THE LONGEST RELATIONSHIP EVER

One of the many great things about being Sephardic and living in Israel is that in Israel we can eat Filet Mignon. The reason why Ashkenazim don't eat it, and American butchers don't carry it, is because the process of Nikur, of removing the sinew of the Gid Hanasheh, from the Filet Mignon cut of meat, is complicated. But Sephardim, in Israel, have a tradition, and the Machpud Kashrut and other Sephardic Kashruiot do Nikur, also on Filet Mignon.

One who settles permanently in the "lands of the nations" demonstrates a lack of faith in the promise of G-d, given through His prophets, that the entire purpose of exile is only as atonement until the return to Jerusalem. Such a person is as if he has no G-d within him. One who truly has a G-d, works to perfect the world under the sovereignty of G-d. And Hashem is sanctified only within the people of Israel, in the Land of Israel, not only as a Jewish State, but as a State of G-d. As the prophet Yechezkel says וְאֶת־שֵׁם קְדוֹשִׁי אֲדִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ עַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא־אֲתֵלֵא אֶת־שֵׁם־קְדוֹשִׁי עוֹד וְיִדְעוּ הַגּוֹיִם כִּי־אֲנִי יְקֻנֶה קְדוֹשׁ וְיִשְׂרָאֵל (39:7)

On the other side of the coin, the Baal Shem Tov adds a twist to the words, that someone who lives in Israel, דומה, it is similar that he is has a G-d. "Seems like he has a G-d" can mean, it seems to him he has a G-d. He feels great about himself: he's living in Israel, in a Jewish state, and in his mind, he is in Geulah mode. He thinks he's on G-d's VIP list of Geulah Jews, and already fulfilled his divine obligations!

But the one who lives out of Israel, it "Seems like he doesn't have a G-d": It seems to him he has no G-d. He actually realizes how far he is from true godliness. That's when he wakes up. That's when the real work begins for him, when he knows he has to do teshuva and bring the Shechinah into his life.

The one who thinks he's close may be very far. The one who knows he's far... he's already getting closer.

What is so wrong about having Gid Hanasheh? Ya'akov's battle with the angel of Esav, throughout that fateful night, and the injury that Esav's angel inflicted upon Yaakov, in his thigh, in Gid Hanasheh, is the reason we don't eat Gid Hanasheh. The Sefer Hachinuch writes that this is not just a story. It is one of the 365 negative commandments! The Sefer Hachinuch writes that the reason behind this prohibition, is to hint to the Jewish nation that even though we will suffer often

and greatly in exile, from the gentiles and from Esav,... be sure that we won't be annihilated nor will we lose our identity, completely, in Exile. That G-d will always be there for us and for our descendants, and will bring us the Redeemer. And when we remember this, our faith will strengthen, and we will be able to withstand the Exile! This is hinted to, from the very fact that the angel that fought Yaakov was the angel of Esav and wanted to get rid of the Jews in exile, in the "night". But in the end, Yaakov won, and in the end, we, his descendants, will come out on top. In the end, the sun rose for Yaakov to cure him, as this is symbolic of the rise of Mashiach who will cure us of our pain and suffering and redeem us, speedily, in our days.

There are 365 negative commandments, 365 tendons in the human body, and 365 days in the year. The Rabbis teach that each negative commandment is parallel to one of the 365 days of the year. And the day of the year that is parallel to the negative commandment of not eating the tendon, the Gid Hanasheh, is Tisha B'Av. Just like Esav had an effect on Yaakov on the Gid Hanasheh, so, too, Esav has a hold on the Jews on the day of Tisha B'av. He destroyed our two Temples, and sent us into Exile, on that day.

The day of Tisha B'Av is called a Moed קָרָא עָלַי , a holiday, an anniversary, and therefore we don't say Tahanun on it. Pesach, Shavuot and Succot are anniversaries of love and connection. Tisha B'Av, in stark contrast, is the anniversary of distancing ourselves from Him, of not trusting Him, and of His reciprocating. We said, on that fateful night, the first Tisha B'av, the night of the Spies, the worst thing we could ever have said about G-d – that we won't be able to capture the land of Israel, because the Canaanites are stronger than our G-d מִי־חֶזֶק הוּא מִמֶּנּוּ . How silly of us! Didn't David, a young boy, take down the mighty Goliath, with just a sling shot!? Didn't Yehoshua take down the walls of Yericho with some Shofarim and Hakafot?! This marked the beginning of our lack of trust in Him. Still today, we are sinning that sin, telling G-d how great our problems are and not telling our problems how great G-d is.

The reason why this sad day is, ironically, a day of celebration, a Moed, is because the first step out of a mess is to realize that you are in one. The biggest problem is when you do not even realize that you have a problem. The worst relationships are the ones when there is no relationship, and you think there is one. Realizing our distance is the first step toward reconnecting with Him, and it is the pre-game to Elul, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Shemini Asseret; hence, the name of the month אב , which stands for אלוּל בא . And G-d swears to us, with the law of Gid Hanasheh, that we won't ever disconnect forever, that we will end up coming back, that the sun will shine again.

Somebody asked me, if the purpose of the world according to Judaism is for Torah study, and for Olam Haba, (ברוך אלוּקֵינוּ שְׂבָרָנוּ לְכַבּוּד וְהַבְדִּילֵנוּ מִן) why did G-d create all the gentiles? Also, why didn't G-d give the Torah on the first day of creation, to all humanity?

The answer seems to be that part of the Torah is to be והבדילנו מן התועים , and He separated us from those who are living mistaken lives. Part of the Torah, from the very beginning, is the Jew going through exile, וְהֶאֱרִץ הַיְתֵהָ תְהִי נִבְהוּ וְחָשַׁף עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם , The very second passuk of the Torah hints to the four exiles and the coming of Mashiach, right here in the blueprint of Creation. Exile is part of the original plan, and we say Shira on it, מִי־כַמְכָּה בְּאֵלֶם יְקֻמָּה Who is likened to You amongst the gods,... our Rabbis say, to twist that. מי כְמוֹכָה בְּאֵלֵם , Who is likened to You amongst the mutes?! Part of the greatness of G-d, is that He sees the nations mistreating His children, and He keeps silent. (Gittin 56b) When we pray three times a day and tell G-d that He is הגדול הגבור והנורא the Great, the Mighty, and the Awesome, we are referring to His ability to allow His children go through exile, to learn how to yearn, as He watches over us, as He keeps an account with the gentiles, all so quietly! (Yoma 69b) This whole in-and-out of Exile thing is the theme of G-d's favorite song, The Song of Songs! It is all about the Shalom Bayit between G-d and His People!

The reason why the Arizal says not to eat meat on Rosh Hodesh Av, itself, is because Rosh Hodesh Av is the Yahrzeit of Aharon Hakohen, the only yahrzeit mentioned in the Torah. (Bamidbar 33;38)

Aharon was known as the Lover of Peace. The blessing of the Kohen was of peace, and for Pinhas to become a Kohen, he needed to be blessed with the covenant of peace. The Shelamim sacrifice, would bring peace between man and his Creator. The Beit Hamikdash had many names, amongst them, Har HaLevanon, the mountain that would whiten the “stains”. The Beit Hamikdash was a place for peace, between Man and G-d, this world and the next, man and his friend, man and himself, a place where worlds meet, a בית עולמים, another name of the Temple. For peace, we need to clean the stains on these relationships. The Beit Hamikdash, Yerushalayim, was a place where a person would find שלווה serenity, an inner peace. *שְׂאֵלוּ שְׁלוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם יִשְׁלְיוּ אֶת־בְּיָדָהּ. Those who seek the peace of Jerusalem will find serenity, those who love it.* Jerusalem had the power in it, that its visitors would clarify their life purpose and identity, something that will clarify any crisis, and bring one to an inner peace. Every crisis in life, is an identity crisis, in disguise. The loss of the Temple, is the loss of serenity.

In Parashat Masei it is written *וְהָיוּ הָעָרִים לָהֶם לְשֹׁבֵת וְהָיוּ וּמִגְרָשֵׁיהֶם יִהְיוּ לְבִהְמָתָם וְלִרְכֻשָׁם וְלִכֹּל חֵינָתָם* *These cities shall be theirs (the Levites) for dwelling, and their open spaces shall be for their cattle, their property, and for all their needs.* What does the word *וְלִכֹּל חֵינָתָם*, their needs, come to include? The Talmud tells us that this includes, leaving place for the

Leviim to do their laundry! (Nedarim 81a) Laundry is a human need, a person’s חיות, liveliness, is dependent on it. Why? The Talmud tells us that when a person doesn’t clean their clothes, he has no inner peace, as confusion, ערבובייה, enters into the head.

This can explain why we are not to clean clothes during this period of time, even by a gentile laundromat. To remind us that we can’t clean our stains, without the Bet Hamikdash. To help us realize, that we have stains that need to be cleaned, in order for our relationships to be the way they are supposed to be.

These are the days where, on the one hand, there is a great distance between the Jewish Nation and G-d, but on the other hand, He is waiting for us to reach out to Him, more than ever. *כָּל־רִדְפֶיָהּ הַשְּׁמִינִיָה* , *רִדְפֶיָהּ* , reach Him in the Three weeks, in Bein Hametzarim. As the Maharsha parallels the power of the 21 days of the Three Weeks to the 21 days between Rosh Hashana and Shemini Atzeret. (Bechorot 8b) Through recognizing how far we are from Him, how all of our suffering is because of our distancing ourselves from our Av, our Father, and through yearning to become better. We need to come back to Him, to trust in Him, to make “Shalom Bayit” and desire with our whole heart, that He rebuild the Bet Hamikdash.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU SAY

Your speech defines who you are. Like it or not. The Shlah Hakodosh wrote, the very saying Be’ezrat Hashem, Bsiyata Dishmaya, (with the help of Heaven,) before everything that you do, has in it the power to help you, and to make you successful, in that thing that you are dealing with. (Shaar Haotiot 1) It is good to get used to saying, Me’et Hashem, it is all from G-d. (Mishlei Hachamim 1) This is the way of our Forefather Yaakov. (See Bereshit 27; 21- Rashi)

Why is it important to say this? Why can’t you just think this in your heart? King David answered the question. *I believed, when I spoke* (Tehillim 116;10). Hassidic masters explain this, that the Emunah and the Bitahon come to a

person through his putting it into words. This is because your heart is hardwired to your actions. Why? Why do the words you use carry such a heavy weight on your identity?

אִישׁ כִּי־יִדַּר לְדַר לִיקְנוֹת אֶת־הַשָּׁבַע שְׁבַע לְאָסֹר אֶסֶר עַל־נַפְשׁוֹ *A man who promises a promise to G-d or swears an oath to make something forbidden to his soul, he shall not make light his word. Whatever came out of his moth, this shall he do.*

Our Rabbis learn from here the power of speech of a man who keeps his promises. If one is careful with his word, not to transgress it, G-d Himself,

יִעָשֶׂה , will do whatever comes out of this person's mouth.

Transgressing your vows, even a commitment or promise, can be one of the worst sins of the Torah, transgressing the second of the Ten Commandments. It is so severe that we begin Yom Kippur with Kol Nidrei. Some Sephardic customs are not only Hatarat Nedarim before Rosh Hashana, but a few times before Yom Kippur. For transgressing vows, commitments or promises that were not given the condition of "b'li neder", one's wife and/or children can – G-d forbid – die. (Shabbat 32b) What?! Why so harsh? Why is transgressing your word, without saying Bli Neder, so important? And does this mean that I should not promise or commit to anything at all?

The answer is that when you transgress such verbal transgressions, you show that you are not a real person, with real commitments. If you committed to something, you value it. You have positive feelings towards it. It means this is the spiritual you. To be a good husband, to be a good father, you need to be one who can stay committed. One who can't keep commitments, may risk losing his wife and children.

In life coaching, we are taught the power of a true commitment: it is made with deliberation, determination and motivation. It drives you towards your goals. It keeps you going, even though you haven't yet seen results. Commitment keeps marriages together. When you say, "Harei At...", you are committing to all that marriage entails. Commitment is the glue that holds any relationship together. If you cannot commit, you cannot remain a part of a community, synagogue, or any other group. Commitment holds our nation together, and it keeps G-d connected to us. Commitment is the very essence of what it means to be a Jew.

Businesses are built on commitment. All business concepts begin with the question, Who are you committed to serve and what are you committed to offer? Until you walk, talk, breathe your commitment, you have not started your business.

This is what a running coach has written. It gave me a whole new insight on the importance of what

we commit to, and the severity of transgressing our word.

"There is a very real power in our words A verbal declaration should be clear and specific. It should detail "what" and "by when". "Bli Neder, I commit to ..." " Bli Neder, I shall ..." Avoid weak sentences: "I'll try..." "I want to ..." "I would like to ..." Another good example might be: "I will lose 3kg by May 30 this year" as opposed to: "I'll try to lose weight."

Your subconscious mind is a super powerful recording device that remembers all the times you have or haven't done what you said you would do. It doesn't record the excuses, and whether they are legit or not. If you promised to go to gym at 6am but you press snooze and go at 6.30, this is recorded, and your integrity is compromised. Likewise, if you promise to meet a friend for coffee at 11am and you get there at 11:05, it's recorded as a time when you broke your word. These add up and impact your overall integrity or character. The gist is, how can you expect yourself to reach your BIG goals, if you cannot trust yourself with little ones? They are directly related, so keep a check on your integrity. It's the fuel behind the power of your word.

When G-d created the world, He did so through speech. הוא אמר ויהי He said, and it was... R Nachman from Breslev would teach that for your greatest desires to come to fruition, you must transform inspiration, motivation, what touches your soul, into words. As the passuk says, רצון יראיו יעשה ואת שוועתם ישמע וישעם. *The will of those who fear Him, He will do; and their cry, He will hear and He will save them.* Only after they put the requests of their heart into words, will G-d heed their prayer. When one speaks excitedly about his will, this brings his soul into his words, as it says נפשי יצאה בדברו. This takes his thoughts into action.

The Arizal was quoted saying that a person has only a certain amount of vain words in life. (Words of Torah and prayer are not part of this count.) Once a person finishes those words, life ends. This is hinted to into the words of Shir Hashirim. נִפְשִׁי יִצְאָה כְּדַבְּרִי (Shir Hashirim 5) *My soul left, when it spoke.* This idea was also mentioned in the words of the Darchei Tzedek, student of the Noam

Elimelech. (Also see Derech Pikudecha L”T 34) Words, commitment and soul are inseparable.

ברוך אומר ועושה ברוך גזור ומקיים. *Blessed is He Who says and does. Blessed is the One who decrees and*

JUDAISM 50% OFF

In this week’s Parasha, the Midrash says אָלָהּ לַמִּטֶּה: When Moshe sent men from the Tribes to fight against Moab, G-d told him *to send out a thousand from each Tribe, a thousand from each Tribe, for all the Tribes of Israel, you should send to the army* (31, 4). The Midrash Rabbah asks why the Torah mentions “a thousand for each tribe” twice. The Midrash answers that for each thousand warriors that were sent, there were a thousand Torah scholars designated to pray for success in battle.

How many people learn Torah in Israel? According to a recent study by Yated Neeman together with Vaad Hayeshivot, in Israel there is a total of 125,000 students learning Torah: 35,000 students in “Yeshiva Gedolah”, 30,000 in “Yeshiva Ketana” and 60,000 in Kollel. The Israeli army in July, 2015, had 176,500 soldiers and 445,000 men in the reserves.

But would it not help if we sent all those yeshiva boys to the army, adding more forces? More numbers? More Hishtadlut? The Rebbe from Tshebin gave an example: A certain wagon driver’s load was so heavy that the horses couldn’t pull the wagon uphill. The driver started unloading the weight from the wagon piece by piece, but to no avail. Out of despair, the frustrated wagon driver decided to take off the big, heavy steel wheels of the wagon, thinking that by doing so, he’d help the wagon go up hill... Reducing parts of our Tefilla, removing anything from Torah with the idea that we are increasing hishtadlut, or making things easier, is like taking off the wheels of the wagon...

At times, we feel that our religion is holding us down. Take the Three Weeks, as an example. At times we feel that period of the Three Weeks is somewhat an inconvenience, something we just want to get over with. But this is a HUGE mistake. The Three Weeks, the 21 days, are the essence of our relationship with G-d, where we connect to G-d on a new level, feeling His pain. His being exiled,

keeps (His Word) The very beginning of our praise to G-d is that He keeps His word. We should follow His example.

along with His children, from His Home. This is the seed, the root, the wheels, the catalyst for our joy in the upcoming High Holidays. These days are so great they parallel the 21 days from Rosh Hashanna until Hoshana Rabbah, the days of forgiveness and holiday. (Maharsha Bchorot, 8a). No one would want to “just get over with” the High Holidays.

Thinkingaboutme is strictly a Parasha sheet, written strictly for people who want to improve themselves and live better lives as better Jews. Generally, Thinkingaboutme readers are “allergic” to politics. It’s just one of those topics that tends to push people apart, not bring together. But there is something this week in the news that, to me, was a big piece of Mussar, something for introspection. Just a week ago, when PM Netanyahu defended Israel’s rights to the Ma’arat Hamachpela, he started his speech wearing a black yarmulke, mentioning the pesukim in Chaye Sarah that discuss how Avraham bought the land from the people.

וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָהָם אֶל-עֶפְרוֹן וַיִּשְׁקַל אַבְרָהָם לְעֶפְרוֹן אֶת-הַכֶּסֶף אֲשֶׁר דָּבַר בְּאָזְנוֹ בְּגִייתָת אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שֶׁקֶל כֶּסֶף עֶבֶר לְסֹקֶר... וְאַחֲרֵי-כֵן קָבַר אַבְרָהָם אֶת-שָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל-מַעְרַת שְׂדֵה הַמַּכְפֵּלָה עַל-פְּנֵי מַמְרָא הוּא הַקְּבוּר בְּאַרְצָא כְּנָעַן: וַיִּקָּם הַשָּׂדֵה וַיְהִי עֵרְוָה אֲשֶׁר-כִּי לְאַבְרָהָם לְאַחֲזֹתָהּ קָבַר מֵאֵת בְּגִייתָת

That was beautiful, a true Kiddush Hashem. The nation’s leaders bring Psukkim of the Torah to be the first line of defense to the UN, or to the nations of the world, proving that we have the rights to the Land. How sad though, that before PM Netanyahu continued his speech, he took off his yarmulke. I don’t understand politics; I am not well versed in the political scene, and I don’t want to be. But, it bothered me how our PM quickly switched *conveniently* from being religious to being what is referred to as a “secular” Jew. On a world-public platform.

And then, it bothered me even more, how I feel about myself, with *my* relationship to G-d. How,

sometimes, I switch from who I want to be to who I am, and back again, at *my convenience*. But Judaism is just not that type of religion. It is not known for being convenient.

In Judaism, not a single one of the Mitzvoth can be missed or ignored, no matter how inconvenient it may be. And sometimes, it is those inconveniences in our religion that make all the difference. This is something we can all learn from Bilaam's donkey. When the donkey reprimanded Bilaam, he said, "... and now, you hit me three times." However, instead of using the word פעמים for the word "times", the donkey used the word רגלים, or *occasions*. Literally, the word רגל means foot. He hinted to him – you are seeking to uproot a nation that celebrates שלשה רגלים – three festivals, each year! (Rashi 22;28) Why did the donkey mention, out of all the mitzvot of the Torah, the merit that the Jews have for celebrating the three festivals?

A beautiful answer is given by the *Melo Ha'Omer*. We find in the Midrash that G-d asked Bila'am – "It is your wish to curse and uproot the Jewish nation? Who, then, will keep the Mitzvoth of the Torah, if not the Jews?" Bila'am, may his name be erased, said, "I will".

This is what the donkey was telling him, but Bila'am did not understand: Every year, three

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 Betoch, 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

times a year, the Jews celebrate the festivals and keep the mitzvah of ascending to Jerusalem *by foot*. Now, it is to this fact that the donkey was referring when he exchanged the word "times" with "occasions", hinting at the Three Pilgrimages, known as שלשה רגלים, of the Jewish year. The Halacha is that only a person who can *walk up* the mountain to Har Habayit has the mitzvah of Oleh Laregel. Being that Bilaam was crippled in one leg, he could not take the place of the Jews in keeping the mitzvot, for he was exempt from this just one of the 613- *walking by foot up the mountain of the Temple three times a year!* If not for this *one* mitzvah, Bila'am could have cursed us and destroyed us. *How ironic that the one Mitzvah that saved us is a Mitzvah that is not exactly convenient! Walking up a steep hill, by foot!*

We do not know what even one mitzvah can do for us, and that is why you can't get the 613 at a discount of 50% off. Judaism is not a cocktail of options in which you can pick and choose what you like, at your convenience. This is because Judaism is a package deal, like any relationship. Sometimes we feel that davening, learning, doing mitzvot take a toll on our schedule, on our energy, on our finances. But those inconveniences in the religion are the wheels of your relationship with G-d. These are the wheels to get us to where we want to go. Removing them will get us nowhere.

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 Mashiah – 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

A PHONE CALL FROM THE GANENNET

Israel tried passing some new laws. If a child does not show up in kindergarten or first grade for the first hour of school, the teacher is responsible for calling the parent to find out where the child is. This is meant to be a precaution taken to prevent the type of tragedy that has, unfortunately, struck all too often lately. Good hearted, loving parents, due to the hustle and bustle of life, forget their kids in the car as they start their day at work. If the parent gets a phone call from the kindergarten teacher, the Ganennet, within the first hour, asking the parent where the child is, there is a better chance that parents will not forget their kids in the car for the hour it takes to suffocate the child.

I wanted to cry when I heard the father cry on the radio, as he sat shiva over his own daughter. He quoted the Talmud that records how during the time of the Temple Destruction, Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai was granted a wish from the Caesar. He asked the Caesar to save Yavneh and its wise men. The Talmud asks how Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai, who was Hillel’s student, who was one of the greatest Rabbis who ever lived, could make such a mistake, and did not, instead, ask the Caesar to save Jerusalem. The Talmud answers that at times of a decree, G-d takes away wisdom from the wise. People make mistakes, no matter how great they are. The bereaved father said he feels that this was a decree; that G-d made him forget that his daughter was left in the car.

With a glaring lack of sensitivity, the radio show host asked this father the following question: “There are stories about this epidemic lately, on the radio, in the newspapers. Until now, what was your

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.

response? Did you say to yourself, this tragedy, this mistake will never happen to me?”

He cried, and said. “When the police interrogated me, to establish my guilt, or to prove that it was an accident – they saw how much I loved her, and how hard it is for me to bear this whole tragedy. They decided that what I did was to be considered a mistake, not negligence. A mistake that anyone can make.” The radio show host pushed further. “But what did you tell yourself, until now, whenever you heard or learnt about such tragedies? Did you think it could happen to you?”

He responded, “ I never connected stories of forgetting children in the car to myself. I thought it has nothing to do with me.”

My Parasha sheet is strictly about learning lessons from the Torah, how to live better and more meaningful lives. I do not take lessons from tragedies, for I feel that the loss is always bigger than the lesson. This is why I have a hard time writing this time of year, writing lessons learned from the Churban, as Tisha B’av is about mourning our Temple, mourning our lack of connection with G-d, mourning our distance from how great we could be and how great we could make the world. But, I want to mention something that the policeman said to the broken hearted father: “This can happen to anyone”. And sometimes, we need to set up a reminder system, a checkup with our rabbi, mentor, coach, to bring about awareness and to prevent things from turning out the way we do not want them to turn out.

So many times in life, we do not realize our own mistakes (sometimes bordering on negligence) and their heavy price. During quite a long period, the Jews knew that the Destruction and the consequent tragedies were imminent. For forty years in a row, on Yom Kippur, when the Kohen Gadol would pick the lot of “Lashem” and “La’Az’azel”, the lot of the goat to be sacrificed in the Temple came out in his left hand! Left reflects G-d’s Attribute of Judgment. This meant that judgment, for the Jews, was imminent. (Yoma 39). So, why did they not “get the message”? Because they said to themselves, “This has nothing to do with me.”

In this week’s Parasha, this is the lesson that we learn from the one who kills by mistake. His ax was not well secured, and consequently, he killed somebody, and the price he needed to pay was to go into exile. Why does the one who unintentionally killed go to exile? And why are we still in exile? Exile is the place for people who are not aware of what they are doing. The reason people are not aware of what they are doing is because of how their life is structured. By changing habits, by changing life structure, a person can wake up.

We do not have a Temple because we looked at Judaism as a brand name, not as a vibrant connection to G-d. As if, as long as I am orthodox, I am under the radar. In Yeshiva last week, the Rosh Yeshiva put on a famous speech of Rav

Gifter, zt”l . “I am not an Orthodox Jew. I do not know what an Orthodox Jew is. I am a Torah Jew.”

What got me thinking about writing this article, was a tee shirt I’ve been seeing every day, when I walk home from Shacharit on Uziel St., in Bayit Vegan. Every day, the same guy, bald, with an earring in his left ear, shorts, and a backpack. His black tee shirt says in big, bold white letters, “I AM A NICE GUY”. His face looks like he probably stole the shirt from a nice guy. But it has been five days, so far, that he passes me each day, with his shirt. The law of advertising is that after five times of exposure to your message, the acceptance rate reaches 73%. He would have convinced me, but his face gives me the opposite message from that of his tee shirt.

Are we giving mixed messages to the world, to our children, or even to ourselves about who we are? Are we realizing that we think that we love our spouses, children, families, fellow Jews, but we are not being the nice guy our “Orthodoxy” says we are? Are we taking Shabbos as a day of Rest from our Cellphones, but not a Day of Connection with G-d?

Tisha B’av. Three weeks. All the weird mourning customs. They remind us that we are in exile, and that the Churban has a lot to do with each and every one of us. And they are reminding us not to suffocate our Neshamot in this long exile, for our connection to G-d is our only oxygen.

THE ART OF HEARTFELT PRAYER

R’ Y. Eibshitz (1694- 1764 Prague) was once challenged by the king of his day. “In your books, it says that Mashiach will come as a poor person riding a donkey. גילי מאד בת-ציון הריעי בַּת יְרוּשָׁלַם הַגְּדָה. מֶלֶכְךָ יְבוֹא לְךָ צָדִיק וְנוֹשֵׁעַ הוּא עָנִי וְרִקְבַּ עַל-חֲמֹר וְעַל-עִיר רְגֹזָה רַגְלָיו. *Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion, blow your trumpets daughter of Jerusalem: for your king (Messiah) will come to you, he is just and victorious, a poor man* (symbolic of the lack of merits of the Jewish Nation), *riding on a donkey*, (symbolic of humility) *and upon a colt – the foal of a donkey.* (Zecharia 9:9) Do you really believe that your Messiah will come as a frail man

riding a donkey, and rule over all the kings of the world?!?!

R Y. Eibshitz responded that the king was asking him a difficult question to answer. He needed two months. He further requested that, at the end of the two months, each of the king’s ministers come to the king’s court with a nice, big turkey. He added, I, myself, will also come with a turkey, and with an answer to your question. The anticipated day arrived, and each minister came with a fat, hefty turkey, a turkey that they had fattened for two months. R Y. Eibshitz, also, showed up with a turkey, but a very weak, frail one. So weak and

frail, you could barely see that it was from the same species as the other turkeys.

The king was puzzled... “What next?” R. Y. answered: “Tell all your ministers to bring all of the turkeys into a big room. I will also bring my turkey.” The minute that the poor, weak turkey of R.Y. noticed the other turkeys it was on the floor with, it ran into a corner of the room and hid behind an oven, frightened of its fate. The king and all his ministers stood around in a circle watching and waiting to see what was going to happen. Suddenly, R. Y. pulled out of his pocket a handful of seeds and threw it in the middle of the circle. The turkeys started fighting with each other, pecking at each other with their beaks, whacking each other with their wings, scratching with their claws... A half hour later, tens of turkeys lay on the floor, wiped out, breathing their last breaths... Suddenly, R. Y.’s frail turkey came out of his hiding place from behind the oven, and with cautious steps, walked over to the pile of seeds waiting for him in the middle of the circle. On its way, it trampled over turkeys that, not long before, it had been afraid even to look at.

R.Y. explained to the king that if G-d wants, He just throws something into the world that causes the biggest nations to fight, to compete, to eat each other alive... All the kings, all the presidents, all the governments, all the businesses, all the economies will tumble over each other, and Mashiach will come on his donkey, with his humility, a poor man, and rule the world without a gun, bomb, or war. Mashiach will not rely on anything, except for G-d alone. He won't rely on the Jews' merits, as he is 'poor', in the sense, that the Jews don't have enough merit to be redeemed. The Final Redemption will be the work of G-d alone.

לְעֹשֶׂה נִפְלְאוֹת גְּדוֹלוֹת לְבָדּוֹ כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶד
To Him Who alone performs great wonders, for His kindness endures, forever. (Tehillim 136:4) Of course G-d does wonders alone!? Who helps him? The answer is that G-d waits to do His thing, He waits to bring His amazing wonders, until we realize that He is alone, that He does not need anything or anyone to help Him. He does not need our help, or anyone else's help. Not the help of doctors, lawyers, iron-

Sam or Amazon. קְרוֹב יִקְנוֹק לְכָל-קִרְאָיו לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאָהוּ
בְּאֵמֶת: *G-d is close to all that call Him, to all that call Him sincerely.* (Tehillim 145) What does that mean, to all that call Him sincerely? What would mean not sincerely?

The fifth of the 13 principles of being a practicing Jew is אֲנִי מֵאֲמִין בְּאֵמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה, שֶׁהַבּוֹרֵא יִתְבָּרַךְ שְׁמוֹ לוֹ לְבַדּוֹ רְאוּי לְהִתְפַּלֵּל, וְאֵין רְאוּי לְהִתְפַּלֵּל לְזוּלָתוֹ. *I believe with a complete belief that the Creator, may His name be blessed, to Him alone, is it fit to pray, and it is not fit to pray to any other.* The Only One who can help me is G-d. He is the Boss of all bosses, the King of all kings, President of all presidents, the Doctor of all doctors, Teacher of all teachers, Advisor of all advisors. When the doctors give up, when the police give up, when the stock market gives up, when there is no one anymore to turn to, to hope for, then you can call G-d's Name *sincerely*, באמת!!!

I will never forget the time I prayed Shaharit at sunrise by the Kotel. I needed help from G-d with a project I was involved in. As I was praying, I noticed that standing right behind me was one of the richest Jews in the world, a good man from the Syrian community I grew up in. I noticed that my eyes were set on two places: on the Kotel, and on this guy behind me. If only G-d could help me approach this person and get some aid for this project that I am passionate about. Then, I realized how dumb of me!!! This man, himself, is coming to G-d for help! He, also, needs G-d! All I need is G-d, I do not need G-d to help me through this good rich Jew behind me! That is what G-d is waiting for. For us to make him King over the whole world, over every source of help we rely on that we think can help us. To call to Him, and only to Him, and then, our prayers will be real. באמת!

We polish off our every prayer with these words and this recognition. יְהִי לְרִצּוֹן אֱמֶרֶי־כִּי וְהִגִּינוּ לְכִי
לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ יְקִיָּם צַר־י וְגֹאֲלִי
YKVK is my Rock, and my Redeemer. I don't have another rock to rely on, or another redeemer to save me. אין לנו מלך אלא אתה.

We do not have any king, other than You! No one that we turn to actually has the ability to save us, except You! And that is when G-d answers our every prayer – העונה לעמו ישראל בעת שוועם אליו – He answers His Nation Israel when they pray TO HIM! And only HIM! There is no better way to

serve G-d than to peel off everything you rely on, and pray only to Him, relying only upon Him.

We learn the power of a sincere, heartfelt prayer, a prayer that comes from a place of total dependency, from the man who killed unintentionally and is confined to the city of refuge, until the day that the Kohen Gadol dies. וַיָּשֶׁב בָּהּ עַד־מוֹת הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל (Bamidbar 35:25) The Mishna teaches that the mother of the Kohen Gadol would supply food and clothing to these unintentional killers so that they wouldn't pray that the Kohen Gadol die. (Makkot 11a)

What?!? Just because the killer now has a supply of food and clothing, he won't pray that the Kohen Gadol die? He can't step one foot out of the city of refuge! He can't see his family! And another question... Is the mother of the Kohen Gadol really worried that G-d is going to answer the prayers of this unintentional killer and bring about the death of her Kohen Gadol son?!

The answer is, YES!!! One question answers the other. Even an unintentional killer who prays with his whole heart, who has nothing else to rely on other than G-d bringing the death of the Kohen Gadol, G-d is close to those prayers!!! The mother of the Kohen Gadol can help stop that, though. If she supplies food and clothing to this man, he won't rely on G-d, alone. He will also rely on the Kohen Gadol's mother!!! He won't pray with his

WALKING INTO HOLINESS

As the Roman who attempted entering the Temple was struck by an angel, the Romans did not dare to loot it. They needed a Jew to initiate that move. They found the guy. Yosef Mashita. They told this *Rasha* that the first thing he would take out of the Temple would be his to keep. On each successive time, whatever he took out would belong to the Romans. Yosef Mashita had the audacity to enter the Temple and take out a golden Menorah! The Romans looked at it, and he was shocked when they said to him, "This is a candelabra that belongs in a palace, not in the home of a commoner, like you. Go into the Temple again, and the next thing you take out will be yours." Yosef did not go back in. He refused, saying, "It is enough that I have angered my Master once; I cannot do it again..." They offered

whole heart that G-d bring the death of the Kohen Gadol, and G-d is not close to those prayers!

When we stop relying on Uncle Sam, we can start relying on G-d, and our prayers will be answered. כִּי מִי אֱלֹהִים מִבְּלַעֲדֵי יְקֻוֹק וּמִי צֹר וּזְלָתִי אֶלֶהֵינוּ: *For who is a god other than YKVK? And who is Rock, other than our G-d?* (Tehillim 18)

Selfie steps to sincere prayer:

1. To pray properly, you have to understand that not /only G-d loves you, but His love for you is infinite.
2. To really talk to G-d, you need to know He is willing and able to do it all. He has all the right connections.
3. Anticipate that G-d wants to help you. Anything that you could ask Him for is infinitesimally small compared to what He has already given to you.
4. G-d is not hurt when we ignore Him. We are. G-d has no needs and doesn't need a relationship with us. It is we who need a relationship with Him. Our greatest pleasure is being in touch with G-d. That's why He arranges small mishaps to get our attention. All for our own benefit.

him a three-year position of levying taxes (an important and lucrative office). He refused. They threatened him with a death of suffering and torture, but he adamantly refused to repeat his transgression. "It is enough that I angered my Master once; I cannot do it again..." They did not just kill him. They tortured him to death with unspeakable suffering, but, with his waning strength, he said, over and over, "Woe is to me for I have angered my Maker".(Breishit Rabbah 65; 22) An eerie story of the Destruction.

The question that begs an answer is: If Yosef Mashita was such a *Rasha*, having less fear of G-d than even the Romans, how did he change his mind so fast? How could he suddenly stand firm in refusing to go in for the second round of booty,

even in the face of terrifying threats? How did he change his life's views in just a few minutes, so fearful of displeasing his Master that he was willing to die, just in order to not anger Him?

The Rav of Ponevesh learnt from this something amazing about the Beit Hamikdash. *Just entering the Holy Temple would have an effect on a person.* Just walking in makes one a completely different person. After going in the first time, Yosef Mashita could not go back in again and do such a disgraceful act.

This answer is most revealing. It teaches us a little about what we have lost. We have lost a place in this world where you could, just by entering it, become a different person. A holier person. A person with proper values. A person who is willing both to live and die for his values. This is what we mourn in these three weeks.

But the answer is not complete. A question still remains. If by walking into the Temple a person was so spiritually elevated, how, then, was Yosef Mashita able to take out the Menorah the first time? Once he went in, didn't the Temple effect his Neshama, his soul?

The answer is, I believe, that the effect is not always felt right away. It might take a few minutes. It might take a couple of hours. Days. Weeks. Or even years. At some point in time, though, it will be translated into action.

Nowadays, we do not have a Temple. We *dohave* a *מקדש מעט*, a smaller version of it: a synagogue and a study hall. We wonder, in a world so full of immorality, where one can tap into holiness. If one is looking for something deeper than his everyday, materialistic life, where should he go? He does not

have the Beit Hamikdash to go to. But he can go to the smaller versions of the Temple, the study hall and the synagogue. He may not get the same holiness that one was gifted with by entering the Beit Hamikdash, but he will get something. He may not feel the holiness right away. He may not be able to identify what, exactly, changed in his value system. But something, some time, will change.

A certain Torah scholar was getting frustrated with himself, seeing that he was not making it as "one of the top". He went to his rabbi to pour out his heart, full of feelings and doubts. The rabbi told him something amazing. Our rabbis tell us, "When one goes into the study hall to learn, he should say the following prayer: *May it be the will before You, Hashem my G-d and the G-d of my Fathers, that I will not make mistakes in my learning, and I will not stumble in Halacha, and may my study partners be happy learning with me....*" And when one leaves the study hall, he should say, "*I thank you, my G-d, for Your having placed my lot amongst those who sit in the study hall and not amongst those who sit around and do nothing...*"

From here, we see that a person comes to the study hall with aspirations of learning so well. Aspirations not to make any mistakes in his learning, and even to become a posek halacha, an authority in Jewish law. However, when one leaves, he is to thank Hashem for meriting *just sitting in the study hall*. Even if he was not successful in learning anything at all. One is lucky to just sit there. Because something deep down changes. Something deep down clicks. It might not be right away. It might be only a day later. A week later. A year later. But, it will happen.

THE MONTH OF "FATHER"

Two and a half years ago, newspaper headlines reported the tragic death of David Cohen and his wife, of blessed memory, in a fatal accident, including several other members of the family. A year and a half later, his son-in-law, Michael Levy, came to Jerusalem for a Torah study break. He joined his brother, a Torah scholar, at the largest yeshivah in the world, Yeshivat Mir. After a week

of intensive study together with Talmudic scholars of the highest caliber, Michael was asked to share his thoughts with the group on the national mourning period known as the "Three Weeks," as well as sharing some impressions of his late father-in-law.

Among other things, he noted that the month of Av is the only month in the Jewish calendar with a meaning in the Hebrew language: *Av* means *father*. Why, he asked, is the month in which we mark the Destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple called *father*?

Before answering his own provocative question, Michael turned to his family tragedy, and how they are trying to deal with the enormous loss:

Not long ago, I found my orphaned 16 year-old sister-in-law crying about her difficulties in school and with friends, among other worries. Her tears were connected with everything a normal girl her age cries about. I could not hold back my own tears as I tried to put things in perspective for her: "You are probably expecting a different answer to each one of your questions, since they are essentially unrelated. But, in a sense, there is actually a single answer to all you questions. The difficulties that you are going through are experienced by many girls your age, and they usually deal with them successfully by turning to their mother or father for encouragement and advice. Without a father and mother, however, so

many things are harder for a teenager." Parents are the solution that my sister-in-law needs, but no-one can supply that solution.

Throughout Jewish history, our nation has suffered many losses during the period between the two fasts which mark the beginning and end of the "Three Weeks." And we continue to cry for each loss. Like Michael Levy's sister-in-law, we might be tempted to look for a separate answer or explanation for each tragedy, both personal and national. We look for someone to cry to – not knowing how to deal with the hardships. But the truth is that there is really a single answer to all our questions: אב /Father. We have a Father in Heaven, and He wants us to come to Him for support. He wants us to realize that we don't have a series of individual problems, but rather one big problem – *our distance from Him*. This should be our focus during these days: to recognize how we have compromised our relationship with our Father in Heaven, and to do everything in our power to strengthen it.

WE ARE WHAT WE SAY

Moshe Rabbenu made a rare display of anger when he was approached by the tribes that wished to settle on the east side of the Jordan River – Gad, Reuven and half of Menashe. He shot back with the rhetorical question: "Your brothers will go out to war while you settle here?" The spokesmen for the tribes responded that they definitely were not thinking of dodging their military responsibilities to their brethren, and would join the war effort to conquer Canaan. They noted, though, that they first wanted to make arrangements for their families and possessions: "We will *build enclosures for our flock* here on this side of the river as well as *towns for our children* ." When Moshe acceded to their request, however, he made a significant reversal in the stages of the plan they had suggested: "...*build towns for your children and enclosures for your flock*." This reversal was no accident!

What someone mentions first in a series is usually of greater value and importance to him or her. In

making their request, the spokesmen for the tribes first mentioned how and where they would place their source of sustenance – their flocks – and only then did they indicate how they would ensure their children's safety. Moshe reprimanded them about this indirectly by first mentioning the placement of the children *and then* the safeguarding of the flocks.

And what about us? People can invest so much time, thought, and money in their investments. But for some reason, their children – their best investment in the future – often take second place. Children need their parents' time, interest, and thought. Of course, they also need money. But money given to meet children's needs can never be a substitute for their fundamental need for parental time and thought. Would anybody dispense with putting time and thought into an investment, and just throw money into it?!

It is the naive parent who convinces himself that the child does not know about his or her priorities. The subconscious of a child even picks up subtleties like the order used by the parent in mentioning life values. And, of course, spouses can sniff these things out on each other as well.

Moshe helped the two and a half tribes prioritize by re-arranging their “list.” If we can learn from Moshe, and take care about organizing our priorities before mentioning them to others, we will be better parents, spouses, and – generally speaking – better people.

DECISIONS OF A WOODCHOPPER

It seems that exile to the city of refuge serves to atone for unintentional sin. But, we might ask, why does the unintentional killer need atonement in the first place? What was his crime? He may not have been 100% careful about securing the blade of his axe; he may have failed to notice a bystander in an empty forest, and – accidentally – the bystander was killed.

But the Torah requires us to take *full* responsibility for our actions. What we do and where we are – even unintentionally – everything results from innumerable unconscious decisions we make every day.

Have you ever asked yourself how many decisions you make consciously and unconsciously in an hour? Just to drive home the point, here are some of the decisions that you are making right now: Whether to finish reading this article now or to push it off till later. Whether to skim, or read it slowly and intensely. Indeed, it is your decision to find this article interesting or not. You, alone, decide if you agree with the ideas presented here, and if you want to remember and apply them.

Every conscious decision we make can affect future decisions – especially subconscious ones.

Decisions made in the present “program” us, in a sense, to make similar decisions automatically in the future. The less conscious we are of present decisions, the greater the likelihood that our “automatic pilot” will keep us on the same old course, without considering if there isn’t a better way of doing things. This applies to the indecisive as well. Many people feel that they procrastinate in decision-making, labeling themselves “indecisive.” **Remaining** indecisive is, to a large extent, their own decision. They could learn to research faster and plan better.

Considering the woodchopper in this light, we can better appreciate that having an axe blade not securely attached is a “decision” to ignore caution. (Incidentally, the person chose, for his livelihood, a job where accidents are likely to happen.) But since he did not kill with conscious intent, the Torah does not punish him with death. Rather, this man is confined to the city of refuge where it is illegal to own any potentially lethal tools or utensils. His freedom of decision to act carefully has, for this period, been revoked, guaranteeing that he will not commit another such mistake during his stay.

FOR ARGUMENT’S SAKE

נקום נקמת בני ישראל מאת המדיינים אחר תאסף אל עמך (ב: *Take revenge for the Jews from the Midianites, and then you will (die and) be gathered to your People (in the Next World)...*

Why was Moshe to take revenge on the Midianites and not on the Moabites? The Moabites were motivated to engage in war against the Jews out of fear that they would be robbed and deprived of their possessions. *Moab was very afraid of the*

Jewish Nation, and therefore they enticed the Jews to stray away from G-d through immoral sin and idolatry. Midian, on the other hand, was not under any threat. They joined Moab in placing these spiritual obstacles before the Jews and got involved in a fight that was not theirs. (Sifri, Rashi)

Although Moab and Midian did the same act, causing the Jews to stray from Torah and Torah

values and be visited by a plague, one nation was to be the object of revenge, while the other was not. The reason *behind* their actions provided the determining factor.

Each time we find ourselves getting into an argument, we must frankly examine our motivation. If the reason does not justify our arguing, we will be held responsible for the fight. How many arguments do we get ourselves into that will make no difference to our lives or our future? Many arguments are actually “*theoretical*” disagreements. If we were to ask ourselves what we could or should do to justify our side of the argument, in many cases we would find that there is no practical path of action available. When the argument is not initiated as the expression of a sincere desire to correct a wrong; it is what we call *for arguments sake*. And when this is true, we are guilty of transgressing one of the more severe Negative Commandments between a man and his fellow: *Arguing*. The Torah forbids arguing when it says ולא יהיה כקרח ועדתו... *and one should not be like Korach and his people*.

Let us review, for a moment, the episode with Korach, Datan and Aviram. This was the first time, when Moshe was attacked by the People that, instead of praying for them, he punished them. With the powers he had from Torah, he commanded the earth to open up and swallow his opponents. Why was this instance different?

In Yalkut Shimoni, it states that Korach refuted the entire Torah! He rejected the choice of all the people that G-d and Moshe had put into office, argued about the tzitzit and Mezuzah, etcetera,

etcetera. Moshe was willing to accept any opposition leveled at him, but would in no way countenance opposition to the Torah itself. This was the unique argument between *Korach and Moshe*. Korach was a man of great stature, being one of the Leviim who would carry the Aron Hakodesh. He saw, with Ruach Hakodesh, that in the End of Days, he would be a Kohen Gadol. In seeking a way to get closer to G-d, he felt he could serve his purpose by detracting from and criticizing Moshe Rabbeinu. Although his motivation was in part spiritual, starting an argument in order to grow in spirituality is forbidden.

Datan and Aviram, on the other hand, had no such spiritual goal. They just wanted to fight. *For argument's sake*. This was their nature from the first mention of their names in the Torah until their death. One can recognize the difference between Korach and Datan and Aviram through the result: Korach's children, who were raised to grow in spirituality from their father, repented and were saved from the Mouth of the Earth. From them came great people (Shmuel the Prophet). Datan and Aviram, who argued solely for argument's sake, were lost along with their children. For this reason, we find in Parashat Ekev, when Moshe on his last day reminded the People of the episode of Korach, he made mention of Datan and Aviram alone. את אשר עשה ה' לדתן ואבירם. Korach was not mentioned. This is because Korach had some sort of spiritual goal. But Datan and Aviram had no reason to fight. They fought *for arguments sake*.

ELIMINATING ANGER

Recall for a moment someone you recently saw getting angry. Did you notice the metamorphosis? The face turns red or pale, the shoulders stiffen up, and the nostrils flare. The tone of voice changes dramatically, and the volume hits the far end of the sound spectrum. The overactive hands reflect the speed of the fast-paced heartbeat. You begin to wonder whether the person in front of you is just “angry-mad,” or perhaps stark-raving mad. If you were unfortunate enough to see things get out of

hand, you might have witnessed the angry person punch the wall, throw household items around, or even harm those around him – possibly even himself. No wonder the Talmud says of someone who gets angry: All types of hell rule inside of him (*Nedarim 22a*). Just by seeing someone in this state, we make up our mind that we do not want to go through this ourselves.

Rationalizing Wrath and Rage

When things calm down, our furious friend may tell himself that this sometimes happens to the “best of us.” But this is a dangerous rationalization, no less foolish than building a house on a potential volcano. Only a few seconds are needed for friction to erupt into an outpour of wrath destroying everything in its path.

Pleasantly Peeved?

Of course, not every outburst of anger is as dramatic as the one described above. Indeed, there are many levels of anger. Anger is an emotional state that varies in intensity from fury and rage down to mild annoyance. But they share a common root. Since few of us can say that we are totally successful in controlling our anger – regardless of the level of intensity – we owe it to ourselves to invest some time and thought in the subject.

Quick-fix Exercises

A great deal of professional and popular literature can be found on how to deal with anger once it surfaces. Some experts speak of recognizing anger as an inevitable emotion that needs to be controlled. Others take a quick-fix approach, offering readers “Ten Ways to Control Anger.” These include breathing exercises, counting to ten, going for a walk outside to take a time-out, getting into a relaxing posture, verbalizing the emotion and expressing anger constructively using the words *I feel angry when... because...*, speaking slowly and calmly, sitting down and having a glass of water, listening to music, laughing, etc. But these approaches all assume that one cannot rise above his nature and avoid anger altogether. Is anger really an emotional response that surfaces too fast to nip in the bud?

Therapeutic Consolation or Exacerbation

When dealing with patients who suffer from anger and rage, many therapists make the mistake of assuming that anger is not a bad thing, that it can be used positively if it is controlled. They assume that by accepting or expressing anger, the

individual will be in a position to contain it. But this approach does not, for example, take into account the harm caused by the expressions of annoyance or insulting sarcasm which stem from anger. These are very harmful for interpersonal relationships, and we must find a way to rein in this emotion (making sure it does not rise to begin with) for the sake of our loved ones. This is equally important for accepting our lot in life and, in general, for healthy living. Angry people are at much greater risk of injury (such as through banging into things), heart condition, stress, and depression. Even worse, as the Sages tell us, a person who breaks things out of anger is similar to one who involved himself with idol worship (*Shabbat* 105 and *Nedarim* 21a).

The High Price of Anger

Nobody – not even the greatest or humblest human being – can escape the negative consequences of anger. We find in this week’s Parashah that Moshe Rabeinu got angry: ויקצוף משה על פקודי ההיל—*Moshe got angry at the army generals (BeMidbar 31:14)*. Indeed, the Midrash observes that Moshe got angry at the nation a total of three times, and each time he suffered the embarrassment of forgetting a law of the Torah (*Vayikra Rabbah* 13:1). Now, let us keep in mind that there was absolutely no egotism behind Moshe’s anger. He acted solely for the unselfish purpose of rectifying a wrongdoing or in response to a desecration of G-d’s Name. Why then was he be punished with forgetfulness? Apparently, as the saying goes, a person is not only punished *for* his anger, but also *by* his anger. No-one can escape this fate, not even the incomparably humble Moshe Rabeinu.

If even Moshe Rabeinu succumbed to anger three times, we would be naïve to think that we can completely eliminate this response from our lives. But with serious and consistent effort, we can cut it down to the minimum and only for the most vital issues. Imagine being eulogized as a person who almost never got angry or annoyed – perhaps only three times during his entire adult life! Wow!

A Positive Approach

The best way to eliminate anger is take a positive approach, and cultivate a stress-free and content-rich life. Before focusing on what this means in practice, let us take note of some primary causes of anger. Needless to say, some of them overlap:

- * Having expectations from others, G-d, or ourselves that are not met
- * Being pressured to do something we find very difficult
- * Being insulted or shown disrespect or lack of consideration
- * Being neglected
- * Being disobeyed
- * Being jealous
- * Seeing our efforts fail

Anger-Proof Workout

How can we stay calm under these circumstances? How can we rise above our nature and avoid anger? The more we can internalize the concepts below, the easier it will be. But again, the challenge is not an easy one. It is the work of an entire lifetime. It involves constantly checking ourselves, and reviewing our actions to make sure they are in line with what we know – intellectually – to be the correct outlook. In short, we need to:

- * Realize that it is our responsibility to overcome this emotion/urge before it overcomes us, and understand that no-one else is responsible for us living happy lives except ourselves.
- * Accept others, G-d, and ourselves in our relationships with them.
- * Be well-planned and patient; know how much time, effort and money each life-project requires, and do the best with the resources at our disposal.

* Avoid perfectionism, and accept that if something we do is not perfect, it is still worth something (perhaps even a great deal).

* Maintain a non-inflated ego by knowing that we are important, but not more important than others.

* Do what is good and what needs to be done because it is the right thing to do – without expecting a payback in honor or pleasure.

* Use emotional intelligence to understand that often the other party did not mean to make us feel bad; judge others favorably.

* Know how to ignore people when they deserve to be ignored.

* Know how and when to express feelings.

* Relinquish old feelings of resentment; a “must” because anger is often the result of an accumulation of past feelings. When gripes (and the like) sit too long, we may no longer know how to express our feelings about them, and they will stay bottled up inside us until they explode *unexpectedly*.

* Be cognizant of how much G-d loves and cares for each and every one of us. He knows what is best for us, and we must understand that no-one can take away anything He wants to give us.

* Realize that each and every person has worth and value, and is actually full of potential for greatness if he learns from his mistakes and those of others

Accepting the Dog’s Bark

Notice that many of these concepts are, in one way or another, connected to acceptance and a properly adjusted ego. No-one gets worked up over a dog that does not purr or a cat that does not bark. But for some reason, we are annoyed at others – or at ourselves – for the way they are, and we often try to “fix” them. The fact is, though, that the only person we can try to “fix” is ourselves. Ironically, when we see something that needs to be changed in others, it is often something that needs to be changed in ourselves. Unfortunately, though, we are often too lazy to do so and so we expect the change to take place in others. In our relationships,

we find ourselves grinding water as we become enraged, and express our feelings of disappointment towards others for simply being what they are. In our iPod generation, we would like to “fix” and change others as fast as we change a song we dislike. Is there anything more egocentric than this? As the saying goes, “Anger is a way one tries to take control when he is out of control.” On the contrary, we must focus on controlling ourselves before our anger controls us.

Just a word in closing on the quick-fix techniques mentioned above. While they have some value,

they too much resemble that proverbial hospital built under an unfinished bridge for treating injured drivers and passengers who crashed down below. We must work to make ourselves “anger-proof” by changing our perspective and the way we live. The only way to live content-rich lives and ultimately eliminate anger from our lives, is to invest in working on ourselves.

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF SONNY AND IRENE GINDI A”H